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ARTICLE

Shnur 'Against Sincerity': Aesthetics of Imperfection and Sincerity Anxieties in Twenty-First-Century Pop Culture

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Abstract

This article examines the paradoxical relationship between discourses of sincerity and an aesthetics of imperfection in twenty-first-century pop culture, with special attention to the Russian music scene. We focus on the career of cult musician Sergei Shnurov to address this broader question: What do present-day anxieties around sincerity tell us about pop-cultural production and consumption processes? First, we offer a genealogy of post-Soviet sincerity rhetoric. We then use this genealogy to unpack the approach to sincere expression that Shnurov and his critics and fans adopt. Two recurring artistic strategies stand out. First, Shnurov creates a sincere effect by insisting on insincerity. Second, he amplifies this 'insincerely sincere' rhetoric by foregrounding a visual aesthetics of imperfection. We argue that these strategies play an important role not only in Shnurov's biography but also in a broader story: that of sincere expression as a prime concern of twenty-first-century media and popular culture.

Keywords: aesthetics of imperfection; pop culture; Russian popular music; Sergei Shnurov; sincerity

1. Introduction

In 2022, the Russian cult rock/punk musician Sergei Shnurov, better known as 'Shnur', caused a stir with a music video titled 'Vkhoda net!' ('No Entry!').[1] Released on YouTube on 10 March 2022, the clip – a joint effort by Shnur's ska-punk band Leningrad and music group Zoya – had received over 5 million views, 165,000 likes, and 13,300 comments at the time of writing. The cause for controversy? In a music scene where, despite repressions, multiple rock and pop musicians continue to publicly oppose Russian authorities' war aggression and political repression,[2] Shnur opted for visuals and words that seem to provocatively defend 'the Russian'. In the song's lyrics, Shnurov and Zoya lead singer Kseniia Rudenko lamented – the latter in traditional headgear and incarnating the pathos

[1] We use the ALA-LC system to transliterate Russian names and quotations. In references, we use the published names of Russian authors, which can be spelt differently (e.g., 'Lipovetsky' instead of 'Lipovetskii'). Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by the authors of this article. We thank the anonymous reviewers of *Popular Music* for generous and valuable comments on earlier drafts of this analysis.

[2] For examples by, respectively, Russian rapper Oxxxymiron, rock musician Iurii Shevchuk, and Russian-Tatar-Bashkir pop star Zemfira, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufRsgtd2fIA, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngFQFeZ851Q, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rynqvi4tS0 (accessed 19 July 2023).

of traditional Russian folk singing – the situation of Russians in Western Europe. Comparing their status to that of Jewish citizens in Nazi Germany, they complain that 'the scoundrels' who critique Russians are 'imposing a little genocide', which is accompanied by images of signs saying: 'No entry for Russians and dogs' (Leningrad 2022). The video is filmed in a bare studio setting and lacks special effects; behind the singers, viewers see two stern-looking men in traditional Russian embroidered shirts wearing a purple star of David (ibid.).

The YouTube responses to this video were, understandably, mixed. Some commentators expressed distaste, others cheered that a singer with 'balls' shared 'the truth' in a 'straightforward text', and yet others sensed potential 'subtle irony' (Sobolevskaia 2022; Tort Bufet 2022). In view of the persistent Russophone practice of online trolling (Jamieson 2020), one may wonder how 'sincere' the viewer comments are – but if we stick to the texts, what resonates is an urge to assess whether Shnur's song and performance are truthful or ironic.

This urge is not new. In this article, we examine the paradoxical relationship between discourses of sincerity and an aesthetics of imperfection in twenty-first-century pop culture. We do so with special attention for the Russian music scene, and for Shnurov – who is a cult icon for many Russians – in particular. We take the artist's complex relationship with the notion of sincerity as a starting point to address the broader question: What do present-day discussions about sincerity tell us about contemporary pop-cultural production and consumption processes? Put more plainly, we use the case of Shnurov to ask: What do anxieties around sincerity teach us about public cultural life – and about post-socialist life in Russia in particular?

Our article offers a twofold analysis. Building on previous research by one of us, we first offer a genealogy of post-Soviet sincerity rhetoric. We use this framework to examine the approach to sincere expression that characterises Shnur's musical, verbal, and visual self-fashioning. With this aim in mind, we close-read and compare interviews, social media posts, and music videos by Shnur and Leningrad. We also examine media materials in which critics and fans further cement the singer's public reputation. The second part of our argument unpacks the relationship between discourses of sincerity and the aesthetics of imperfection in Shnurov's public self-image and musical work.

