

I AM AN MC

RUSSIAN RAPPERS AND THEIR USE OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Since hip-hop culture arose in the 1990s in Russia, rap music was initially disregarded because of its reputation of “songs about wild parties and expensive cars”.¹ One of Russia’s most influential rappers nowadays, Miron Fedorov (Oxxxymiron) even declared that Russian rap until his own breakthrough had “either been a cheap imitation of ‘blackness’ in a kind of Ali G way, or a completely absurd attempt to be Russian and different without respecting the art form [i.e. rap music]”.² However, as Fedorov’s statement already indicates, over the past few years the face of rap music specifically in Russia has changed tremendously. A new generation of rappers has risen; a generation of smart, eloquent and authentic rappers that have not remained unnoticed by music critics and the intelligentsia.³ As a result of both the professionalization of the Russian rap scene and the acknowledgement of the Russian intelligentsia, a public debate is taking place about the value of rap music. Some compare rap music’s significance to the influential rock scene during the perestroika period; others foresee a bright future for rap music as the hope for Russian poetry and literature.⁴

The Russian debate about rap music as a form of poetry intensified after an incident on a high school in Khabarovsk in February 2016, when a schoolgirl recited a poem in front of her class. The assignment told her to recite a poem written by the Silver Age poet Osip Mandelshtam, but she was actually reciting Oxxxymiron’s rap song *Perepleteno* instead. At first, the teacher did not notice the mix up, but as soon as she heard the text recited was not Mandelshtam’s, but Oxxxymiron’s, she decided to reward her student with a *pyaterka* (the highest grade possible). The performance of the girl, Nastya, was filmed and soon the footage appeared in Russian media and went viral.⁵ Responses to this incident were various: some denounced the teacher’s unawareness for not noticing the mix up; others attributed this to the lyrical value of Oxxxymiron’s rap lyrics. Miron Fedorov himself barely responded to the

¹ Sasha Raspopina, “That’s a rap: your FAQ on the extraordinary rise of Russian hip-hop”, *The Calvert Journal* (12-09-2016), <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/6660/russian-rap-oxxyymiron-mtv> [Accessed on 17-03-2017]

² Shaun Walker, “The man who was raised in Slough and raps in Russia”, *The Independent* (16-11-2012), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/the-man-who-was-raised-in-slough-and-raps-in-russia-8324127.html> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

³ Sasha Raspopina, “That’s a rap: your FAQ on the extraordinary rise of Russian hip-hop”, *The Calvert Journal* (12-09-2016), <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/6660/russian-rap-oxxyymiron-mtv> [Accessed on 17-03-2017]

⁴ idem

⁵ Author unknown, “WTF Dnya: shkolnica na uroke prochitala kuplet Oxxxymiron vmesto stixotvoreniya Mandelshtama”, *The-Flow.ru* (03-02-2016), <http://the-flow.ru/news/vse-perepleteno> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

incident, yet on Twitter he proved to have a rather positive attitude towards it. He shared a link to the video of the schoolgirl, accompanied by the words “a bit about education in humanities”.⁶

Russian hip-hop culture (with Russian rap as one of its manifestations) is an understudied phenomenon in academia. However, as I have stated before Russian hip-hop culture has since the 1990s evolved into a subculture that can and should no longer be denied. Tickets to shows of the big hip-hop artists sell out months in advance, not only in the big cities Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but in small towns as well. Therefore, with my thesis I hope to start filling an existing gap in the research of contemporary Russian culture.

My thesis will evolve around the question if (and how) Russian rappers use literature in order to establish their own image in Russian society. This question already assumes that literature in Russia plays a special role, as a result of which it becomes interesting for rappers to use literature to establish their own image. Therefore, I consider it to be necessary to go deeper into this special role of literature in Russian society in the first chapter of my thesis.

In the second chapter I will address some similar situations in Russian history, when music was being compared to poetry. I will therefore briefly discuss the genres guitar poetry and Russian rock music, as these music genres give an interesting perspective on what is currently happening to Russian rap music. In this chapter I will also discuss Rachel Platonov’s concept of *lichnost’*, which will prove to be highly relevant in the following chapters of my thesis to examine Russian rappers.

In the third chapter of my thesis I will provide some additional information about the discussion about Russian rap music as a new form of contemporary Russian poetry. I consider this to be highly relevant for the purpose of this thesis, as it shows both how rap music in Russia has normalized and the content and the scope of the discussion itself. I have divided this chapter in two paragraphs. Firstly, I will briefly discuss existing theories why rap music in general should be seen as a form of poetry. In the second paragraph of this chapter I will focus on Russian rap music in particular. In this part of my thesis I will both discuss academic opinions on Russian rap music as a form of contemporary poetry and how mainstream media is influencing this discussion.

The fourth and final chapter will be the most important part of my thesis, as in this chapter I will analyze rappers’ attitudes towards Russian poetry. Firstly, I will discuss the rare

⁶ Miron Fedorov (Oxxxymiron), *Twitter.com* (02-02-2016), <https://twitter.com/norimyxxxo/status/694550156608413697?lang=nl> [Accessed on 18-04-2017]

cases in which rappers have embraced the connection between Russian rap music and poetry. By discussing artists like Andrey Lysikov (Del'fin) and Ivan Alekseev (Noize MC), I will show that these artists should not be regarded as an influential tendency, but as exceptions instead. As I will explain secondly namely, the majority of rappers adhere to the *lichnost'* of the “anti-intellectual rapper” in order to establish rap music as an individual art form. Embracing a possible connection between poetry and rap music is in complete contradiction with this prevalent *lichnost'*. In this paragraph I will discuss the most common features of the *lichnost'* of the “anti-intellectual rapper” in order to illustrate how rappers reject the connection with poetry in order to establish rap music as an individual art form.

In the conclusion of my thesis I will once again repeat my most important findings. Moreover, I will explain that indeed Russian rappers use literature in order to establish their own image in Russian society. Rappers persistently refuse to make any connection between their own music and poetry, as this is in contradiction with the *lichnost'* of the “anti-intellectual rapper”. This *lichnost'* is aimed to establish rap music as an individual art form. It proves that Russian rappers, despite all the theories scholars have created to prove the lyrical value of Russian rap music, are totally uninterested in being “promoted” to literature, but instead want to be respected as a serious art form equal to literature.

1. THE POET AS A NATIONAL HERO

When riding the metro, whether in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, one will always find a commuter reading a book. Ask a Russian about Pushkin's poetry, and he will immediately start to recite his favorite poem by heart. Across every city can be found an innumerable amount of statues, commemorative signs, plaques on birth houses, living sites and dying places of all the great writers Russia once had. It does not take very long for a foreigner in Russia to notice that a special role in Russia is attributed to literature.

It must be noted however, that this special role of literature has changed tremendously over the past century. The prestige of highbrow literature and the role of the writer were even more important in prerevolutionary times. To understand fully, why rappers would even consider using poetry to establish their own image, it is highly important to have a complete idea what exactly the role of the writer in Russia once was and how it has evolved. Therefore, this chapter will focus on setting out the special role that was attributed to highbrow "serious" literature and the writer in Russian society.

The study *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, written by Andrew Wachtel, focuses on the development of the role of the writer after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. Wachtel explains that writers traditionally fulfilled the role of national hero in Russia.⁷ This tradition stems from prerevolutionary times, when creating unity by any measure was highly necessary, as political unity was lacking. The figure of the national poet appeared to be well equipped to deliver this kind of unity in the form of literature. These authors, according to Wachtel, were presented as producers of literary work that precisely captured the nation's spirit and as codifiers of the national language.⁸ Therefore, the task of the writer was inherently patriotic.⁹

In Russia this role of the national poet is often attributed to Alexander Pushkin, who is described as "undeniably Russia's best author, a primary keystone for all writers and poets, and undeniably present in the hearts and minds of every Russian that has enjoyed education".¹⁰ Stephanie Sandler, who wrote a separate monograph devoted to Pushkin's myth as a national poet, supports this notion. She states that Pushkin "created modern Russian culture, not because he gave things their names, like some Slavic Adam, but because he

⁷ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, "Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe", The University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2006), pp. 15

⁸ *ibidem*

⁹ *idem*, pp. 14

¹⁰ Arthur Langeveld and Willem G. Weststeijn, *Moderne Russische Literatuur: van Poesjkin tot heden*, Pegasus (Amsterdam, 2005), pp. 8

himself remains the poet Russians most love to contemplate. His specific individual traits have assumed larger than life significance, but also he is the symbol of the poet; he stands for all that poetry is meant to be".¹¹ Pushkin and the myth that is surrounding him in Russia that Sandler describes in her study therefore became one of the constituent elements of the special and prestigious role of the poet in Russia.

As a result of this special role that Russia attributed to writers, literature in general and the profession of being a writer gained an enormous amount of prestige and status in Russia. This prestige was only deepened after the Revolution under communist rule.¹² Communists considered literature to be a potential tool to achieve their own communist goal. Therefore, another task was attributed to the writer in the Soviet Union. According to Stalin writers were "engineers of the human soul", who were essential in the process of achieving a true communist state.¹³ By the means of literature the Soviets tried to mold the readers with carefully, selectively chosen fragments into perfect Soviet citizens. Therefore, the government's interference with the content of literature was, as one can imagine, extensive.

Soviet society was highly litero-centric and oriented towards the classics of Russian literature. Therefore the population in general was raised to mistrust all that is called "popular", "pulp", or "mass" culture in the West, as Andrew Wachtel explains: influence of Western phenomena, such as rock-and-roll music, modern jazz, television soap opera's and most Hollywood films were limited, as these "pulp" outlets were highly suppressed by Soviet authorities.¹⁴ Therefore, the role of the poet became only more prestigious under the communist regime. The conviction that highbrow literature was of the utmost importance to society was omnipresent.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union the situation changed drastically. The government's controlling conditions that had facilitated the role of writers in society disappeared. As a result of this, explains Wachtel, the prestige of serious literature suffered a major blow.¹⁵ Wachtel claims that "artistic literature in the post socialist cultural model has become socially unnecessary, an almost completely private affair which lacks any social importance and which is interesting only to narrow academic circles, to writers and to rare

¹¹ Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of the National Poet*, Stanford University Press (Stanford, 2004), pp. 3-4

¹² Andrew Baruch Wachtel, "Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe", The University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2006), pp. 26

¹³ *idem*, pp. 28

¹⁴ *idem*, pp. 15

¹⁵ *idem*, pp. 47

dedicated readers (...)”.¹⁶ From the 1990s until the early 2000s the book market in Russia as well suffered major blows. Society seemed to turn away from literature and free itself from the influence it has had for so many years. Moreover, as the Soviet Union collapsed, the market opened up for all literature the Soviet authorities had attempted to ward: pulp literature and popular culture.

As becomes clear from a Levada Center report, the interest in poetry has continued to decline substantially during the 2000s.¹⁷ In 2002 the interest in poetry was already quite low, valued a 2,6 on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 meaning not being interested at all; 5 meaning being highly interested). In the 2007 however, the entire population valued their interest in poetry with a 2,46, declining towards the attitude of “not being really interested”, according to the Levada Center.¹⁸ An inquiry by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) published in 2014 confirms this notion, stating that only 5% of their respondents regularly chooses to read poetry.¹⁹ Another report from the Levada Center signals a significant decline in reading activity in Russia. (For full chart, see Appendix 1) In 2003 the majority of the respondents (i.e. 40%) declared to read books from time to time, as opposed to the 34% that declared to never read a book. Only 26% of the respondents indicated they read books “all the time”.²⁰ In 2008 the situation has changed dramatically. The biggest group of the respondents (i.e. 46%) declared to never read a book. The percentages of the respondents that read novels “from time to time” or “constantly” dropped to respectively 36% and 16%. It has to be noted though that the term “book” in the survey is not specified, which means it could potentially be anything that has been published in book form, from pulp literature to highbrow literature. Still, the survey signals an overall decline of the interest of Russian society in reading. The Levada report shows even more information about the decline of reading activity in Russia. The report namely states that despite the fact that the total amount of published titles in Russia

¹⁶ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, “Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe”, The University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2006), pp. pp. 66

¹⁷ Author unknown, “Chto interesuet Rossiyan?”, Levada Center (2007) via <http://www.levada.ru/2007/10/11/chto-interesuet-rossiyan/> [Accessed on 04-05-2017]

¹⁸ idem

¹⁹ Press Release nr. 2596 as published on *wcoim.ru* via <https://wcoim.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114843> [Accessed on 06-06-2017]

²⁰ B.V. Dubin and N.A. Zorkaya, *Chtenie v Rossii – 2008: Tendentsii i Problemy*, Levada Center (Moscow, 2008) via http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/chtenie_v_rossii-2008.pdf [Accessed on 04-05-2017], pp. 11

from 1990 to 2007 has increased 2,6 times, the average print run per title declined 6,1 times.²¹ (For full table, see Appendix 2) As becomes clear from the table, the profession of being a writer seems subject to inflation. An increasing amount of titles is being published, yet it appears that the value that is attached to literature is only declining.

More recent studies show that from 2011 to 2014 reading activity in Russia has actually increased. When respondents were asked how many books they had read in the past three months, the average answer in 2011 was 3,94 books. In 2014, this number has increased to 4,55.²² The book did not necessarily need to be highbrow literature, the inquiry was aimed to signal overall reading activity. Looking at these results it is still too early to claim that Russia is currently restoring its literature-centered society, as the average amount of books read in the past three months is still significantly lower than in 1992, when the respondents of the inquiry read averagely 5,14 books in the past three months.²³ So, currently it would be inaccurate to dismiss the value that is attached to literature completely, as most recent studies indicate that Russia's litero-centric society is slightly recovering from the blow it suffered after the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, the role of literature and the position it takes in Russian society is not fully restored and currently is tremendously different from twenty years ago.

²¹ B.V. Dubin and N.A. Zorkaya, *Chtenie v Rossii – 2008: Tendentsii i Problemy*, Levada Center (Moscow, 2008) via http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/chtenie_v_rossii-2008.pdf [Accessed on 04-05-2017], pp. 8

²² Press Release nr. 2596 as published on *wcoim.ru* via <https://wcoim.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114843> [Accessed on 06-06-2017]

²³ *idem*

2. MUSIC AND POETRY IN RUSSIA

It is not the first time in Russian history that music has been compared to poetry. In this chapter of my thesis I will briefly discuss two influential music genres that, like rap music, also have been compared to poetry. I consider it to be highly relevant to discuss these two genres, as the situation surrounding them proves to be very similar to what is currently happening to rap music in Russia. Therefore, besides giving some brief information about the genre itself, I will more importantly point out the similarities between the genres, which makes them relevant for the purpose of this thesis.

