Voinovich's "Consumer" Satire in *2042*

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Vladimir Voinovich's *2042* is an anti-Soviet satire in the tradition of his earlier major two-volume work, *Private Chonkin*.[1] Its satiric intent is signaled from the outset by Voinovich's telling us that Orwell did not attempt to predict the future but rather parodied the present.[2] Although this work has some of the trappings of classical satire and of *Private Chonkin*, it is not nearly as effective as its predecessor. This may be because the Chonkin volumes employ the technique of the simple bumpkin caught up in but unable to assimilate to the bizarre logic of the Soviet system. The system is exposed by Chonkin's naive inability to comprehend it, thus successfully challenging the logic of its modus operandi. *2042*, on the other hand, features a relatively sophisticated author on a trip to "the future" and primarily presents a consumer's view of the failings of the Soviet system.

As an additional difference, *Chonkin* involves a variety of targets and a variety of satirical techniques: irony, mock heroic, fantasy, animal imagery, grotesquery, and the excremental imagery and sexual references that constitute "democracy of the body" type techniques.[3] While *2042* also is concerned with the juxtaposition of official reality to actual events as people experience them, and therefore focuses on word games and other indications of how the system being satirized has undermined language, it has neither the variety of techniques nor the ability to demonstrate rather than simply state the central messages that characterize *Chonkin*. Rather, it depends almost entirely on facetious exaggeration. The objects of ridicule in *2042* are essentially those discussed by Voinovich in his nonfiction *The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union*.[4] It is a consumer's view of the failings of the Soviet system in the sense that the paucity of outputs is canvased but the intricacies of the system itself receive much less attention.

The plot of *2042* involves the narrator, Vitaly Nikitich Kartsev, meeting the expatriate, Sim, who is convinced that he is destined to become czar and is practising to enter Moscow triumphantly on a white horse. Kartsev then time-travels to the Moscow of 2042 and is honored there as a "pre-communist" writer. In the meanwhile Sim has been preserved via deep freezing and is about to march on Moscow, and the communists want Kartsev to preclude that

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[1] The first four volumes of a promised five volume set were published in English as *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, trans. Richard Louries (New York: Farrar, Straux, Giroux, 1969) and *Pretender to the Throne: The Further Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, trans. Richard Lourier (New York: Farrar, Straux, Giroux, 1979).

[2] Vladimir Voinovich, *2042*, trans. Richard Louries (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986) 7. Further references are indicated by page numbers in brackets in the text.

[3] See, e.g., M.D. Fletcher, *Contemporary Political Satire* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), Chapter 2, for an analysis of *Chonkin* as satire.

[4] Vladimir Voinovich, *The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1985).

event by writing Sim out of his book. Primarily, however, the narrative is about how things have (not) changed, how the Soviet system continues to fail to deliver the goods. When the themes of *The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union* are extracted, there is little left over.

In addition to specific points about the number of monuments to, and the extreme decrepitude of, Breznev and his cohorts (e.g., 179 and 181; 214, 273), the major themes are the failure of the regime to answer basic physical needs; the manner in which everything is ruined by planning, suspicion, and sanitization; and the contrast between the pretensions of the regime, on the one hand, and its actual preformance and perceptions of it by its citizens on the other hand.

The first theme is the absence of physical fulfillment. People have to queue for questionable food - e.g., the queue "wasn"t long -- sixty tops" (184), the choice of coffees is between corn coffee and barley coffee (210), and the pork is "vegetarian pork" (185) -- and the "palace of love" is a place where sexual needs are "satisfied on a self-serve basis" (193). Everyone is equal and born with similar general needs, but political acceptance leads to an assumption of increased "needs" to be satisfied (200).

The second theme is that everything has been ruined by such characteristics of the system as planning, spying, the sanitization of language and the sterility resulting from an enforced ideological purity. Planning leads to lifelessness, as evidenced by the athletic program in which scores are determined by political assessment of the players (300) and by the Generalissimo's adage that "Movement is everything, the goal is nothing" (310). Spying is ubiquitous, so that sex does not seem to exist except as part of that activity (e.g., 88, 201), and all graduates receive their agent's card along with their diploma (228). The Soviet state security organ (Seco) and the CIA are described as totally cross-infiltrated (296, 297), and everything is constantly seen as suspicious.[5]

The sanitized language of abbreviations and contractions--"natfunctbur" for natural function bureau (already highly euphemistic), for example--is paralleled by a semantic form of obedience in such "revolutionary" names as Propaganda Paramonovna Bovinak or Communi Ivanovich Smerchev (119). There also are numerous semantic solutions: Kartsev is allowed to take pictures and record discussions but not with film or tape -- but cannot, then, say that taping or taking pictures was not allowed (149); torture is described as "testing the firmness of people's beliefs" (320); and a bionic superman has been "edited" (castrated) by the leadership (323).

Finally, under the general theme that everything is ruined, the richness of human imagination, as epitomized by literature, is set against the sterility created by "ideological purity." There is no paper in Moscow (164), but literature without paper is an advance because there is no need for people to see what they have written (233) and the best words can be rearranged by computer for the best single effect ("collective creativity"; 236). This would seem to over-

[5] The example in *2042* is that every time someone uses the word Generalissimo they also use the word Sim (253); for discussion of a comparable device in *Chonkin*, see Fletcher, *Contemporary Political Satire*, 51 and 58 note 28.

shadow the team approach of putting one's name on work by a team of assistants (266) and to supercede the fact that everyone spontaneously writes about the Generalissimo (232). There are no longer any critics, as that function has been taken over directly by the security police (232). By far the best comment, on plagiarism as it happens, involves a teacher rhetorically asking her pupils what pre-communist writer could have written anything of such genius as the phrase attributed to the Generalissimo on one of his statues: "'I devoted my lyre to my nation.'" As Kartsev responds, "Pushkin could have" (181-82).

The third major theme involves the juxtaposition of the regime's own claims to sacredness with the absence of remaining believers. The citizens of *2042* Moscow "star" themselves, as one might cross oneself if Catholic, but even demonstrators trucked in to greet Kartsev have no interest once they have finished the day's official activity (140); as the narrator says, Orwells parody could not exist in reality because even Soviet citizens only pretend to obey (7).

The general pursuit of this theme is carried by excremental imagery. Newspapers come rolled up like toilet paper (137), and pigeons defecate on Karl Marx's monument (174).[6] To receive "primary matter" (food), one must return "secondary matter" (148), and by the size of the pile of secondary matter left for the Generalissimo the donor was plural (346). Finally, the key to the Generalissimo's teaching is that "primary matter is secondary matter and secondary is primary" (240), presumably referring specifically to the food as earlier described and generally presenting an evaluation of the entire Soviet experience.

[6] The same device is more humorously used for satirical purpose by Mario Vargas Llosa in *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, trans. Gregory Kolovakos and Ronald Christ (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 221; similarly, Voinovich's contention that planning meant that TV sports scores were listed in the TV guide is anticipated (and upstaged) by Talvar Ulhaq, Salman Rushdie's clairvoyant police officer -- who therefore can exercise preventive detention -- in *Shame* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983).