Our studies concentrate on the years between 2010 and 2019. We do briefly revisit, first, the early phase of Shnur's career (the 1990s in particular), and, second, his flirtation with totalitarianism and Kremlin doctrines in the 2020s (the 'No Entry!' clip with which we opened this analysis is a case in point). But in our primary case study, we choose to focus primarily on the 2010s. We do so for a reason. After disbanding in 2008, Leningrad regrouped in 2010, creating some of its greatest hits and Instagram-fuelled commercial successes. In 2019, Shnur announced the band's farewell tour on his Instagram account.[3] In the intervening years, Shnur's celebrity peaked. In March 2019, after Leningrad's second disbandment was publicised, this commercial peak waned. Moreover, in the 2010s, Shnur most actively and most visibly employed the type of seemingly non-premeditated but high-profile commercial media strategies that have our special interest. Below, we explain in more detail how this phase in his career parallels broader transitions in Russian public culture at the time.

Our findings – for which we rely on insights from Slavic studies, as well as art and music theory and histories of emotion – imply that two paradoxical sincerity devices, to which a rhetoric of insincerity and an aesthetics of imperfection are formative, recur throughout the singer's career. As we explain below, these devices matter not only to Shnur's biography; they are also important constituents of a broader story – namely, that of sincere expression as a prime concern of twenty-first-century media and popular culture.

[3] Admittedly, since 2022, *Leningrad* has become active again and has released over twenty new songs, including the clip 'No Entry!'. However, after the 2019 Instagram post, the band did perform less regularly for 3 years.

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2. New sincerity in contemporary culture

Before zooming in on Sergei Shnurov, we start by outlining a broader cultural concern with sincerity, and with a purported present-day rebirth of this concern in particular.

Anxieties about sincerity – in art, politics, and public debates – hark back to old concerns about the need to stay true to oneself, and about the difficulty of fulfilling that need (for details, see Groys 2010; Markovits 2008; Peyre 1963; Rosenbaum 2007; Trilling 1971). In the fourth and third centuries B.C., both Confucius and, half a world away, Aristotle already described the state of being true to oneself in private and public matters as a crucial social responsibility (An 2004, 2008; Korthals Altes 2008). Between the mid-1980s and today, however, the difficult old question of how to be true to yourself gained new urgency. During this time, the notion of 'new sincerity' has been used by people from a variety of social, cultural, and professional backgrounds to typify a novel philosophy of life. Journalists have presented 'the New Sincerity movement of the 1980s' as 'the answer to snarky postmodern web culture' and to the 'cruelty' of social-media discourse (Wink 2017). Cultural critics have framed Barack Obama as an emblem of a new sincerity that moves away from irony and distrust in politics – but sociologists also identified Trump and Putin as 'strongmen' who 'have the balls to say aloud what others are only thinking' with 'New-Sincere' political rhetoric (Colton 2016; Watercutter 2011; Zhurzhenko 2018).

Twenty-first-century pleas to reanimate sincerity blend in with a broader polemic on a new cultural era that started somewhere in the 1980s – and that, after a liberal starting phase, gradually acquired more conservative contours.[4] In this novel era, new modes of being or speaking – a 'new sincerity', but also, say, a 'new authenticity' or 'post-realism' – are purportedly replacing existing ones (see Leiderman 2005 on 'postrealism' and Tolson 2012 on 'new authenticity'). Within the jumble of cultural-era labels, however, the discourse on a new sincerity has resonated with particular force in transnational pop culture and news media. Central to this discourse are pleas for reconceptualising sincerity – 'the assessment', according to one expert definition, 'by addressees that the expressions by addressers are true representations of their feelings and emotional state' (Beeman 2001). Promotors of a new sincerity rarely advertise sincerity as such: the sincerity that they celebrate is a reactive, or, as some commentators put it, a 'dialectical' concept – one that responds to something else (Buckland 2012, 1-5). Initially conceptualised as a reply to postmodernism, with time, cultural critics started envisioning a reborn sincerity as a counter response to a whole plethora of social developments and challenges – from mediatisation and late capitalism to post-truth politics. Poet Jason Morris (2008), for instance, points to media changes as a catalyst for lo-fi 'New-Sincere' cinema. In his words, 'young filmmakers [...] nod to the medium's first promise – to be an "honest" representation of reality'. Journalists, meanwhile, have used the label new sincerity for a post-truth trend among Russian politicians to use emotional rhetoric ('we are defending the nation') to openly justify corruption and propaganda (see, e.g., Kolesnikov 2019; Pertsev 2014).