2.1. GUITAR POETRY AND THE CONCEPT OF LICHNOST'

From the 1950s alternative (and therefore unofficial) music started to emerge in Russia. In the immediate post-Stalin period the unofficial genre “guitar poetry” acquired an enormous amount of popularity among several generations of young Soviet people.²⁴ This music genre typically was centered on the idea of triunity (*triedinstvo*). Rachel Platonov explains this concepts as a situation in which “ideally, one person is the author of the text, the composer of the melody and the performer of both”.²⁵ Stylistically guitar poetry was characterized by “studied unprofessionalism”, a deliberately unpolished quality of both voice and musical accompaniment, as Platonov explains.²⁶ Themes of the songs typically differ strongly from each other: guitar poetry could be about potentially anything, from discussing politics, examining taboo ideas and openly ridiculing ideas and icons sacred to Soviet power.²⁷ Over three decades the genre quickly developed from an intimate kitchen genre into a mass phenomenon, with major celebrities like Vladimir Vysotsky and Bulat Okudzhava.²⁸ The year 1988 is frequently seen as the end of guitar poetry, as Okudzhava in an interview with *Pravda* stated that it seemed to him that guitar poetry “in that interpretation in which it [once] had existed, has...died”.²⁹

In her study *Singing the Self* Rachel Platonov explains an interesting theory regarding guitar poetry that also highly relevant for the purpose of this thesis. She namely argues that guitar poetry should not be considered as a “one-way system of communication”, but instead

²⁴ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Singing the Self*, Northwestern University Press (2012), pp. 4

²⁵ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Marginal Notes: 'avtorskaia pesnia' on the boundaries of culture and genre*, Harvard University (2004), pp. 3

²⁶ *ibidem*

²⁷ *idem*, pp. 4

²⁸ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Singing the Self*, Northwestern University Press (2012), pp. 4

²⁹ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Marginal Notes: 'avtorskaia pesnia' on the boundaries of culture and genre*, Harvard University (2004), pp. 2

has a specific emphasis on the dialogue between performer and audience.³⁰ To explain this idea of “guitar poetry as a dialogue”, Platonov introduces the notion *lichnost'*, which can both be interpreted as person(ality) and individual(ity). According to Platonov, the *lichnosti* of the performers of guitar poetry facilitated an atmosphere of sincere, direct interaction between bards (i.e. the performers of guitar poetry) and their audiences.³¹ So, concluding from this theory, when researching guitar poetry, it is not only important *what* the bards sang, i.e. the content of their lyrics, but also how they expressed themselves in performance. In her study *Singing the Self* Platonov does not only extract *lichnost'* from performances (formal or casual), but also from personal interviews, secondhand accounts, photographs, video footage and audio recordings.³²

As a theoretical framework to examine the *lichnosti* of bards Platonov uses the concept of “front” as defined by Erving Goffman, which she explains as the “expressive equipment that an individual uses during a performance, whether intentionally or not, and that defines the situation for those who observe the performance”.³³ The concept of “front” can be divided into two subcategories, that is “setting” and “personal front”. For the purpose of examining *lichnost'*, the latter subcategory is particularly interesting, as it focuses on “both mutable and immutable features that we identify most intimately with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer everywhere he goes”.³⁴

Rachel Platonov in her research about guitar poetry addresses several characteristics of the genre that are highly similar to Russian rap music. Guitar poetry, as the name of the genre already implies, has been described as “poetry combined with music”.³⁵ As I will explain more in depth in the following chapter of my thesis, the same has been the case with Russian rap music. Like rap music, in guitar poetry the text carries the dominant artistic and semantic role, which obviously facilitates the comparison to poetry.³⁶

Moreover, guitar poetry and rap music share the common feature that the musical outlet of both genres (i.e. the song or rap) is merely a small part of a much broader movement. Platonov explains in her study *Singing the Self* that guitar poetry should not be interpreted as

³⁰ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Singing the Self*, Northwestern University Press (2012), pp. 57

³¹ *ibidem*

³² *idem*, pp. 58

³³ *idem*, pp. 59

³⁴ *idem*, pp. 60

³⁵ Suzanne Ament, “Russian Bard Music in Transition – A Case Study: Ivashchenko and Vasil’ev”, *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 37:4 (May 2004), pp.564

³⁶ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Marginal Notes: ‘avtorskaia pesnia’ on the boundaries of culture and genre*, Harvard University (2004), pp. 2

merely a music genre, but as a “sociocultural phenomenon, a medium through which Soviet young people across several generations articulated thoughts, opinions and identities”.³⁷ The same can be said about the Russian hip-hop community, which seems to be one of the most influential cultural phenomena at the moment in Russia, penetrating “almost all spheres of Russian culture”.³⁸ Russian rappers, like the bards, should be seen as the leading figures of the cultural phenomenon hip-hop. Their music, the rap songs, should be interpreted as their means of communication with their audience.

This notion brings us back to Rachel Platonov’s concept of *lichnost’*. The similarities between guitar poetry and rap music that I have described above make Platonov’s theory highly relevant and applicable to the current hip-hop scene, as the construction of both cultural phenomena is so similar. The hip-hop community in Russia is a very tight-knit community that is ruled by personalities (spectacular individuals) like those of Russia’s biggest rappers. Therefore, it is very useful for the purpose of this thesis to examine Russian rappers based on Platonov’s concept of *lichnost’*, as I will do in the fourth chapter of my thesis.

2.2 RUSSIAN ROCK-POEZIYA: PROMOTING THE GENRE TO POETRY

Around the late 1960s rock music started to appear in Russia as well. Most rock bands just started playing Beatles covers, but limited knowledge of the English language soon led to songwriting in their native tongue.³⁹ From the 1970s the number of rock bands started to increase considerably, yet most activities had to remain underground as a result of the oppressive policy of the Soviet administration. Few bands, like for example *Zemlyane* pursued an official, state-approved career.⁴⁰ Most rock related activities around this time were centered in Leningrad, where the Leningrad Rock Club proved to be “the sole refuge for rock music”.⁴¹ Thematically rock music was highly preoccupied with the idea of “freedom”, social

³⁷ Rachel Slayman Platonov, *Singing the Self*, Northwestern University Press (2012), pp. 4

³⁸ Sergey Ivanov, “Hip-Hop in Russia: How the Cultural Form Emerged in Russia and Established a New Philosophy” in: Sina A. Nietschze and Walter Grünzweig (eds.), *Hip-Hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows*, Transnational and Transatlantic American Studies, Vol. 13, pp. 88

³⁹ Yngvar B. Steinholt, “You Can’t Rid a Song of Its Words: Notes on the Hegemony of Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 91

⁴⁰ idem, pp. 104

⁴¹ idem, pp. 91

and ethical issues, human indifference, social passivity, conformism and hypocrisy.⁴² Rock music in Russia evolved from an activity that consisted mostly of covering The Beatles to a socially engaged genre. In a time of uncertainties and doubt, an enormous crowd turned to Russian rock stars to hear them sing about the Russian fate. In a way, this resembles very much the way writers were approached in Russia for a long time.

A good example of a national hero that emerged from the world of rock music is Igor Tal'kov. The singer-songwriter became highly popular in Russia at the end of the 1980s. However, his stardom really took off after his murder. In October 1991 Tal'kov was shot during a concert in Saint Petersburg. The circumstances of the murder have never been clarified, yet as a result of it Tal'kov acquired the status of a national martyr, very similar to what happened to Alexander Pushkin after his death.⁴³ His dedication to the Russian cause is perfectly shown in the lyrics of the song *Rossiya*, which came out in the same year as his death. In the song Tal'kov denounces the Soviet administration and praises “the Golden Age of Catherina the Great”.⁴⁴ In the song Tal'kov expresses his longing to a great and united Russia, as it was in the time of the tsars. Highly preoccupied with the Russian fate, Tal'kov was a very suitable persona to act as a national hero.

From the 1990s the lyrical appreciation of Russian rock music made its mark in Russian society. According to Yuri Domanski this development was initiated by the appearance of Russian rock lyrics in print.⁴⁵ Rock artists themselves however, have always rejected the possible connection between their lyrics and Russian poetry. They even thought the comparison was slightly embarrassing. Andrey Makarevich, founder of one of Russia's oldest rock bands *Mashina Vremeni*, firmly states that:

« Слова песни – это не стихи. (...) Это часть произведения, сделанного из музыки и слов по законам своего жанра, поэтому слова, оторванные от мелодии и ритма, самостоятельным произведением, на мой взгляд, не являются. Во всяком случае, мне бы хотелось, чтобы читатель напел их хотя бы про себя, а не читал протяжно и с подвыванием, как обычно поступают со стихами. »

⁴² Ekterina Nikolaevna Chuyeva, “Features of the “Freedom” Concept in Russian Rock Poetry”, *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta SANU*, Vol.60 No.1 (January 2012) , pp.7-20 |Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: The True Story of Rock in Russia*, Omnibus Press (1987), pp. 35

⁴³ Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of the National Poet*, Stanford University Press (Stanford, 2004), pp. 2

⁴⁴ Igor Tal'kov, *Rossiya* (1991) Lyrics available via: <http://lyricstranslate.com/ru/Igor-Talkov-IGOR-TALKOV-Rossiya-ROSSIYA-lyrics.html> [Accessed on 11-05-2017]

⁴⁵ Yuri Domanski, *Russkaya Rok Poeziya: Tekst i Kontekst*, Intrada (Moscow, 2010), pp. 10

*“Words to a song are not poems (...) They are part of a work, made from music and words by the laws of the genre, and therefore the text, discarded from its melody and rhythm, in my opinion is not a self-sufficient work of art. In any case, I would like the reader at least to sing them [the texts] to themselves, and not to read them slowly and howling, as is usually the case with poems”.*⁴⁶

Despite rock artists’ refusal to be compared to poets, in the 1990s Russian academia started to actively confirm the connection between rock music and poetry by research.⁴⁷ Yngvar Steinholt mentions the University of Tver in particular as pioneers in this matter. He describes that “defining rock and poetry and defending it as part of Russian ‘high culture’ has been their first priority”.⁴⁸ This statement becomes immediately clear when reading Domanski’s (who is a professor at the University of Tver) study on Russian rock poetry. Domanski namely states that he defines rock poetry as the verbal component of a rock composition.⁴⁹ He believes in Russian rock music as a synthesis of mass culture and elite ‘high culture’ and that rock poetry, as every phenomenon from postmodernist times, is saturated with references to Russian literary tradition.⁵⁰

The developments of Russian rock music and the discussion about the existence of the phenomenon ‘rock poetry’ is highly interesting for the purpose of this thesis. Leaning on the former prestige and status of writers, scholars made an extensive effort to promote rock music’s status from popular art to highbrow art, by declaring its lyrics to be poetry. However, some scholars like Yngvar Steinholt do not agree with this and argue that when it comes to rock music academia has focused too much on the lyrics of Russian rock music.⁵¹ Moreover, rock stars themselves have always denied a connection between Russian rock lyrics and poetry. The situation shows a lot of similarities to what is currently happening in Russia to rap music and rappers. Again the combination of socially engaged texts and strong, opinionated individuals leads to the fact that rap music, just like Russian rock, is being compared to –or even declared to be- poetry. Or, as Vasily Vakulenko – in Russia better known as the rapper Basta- declared in an interview with Russian newspaper *Izvestiya*:

⁴⁶ Yuri Domanski, *Russkaya Rok Poeziya: Tekst i Kontekst*, Intrada (Moscow, 2010), pp. 12

⁴⁷ Yngvar B. Steinholt, “You Can’t Rid a Song of Its Words: Notes on the Hegemony of Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 91

⁴⁷ idem, pp. 89

⁴⁸ idem, pp. 90

⁴⁹ Yuri Domanski, *Russkaya Rok Poeziya: Tekst i Kontekst*, Intrada (Moscow, 2010), pp. 3

⁵⁰ idem, pp. 9, 16

⁵¹ Yngvar B. Steinholt, “You Can’t Rid a Song of Its Words: Notes on the Hegemony of Lyrics in Russian Rock Songs”, *Popular Music*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 89-90

«Сначала темп времени угадывала поэзия, потом — пришел русский рок, сейчас русского рока нет, но зато есть русский рэп (...)»

“First poetry kept up with the pace of time, later arose Russian rock. Now Russian rock is no more, but on the other hand there is Russian rap.”⁵²

⁵² Evgeniya Korobkova, “Rep kak poeziya novogo vremeni”, *Izvestiya* (30-06-2016), <http://izvestia.ru/news/620228> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

3. PROMOTING RUSSIAN RAP

The link between rap music and poetry is quite obvious. One can immediately understand why the two are being compared: for both rhythm and rhyme are key concepts. However, in Russia this connection between rap music and poetry is being exploited in order to “promote” the genre of rap poetry. The result of this effort is a heated debate that is currently taking place in Russia, in which rap music is being discussed as a new form of contemporary Russian poetry. Remarkably, rappers rarely speak out in this discussion, as I will further explain later in this thesis. Instead, this discussion is mainly conducted by outsiders of the hip-hop community. Especially scholars and mainstream media are making a tremendous effort to raise the prestige of rap music by linking it actively to poetry. The purpose of this chapter is to give an impression of both the content and the scope of this discussion. Therefore, I will first explore the international attempts to promote rap music by means of poetry. Secondly, I will examine both the content and the scope of the Russian discussion about Russian rap as a new form of Russian poetry.

3.1. INTERNATIONAL ATTEMPTS TO CONNECT RAP TO POETRY

As I have explained before, the discussion about the lyrical value of rap music is not exclusively a Russian one. Internationally several scholars have made an effort to promote the genre by connecting it to literature or poetry more specifically. By doing so, scholars often perceive more common characteristics between rap music and poetry than solely the strong focus on rhythm and rhyme in both art forms.

In the study *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality: Blues, Jazz and Rap as Music and Poetry* Brian Dorsey provides a comprehensive overview of the history and characteristics of (American) rap music. The author specifically focuses on American rap music, as this was the cradle of the entire hip-hop culture. One of the central issues of his study is the extreme focus on text in rap music. As Dorsey claims, the text is the defining component of rap music, instead of the music itself. He even writes that “if the music overwhelms the word, then it is not a rap record”.⁵³ From Dorsey’s statements it becomes clear that in the case of rap music, the music is inferior to the words. Skeptics towards the lyrical value of rap music, like for instance Adam Kirsch, often claim that by regarding rap music as poetry, one of its defining

⁵³ Brian Dorsey, *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality: Blues, Jazz and Rap as Music and Poetry*, Braumüller (Vienna, 2000) pp. 327

elements is being overlooked: the music.⁵⁴ Dorsey in his study makes clear that in rap music, as in poetry, the word is of the utmost importance. As he states: “Rap artists delve in grammatical creativity, verbal wizardry, and linguistic innovation in refining the art of oral communication. (...) Linguistic innovation and verbal experimentation (...) have been transformed into a lucrative art by rap music.”⁵⁵ It has to be noted that Dorsey does not specifically try to elevate the genre of rap music by linking it to poetry. Yet, his study definitely ensures to persuade the reader of rap music’s strong textual focus.

Dana Gioia does make an explicit connection between rap music and poetry. In her article “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture” Gioia shares and explains her rather unorthodox point of view. She claims that as a result of the rise of digital culture, the primacy of print culture has come to an end. And with the end of the primacy of print culture, Gioia questions in her article the current position of poetry. She asserts that “any serious attempt to assess poetry’s current position will need to proceed in unorthodox ways – not out of intellectual perversity but from sheer necessity- because the orthodox views of contemporary poetry no longer are either useful or accurate in portraying the rapidly changing shape of the art”.⁵⁶ Gioia advocates that popular poetry, amongst which she includes rap music, should be seen as the new dominant form of poetry.⁵⁷ Dana Gioia however decides to refrain from judging the quality of rap music’s lyrical value. She notes that “whatever one thinks of the artistic quality of these new poetic forms, one must concede that at the very least they reassuringly demonstrate the abiding human need for poetry. (...) While [Gioia is] admiring the energy of the revival, (...) [she does] *not* maintain that these new forms of popular verse represent the best new poetry of the period”.⁵⁸ Gioia argues that despite the fact she makes no claim for the artistic distinction of rap music, it is still important to analyze the genre seriously, as she insists that its “creative methods, performance techniques, and public reception illuminate the world of literary poetry in many ways that conventional frames of reference do not”.⁵⁹ Gioia’s statement does not only show that she is trying to promote rap

⁵⁴ Adam Kirsch, “How Ya Like Me Now”, *Poetry* (February 2011), via <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/69644> [Accessed 23-02-2017]

⁵⁵ Brian Dorsey, *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality: Blues, Jazz and Rap as Music and Poetry*, Braumüller (Vienna, 2000) pp. 330

⁵⁶ Dana Gioia, “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture”, *Hudson Review*, Vol. 56(1), pp. 23-24

⁵⁷ *idem*, pp 25

⁵⁸ *idem*, pp. 25

⁵⁹ *idem*, pp. 37

music by connecting it to contemporary poetry, she even proclaims it to be the new dominant form of poetry.

Scholar and literary critic Adam Bradley does not refrain from judging rap music's lyrical qualities. Bradley has extensively investigated the connection between rap music and poetry. In the study *The Anthology of Rap* (coedited with Andrew DuBois) he analyzes nearly 300 rap lyrics to "highlight rap's development as a literary art form".⁶⁰ Bradley over the years has made an extensive effort to convince the public that rap music should be seen as a form of poetry. In the short article "Adam Bradley Asks: Is Rap Poetry? Is It Good Poetry?", Bradley explains his view on the connection between rap music and poetry: "Song lyrics and lyrical poetry share a common lineage. The connection is in the language itself: "lyric" after all, is the Greek term to describe verse set to the music of the lyre. Rap simply replaces the lyre with two turntables and a digital sampler. The essence of rap's poetic identity lies in its artful use of rhythm, rhyme, and wordplay; it lies in its emphasis on concision and emotive expression."⁶¹ He actively advocates analyzing the lyrics of rap songs, as he genuinely believes that "understanding the inner workings of the language of the lyrics can cultivate a greater appreciation for the aesthetic pleasures embodied in the song as a whole".⁶² By saying so, Bradley implicates that rap music cannot only be seen as a form of poetry; he also qualifies it as *good* poetry. Bradley however does make an important remark: not all rap music has lyrical value. Bradley appreciates the lyrical value rap music potentially can have, but is fully aware of the fact that rap music is not inherently poetic. He notes that the songs designed to dominate the music charts (and succeed in doing so) are often not the most rewarding lyrics to analyze.⁶³ Still, by stating that at least *some* rap music can be just as rewarding and esthetically pleasing to read as poetry, Bradley of all scholars discussed in this paragraph appears to have the most extreme opinion about rap music in relation to poetry.

3.2. RUSSIAN RAP AS A NEW FORM OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY

The discussion about rap music as a form of poetry has reached Russia as well. Despite the fact that hip-hop generally is a relatively understudied phenomenon in academia several

⁶⁰ Adam Bradley, "Adam Bradley Asks: Is Rap Poetry? Is It Good Poetry?", *Yale Books Unbound* (30-09-2011), <http://blog.yupnet.org/2011/09/30/adam-bradley-asks-is-rap-poetry-is-it-good-poetry/> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

⁶¹ idem

⁶² idem

⁶³ idem

scholars have attempted to examine rap music by connecting it to literature.⁶⁴ In Russia, there seems to be even more ground for comparing Russian rap to Russian poetry, caused by specific characteristics of Russian poetry. This is for example explained in the study *Music in Russian Poetry* by Paul Friedrich, in which the author states that musicality has always had a strong influence on Russian poetry. It has to be noted though that Friedrich himself does not mention rap music at all: his study solely focuses on Russian poetry. However, Friedrich mentions two elements that are highly relevant for rap music's (possible) connection to Russian poetry.

First of all, as becomes clear from the study *Music in Russian Poetry*, musicality is a highly important aspect of Russian poetry. Friedrich argues that “throughout this period (1750-1930) Russian poets were highly conscious of the musical aspects of language and the possibilities of making a poem musical”.⁶⁵ So, as can be concluded from Friedrich's statement Russian poetry has, at least until the 1930s, strongly been occupied with musicality. Therefore its connection to rap music seems to be particularly strong. Friedrich explains: “In the language of poetry, sound has many special meanings in its own right. This is the phonetic aspect of the idea that “poetry forefronts the message”. In other words, there is an inversion of the usual linguistic situation: instead of sounds signifying ideas, images, and emotions, sound signifies itself; moreover in the more extreme cases, images and other conventional things signified turn out to have the primary function of highlighting or calling attention to the sounds of the text.”⁶⁶ It can be argued that rap music, with its rhythm, rhyme and wordplays does exactly the same thing. Friedrich argues as well that certain aspects of a poem can make it adaptable for music. He adds that when it comes to this there is no sharp line between classical or popular music.⁶⁷ So in other words, the internal linguistic music of a poem can work together with external music, whether it is a classical symphony or a hip-hop beat.

Secondly, Friedrich mentions another characteristic of Russian poetry that can be connected to rap music as well. Adam Bradley, who has extensively researched rap music's lyrical value, explains that one of the critiques he most often gets is the claim that it is incorrect to consider rap music as a form of poetry, because it does not take an important

⁶⁴ Sergey Ivanov, “Hip-Hop in Russia: How the Cultural Form Emerged in Russia and Established a New Philosophy” in: Sina A. Nietschze and Walter Grünzweig (eds.), *Hip-Hop in Europe: Cultural Identities and Transnational Flows*, Transnational and Transatlantic American Studies, Vol. 13, pp. 88

⁶⁵ Paul Friedrich, *Music in Russian Poetry*, Peter Lang Publishing (New York, 1998), pp. xv

⁶⁶ idem, pp. 4

⁶⁷ idem, pp. 13

element of rap music itself in account; the performance.⁶⁸ Friedrich however, by showing that the relationship between Russian poetry and performance is rather special, enables to refute this criticism in relation to Russian rap music. In his study *Music in Russian Poetry* Friedrich several times mentions the Russian tradition to recite poetry by heart.⁶⁹ This is extremely important for musical poetry as well, as the musicality of a poem cannot fully be enjoyed unless it is being recited. So, concluding from Friedrich, the element of performance is actually very important to Russian poetry. Friedrich states: “For some two centuries the music of poetry has been more clearly and frequently heard in Russia than anywhere else in Europe.”⁷⁰ Therefore, precisely in Russia the connection between rap music and poetry seems stronger than elsewhere in the world.

Authors like Friedrich, without even mentioning rap music, facilitate that scholars have more ground to approach Russian rap music as a new form of contemporary poetry. This notion apparently even is highly accepted in Russian academia, as most scholars in their studies simply make the assumption that rap is a new form of poetry without justifying it. This for instance becomes clear when reading Tatyana Kozhelupenko’s dissertation on slang in Russian and American rap texts that she considers rap texts to be the poetic part of hip-hop culture.⁷¹ She argues that the boundary between spoken literary speech and slang is vague and has no clear distinction. From these statements becomes clear that Kozhelupenko considers rap texts, despite their reputation of consisting of inferior language, to be poetic, yet she refrains from actually explaining this assumption. She claims that precisely these rap texts, because of the “inferior” or non-standard language they are written in are extremely rich, expressive and very suitable for conveying emotions and ideas, as a result of which they are very interesting for the audience.⁷² In her dissertation Kozhelupenko tries to make clear that dismissing rap texts as inferior language heavily simplifies the phenomenon. By linguistically studying rap texts, the author shows that the language used in rap texts is not merely to be

⁶⁸ Adam Bradley, “Adam Bradley Asks: Is Rap Poetry? Is It Good Poetry?”, *Yale Books Unbound* (30-09-2011), <http://blog.yupnet.org/2011/09/30/adam-bradley-asks-is-rap-poetry-is-it-good-poetry/> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

⁶⁹ Paul Friedrich, *Music in Russian Poetry*, Peter Lang Publishing (New York, 1998), pp. 3

⁷⁰ idem, pp. 16

⁷¹ Tatyana Pavlovna Kozhelupenko, “Sleng kak sredstvo subkul’turnogo kodirovaniya v sovremennykh amerikanskikh i russkikh rep tekstakh”, via <http://www.dissercat.com/content/sleng-kak-sredstvo-subkulturnogo-kodirovaniya-v-sovremennykh-amerikanskikh-i-russkikh-rep-te> [Accessed on 25-04-2017]

⁷² idem

seen as a way of communication, but as a coded language of a subculture instead.⁷³ For outsiders, the true meaning of rap texts, both American and Russian, remains hidden. Yet Kozhelupenko argues that Russian rap texts in essence are vectors of emotions of social change: a mirror of the face Russia.⁷⁴ By saying so Kozhelupenko makes the connection between Russian rap music and poetry even stronger. As is the case in rap music, according to the author's research, poetry's meaning is not explicit either; the true meaning is only revealed to the intended audience that reads the texts thoroughly.

Moreover, some Russian scholars have even made an extensive effort to analyze rap music in a way poetry is usually analyzed. Some attempts are more successful and professional than others, but still they show the degree of seriousness the discussion about rap music's connection to poetry has taken. Needless to say, authors of literary analyses of rap music all agree that Russian rap music should be seen as a form of contemporary poetry. For example, in the article "Poetika rep-tekstov gruppy 'Makulatura': Problemy Izucheniya" authors R.S. Tsaplin and T.F. Sem'yan propose a method of analysis for rap texts. The aim of the article is to persuade the reader of the fact that Russian rap music indeed is a form of contemporary poetry and deserves academic attention and research.⁷⁵ To defend their conviction Tsaplin and Sem'yan in the article analyze the rap texts of the underground rap group Makulatura. Through their analysis the authors hope to expose the lyrical value of rap texts. However, the analysis is lacking any true evidence that Makulatura's work is actually poetic. In the article their lyrics are analyzed based on form, style and content. Apparently for the authors of the article, merely the capability of analyzing rap texts' content, style and form appeared to be enough supportive evidence of the fact that rap is a form of poetry. However, for the reader this is hardly convincing.

Andrey Kavtaev promotes the same idea in the article "Intertekstual'nost' i syuzhet v muzykal'nom liro-epicheskom proizvedenii Mirona Fedorova "Gorgorod" kak ob'ekt literaturovedcheskogo analiza". The article suggests that Oxxxymiron's album within the

⁷³ Tatyana Pavlovna Kozhelupenko, "Sleng kak sredstvo subkul'turnogo kodirovaniya v sovremennykh amerikanskikh i russkikh rep tekstakh", via <http://www.dissercat.com/content/sleng-kak-sredstvo-subkulturnogo-kodirovaniya-v-sovremennykh-amerikanskikh-i-russkikh-rep-te> [Accessed on 25-04-2017]

⁷⁴ idem

⁷⁵ R.S. Tsaplin and T.F. Sem'yan, "Poetika rep-tekstov gruppy 'Makulatura': problemy izucheniya", *Yazyk. Kultura. Kommunikatsii.*, <http://journals.susu.ru/lcc/article/view/507/531> [Accessed 05-04-2017]

genre of rap music can be used as an object of literary analysis.⁷⁶ Kavtaev therefore considers Oxxxymiron's album *Gorgorod* as a musical novella of the lyrical-epical kind.⁷⁷ Again, the assumption that rap music is a form of poetry is made, based on the mere fact that literary analysis of the text is possible. *Gorgorod* in general proves to be a popular object of analysis. Numerous articles on the Internet can be found. For example, on the website *dystopia.me* a thorough analysis of the album can be found as well. The article, written by specialist in literature Alexander Goncharov, analyses the text of all the songs on the album separately.⁷⁸ These articles all have in common that in neither of them, the writers felt compelled to explain why exactly they assumed rap music can be analyzed like poetry. Apparently in Russian academia it is so normalized to talk about rap music as if it has lyrical value, that when writing an (academic) article about it, there is no real need to justify this assumption. The actual content of these articles is hardly convincing and not particularly interesting. However, their presence not only illustrates that Russian academia is now examining the subject of rap music in connection to literature, but also that this has become so normal to do so that authors do not even feel compelled to justify their assumption that rap is a new form of Russian contemporary poetry.