Our short introduction to a resurfaced interest in sincerity since the 1980s is relevant to Shnurov's self-fashioning strategies and public perception, which we study in the context of a strong fascination with sincerity in post-socialist cultural life in Russia. Between the 1990s and today, several studies of cultural transitions in contemporary Russia have singled out (albeit, sometimes, with scepticism) a reanimated sincerity as a salient 'post-post-communist', 'late postmodern', or 'post-postmodern' trend (Boym 1994; Epstein 1999;

[4] We are referring to discussions about the late 2010s as a time of post-truth or of new fascism and populism. For helpful analyses of these discussions, see McIntyre (2018) and *Pfeffer (2018)*. The reading of Trump as a representative of a 'new sincerity' that we cited earlier (Colton 2016) is unthinkable outside these discussions. For fruitful thinking about 'the politics of sincerity' in present-day politics, see Zhurzhenko (2018).

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Lipovetsky 2008; Yurchak 2008). This trend does not come out of nowhere: in Russian cultural criticism, concerns about sincerity have a rich history – one that blends in with transnational inquiries into sincere expression, but that also takes local turns. Russian intellectuals have, for instance, fervently pondered sincere expression in the context of the European Romantic project. Artistic sincerity was also critically examined in Slavophile debates about a Russian *Sonderweg* (Halfin 2003; Kelly 2010; Klein 2010; Rutten 2017a). Russophone discussions about sincerity famously culminated in the 1950s, when Soviet writer Vladimir Pomerantsev (1953) paved the way for a critical assessment of the Stalin era with his influential essay 'Ob iskrennosti v literature' ('On Sincerity in Literature').

In what follows, we ask how the problem of staying true to oneself was approached at the time and place in which Shnurov gained fame: between the early post-Soviet era and the late 2010s in Russia. During this period, we can discern a local genealogy of sincerity rhetoric that consists of three phases.

3. Sincerity after communism: Three stages

The first phase of post-communist sincerity rhetoric started just before the Soviet collapse. Emblematic for this phase was underground poet-and-performer Dmitrii Prigov's question in a lecture in 1985 whether time wasn't ripe for a 'New Sincerity' – a new mode of writing and speaking that would allow artists to speak 'sincerely and directly', but 'without forgetting the entire scorching experience of what we have been through' (Prigov 1996). After all, Prigov (1996) concluded, 'we need ideology!'. The reference to past experiences is no coincidence. For Prigov and many contemporaries, discussions about sincerity were at that time, almost by default, discussions about the Soviet trauma, and about the realisation that, as poet Sergei Gandlevskii (1991) put it, behind the mask of a socialist utopia 'there were blood' and 'lies' (see more extensively chapter two in Rutten 2017a). Talk about sincere behaviour in the *perestroika* and early post-Soviet years was, put differently, talk about a curative sincerity – that is, the belief that sincere expression, no matter how complex that notion felt in post-Soviet and postmodern contexts, could act as a near-medicinal tool for dealing with a traumatised collective memory.

No less popular, in the 1980s, was a '*stiob*esque' trend among musicians and other arts professionals to frame sincerity as a uniquely Russian quality. *Stiob*, a specific late- and post-Soviet form of mockery or parody, makes it almost impossible to determine whether something is meant as 'sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two', to cite Alexei Yurchak (2005, 250). An exemplary *stiob*esque take on a hyper-Russian sincerity was musician Sergei Kuryokhin's claim, in the late 1980s, that the 'pathological sense of computisation' in Western music contrasted with a 'pathological sincerity' in its Russian equivalent.[5]

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the central inquiry in Russophone debates about sincere expression shifted from the question: 'how to profess (a markedly Russian) sincerity after the Soviet experiment?' to: 'how to be sincere in the economic reality of post-communist capitalism?'. Emblematic for this second phase of post-communist sincerity rhetoric is a controversy surrounding the postmodern writer Vladimir Sorokin. After a hardboiled deconstructivist career start, by the late 1990s, Sorokin was reaching wide audiences with more accessibly written prose and downright glamorous mass-media performances.[6] The shift in his writing *and* his public image stirred vivid debates among readers. Were they to trust this change? Or was the author, as a former friend disappointedly wrote, turning

[5] For Kuryokhin's claim on sincerity (made in the show *Telemost: Leningrad-London* in 1988), see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfikYnlGpyc (accessed 19 July 2023).