By now the discussion about rap music in connection to Russian poetry in Russia reaches beyond the field of academia. Over the past few years the Russian mainstream media have interfered with the subject as well. It has to be noted though that in mainstream media, not everyone is as supportive of the concept of Russian rap as a form of contemporary Russian poetry as in Russian academia. On the website *godliterature.ru* appeared several articles about the connection between Russian rap music and poetry. In the article "Rep – Poeziya?" journalist and translator Michail Vizel' and poet Viktor Kulle both give their opinion about this topic. Michail Vizel' proves to be rather positive towards accepting Russian rap as a form of poetry. He argues that every generation of writers changes and innovates poetic language. Vizel' advises his reader to not forget about poets like Blok or Pushkin, but at the same time not to denounce this new cultural phenomenon either: rap music

⁷⁶ Andrey Viktorovich Kavtaev, "Intertekstual'nost' i syuzhet v muzykal'nom liro-epicheskom proizvidenii Mirona Fedorova "Gorgorod" kak objekt literaturovedcheskogo alaliza", *Filologiya i Literaturovedenie*, <http://philology.snauka.ru/2016/03/1957> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

⁷⁷ idem

⁷⁸ Aleksandr Goncharov, "'Gorgorod' v rukakh literaturaveda", *Dystopia.me* (09-02-2016), <http://dystopia.me/gorgorod/> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

does not deny its predecessors, but supplements them.⁷⁹ Vizel' refrains from commenting on the actual lyrical quality of Russian rap music, but sticks to acknowledging the purely linguistic common features of rap music and poetry. Poet Viktor Kulle on the contrary seems more hesitant to embrace this new cultural phenomenon as a form of poetry. He considers poetry as a form of harmonization of the surrounding world and in this sense believes "that there is nothing bad in seeing rap as a special form of musical poetry".⁸⁰ However, he does not think that the rap music Russia is producing right now deserves this qualification as it "parasitizes the previously created harmony, makes it more primitive and blurs the very border of art".⁸¹ So, Kulle does not dismiss rap music's potential to become a form of poetry, but considers the quality of Russia's rap music at this point too low.

Cultural historian Alexey Mashevsky broadly agrees with Kulle's point of view, concluding from the lecture he gave about the role of literature and its connection to rap music and rap battles.⁸² In his lecture at the Open University in Saint Petersburg, which can be viewed on YouTube as well, Mashevsky explains that there indeed is a certain common feature between rap music and poetry.⁸³ He namely underlines the textual focus of both genres and states that for both the reading of the text is of the utmost importance. Just like rap music, poetry is supposed to be heard. According to Mashevsky the quality of poetry even depends on the performance of the reader.⁸⁴ However, Mashevsky does note that he does not consider contemporary Russian rap music as a form of poetry as it lacks any intonation and therefore emotion, which he considers to be a defining element of poetry.⁸⁵ According to Mashevsky the monotonous rhythm of rap music makes lyrics, which potentially could carry most meaningful and emotional thoughts, vulgar and insignificant. Despite the fact that Mashevsky does not seem positive about Russian rap's lyrical value, the lecture itself already signals the interest in the matter of both the audience of the lecture and Mashevsky himself. Both Kulle's and Mashevsky's opinions are illustrative of the fact that not everyone unanimously agrees with the notion that rap music is a new form of Russian poetry. In most

⁷⁹ Michail Vizel' and Viktor Kulle, "Rep – poeziya?", *God Literatry* 2017 (05-02-2016), <https://godliteratry.ru/public-post/ryep-poyeziya-2> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

⁸⁰ idem

⁸¹ idem

⁸² Ksenia Toporova, "Ot Alkeya do Oximirona: Lektsiya kul'turologa Aleksey Mashevskogo o roli poezii i ee svyazi s repom i battlami", *Bumaga* (30-09-2017), <http://paperpaper.ru/mashevsky-oxi/> [Accessed on 12-04-2017]

⁸³ idem

⁸⁴ idem

⁸⁵ idem

cases, as the quotations from Kulle and Mashevsky show, this negative opinion belongs to an older generation that considers rap music as something vulgar. Generally they do acknowledge the *possible* lyrical value of rap music, as they clearly see the similarities between the genres, yet they refuse to see the content of contemporary rap music as poetry. Both Kulle and Mashevsky clearly are no examples of outsiders of the hip-hop scene who are trying to promote the genre. Yet, the fact that their opinions are spread in Russian (online) media shows the scope of the discussion in Russia currently, which penetrates through all generations and spheres in Russian society.

In online media appear at the same time a lot of articles in which Russian rap music is treated as a new form of contemporary poetry. For example, online hip-hop journalist Danya Bashta has published several articles about Russian rap music's connection to poetry on different websites. In the article "Mayakovskiy – otec russkogo repa" Bashta mentions that the egos of rappers and poets is highly similar to each other, as they are both suffering from egocentrism: "and not only personal, but genre [egocentrism] as well".⁸⁶ By making this comparison, Bashta shows similarities of the art form in an unexpected way: as egocentrism (both personal-, and connected to the genre in itself) is seen a typical condition of poets, rappers can be considered as poets as well as they suffer from the same condition. He explains that both rappers and poets have the tendency to focus solely on their own hip-hop/poetic world. As an example Bashta quotes Alexander Blok's poem *Poety* (1908) and compares it to the rap song *Rep dolzhen byt' na ulitsakh* by rap group the Chemodan:

Alexander Blok [fragment]

*Так жили поэты. Читатель и друг!
Ты думаешь, может быть, хуже
Твоих ежедневных бессильных потуг,
Твоей обывательской лужи?*

*Нет, милый читатель, мой критик слепой!
По крайности, есть у поэта
И косы, и тучки, и век золотой,
Тебе ж недоступно все это!..*

*Ты будешь доволен собой и женой,
Своей конституцией куцой,
А вот у поэта — всемирный запой,
И мало ему конституций!*⁸⁸

Chemodan [fragment]

*Протыкая мозги языком острым,
Ломая кирпичи, доски голосом грозным,
Крутые MC выдавали рифмо-салаты,
Сейчас пиздатый тот, у кого крутой аватар.
Ни под кого не кошу, кошу анашу, я рад,
Это хип-хип мать вашу, хип мать вашу хип,
Я проверяю микро: one two one two one,
Меня зовут Грязный Луи, вещает Чегодан!
Чэ-чэ-чэ чё ты предъявишь-то мне?
Я с теми кто поднявшись останется на дне...*⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Danya Bashta, "Mayakovskiy - otec russkogo repa", *VSRAP.ru*, <https://vsrap.ru/article/mayakovskijj-otec-russkogo-rapa.html> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

⁸⁷ Chemodan, *Rep dolzhen byt' na ulitsakh*, via: http://rap-text.ru/the_chemodan/4723-the-chemodan-feat.-masta-proof-rjep.html [Accessed on 14-06-2017]

⁸⁸ Alexander Blok, *Poety* (1908) via <http://www.stihi-rus.ru/1/Blok/123.htm> [Accessed 07-06-2017]

As becomes clear from both fragments, the texts are both highly preoccupied with the superiority of the individual. In Blok's poem, he describes how ordinary people are satisfied with "themselves and a wife", but immediately adds, that for a poet that is not enough. In Chemodan's song is being boasted about being "a cool MC". For Bashta, this is enough ground to compare the position of the rapper in Russian society to the position of the poet. Bashta explains in his article that despite the fact that Chemodan's rap is more aggressive and less lyrical, both texts are heavily preoccupied with the ego of being a rapper or poet.⁸⁹

Bashta notes as well that it is important to remember that Russian rap music in first instance was not inspired on Russian poetic tradition, or even European tradition. First of all, the first manifestations of Russian rap music should be interpreted as mere imitation of the American tradition.⁹⁰ According to Bashta, poetry can still play a leading role in improving the quality of Russian rap music. He namely claims that he considers Mayakovsky to be the father Russian rap music and all serious rap music should be inspired on his poetry, as his poetry is "neglectful, slovenly and free".⁹¹

Furthermore, social media is actively trying to promote rap music to a form of contemporary Russian poetry. For example, the YouTube channel *Men'she Trekh*, a channel devoted to family affairs, shared a video in which couples are asked to decide whether the fragment they are reciting is Russian poetry or Russian rap.⁹² The (elderly) couples more than once struggle with distinguishing rap texts from classical Russian poetry, despite the fact that most of the time they are absolutely certain about their decision. This is not very surprising as I have already assessed that the discussion in Russia has reached all generations of Russian society. As stated before, the older generations generally are rather unwilling to accept rap music as a form of poetry. Watching the video, as becomes visible in the comment section underneath it, revokes in a lot of viewers the notion that indeed there is no real difference between rap music and Russian classical poetry. Some viewers even enthusiastically claim that rappers actually have become "true classics".⁹³ The video is a perfect example of how online media is actively involving Russian society in the discussion about Russian rap music as a form of contemporary poetry. Moreover, as becomes clear from the reactions to the

⁸⁹ Danya Bashta, "Mayakovsky - otec russkogo repa", *VSRAP.ru*, <https://vsrap.ru/article/mayakovskijj-otec-russkogo-rapa.html> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

⁹⁰ idem

⁹¹ idem

⁹² "Vzroslye lyudi pytayutsya otlichit' reperov ot poetov", *Men'she Trekh* via YouTube.com (28-11-2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7q2gHgva5FU> [Accessed on 03-04-2017]

⁹³ idem

video, they are rather successful in promoting the genre, by using poetry's prestige in Russian society.

Another example of the media's effort to promote critical thinking about rap music as a form of contemporary poetry is to be found on the website *Meduza.io*.⁹⁴ Directly following up on the discussion that started with the schoolgirl incident in Khabarovsk, on this website users can take a test themselves to see whether or not they can distinguish Russian rap from Russian classical poetry. From the results of the test, which consists of eight fragments, appears that in the majority of the cases (6/8) the readers of Meduza were able to identify the correctly. In two cases the majority of users of the test was wrong.⁹⁵ The test consciously plays with the common notion that rap music is something vulgar and rough, as opposed to the fine art of poetry. The quiz for example shows a fragment of Mayakovsky's poem *Geyneobraznoe* (1920) and Miron Fedorov's (Oxxxymiron) song *Bashnya iz slonovoy kosti* (2015):

Vladimir Mayakovsky [fragment]

*Мольнию метнула глазами:
"Я видела –
с тобой другая,
ты самый низкий,
ты подлый самый.." –
И пошла,
и пошла,
и пошла, ругая*⁹⁷

Oxxxymiron [fragment]

*Я думал время вышло, вымя выдоено
На дороге рытвины и выбоины,
Валуны и глыбы на моей тропе
меж мира войны*⁹⁶

The poem by Mayakovsky clearly hints at adultery ("I saw you with someone else"), a topic that is rather connected to the vulgarity rap music instead of poetry. Additionally, rather simple vocabulary is used in the poem. The language used in Miron Fedorov's fragment on the contrary is definitely not for everyday use, or full of slang and obscene language. The atmosphere the rap fragment expresses is rather dark and serious. These fragments obviously perfectly show what idea Meduza.io is trying to put forward with its test. It encourages its users to critically think about assumptions and prejudices one has about both rap music and poetry. So not only does the test prove that (social) media is actively engaging in the discussion about Russian rap as a form of Russian poetry. It as well shows how the media is

⁹⁴ Author unknown, "Tsvetaeva ili Guf? Poprobuyte otlichit' poeziyu ot russkogo repa: test", *Meduza.io* (03-02-2016), <https://meduza.io/quiz/tsvetaeva-ili-guf> [Accessed on 01-05-2017]

⁹⁵ idem

⁹⁶ idem

⁹⁷ idem

actively interfering with the promotion of rap music by means of literature and by doing so is trying to encourage critical thinking and awareness about the subject by producing such videos and tests.

So, as I have shown in this chapter there is a tendency in academia to “promote” rap music by means of literature, or poetry more specifically. This is an international tendency in which rap music increasingly is declared to be poetry or analyzed like poetry. In Russia though, (online) mainstream media have also picked up this trend and are now actively promoting Russian rap music as a form of contemporary Russian poetry. As explained earlier in this chapter, this discussion is mainly conducted by outsiders of the hip-hop scene. Russian rappers have been remarkable absent in the entire discourse about rap music as a form of contemporary poetry. Therefore, in the next chapter of my thesis I will explore how rappers engage in this discussion.

4. RAPPERS AND POETRY

In the previous chapters of my thesis I have explained the origins of the prestige that in Russia is attributed to literature and the profession of being a writer. Secondly, I have briefly touched upon similar situations in Russian history, in which music was compared to poetry.

Furthermore, I have explained how the prestige of literature is being used in order to promote the prestige of rap music. However, the main instigators of this attempt are mostly scholars and journalists, that is outsiders of the hip-hop community. In this chapter of my thesis I will finally examine rappers' attitudes towards poetry, which prove to be rather ambiguous. In the first paragraph I will discuss the few rappers that actually embrace the connection between rap music and poetry. Moreover I will explain why they should be regarded as exceptions to the norm. In the second paragraph of this chapter I will namely explain that most rappers reject any connection to poetry as this concept is entirely opposed to the *lichnost'* of the "anti-intellectual rapper" that is prevalent amongst Russian rappers.

4.1. RAPPERS EMBRACING POETRY

Despite the fact that the majority of Russian rappers reject any connection between poetry and Russian rap, it has to be noted that in some specific cases Russian rappers actually have embraced poetry in relation to their own work. In this paragraph I will discuss these cases more in depth. Moreover, I will show that the three cases that I will discuss are so specific, that it would be incorrect to consider them as an influential tendency within the hip-hop community. As I will argue, these rappers instead should be regarded as exceptions to the prevalent tendency of rejecting any link between Russian rap music and poetry and adhering to the *lichnost'* of the "anti-intellectual rapper".

4.1.1. THE JOURNEY OF DEL'FIN: FROM RAPPER TO POET

One of Russia's most famous rappers in fact has actually made a turn *towards* poetry. Andrey Lysikov (Del'fin) was one of the founding members of *Mal'chishnik*, Russia's first famous rap group that was founded in 1991. In 1997, after six successful years with the group, Lysikov decided to pursue a solo career. In the twenty years that have passed, Lysikov has removed himself increasingly further away from the hip-hop scene. As the pinnacle of the (former) rapper's turn to poetry, Lysikov in 2014 published his poetry under his own name instead of his stage name Del'fin. The case of Andrey Lysikov does not only show that not all (popular) rappers reject poetry. In fact, it also shows that by using poetry and its status in Russian society, Lysikov is trying to increase the prestige of his own work. In order to be able to do so however, he had to distance himself from his reputation as a rapper.

Despite the fact that Lysikov started his career as a rapper, according to the critics his music currently more strongly resembles indie- or post rock.⁹⁸ It has to be noted though, it is almost impossible to define Del'fin's music within an already existing genre in Russian music: Lysikov sings his texts exclusively in Russian in a highly monotonous manner accompanied by estranging, dark music. Already before publishing his own collection of poems *Stikhi* (2014), Lysikov's work was being compared to poetry. In 2000 for example, Lysikov was rewarded with a Triumph award in the category 'Poetic Genius'.⁹⁹ The Triumph award is the first Russian non-state award in the field of art and literature. A jury annually chooses the winners of the awards.¹⁰⁰ Rolling Stone Russia critic Lev Oborin argues that Lysikov wrote some of the most memorable texts in Russian showbiz during the 1990s.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Oborin notes that since 1999 (when the album *Glubina Rezkosti* came out), Lysikov has been driven by an attempt to write complicated texts, the meaning of which is "not for everyone".¹⁰²

In 2014, which is the same year as the publication of his collection of poems *Stikhi*, Lysikov also released an album under his stage name Del'fin named *Andrey*. The year 2014 should be seen as the fulfillment of Lysikov's gradual journey from rap music to poetry, with the publication of his poetry as its final destination. Lysikov says, about his own status as a poet, that for him the Triumph Award came too early in his career. In an interview with *Afisha Daily* he states:

«Я всем очень благодарен за эту премию, но расценивал и до сих пор расцениваю ее скорее как большой аванс, который я еще не сполна отработал. (...) Это было, во-первых, действительно приятно и, во-вторых, хоть я и говорил, что неважно, подсознательно придавало мне сил делать что-то дальше.»

⁹⁸ Aleksandr Belyaev, "Slozhno ubezhat' ot samogo sebya: interv'y u s Del'finom", *Lenta.ru*, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/02/09/delfin/> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

⁹⁹ Nikita Velichko, "Eto strannyj simbioz": Del'fin o novym al'bome i poeticheskom sbornike", *Afisha Daily* (05-12-2014), <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/volna/heroes/eto-strannyj-simbioz-delfin-o-novom-albome-i-poeticheskom-sbornike/> [Accessed on 30-05-2017]

¹⁰⁰ Author unknown, "Premiya Triumf: Spravka", *RIA Novosti* via <https://ria.ru/spravka/20070122/59473229.html> [Accessed on 21-06-2017]

¹⁰¹ Lev Oborin, "Andrey Lysikov: Stikhi", *Rolling Stone Russia* (20-01-2015), <http://www.rollingstone.ru/music/review/21286.html> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹⁰² idem

“I am everyone very grateful for the award, but I regarded it and still regard it as an advance that I did not fully deserve yet. (...) It was first of all really nice, and secondly, even though I said it was not important, it subconsciously gave me the strength to do something more.”¹⁰³

However, from the same interview becomes clear that after writing his album Andrey and his collection of poems *Stikhi* Lysikov does consider himself a poet. According to Lysikov himself, the material should be regarded as a piece literary art and a musical book with bright illustrations.¹⁰⁴ Besides that, he remarks:

«Если мы сочиняем пластинку, то я сосредотачиваюсь на том, что мы делаем, и пытаюсь думать о том, что я величайший поэт всех времен и народов, и выжимать из себя все, что только могу. »

“When we are creating an album, I focus on what we are doing, and try to think that I am the greatest poet of all times and people and try to squeeze everything I can out of myself.”¹⁰⁵

Lysikov does note that whether he succeeds in that is a question for his audience to decide, but his initial attempt definitely is to write poetry.

Despite Lysikov’s ongoing attempts to make poetry, rather than music, the artist is still - like most other rappers – completely uninterested in literature. When journalist Nikita Velichko asks Lysikov whether or not the developments of contemporary literature are interesting to the musician, Lysikov simply answers:

«К сожалению, нет. Даже не знаю, к сожалению ли. Просто не слежу. »

“Unfortunately, no. I am not even sure if it is unfortunate. I do not follow it.”¹⁰⁶

In this remark, a glimpse of Lysikov’s past as a rapper still shows through. While trying for almost twenty years to become a poet, Lysikov still pretends he has not bothered to actually follow the developments of Russian poetry. He is not even interested in it. Again, the

¹⁰³ Nikita Velichko, ““Eto strannyj simbioz”: Del’fin o novym al’bome i poeticheskom sbornike”, *Afisha Daily* (05-12-2014), <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/volna/heroes/eto-strannyj-simbioz-delfin-o-novom-albome-i-poeticheskom-sbornike/> [Accessed on 30-05-2017]

¹⁰⁴ idem

¹⁰⁵ idem

¹⁰⁶ idem

same arrogance becomes visible of which rappers suffer as well: Lysikov believes, like most rappers, that he is doing something unique, something different. However, in the case of Andrey Lysikov this statement is completely contradictory to the fact that Lysikov considers himself to be a poet and published his own poetry in print. In order to write poetry, Lysikov is not even slightly inclined to follow the current developments of Russian poetry. Yet, he still believes that his work is truly poetic.

Lysikov's publication itself is actually quite interesting as well. The first thing that obviously catches the eye of the reader is the fact that Lysikov chose to publish his poetry under his own name, instead of his stage name Del'fin. This choice indicates a major difference between Lysikov the poet and Del'fin the musician. As well, it indicates a difference between the texts on Lysikov's album *Andrey* and his publication *Stikhi*. However, these two pieces of art are in fact highly intertwined. Some of Lysikov's poems, like *Otkroy Glaza*, appeared on Del'fin's album *Andrey* as well, albeit with a different name (*List'ya*). When Lysikov is asked whether *Stikhi* contains actual poems or lyrics to songs, the artist notes:

«Отличаются они тем, что некоторым из них повезло быть положенными на музыку, а некоторые не дождались этого по каким-то причинам. Я думаю, что они все могли бы стать частью музыкального произведения. »

“They differ to the extent that some were lucky enough to have been put on music, while some are still waiting for this for some reason. I think they could all be part of my musical work.”¹⁰⁷

By saying so, Lysikov tries to erase the difference between his musical work and poetry completely. Actually, he thinks poems that have not been put on music are less “lucky” than those that have. From this statement becomes clear that Lysikov clearly considers the genre of music to be superior the genre of poetry. By doing so, the artist has created his own, and very specific, type of (musical) poetry. By not following the trends of contemporary Russian poetry and creating a hybrid form of music and poetry Lysikov is trying to push conventionally accepted poetry into his own direction.

¹⁰⁷ Nikita Velichko, “ “Eto strannyj simbioz”: Del'fin o novym al'bome i poeticheskom sbornike”, *Afisha Daily* (05-12-2014), <https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/volna/heroes/eto-strannyj-simbioz-delfin-o-novom-albome-i-poeticheskom-sbornike/> [Accessed on 30-05-2017]

The critics however are not necessarily positive about Lysikov's poetry in *Stikhi*. Lev Oborin notes in Rolling Stone Russia that he considers Lysikov's poetry to be rather archaic. Thematically he compares it to Mayakovsky's poetry and in its use of meter Oborin recognizes the style of Soviet poet Yulia Drunina.¹⁰⁸ With only one exception, Lysikov adheres to rhyme throughout the entire publication. And, remarks Oborin, the rhyme is not always adhered perfectly: according to Oborin music is more forgiving for the type of rhyme that Lysikov often uses.¹⁰⁹ So, despite Lysikov's attempts to establish his own poetry as something completely new and different, it actually seems to be rather archaic.

So, as becomes clear, Lysikov is unwilling to engage in the developments of contemporary poetry, it does not even seem to interest him. Besides this, he refuses to distance his poetic work from his musical work; instead he tries to create a complete new kind of (musical) poetry. By using "old forms", like publishing his poems in print, Lysikov is using the prestige of poetry in Russia for his own sake. By using the status of poetry, Lysikov tries to acquire a higher degree of appreciation and prestige for his own work. Despite the fact that Lysikov does not succeed in producing exceptionally good poetry according to critics like Oborin, he does seem rather successful in increasing the prestige of his own work, as most Russians consider him to be a poet, and not a rapper anymore.¹¹⁰

The case of Andrey Lysikov therefore not only shows that some rappers are actually embracing poetry in their own work. Lysikov proves, as I have stated before, that the profession of a poet cannot coexist with the profession of a rapper. In order to become a successful poet, Lysikov had to distance himself from his reputation as a rapper.

4.1.2. NAUM BLIK – *RE:POETY*

As I have stated earlier in this thesis, most popular rappers reject poetry and refuse to regard their work as poetry. However, it must be noted that when looking at rappers that are not extremely popular in Russia, the situation is different. Generally, rappers enjoying limited popularity are more regularly inclined to stress rap music's relationship to poetry and try to use it for their own benefit. It has to be noted however that these attempts so far have never succeeded in achieving national fame for a rapper.

A good example of a relatively unknown rapper that uses poetry to establish his status

¹⁰⁸ Lev Oborin, "Andrey Lysikov: Stikhi", *Rolling Stone Russia* (20-01-2015), <http://www.rollingstone.ru/music/review/21286.html> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹⁰⁹ idem

¹¹⁰ Aleksandr Belyaev, "Slozhno ubezhat' ot samogo sebya: interv'y u s Del'finom", *Lenta.ru*, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/02/09/delfin/> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

in the Russian music scene is Dmitry Iordaty (Naum Blik). Until 2009 he was a member of the rap group EK-Playaz. In this formation Iordaty released four studio albums, none of which gained the group significant national fame. In 2010 however, Iordaty decided to pursue a solo career by releasing the album *Re:Poety*, which produced a reasonable amount of attention in Russian media. The album was not praised in particular for its great musical quality, but for its remarkable concept. The album namely turned Russian classical poetry into rap music. Iordaty's album almost proves to be an innovative anthology of Russian poetry, as he raps a way through the entire history of Russian poetry, from Pushkin and Tyutchev to Pasternak and Brodsky. When Iordaty in an interview is asked for his motivation to make this album, he explains:

«Я хотел сказать, что рэп — это новая, современная форма поэзии. Если можно считать бардовскую песню поэзией, то, может быть, и рэп тоже. Конечно же, не весь рэп, который выпускается, а два, пять, десять процентов, не более! — это все-таки поэзия, пускай уличная. »

“I wanted to say that rap is a new form of contemporary poetry. If a bard can be seen as poetry, perhaps rap music can too. Obviously not all rap music that is released, but two, five, ten percent, not more! – It is still poetry, albeit street poetry.”¹¹¹

This statement is the complete opposite of what other (popular) rappers usually state about this matter, as I will discuss more in depth later in this chapter. With the album, Iordaty also wants to learn his fellow rappers something:

«А еще я хотел показать молодым рэп-исполнителям, что нужно бережней относиться к слову, что тексты могут быть осмысленными, интересными. »

“I also want to show young rappers, that you have to treat the word carefully, that texts can be meaningful, interesting.”¹¹²

So, according to Iordaty, he has not created this album for himself, but for rap music's sake. Iordaty believes that by making this album he has helped rap music to grow as a genre and to become generally more accepted. To what extent Iordaty has actually been a part of

¹¹¹ Michail Vizel', "Naum Blik: 'Rep – eto novaya forma poezii'", *God Literatry* 2017 (29-06-2016), <https://godliteratry.ru/public-post/ryep-yeto-novaya-forma-poyezii> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

¹¹² idem

this development, obviously is impossible to decide. However, the rapper's statements show that by linking rap music to poetry Iordaty sees a possibility to improve rap music's status. This is however opposing the attempt of popular rappers to establish rap as an individual art form.

Iordaty does seem aware of the fact that he is contradicting the prevalent opinions in the hip-hop scene about rap as a form of Russian contemporary poetry with this album. He namely underlines that after this album he wants to start working with his own material again. Despite the fact that *Re:Poety* was the first studio album that actually gained Iordaty national publicity, the rapper is not inclined to proceed with his project of putting poetry on rap music. In an interview on the website *GodLiterature.ru* he shares his concerns with Michail Vizel':

«Но вообще меня немножко тяготит, что после альбома «Re:поэты» меня воспринимают как человека, который читает чужие тексты. (...) Вообще-то хорошо прочитать классиков — это надо постараться. Но у меня есть альбомы на собственные тексты, я пишу стихи, хочу издать книжку. Нужно поработать с собственным материалом. Мне не хотелось бы заикливаться на чужих текстах. . »

“Well, in fact I feel a bit uncomfortable that after the album Re:Poety people see me as a man, who only uses another's texts. (...) In general, it is good to read the classics, it had to be tried. But I have released albums with my own texts, I write poems, I want to publish a booklet. I have to work on my own material. I would not want to repeat myself with another's texts.”¹¹³

Iordaty's attempt to incorporate Russian classical poetry in rap music should therefore be interpreted as merely opportunistic. The rapper is fully aware of the fact that this album could make him a possible target for critique as he promotes rap music as a form of contemporary Russian poetry. By stating that he wants to continue working with his own texts instead of Russian classical poetry, Iordaty proves both that he is fully aware that his album contradicts the prevalent opinion about rap in connection to poetry and that his motive is purely to gain national attention. Therefore, the work of Iordaty should be seen in perspective: after his album *Re:Poety* was released, the rapper still enjoyed only limited popularity in Russia.

¹¹³ Michail Vizel', "Naum Blik: 'Rep – eto novaya forma poezii'", *God Literature 2017* (29-06-2016), <https://godliterature.ru/public-post/ryep-yeto-novaya-forma-poyezii> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

4.1.3. NOIZE MC – *SOKHRANI MOYU RECH*’

Currently in Russia there is only one rapper who seems to be truly successful in combining rap music with poetry. In 2014 the song *Sokhrani Moyu Rech*’ was released by Noize MC (Ivan Alekseev), who has been described by Miron Fedorov (Oxxxymiron) as one of Russia’s top 3 rappers.¹¹⁴ The rap was written for the film *Sokhrani Moyu Rech*’ *Navsegda* (2015), about the life of the poet Osip Mandelshtam. The song’s chorus consists of the first verse of Mandelshtam’s poem *Sokhrani Moyu rech*’ (1931). The major difference between this successful song, in which poetry and rap are combined, and the other unsuccessful attempts discussed earlier in this paragraph, is the fact that Alekseev has not blindly copied Mandelshtam’s poem, but has incorporated his own lyrics as well. In an interview with *The Flow*, Alekseev gives further explanation about the song:

«У меня была задача постараться доступным современным языком раскрыть проблематику, сложность и многообразие внутреннего мира поэта и его жизненной истории. Дать этому современное и понятное наполнение. С этой точки зрения, мне кажется, все удалось.»