[6] For representative publications and videos, see the photos published in a *Time Out* interview with Sorokin in 2007, republished at https://sorokin-news.livejournal.com/42122.html, and a vodka tasting video dating from 2009, which can be watched at https://snob.ru/selected/entry/8326 (accessed 19 July 2023).

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literature into a mere 'commodity'? (Ryklin 2003, 183). The discussion about Sorokin's transition blended in with broader debates about contemporary cultural shifts and commercialisation – discussions to which the economic challenges of post-communist intellectual life were formative.

In the early 2000s, anxieties around commercialisation made way for a third phase, and a third question in the debate. A new generation of writers and bloggers – in Russia, but also elsewhere in the world – now pondered the question: 'how can one be sincere in a mediatising and digitising world?' (on mediatisation, see Couldry and Hepp 2013; De Zengotita 2005). Some used the new sincerity talk as a lifestyle marker, by labelling more or less anything as emblems of a new sincerity, from Bach recordings to new Nike models. Others argued that digital media facilitated sincere expression and social commitment better than print media ever could. Yet others said: no, new media create dehumanisation – a trend that we must counter by practising sincere, non-polished writing, art, or music *within* online media (see, e.g., Rutten 2017a, 159ff). Music critic and leader of late-Soviet punk band DK Sergei Zharikov (2001), for instance, observed a perfection-defying new sincerity in response to technological progress in songs by the famous Moscow-based attorney and lay musician Sergei Beliak. The latter promoted his compositions in a wilfully amateurish, far-from-perfect campaign that only fuelled the music's success.

That discourses of sincerity could also be instrumentalised in less happy-go-lucky media contexts became clear from the mid-2000s onward. From that point, we witness a downright conservative shift in Russian sincerity rhetoric – one that evokes the gloomier parts of Soviet history, when a top-down urge to test and measure sincere commitment among party members turned into a downright 'Communist obsession' (Halfin 2003, 271). One of us has theorised this transition as a turn to 'reactionary sincerity' (Rutten 2017b) and demonstrated how it blended with broader reactionary shifts in Russian politics and media (see also Lipovetsky 2018; Medvedev 2018 and 2008). Exemplary of this conservative turn in Russian new-sincerity rhetoric is a political analysis of the war in Ukraine by journalist Andrei Pertsev. When pro-Kremlin journalists openly justified doctored media images of fights in Donetsk in 2014, Pertsev (2014) framed their reports as a state-induced 'new sincerity'; in his view, this new, Machiavellian-type sincerity was paradoxically honest in refusing to hide its rhetorical goal.

As this genealogy demonstrates, concerns about post-Soviet sincerity have been fed by three pressing local and transnational longings: (1) the desire to digest a traumatic socio-political past; (2) the yearning to confront an economically stormy present; and (3) the urge to navigate and understand radical mediatisation. To Shnur, to whom we turn next, these longings are not unknown. Our analysis of his visual, verbal, and sonic self-fashioning partly illustrates the historical picture that we just mapped – but his work also complicates it.

4. 'Sincerity, madness, joy': Sincerity and the case of Sergei Shnurov

Sergei Shnurov and Leningrad first gained fame in the late 1990s. From a popular name in St. Petersburg's lively 1990s music and arts scene, the band quickly rose to national fame (and shame) with tracks that blended punk with ska and rock with jazz, and with lyrics that praised revolt, vodka, and women (for details, see Gololobov *et al.* 2014, 43f). Shnurov's provocative style remains in place to this day, but since the turn of the century, he has morphed from a quirky local icon into a leading name in the Russian pop-entertainment industry, who has performed at large-scale festivals and stadiums both in and well beyond Russia.[7] Subsequently, Shnurov's music productions and performances became more

[7] For a discussion of Shnurov and Leningrad as leading international 'representatives of Russian show business' alongside such collectives as the satirical rave band *Little Big*, see Engström (2021, 99).

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polished. At the same time, throughout his career, he has pertained an interest in the same raw, unfinished sounds and coarse visuals that Leningrad promoted (and deliberately stylised) in initial performances and early songs and album covers.[8]

Among the many traits that are (self-)attributed to Shnurov and his ska-punk band Leningrad, the concept of 'sincerity' ranks high. Russian television channel 5TV describes Leningrad's lyrics as 'erudite and sincere', though 'crude' and ridden with '*mat*' (Piatyi kanal 2017) – that is, the types of linguistic registers that in English would be called vulgar or profane, and which are highly taboo in Russian mainstream language. Meanwhile, Shnurov himself has more than once been perceived as a model of 'sincerity and obvious Russianness' (Donskaia 2017). And when the band members set out on an international concert tour to celebrate Leningrad's twentieth anniversary in 2017, they did so under the slogan: 'Sincerity, madness, joy' (VKontakte 2017).