“I was given the task to try to reveal the problems, complexity and diversity of the poet’s inner world and his life story in accessible modern language. To give it a modern and understandable content. From that point of view, I think I succeeded.”¹¹⁵

So, as Alekseev explains, he did not blindly copy Mandelshtam’s poem, but he tried to put the poem in a modern context. Why precisely this song was successful, as opposed to for example the album *Re:Poety* is for me hard to explain. It has to be noted that when *Sokhrani Moyu Rech*’ was released, Ivan Alekseev was already one of the most successful rappers in Russia. This may have played a role as well, given the fact that generally Alekseev was already accepted and respected as a rapper, both in- and outside the hip-hop community. Despite the fact that I cannot fully explain Alekseev’s success in combining poetry and rap music, this example is nonetheless significant. Alekseev namely shows that in very rare cases it is possible to connect rap music with poetry.

¹¹⁴ Chris Mitchell, “Oxxxymiron: the Russians are Coming”, *BattleRap.com* (17-04-2015), <http://battlerap.com/news/2015/04/12132-oxxyiron-the-russians-are-coming> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹¹⁵ Author unknown, “Noize MC – Sokhrani Moyu Rech”, *The Flow* via <http://the-flow.ru/videos/noize-mc-sohrani-moyu-rech> [Accessed on 22-06-2017]

4.2. EXAMINING THE LICHNOST' OF THE 'ANTI-INTELLECTUAL RAPPER'

As the case of Ivan Alekseev has shown, some rappers do not scare away from openly connecting rap music to poetry. However, the majority of rappers are highly opposed to this connection. When asked directly whether rappers consider themselves to be poets, rappers respond highly negatively, even insulted at times. Most rappers have constructed a specific way of presenting themselves to their audience, in which a combination between rap music and poetry appears to be strictly impossible.

To expose the specific features of this image Rachel Platonov's concept of *lichnost'* becomes highly relevant again in this paragraph of my thesis. As I have explained earlier, rap music should not strictly be seen as a music genre, but part of a broader movement, i.e. hip-hop culture. Therefore, I would overlook essential elements of rap music, if I would merely focus on rap music itself. Instead, I will examine Russian rappers through the prism of *lichnost'* as suggested by Rachel Platonov. This chapter will argue that by creating a *lichnost'* of the "anti-intellectual rapper", rappers attempt to put an end to the notion of rap music as a new form of Russian contemporary poetry and instead establish rap music as an individual art form. Each paragraph of the chapter will discuss one defining element of rappers' *lichnost'* of the "anti-intellectual rapper".

4.2.1. "POETRY IS FOR SUCKERS"

The first important element of the *lichnost'* of the "anti-intellectual rapper" is their persistent refusal of a personal connection to Russian literature. This becomes particularly clear when analyzing interviews with Russian rappers. As the popularity of rap music increased in Russia, so did the amount of media coverage about rappers. Nowadays in Russia some magazines, of which *The Flow* (original Russian name) is the most influential, are fully devoted to writing about the different facets hip-hop culture.¹¹⁶ Magazines like these often publish interviews with different Russian rappers, in which their personal relationship to poetry sometimes is discussed. It is remarkable that rappers themselves never bring up the subject, but instead the journalist always does. When rappers are asked about their personal relationship with literature (both prose and poetry), reactions tend to be dismissive towards Russian literature. In an interview with *Harper's Bazaar Russia*, Adil' Zhalelov (Scriptonite) one of Russia's most popular rappers of the moment, states that he is barely interested in

¹¹⁶ *The Flow*, see <http://the-flow.ru/> [Accessed on 20-06-2017]

literature. Zhalelov's album *Dom s normal'nym yavleniem* has been often praised as the best Russian album of 2015 and beat Adele's 25 in the Russian iTunes Chart.¹¹⁷ He states:

*«Это две-три книжки Чарльза Буковски и все. Ну, в детстве я прочитал «Крестного Отца» Марио Пьюзо и «Ясновидящего» Стивена Кинга. «Ясновидящий» — это вообще была бесполезная информация для меня даже в детстве. Тупо какая-то ***** [фигня], еще эта книга большая была, я так долго ее читал. А знакомство с Буковски у меня случилось так: я наткнулся на пару цитат, а у него такой слог, грубо говоря, мой. Просто говорит, как есть. Я его, когда читаю, то, как будто сижу с дедом — не со своим, а с пожилым другом. И он мне рассказывает, как все было раньше, и мы вместе смеемся, где-то грустим вместе.»*

*“I have two or three books by Charles Bukowski but that is it. Well, as a kid I read The Godfather by Mario Puzo and The Shining by Steven King – and that was already useless information for me even in my childhood. It was ***** stupid, it even was a very thick book; it took me ages to read it. But my first encounter with Bukowski happened like this: I stumbled upon a couple of quotes, he has this particular style, roughly speaking, the same as mine. He just says how it is. When I read him, it is like I am sitting with a grandfather: not my own, but an old friend. He tells me how everything was in the past, and we laugh together, sometimes we are sad together”.*¹¹⁸

Zhalelov accordingly experiences no connection at all with Russian poetry, or Russian highbrow literature in general. Besides that, he indicates not to identify with international literature of the more popular kind either, as for example the oeuvre of Stephen King. It seems as if Zhalelov in literature is not looking for an opportunity to expand his horizons, but is looking for a voice that is similar to his own: that is why only Bukowski's books attracted him.

Zhalelov to a certain extent agrees with the members of Makulatura, an underground rap duo that consists of Konstantin Speransky and Evgeny Alekhin. Makulatura is famous for its deeply depressing, yet intellectual lyrics that are often (by others) declared to be poetry.¹¹⁹ The name of the group is inspired on Bukowski's novel, which supposedly makes Alekhin

¹¹⁷ Sasha Raspopina, “That’s a rap: your FAQ on the extraordinary rise of Russian hip-hop”, *The Calvert Journal* (12-09-2016), <http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/6660/russian-rap-oxxxymiron-mty> [Accessed on 17-03-2017]

¹¹⁸ Yulia Vakhonina, “Skriptonit: U menya net nikakich pravil”, *Harper’s Bazaar Russia* via <http://bazaar.ru/heroes/fashion/skriptonit-u-menya-net-nikakikh-pravil/> [Accessed on 29-03-2017]

¹¹⁹ Author unknown, “Kogda est’ rep – ty odnovremenno lokh i terminator: Intervyu s gruppoy Makulature”, *The Yaroslavl Room*, <http://yaroslavl-room.ru/kogda-est-rep-ty-odnovremenno-loh-i-terminator-intervyu-s-gruppoj-makulatura-22547/> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

and Speransky as well admirers of the American writer.¹²⁰ In an interview with the rap duo published on the website *Yaroslavl Room* the rappers appear to agitate heavily against literature and contemporary Russia poetry in particular. They state:

*«Если говорить о современной поэзии – то это параша. Нет никакой современной поэзии. Они называют себя поэтами в 2016 году. Да пошли они нах***й. Это просто ряженые клоуны. Мы ездили по городам, видели афиши этих современных поэтов, (...) Как им не стыдно вообще за то, что они сочиняют. Неужели существует спрос на это говно?»*

“Speaking about contemporary poetry – that is just shit. There is no such thing as contemporary poetry. They are calling themselves poets in 2016. They can go to hell. Dressed up clowns is what they really are. We have travelled across the cities and seen the posters of these contemporary poets (...) They should be ashamed of what they create. Is there really any demand for that shit?”¹²¹

One of the few rappers that does not deny to be interested in literature is Vasily Vakulenko (Basta), one of Russia’s rap mastodons. In an interview with *Izvestiya* the successful rapper and owner of record label Gazgolder states:

«Стараясь следовать. Есть такое издательство «Вездец», оно выпускает актуальных современных поэтов — Олега Груза, Солу Монову... У Веры Полозковой, кстати, очень хорошая женская поэзия.»

“I try to follow it [contemporary poetry]. There is this publishing house Vездets, which publishes relevant contemporary poets: Oleg Gruz, Sola Monova. Vera Polozkova actually has some really good female poetry.”¹²²

When rappers are being asked why they are not interested in poetry, they generally come up with the same reason. Rappers believe that poetry has lost the pace of time and as a result of that is not capable anymore to appeal to the masses. Even Vakulenko, despite the fact that he admits to read poetry from time to time, makes this critical remark about Russian poetry. In the same interview with *Izvestiya* he states:

¹²⁰ R.S. Tsaplin and T.F. Sem’yan, “Poetika rep-tekstov gruppy ‘Makulatura’: problemy izucheniya”, *Yazyk. Kultura. Kommunikatsii.*, <http://journals.susu.ru/lcc/article/view/507/531> [Accessed 05-04-2017]

¹²¹ Author unknown, “Kogda est’ rep – ty odnovremenno lokh i terminator: Intervyu s gruppoy Makulature”, *The Yaroslavl Room*, <http://yaroslavl-room.ru/kogda-est-rep-ty-odnovremenno-lokh-i-terminator-intervyu-s-gruppoj-makulatura-22547/> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

¹²² Evgeniya Korobkova, “Rep kak poeziya novogo vremeni”, *Izvestiya* (30-06-2016), <http://izvestia.ru/news/620228> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

«Во-первых, поэзия должна быть острой и молодой. Во-вторых, мне кажется, она утратила темп времени. Еvtushenko собирал стадионы, потому что угадывал и попадал в темп. Сейчас таких нет.»

“First of all, poetry should be fierce and young. Second, it seems as if poetry has lost the pace of time. Evtushenko filled stadiums because he guessed the pace and kept up with it. Now people like him are lacking.”¹²³

Miron Fedorov (Oxxxymiron) in an extensive interview with *The Interview Russia* goes even as far as claiming that rappers have taken over the role that poets used to have. Fedorov believes that poets are failing to fulfill their traditional role in Russian society. By now, rappers have surpassed poets, as they do know how to appeal to the audience. Therefore Fedorov even makes poetry inferior to rap music. Fedorov states:

«Я думаю, тут масса факторов. Первый — деградация поэзии как народного искусства, способного объединять массы людей, как в 60-х. Я не уверен, является ли сейчас Россия читающей нацией, как раньше, но при этом потребность человека обогащаться словом, слогом — она ведь никуда не делась. Свято место не бывает пусто. И вот на место стихов пришли баттлы.»

“I think there are plenty of causes [for the great popularity of hip-hop battles]. First of all, the degradation of poetry as a folk art, capable of uniting masses of people, like in the sixties. I am not sure if Russia is the reading nation like before, but the human need to enrich himself with the word, style, has not disappeared. This sacred place will never be empty. And so instead of poetry, there are battles now.”¹²⁴

It has to be noted however, that Fedorov by no means is trying to declare himself to be “the new sort of poet”, on the contrary: he clearly states to a completely new phenomenon in the Russian cultural landscape. Fedorov sees rap music as a new phenomenon that is able to appeal to a larger audience, whereas contemporary poetry fails to do so.

An important part of rappers’ *lichnosti* is expressed in their denial of any personal connection to poetry or literature. As these statements have shown, rappers generally talk about poetry as a phenomenon that has lost the pace of time and to some extent even is responsible for the increased popularity of rap music. By underlining this, rappers try to

¹²³ Evgeniya Korobkova, “Rep kak poeziya novogo vremeni”, *Izvestiya* (30-06-2016), <http://izvestia.ru/news/620228> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹²⁴ Yekaterina Osipova, “Oxxxymiron: Dumayu, Kendricka Lamara budut izuchat’ b shkolakh”, *The Interview Russia* (05-07-2016), <http://www.interviewrussia.ru/music/oxxxymiron-dumayu-kendricka-lamara-budut-izuchat-v-shkolah> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

promote themselves as innovators, people who are doing something completely new, fresh and different. By doing so, they even claim superiority over contemporary poetry, as Russian rap is able to appeal to the masses.

This notion is strongly confirmed by the members of the rap group Makulatura. They insist that their music should be seen as a genre entirely different from anything else, they even refuse to be seen as music. In the interview with *The Yaroslavl Room*, they claim:

*«А мы вроде не занимаемся музыкой. Это не музыка – это рЕп («Макулатура» настаивает на этой орфографии — Прим. ред.). Понимаете, есть стихи, но стихи для лохов. А есть реп – это что-то среднее между стихами и голосом улиц. Если ты за*****ский – ты будешь делать реп, если ты лох – ты будешь писать стихи. Реп – это когда ты чувствуешь в себе это лоховство, которое заставляет тебя писать, но при этом тебе хочется взять пулемет и прищучивать каждого, кто захочет дать тебе по е***у. Когда есть реп – ты одновременно лох и терминатор»*

*“We are not really doing music. It is not music - it is rEp. (Makulatura insists on this spelling – red.) You see, there is poetry, but poetry is for suckers. And then there is rep, which is something between poetry and the voice of the streets. If you are *****, you will do rep, if you are a sucker, you will write poems. Rep is when there is some kind of stupidity in you, which makes you write, but while doing so you want to take a machine gun and punish everyone, who wants to fuck you up. When you make rep, you are a sucker and a terminator at the same time.”¹²⁵*

The duo Speransky and Alekhin clearly have a very pronounced opinion about the value of their own work. As I have already stated before, the members of Makulatura confirm that they regard rap as an art form superior to poetry: according to Makulatura, poetry is for suckers.

4.2.2. A RAPPER IS NOT A POET

When rappers are asked if they see themselves as contemporary poets, they all respond extremely negatively. The question is actually rarely asked directly to rappers, but in these cases, the answer is either directly negative or confusingly vague. Vasily Vakulenko however is really pronounced about his own potential status as a poet. He explains:

«Но если вы спрашиваете, поэт ли я, то нет, поэтом я себя тоже не считаю. (...) Я стихи писать вообще не умел, это было не мое. Первый раз попробовал писать в 1996 году, срифмовал «пойму» и «приму», и для меня это

¹²⁵ Author unknown, “Kogda est’ rep – ty odnovremenno lokh i terminator: Intervyu s gruppoy Makulature”, *The Yaroslavl Room*, <http://yaroslavl-room.ru/kogda-est-rep-ty-odnovremenno-loh-i-terminator-intervyu-s-gruppoj-makulatura-22547/> [Accessed 12-04-2017]

был культурный шок. В первую очередь я раб музыки. А в стихах чувствую себя графоманом. (...) Это когда человек слово использует ради слова.»

*“If you ask me, whether I am a poet: I am not, I do not consider myself to be a poet. (...) I cannot even write poetry; that is not my thing. The first time I tried to write in 1996 I rhymed *poimu to primu*, and to me that was a cultural shock. In the first place I am a slave to music. When it comes to poetry I feel like a graphomaniac. (...) I.e. when one uses a word for the sake of the word.”¹²⁶*

When it comes to other Russian rappers though, it is impossible to find a direct answer to the question whether they consider themselves to be poets. However, when reading in between the lines it becomes immediately clear that rappers strongly oppose this notion.

For example Miron Fedorov, who explained the increased popularity of hip-hop in Russia through the demise of contemporary poetry, fiercely denies that his method of writing rap music is comparable to the writing process of a poet. In the magazine *The Interview* he states:

«Похоже, многие далекие от темы люди решили, что я пишу так: «Окей, сейчас мне нужно тут вот применить ямб и хорей, а здесь не хватает интервала длиной в столько-то миллисекунд». Я дико угораю с этого. Я ж не ученый какой-то, я эмси. У эмси рифмы и ритмы подбираются интуитивно, без осмысления — сказывается опыт и умение.»

“It seems as if a lot of people who do not know the subject think I write like this: ‘Okay, now I need to apply a jamb and trochee and here is an interval of so many milliseconds not enough’. That infuriates me. I am not a scientist - I am an MC. An MC selects his rhyme and rhythm intuitively, without comprehension: it is about experience and skills.”¹²⁷

From his statement, it even seems as if Fedorov is almost emotional about this matter. In interviews with the rapper, he comes across as a man who takes hip-hop very seriously. He is an MC (i.e. a Master of Ceremony; a term used in hip-hop culture to address a rapper), which is something totally different than a poet to him. The refusal to see hip-hop as a distinct phenomenon and the attempts to mold it into poetry seem insulting to him, almost on a personal level.

¹²⁶ Evgeniya Korobkova, “Rep kak poeziya novogo vremeni”, *Izvestiya* (30-06-2016), <http://izvestia.ru/news/620228> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹²⁷ Yekaterina Osipova, “Oxxxymiron: Dumayu, Kendricka Lamara budut izuchat’ b shkolakh”, *The Interview Russia* (05-07-2016), <http://www.interviewrussia.ru/music/oxxxymiron-dumayu-kendrika-lamara-budut-izuchat-v-shkolah> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

In most interviews Fedorov seems very keen on underlining that the craft of a rapper is significantly different from the craft of a writer. In the same interview he states:

«Люди пишут: «Вот здесь Оксимирон осознанно применяет оморфиму.» (...) А я даже не знаю этих научных терминов. Хотя вроде как изучал литературоведение. У нас, эмси, есть простое понятие - double rhymes, multis. Двойные (или составные) рифмы, составленные из многих слогов. Без них рэп не рэп. Все просто, и все идет от внутреннего чувства хип-хопа, а не от головы.»

“People write: ‘Look, here Oxxxymiron consciously applies olorhyme’. (...) I do not even know what that means myself, despite the fact that I studied literary criticism. We, MC’s, have a simple understanding: double rhymes, multis. Double rhyme (or complex rhyme) consists of a lot of syllables. Without them, rap would not be rap. It is all simple; it is all originates from an internal sense of hip-hop, not from the head.”¹²⁸

It has to be noted however, that these particular statements of Fedorov should be taken under critical consideration. Fedorov, who has an Oxford degree in literature, definitely knows the difference between a jamb and a trochee and I therefore consider it to be highly unlikely that he applies them completely unconsciously and intuitively. However, Fedorov consciously downplays this knowledge, as it is not in accordance with his *lichnost*’ of anti-intellectualism to talk about his extensive knowledge of literature. This statement therefore shows that rappers, like Fedorov, are actually consciously constructing an image and are not always sincere in this matter, just for the sake of their *lichnost*’.

The apparent difference between Fedorov’s personal relation with poetry and his *lichnost*’ of the “anti-intellectual rapper” is perfectly illustrated on the YouTube channel *OPG Podel’niki*. On the channel a video is published that features Miron Fedorov, reciting a poem by Alexander Blok.¹²⁹ As the video ceases to give any context, many questions the video raises remain unanswered. It remains completely unclear why Fedorov is reciting Blok’s poem. Moreover, it is highly uncertain whether Fedorov is actually reciting the poem, or that he is in fact rapping it. Fedorov is not accompanied by music during the video, which makes it more likely that he is reciting the poem. However, in rap battles Fedorov is neither accompanied by music, yet in that case one would most certainly speak of rap instead of

¹²⁸ Yekaterina Osipova, “Oxxxymiron: Dumayu, Kendricka Lamara budut izuchat’ b shkolakh”, *The Interview Russia* (05-07-2016), <http://www.interviewrussia.ru/music/oxxyymiron-dumayu-kendrika-lamara-budut-izuchat-v-shkolah> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹²⁹ Oxxxymiron – Poety, via *O.P.G Podel’niki*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_5tmxZeSv8&t=8s [Accessed 20-06-2017]

poetry. Especially given Fedorov's rather aggressive and emotional opinion towards the connection between rap music and poetry, the video seems highly contradictory. However, in this context, the video shows that the *lichnost'* of the anti-intellectual rapper actually is not always sincere, but to some extent it also appears to be an act.

4.2.3. THE RAPPER AS A SLAVE TO THE MUSIC

The notion that making rap music is a way of living, something "larger than life", is a frequently returning element of the *lichnost'* of most rappers. As I have stated before, Miron Fedorov believes that he above anything is an MC, who writes his lyrics intuitively and from "an internal sense of hip-hop".¹³⁰ By saying so, Fedorov makes himself subject to hip-hop culture in general and rap music more specifically. Vasily Vakulenko stresses the same notion in the interview with Russian newspaper *Izvestiya*. He states:

«Я раб музыки, я раб рифмы. 60% времени только и делаю, что ищу рифмы. Называю это физкультурой мозга: у меня есть в телефоне целые текстовые файлы, в которых по 400 рифм на одно слово, но при этом уже первая с десятой не схожи. Рэп в плане рифм сильно отличается от просто стихов. Я, например, глагольные рифмы не использую, у меня нет ни одной глагольной. Стараюсь сложные рифмы использовать.»

"I am a slave of music, a slave of rhyme. Sixty percent of the time the only thing I do is looking for the rhyme. I call it the physical culture of the brain: on my phone there are entire text files that include 400 rhymes for one word, of which the first of ten are completely different. When it comes to rhyme, rap is very different from poetry. I, for instance, never use verbal rhyme. I try to use more complicated rhyme."¹³¹

From this quotation appears that Vakulenko's entire life is dominated by his music. Again, like Miron Fedorov, he appears to think this urge originates from within, or as he calls it "the physical culture of his brain". By advocating that rap music is something that arises instinctively, rappers try to stress that rap should not be seen as an intellectual affair, as opposed to poetry. Adil Zhalelov as well mentions that he, as a rapper, he is subordinate to rap music itself. He claims:

¹³⁰ Yekaterina Osipova, "Oxxxymiron: Dumayu, Kendricka Lamara budut izuchat' b shkolakh", *The Interview Russia* (05-07-2016), <http://www.interviewrussia.ru/music/oxxyymiron-dumayu-kendrika-lamara-budut-izuchat-v-shkolah> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

¹³¹ Evgeniya Korobkova, "Rep kak poeziya novogo vremeni", *Izvestiya* (30-06-2016), <http://izvestia.ru/news/620228> [Accessed on 21-03-2017]

«Я ради себя, ради музыки пишу. Я сейчас пришел к тому, что вот я могу написать кому-то парт или куплет, припев, не важно. И конечно, приятно будет, если мое имя напишут, но если нет — мне будет ровно. Потому что я знаю, что если мне эта работа нравится, то мне хватает просто знать, что я приложил к этому руку. И когда я слушаю, я кайфую, что к этому причастен. Мне мое придет. »

“I write for the sake of myself, for the sake of music. I have come to the point where I can write a part or a verse, a chorus, it does not matter. And obviously it is pleasant when my name is written down, but if that is not the case, it is the same to me. Because I know that when I like the work, for me the knowledge that I worked on it is enough. And when I listen to it, I go crazy, because I was a part of it. Mine will come to me.”¹³²

For Zhalelov, fame or personal win are by no means incentives to write rap songs. Like Vakulenko and Fedorov, he is a slave to rap music. He even asserts that he does not need the validation from others to know his rap music is good, if he (or his internal sense of hip-hop) is satisfied with the music. By making himself subordinate to hip-hop culture, Zhalelov downplays his own role as an artist, a writer of rap texts. His modest attitude towards his own work is aimed to confirm the notion that rap music is an anti-intellectual affair.

It seems contradictory that these rappers are constantly downplaying their own role and assert they are only “slaves to hip-hop”, as this clearly is part of their *lichnost'*: their way to present themselves to their audience. The ego of the rapper clearly is a highly important aspect of hip-hop culture. However, as I have hope to show throughout this chapter, rappers are very consciously constructing their *lichnost'*. The idea that the rapper is subject to rap music is a crucial element of this *lichnost'* and should therefore not merely be adopted as sincere.

4.2.4. REJECTING PRETENSIONS TO BE POETIC

As I have explained before, expressing that the craft of a rapper is something completely different than the craft of a writer or poet appears to be another important element of the *lichnosti* of most rappers. Most rappers therefore strongly condemn the few rappers that have dared to connect rap music to poetry, as this does not seem to fit their anti-intellectual *lichnost'*. Adil Zhalelov for instance states:

¹³² Yulia Vakhonina, “Skriptonit: U menya net nikakikh pravil”, *Harper's Bazaar Russia* via <http://bazaar.ru/heroes/fashion/skriptonit-u-menya-net-nikakikh-pravil/> [Accessed on 29-03-2017]

«Вообще, у меня какое-то отторжение к этому русско-сказочному стихотворному слогу, когда слова меняют местами и так далее. Этот слог перенесли во всю музыку, особенно в русский рэп. И когда ты говоришь прямой речью, люди воспринимают так, будто ты умничаешь. А ты, наоборот, хотел проще сказать. Проблема многих рэперов в том, что они часто пишут ради рифмы.»

“Somehow I despise everything in Russian poetry-style, when words change places etc. This style took over all music, especially in Russian rap. And when you speak straightforward, people think you are trying to be clever. But you, on the contrary, just wanted to talk simple. The problem with a lot of rappers is that they are often writing for the sake of the rhyme.”¹³³

In this quotation Zhalelov accuses his fellow rappers of the fact that they are *trying* to be poetic, which he apparently strongly condemns. As I have concluded earlier, Zhalelov wants nothing but “talking simple” in his lyrics and thus adhere to the *lichnost*’ of the “anti-intellectual rapper”. Yet he accuses his colleagues of the fact that they are trying to be poetic, which makes them automatically not a part of true hip-hop culture.

This notion is confirmed by the responses of the hip-hop community to the TV show *Poeziya Bit*. At the end of 2013 the TV channel STS introduced a new concept on Russian TV. In a one-time show, which was broadcast in the beginning of 2014, fifteen rappers performed a classical poem written by one of Russia’s most famous poets as if it were a rap song. The aim of the night was to look at the past with a contemporary outlook. Rapper Alexander Stepanov (ST) was one of the participating artists in the TV show. In the short video that was shown prior to Stepanov’s performance, the rapper explains he chose to perform a poem by Evgeny Esenin, as he felt closely connected to the sentiments the poet writes about. The poem he chose namely described the feeling of heartbreak and how a man tries to heal his pain with alcohol. Stepanov states that he also has described this in his song *Idu Ko Dnu*. In this sense he compared his own work to the work of a poet: a notion that would be strongly held against him, as I will explain more in depth later. In the same film, the rapper explains how hard it is for him not to perform his own texts and that he has never done anything like this before.

Stepanov’s performance was strongly condemned by the hip-hop community as he was blamed for trying too hard to “be poetic”. This criticism is for instance expressed in the highly popular rap battle show VERSUS, in which Stepanov participated in 2016. The

¹³³ Yulia Vakhonina, “Skriptonit: U menya net nikakikh pravil”, *Harper’s Bazaar Russia* via <http://bazaar.ru/heroes/fashion/skriptonit-u-menya-net-nikakikh-pravil/> [Accessed on 29-03-2017]

YouTube show, that every episode gets millions of views, is every episode centered around two rappers that start battling. This is a typical phenomenon in rap music, where the aim is to insult and “diss” your opponent as much as you can in the most articulate rap texts. In the specific episode in which Stepanov took part he had to battle one of Russia’s biggest rappers at the moment, Miron Fedorov (Oxxxymiron). In the battle, Fedorov ruthlessly attacks Stepanov’s flirting with poetry. Fedorov raps:

«Я тоже не *баться поэт.
Я тоже могу как и ты читать стихи, и выдавать их за рэп. »

“I am also not a ***** poet
I can also, just like you, read poems and issue them as rap”¹³⁴

This clearly is a direct reference to Stepanov’s participation in *Poeziya Bit*, which is condemned by Fedorov for not being authentic. And, as I concluded earlier in this chapter, Fedorov again refuses to consider himself a poet. Throughout the battle Fedorov even goes further in criticizing Stepanov, as he raps:

«Ты от хип-хопа взял обёртку.
То есть шмотки, манеры, мимику, жесты.
Но суть так и осталась никчёмной. »

“You took from hip-hop only the wrapper
I.e. clothes, manners, mimic, gestures
But the essence still remains useless”¹³⁵

This particular quotation from Fedorov’s battle rap, confirms that the *lichnost’* of the “anti-intellectual rapper” requires more than solely the physical appearance of a rapper, but an internal sense of hip-hop as well. Fedorov implies that a true rapper is not made from just the right clothes and gestures, but apparently for a true rapper an internal element of hip-hop is required as well. By stating this, Fedorov again accuses Stepanov of not being a sincere rapper, as Stepanov tries too hard to act like a poet, which is inherently not in agreement with the *lichnost’* of the “anti-intellectual rapper”.