Shnurov does not rank as a problem-free icon of sincerity, however. His public image has spawned heated debates on the singer's at-times contested artistic integrity. Critics and scholars typify his work in terms that range from 'shocking [...] but sincere' (cultureoeuvre.com 2022) via 'authentische Geste als Provokation' (Moviepilot.de 2023) to '[l]'ironie mordante' (Lebel 2018).

Shnurov's own relationship to the notion of sincerity – which can be called ambivalent at the very least – heightens the confusion. In this analysis, we examine and historically contextualise this ambivalence, and we ask: How does Shnur's contradictory rhetoric of sincerity work? In doing so, we do not take his claims as gospel: critical distance is required in studies of a celebrity who has minutely groomed his public image. But we do take the claims that Shnurov makes in interviews and lyrics seriously as objects of 'discourse analysis', as linguist Norman Fairclough calls the 'systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process' (2010, 10).

5. 'I am generally against sincerity': Flip-flopping value hierarchies

To see what is at play in discussions about Shnurov and sincerity, it helps to look at the outcry that a popular Leningrad clip triggered among Russian music fans and bloggers in 2010. Many listeners then interpreted the band's song 'Khimkinskii les' ('Khimki Forest') as an attack on artists involved in attempts to protect a forest near Moscow from road construction in the same year. In lines that hinted at the Soviet cliché that a Russian 'poet is more than a poet',[9] Shnur sang:

> Khimki Forest...
> Buy tickets, brothers,
> I am the last singer of democracy!
> Khimki Forest (Leningrad 2010).

The lyrics were widely read as a mockery of musicians who supposedly used protests to boost their own fame. Rapper and actor Noize MC, who had contributed to the protests, was, according to several newspaper reports, personally offended by the song (see, e.g., Bolotnikova 2010; Censor.net 2010). He released a satirical video in response. In 'Pobrei

[8] For example, see the early albums *Pulia* (Bullet, 1997) and *Dachniki* (Dacha People, 2000), as showcased on the Russian music site zvuki.ru: https://www.zvuki.ru/M/P/22211/ and https://www.zvuki.ru/M/P/15148/ (last accessed: 20 July 2023).

[9] We refer to Evgenii Evtushenko's much-cited 1965 line 'A poet in Russia is more than just a poet'.

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zvezdu' ('Shave the Star') – the title ironically alludes to a Leningrad song titled 'Pobrei pizdu' ('Shave the Pussy') – the rapper used the style and some of the wordings from Leningrad's original version to unmask Shnurov as a thoroughly 'insincere' artist:

> Social problems, fuck politicians
> Personally, I do not believe them but you do whatever you want there
> In principle I could not care less, the most important thing is not this
> The most important thing is not forgetting to buy tickets to "Leningrad"
> Their number is limited, hurry up people
> I still yell off my ass with a drunken hoarseness [...]
> Buy tickets, brothers!
> I am the last honest singer on stage!
> Buy tickets, sisters!
> My tongue is the sharpest, my banter the toughest! [...]
> We buy tickets
> To the concert of the most sincere group of the planet (lyrics.mp3s.ru n.d.).

Shnurov did not leave the critique unanswered. In an interview, he maintained that his song had nothing to do with the real-time calls for forest preservation in 2010, but that it was in fact a song 'about sincerity... The song is also about Africa, kids from Africa, about all of these things' (Vol'tskaia and Sharyi 2010).

The controversy surrounding 'Khimki Forest' provides a useful starting point for reflecting on Shnurov's complex relationship to sincerity for at least three reasons. First, rapper Noize MC ridicules the singer's trademarks – namely his use of *mat* ('my tongue is the sharpest') and mockery ('my banter is the toughest'), and his carefully preserved self-image of the swearing-but-honest drunkard ('I still yell off my ass with a drunken hoarseness') – that fans most keenly frame as Shnurov's 'sincere' qualities. Second, both the Leningrad and Noize MC lyrics read the pursuit of financial gain within the music world as hypocritical and link the concept of 'insincerity' to commodification. And third and last: Shnur's meta comment in the interview complicates rather than clears matters. At first glance, his response on sincerity serves to underline that the artist's intentions were indeed sincere, but the ironic and dismissive reference to 'kids from Africa' sooner disconcerts than reassures readers of the singer's 'heartfelt' intents.