¹³⁴ Oxxxymiron vs. ST, *VERSUS #5 (Sezon III)*, YouTube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGuYELy8w6s&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DgGuYELy8w6s&has_verified=1 [Accessed on 03-04-2017]

¹³⁵ idem

Besides affirming that Stepanov is not a true rapper, Fedorov finally repeats that Stepanov neither is a poet: he simply is a fraud. Fedorov raps:

*«И такой вот ценитель слога, утверждает, что он поэт.
Много тем, я видел, читал, бро, нет.
Ты, конечно, х*евый МС, и не самый большой эстет.
Даже автор говенных песен, кто угодно, но не поэт. »*

*“And such a connoisseur of style confirms that he is a poet
And a lot of those, I have seen and read, bro, no
You, of course, are a **** MC, and not the greatest aesthete
You are even the author of shitty songs, anyone really, but not a poet”¹³⁶*

In this quotation Stepanov is entirely disqualified as a poet, a rapper and a musician. Apparently to Fedorov, if someone is not adhering to the *lichnost*’ of the “anti-intellectual rapper”, it automatically means this person cannot be a sincere rapper. To be a rapper, as I have shown earlier in this chapter, means to reject any connection with poetry. To strengthen this notion, any attempts from rappers to try to connect poetry to rap music have to be denounced. As becomes visible from this paragraph, the denunciation of rappers that try too hard to be poetic, has also developed into a defining element of the *lichnost*’ of the “anti-intellectual rapper”.

The ending of the rap battle was highly remarkable. Fedorov namely ended his round of rap with a true lesson in poetry for both Stepanov and the audience. He rapped:

*«Нужен поэт?
Это легко! Все что угодно, это Рэмбо, вот Гумилев.
Кобейн, Вийон, Лотреамон, Егор Летов и Блок.
Никонов Лёха плюс Эдик Старков, ППР, Кровосток.
ATL и Лос-Дог. Это поэты, сила и свет.
В них это есть, а в тебе, увы, нет. . »*

*“You need a poet?
It’s so easy! Anything, it’s Rembo, and Gumilev
Cobain, Villon, Lautréamont, Egor Letov and Blok
Nikonov Lekha plus Edik Starkov, PPR, Krovostok
ATL and Los-Dog, those are poets, strength and light
They all have it, but you, alas, don’t.”¹³⁷*

¹³⁶ Oxxxymiron vs. ST, *VERSUS #5 (Sezon III)*, YouTube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGuYELy8w6s&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DgGuYELy8w6s&has_verified=1 [Accessed on 03-04-2017]

¹³⁷ idem

This quotation again shows the constructed character of the *lichnost'* of the “anti-intellectual rapper”. Again, as I have stated before, Fedorov proves himself to be a very knowledgeable man, who knows a lot about literature. It would therefore be probable that this element of Fedorov’s personality would be perceived as highly contrasting with his *lichnost'*, but actually the contrary proves to be the case. After over forty minutes of rapping and battling three judges from the audience decided unanimously that Fedorov in this battle had defeated Stepanov. Both rappers were praised, but especially Fedorov’s knowledge of Russian culture impressed the judges.

The fact that Miron Fedorov actually won this battle precisely because of this knowledge of Russian culture is very paradoxical, as Stepanov was on the contrary despised for his poetic pretensions. Despite the fact that Fedorov is not boasting about himself, he is consciously flaunting his extensive knowledge of Russian literature. This once again proves that the *lichnost'* of the “anti-intellectual rapper” is mostly used to confirm rap music’s status as an independent art form and therefore should not be seen as a form of contemporary Russian poetry. Stepanov did not adhere to this particular *lichnost'*, as a result of which he did not defend rap as an art form on its own, but connected it willingly to poetry instead. Fedorov therefore not simply criticizes Stepanov because he pretends to have knowledge about poetry, but because of the fact he did not defend rap as an individual art form equal to poetry.

These are the most important features of the *lichnost'* of the “anti-intellectual rapper”. All these features ultimately serve the goal to prove that the increasingly popular idea of rap music as a form of contemporary Russian poetry is wrong. By constructing this *lichnost'* of anti-intellectualism, rappers are attempting to establish rap as an art form on its own. They want rap music to be seen as an art form equal to poetry, instead of being subject to it. It has to be taken into account that in order to achieve this goal, rappers are very consciously constructing their *lichnosti*, as a result of which they are not always sincere. As the *lichnost'* of Miron Fedorov illustrates perfectly, *lichnost'* should not be oversimplified as true identity in the case of rappers, but as an attitude as well.

CONCLUSION

Russian literature has always played a very special role in Russian society. As I have explained in the first chapter of my thesis, in prerevolutionary times the writer fulfilled the role of national hero. As political unity was lacking in Russia at the time, writers proved to be able to capture the nation's identity in the form of literature and uniting the nation by doing so. Under communist rule the importance that was attributed to the writer only increased, as the authorities considered literature to be an essential tool to achieve the communist goal. As one can imagine, being a writer in those times was considered to be a very prestigious profession. After the break-up of the Soviet Union this prestige diminished rapidly, as "artistic literature in the post socialist cultural model has become socially unnecessary".¹³⁸ After a major blow of reading activity in Russia during the 1990s, recent studies show that reading activity in Russia over the past few years has actually increased again. However, this does not indicate that the role literature plays in Russian society has been fully restored to the role it once played under communist rule. The average reading activity namely is still lower than in 1992, just after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In Russian history of music are several examples of music genres to be found that have been compared to poetry. In the immediate post-Stalinist period the unofficial genre "guitar poetry" acquired an enormous amount of popularity amongst the younger generations of Soviet citizens. As is the case in rap music, there is a strong textual focus. In guitar poetry, the music is subordinate to the lyrics of the song. Around the late 1960s rock music started to appear in Russia as well. From the 1990s Russian rock music's lyrics started to be published in print, shortly after which the lyrical appreciation of Russian rock music began. Mostly Russian scholars were trying to promote the genre of Russian rock music to poetry, despite the refusal of rock artists themselves. Therefore, the situation is highly similar to what is currently happening to Russian rap music.

Since Russian hip-hop has become bon ton amongst people outside the hip-hop community itself, the genre has been subject to attempts of outsiders to "promote" the genre, as I have described in the third chapter of my thesis. For outsiders of the hip-hop community it seems impossible to accept the genre as an independent art form. The Russian academic attention for rap music, in which it is structurally approached as poetry, is just an example of this. Rappers however, prove to be completely uninterested in this "approval", yet it seems as if outsiders of the hip-hop community actually are. Adam Kirsch in the article "How Ya Like

¹³⁸ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, "Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe", The University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2006), pp. 47

Me Now” perfectly described the situation: “To the poet, turning a rapper into a poet is a cultural promotion; to the rapper, it looks more like a forfeiture of authenticity. And it is hard to imagine why any rapper would want to make such an exchange. If [a rapper] hits it big as an mc, he can look forward to becoming rich and famous, with an audience of millions of passionate fans. If he succeeds as a poet, he can look forward to—tenure.”¹³⁹ Kirsch in this quotation only refers to the figure of the “poet”, who sees turning a rapper into a poet as promotion. In my opinion, this definition is already too narrow and should rather include everyone outside the hip-hop community.

Admittedly, this thesis is built on the exact same principle. In order to write my thesis about Russian rap, I felt obligated to link it to something that had already proved itself in academia: Russian literature. However, now I realize I was mistaken and I hope to have convinced the readers of this thesis as well. Rappers’ persistent refusal of the connection to poetry, in the shape of the *lichnost’* of the “anti-intellectual rapper”, proves that rap indeed should be seen as an independent art form equal to literature. The very few attempts in which rap music was combined with poetry have very rarely led to success. As I have described earlier, Andrey Lysikov (Del’fin) had to fully dissociate from his image as a rapper, in order to become a poet. Rapper Alexander Stepanov’s (ST) participation in the TV show *Poeziya Bitu* was highly condemned within the hip-hop community, with Miron Fedorov acting as an eloquent spokesperson.

In Russian rap, the *lichnost’* of the “anti-intellectual rapper” is dominant. This *lichnost’* consists of the rejection of a personal relationship with poetry, stating that a rapper is not a poet, the rejection of attempts to be poetic and confirming to be a slave to rap music. Miron Fedorov is probably the most intriguing and complex rapper adhering to this *lichnost’*, as he perfectly shows the constructed nature of the *lichnost’* of the “anti-intellectual rapper”. Fedorov, having an Oxford degree, certainly is intellectual. However, in order to have rap music respected by Russian society as an individual art form, Fedorov applies this anti-intellectual *lichnost’*.

So in conclusion, it has become clear that Russian rappers are actually using literature in order to establish their own position in Russian society, yet not in the way I initially expected. Rappers persistently refuse to make any connection between their own music and

¹³⁹ Adam Kirsch, “How Ya Like Me Now”, *Poetry* (February 2011), via <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/69644> [Accessed 23-02-2017]

poetry, as this does not comply with their *lichnost*’ of the “anti-intellectual rapper”. It proves that Russian rappers, despite all the theories scholars have created to prove the lyrical value of Russian rap music, are totally uninterested in being “promoted” to literature, but instead merely want to be respected as an individual art form equal to literature.

For future research I would recommend to start treating Russian rap music as the influential contemporary cultural phenomenon it has proved to be. Russian rap is a phenomenon that is rich enough to be researched on its own. Academia therefore should stop approaching Russian rap music as a form of contemporary Russian poetry, but instead should start to research the phenomenon itself. This however requires extensive knowledge of the Russian hip-hop community, which is hard for outsiders to acquire, especially if a scholar is not located in Russia. Still, I would highly recommend academia to start immersing in Russian hip-hop culture in order to establish a comprehensive understanding this intriguing phenomenon. It is in academia’s best interest to start following the developments of this hip-hop scene closely now, as it could potentially develop into one of the most important cultural phenomena in Russia of the 21st century.

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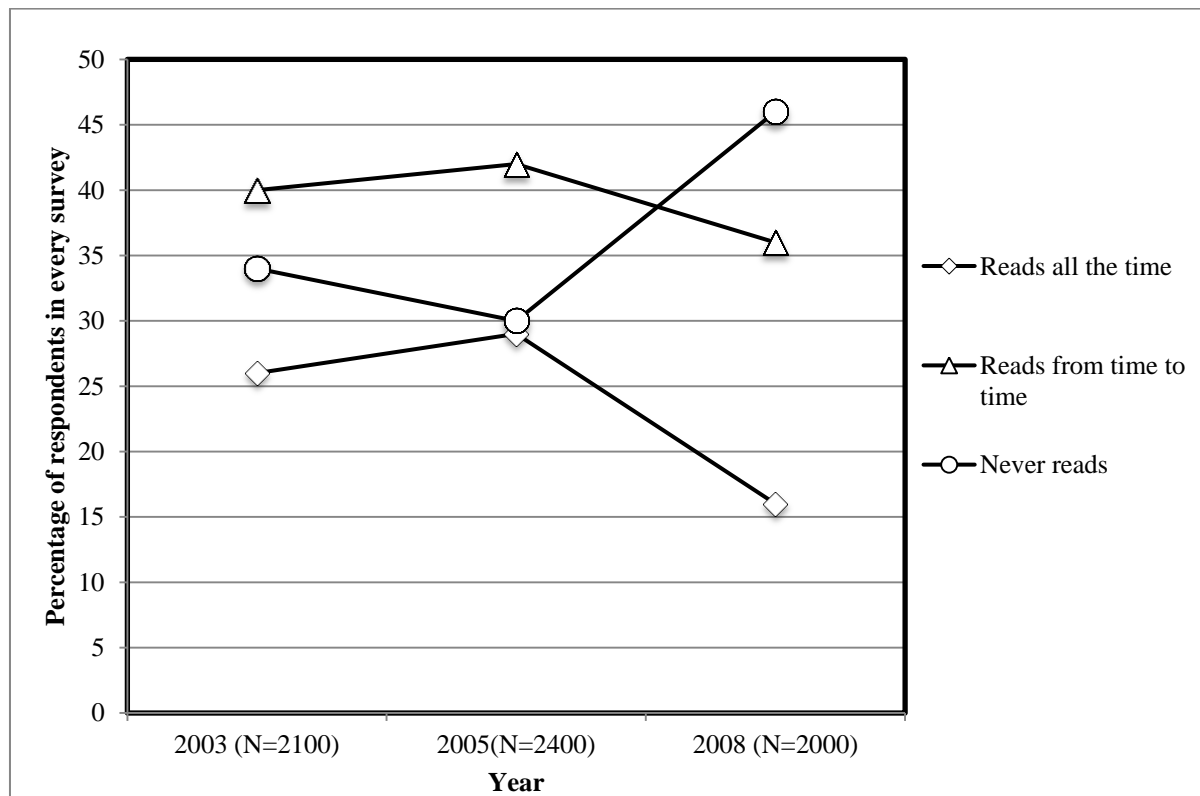
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APPENDIX

1. READING ACTIVITY IN RUSSIA ¹⁴⁰



¹⁴⁰ B.V. Dubin and N.A. Zorkaya, *Chtenie v Rossii – 2008: Tendentsii i Problemy*, Levada Center (Moscow, 2008) via http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/chtenie_v_rossii-2008.pdf [Accessed on 04-05-2017], pp. 11

2. CHANGES IN PUBLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF BOOKS ¹⁴¹

Year	Total titles published	Total print run (millions)	Average print run (thousands)
1990	41234	1553,1	37,7
1995	33623	475,0	14,13
2000	59543	471,2	7,91
2001	70332	542,3	7,71
2002	69749	591,3	8,48
2003	80971	702,3	8,67
2004	89066	685,9	7,7
2005	95498	669,4	7,0
2006	102268	633,52	6,192
2007	108791	665,682	6,118

¹⁴¹ B.V. Dubin and N.A. Zorkaya, *Chtenie v Rossii – 2008: Tendentsii i Problemy*, Levada Center (Moscow, 2008) via http://www.levada.ru/sites/default/files/chtenie_v_rossii-2008.pdf [Accessed on 04-05-2017], pp. 8