The ambivalence of Shnur's comment on sincerity is no isolated case. It prefigures more elaborate statements in later interviews in which the singer directly addresses the problem of sincerity rhetoric. In these statements, he flip-flops classic valorisations of sincerity over insincerity and of truth over lies. In June 2017, in a joint interview with Moscow-based artist and rapper Pavel Peppershtein in the broadly read periodical *Afisha Daily*, for instance, Shnur compared the art world to a 'market square' and explained in markedly gendered language that on this square,

> Sincerity is the worst thing in art, the most disgusting thing. Someone who says "I am sincere" is the biggest liar. And mat [Russian swear language, authors] is part of the Russian language. And without the word ... (with three letters) [Shnur refers to the swear word *khui* meaning 'dick', authors] the Russian language, pardon me, becomes incomplete. If you want to talk in a castrated language, then for God's sake, live without balls, but I want to live with balls (Antsiperova 2017)

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To be able to 'live with balls', the use of *mat*, according to Shnur, is one prerequisite. The other is being untruthful. In the same interview, he playfully frames lying as an integral practice to his work as a public persona: 'It is absolutely clear that this specific interview is not the last one you will give to the Lord. And that means that you can lie and make things much more interesting' (Antsiperova 2017). The artist's plea for lying reminds his co-interviewee, Pavel Peppershtein, of conceptualist practices. In the heyday of Moscow Conceptualism, a postmodernist Soviet art and literary movement active in the 1970s and 1980s, Peppershtein explains, 'we spent time in endless and meaningless conversations, which were only valuable in the sense that they shook the air' (Antsiperova 2017).

In 2016, in another interview in the same periodical, Shnurov chose not to merely critique artistic sincerity but to dismiss it altogether. When asked if a song with religious-sounding verses was sincere, he responded: 'I am generally against sincerity in art. Because art is first and foremost insincerity, fantasy. Sincerity is only good on the loo when you are taking a shit. You fit the place, form, and content, everything is in correspondence' (Zorkii 2016). Sincerity, in short, works for Shnur in the toilet, but not in art (a somewhat confusing claim in light of his famous self-comment elsewhere that he writes all his work 'while sitting on the loo').[10]

In June 2017, the influential Russian journalist Vitalii Dymarskii (2017) linked Shnur's full-fledged rejection of artistic sincerity to the practice of image branding, asking the singer if his image is 'artificially created in order to be effective (let us call it that)?' To which Shnurov replies:

> Yes. But what does artificial mean? And who here is not artificial? [...] What is an image? What is a person without an image, right? Is there such a person? [...] Is there so-called sincerity, right? And isn't that a pose, right?
> V. Dymarskii – I don't know.
> S. Shnurov – I don't know either. [...] The truest form of sincerity is to say that I am lying, right? Everything else is not sincerity (Dymarskii 2017).

In the same interview, Shnurov sums up his media image as '[i]mage, smoking, myth making, cursing partly' (Dymarskii 2017). If, so he argues, one of these trademarks would be missing, 'the thing that works' in his public appearance would vanish. The 'artificial' nature of this self-designed image, Shnurov explains, does not necessarily clash with sincere expression. Rather than claiming to be completely 'natural' and 'honest', sincerity means acknowledging that this 'pose' is a lie to begin with.

The interview citations teem with contradictions, but they illustrate one thing very clearly: Shnurov repeatedly and eagerly flags a tension between sincerity and pose in his public performances. It is therefore not surprising that the same tension is a popular topic of discussion in reviews, media reports, and online fan conversations about the musician's media presence. In May 2016, for instance, music critic Artem Rondarev called the tension between artificiality and authenticity formative to Shnurov's 'artistic project', claiming: 'Shnur is a completely artificial project and people understand that. Authenticity works like that' (Medvedev 2016). Where Rondarev singled out (a purportedly artificial) authenticity as Shnurov's key asset, later that year, cultural historian Anton Pavlov pointed to sincerity as the musician's unique selling point. 'With time', Pavlov argued in an online news essay:

[10] Shnur made this comment in Peter Ripple's 2009 documentary *Leningrad: Muzhchina, kotoryi poet* (Leningrad: The Man Who Sings).

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> Shnurov understood that there is no shame in packaging any of these marginal things, seasoned with irony, which goes hand in hand with very direct sincerity, in a pretty wrapper and making it popular. After all, the audience craves clips and memes! It wants to laugh, and "Leningrad's" "new sincerity" comes in very handy here! (Nsn.fm 2016)

6. 'Everything else is not sincerity': On designing the self

Ironic sincerity, artificial authenticity, sincere lies: public (self-)comments about Shnur and Leningrad brim with these and related oxymoronic typifications. To understand why Shnur and his critics frame artistic sincerity in such seemingly contradictory terms, it is useful to revisit the history of sincerity rhetoric. This history demonstrates that reviews of and interviews with Shnurov follow a long tradition of doubting sincerity. In fact, mistrust surfaces as soon as the word sincerity starts being used. Even before the term entered vocabularies, connotations of distrust already clung to the notions that the word 'sincerity' would later unite. In Confucian teachings, *cheng* or *chengshen* – terms, now commonly translated as 'sincerity', that literally mean 'truthfulness to oneself' – was singled out as a moral responsibility. That status, of *chengshen* as a duty one should bear, implies that fears of *failing* to be true to oneself loomed large even in this early example (An 2004, 2008).

The same fears continued to resonate in sincerity rhetoric in the centuries that followed (Peyre 1963; Rutten 2017a; Trilling 1971), to culminate, in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, in a trend to mock or openly defy sincere expression. '[They will be] very naive of course, and I shall do my utmost to be absurdly sincere', Paul Verlaine told a friend about upcoming verses in 1875 (1929, 104f); and in 1931, Fernando Pessoa would go so far as to insist: 'I want to be free and insincere, / [...] Even love I do not want: it attaches' (2006). These and other canonical names in modernist literature were, in the words of sincerity expert Lionel Trilling, preoccupied primarily 'with the self' and 'with the difficulties of being true to it' (1971, 7).

In Russia, modernist problematisations of sincerity prefigured the late-Soviet parodistic aesthetic *stiob*. *Stiob* is akin to the postmodernist logic of Moscow Conceptualism, of which Peppershtein was understandably reminded in the double interview with Shnur (Leiderman 2018, 51-76). It has been called a formative aesthetic for (and traced to carnivalesque traditions in) Russian rock music (Yoffe 2013),[11] and without its 'peculiar mixture' of 'sincere support' and 'subtle ridicule' – to return to Yurchak's above-cited definition of *stiob* – Prigov's plea for a literary 'New Sincerity' and Kuryokhin's view of a 'pathological sincerity' in Russian music are unthinkable.

Shnur is no rock-only musician, and unlike hardboiled *stiob* adepts, he does not refute sincerity-seriousness or truth-lies dichotomies altogether. Although he pleads for the dismissal of 'dialectics' and rigid binaries in theory (Dymarskii 2017), in practice, he speaks profusely in classic dichotomies, as we saw. But his self-fashioning has an unmistakable affinity with *stiob* – a concept with which he is deeply familiar, as a musician with roots in the 1990s music scene, and which critics frequently use to describe his music (see, in addition to Noize MC in 'Pobrei zvezdu', Bykov 2010). Neither can we isolate his public positioning from

[11] The term 'carnivalesque' has a specific meaning in studies of Russian cultural history. Around the mid-twentieth century, the Russian linguistic and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1941) used this notion to typify narratives that thematise (temporary) reversals of power structures. His studies of these narratives included both stories about actual or fictional carnivals and works that embodied a 'carnivalesque' spirit.

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Russian folkloric traditions (traditions that, as we will see, Shnur actively invokes in his own self-descriptions), punk and 'dirt aesthetics' in Russian art and music (Gololobov *et al.* 2014; Steinholt 2022), or the work of Arkadii Severnyi, Vladimir Vysotskii, and other beacons of the Soviet-era *russkii shanson* whose 'banditist' public image prefigures Shnur's transgressive public self-fashioning ('Russian chanson' is the generic term for Soviet-era songs that romanticise urban underclasses and criminality; see Gordienko 2023).

Shnurov's meta-comments on his public self-fashioning also cannot be separated from a modernist scorn for sincerity. To understand this connection with the modernist project, we must revisit the reflections of cultural theorist Boris Groys on artistic self-design. Groys argues that in the present-day public sphere, increasing mediatisation has forced both public icons and virtually everyone else to continually engage in designing self-images to feed the omnipresent gaze of the media (2009, 3). He witnesses an ongoing public need to design and adapt representational strategies of the self and to evaluate those of others. In theorising the practice of self-design, Groys allocates a central position to the concept of sincerity. He points out that '[t]he contemporary world of total design is often described as a world of total seduction from which the unpleasantness of reality has disappeared' (2009, 1). In truth, he argues, this 'world of total design is a world of total suspicion' (ibid.). In this distrust-laden world, in Groys' words,

> [t]he main goal of self-design [...] becomes one of neutralizing the suspicion of a possible spectator, of creating the sincerity effect that provokes trust in the spectator's soul. In today's world, the production of sincerity and trust has become everyone's occupation – and yet it was, and still is, the main occupation of art throughout the whole history of modernity: the modern artist has always positioned himself or herself as the only honest person in a world of hypocrisy and corruption (ibid., 1-3).

Groys' belief that modernist artists adopt the traditional pose of honest counterforces of 'insincere' society merits nuancing: as we saw, a writer like Pessoa already openly positioned himself as *in*sincere. But the 'total suspicion' that Groys observes in the present-day mediascape indeed heightens older artistic concerns with the production of sincerity. This suspicion thrives with special force in the popular-music industry, where, as cultural historian Janice Miller argues, 'the historical figuration of the musician with a bohemian status' meets consumer culture. In Miller's words, 'the musician is an extremely fruitful marketing tool' (2011, 15). Other popular-music experts have demonstrated that studies of such 'loaded' 'value terms in music discourse' as sincerity, authenticity, and integrity can help us to unpack the tensions between celebrities' public images and their private persona (Moore 2002, 209), the dynamics of music criticism (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010), and the question 'what makes popular music work' (Barker and Taylor 2007).

In light of the media-induced suspicions that Groys discusses, it is no surprise that one strategy that 'makes popular music work' (Barker and Taylor 2007) is the artistic tendency to combat sincerity doubts by inverting traditional value hierarchies. In Groys' words, artists reply to the ubiquitous public suspicion that they face by consciously posing as 'greedy, manipulative, business-oriented, seeking only material profit, and implementing art as a machine for deceiving the audience' (2009, 5f). To create sincerity effects, several contemporary artists choose to confirm rather than refute the viewer's feelings of suspicion, even if this means presenting oneself as 'ethically bad' – a strategy that artistic *enfants terribles* such as Damien Hirst or, in Russia, the performance artist Oleg Kulik embrace wholeheartedly (more extensively on Hirst, see Groys 2009, 5f; on Kulik, see Rutten 2017a, 148f, 151).

Shnur similarly uses unconcealed lying, *mat*, and insincerity as a paradoxical (or, put more correctly, inverted) 'sincerity effect'. Some critics believe that he does so in response

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to the 'reactionary sincerity' vogue of the 2000s. On cultural-news site 2queens.ru, Galina Malashenko, for instance, presents *mat* in a portrait of Shnur as a 'testimony of [...] sincerity' in a time 'when everybody lies'. What dominates in the materials that we studied, however, is rather the type of consciously 'business-oriented' and 'greedy'-style reply to media suspicion that Groys outlines. Using sincerity rhetoric to spark material profit: that is the practice that Leningrad mocked in the song 'Khimki Forest' (2010) and that is the critique that rapper Noize MC levelled back at Shnur. Praising insincerity, lies, and such marketing-inspired terms as 'image', 'effectiveness', and 'market square': that is what Shnur does when interviewers query his intentions.

Starting with the 'Khimki Forest' story, our close readings implied that three aspects dominate Shnur's take on sincerity. These aspects partly overlap with the three genealogical phases that we discerned in post-Soviet sincerity rhetoric. One: in conceptualising sincerity, Shnur frames *mat*, mockery, and carnivalesque profanities as hallmarks of sincere artistic expression. Two: in (self-)comments about the musician, sincere expression consistently intertwines with commodification. Alongside Sorokin and others, Shnur, from the late 2000s onwards, became a target of disputes about sincerity and selling out. Shnur heightened the confusion by mixing sincerity rhetoric with market jargon himself.

These first two red threads each feed the third, most persistent, recurrent trope in our materials. This is the artist's negative or, put more precisely, apophatic approach to the concept (for analyses of 'thinkers who pursue the apophatic path', see Galloway 2016; Noys 2010, 4). What interests Shnurov first and foremost is what sincerity is *not*, why sincerity is *bad*, and why it does *not* work in art. Put in Groys' terms, he produces 'sincerity effects' by positioning himself as insincere. In response to mediatisation and post-truth politics – the developments that feed the third, media-oriented phase in post-Soviet sincerity discourse – he chooses to consistently affirm rather than annul concerns that he might be a hypocrite.

7. The beautiful as terrible: Imperfection as a sincerity device

Shnurov uses yet another important sincerity device – one that partly overlaps with and partly deviates from our genealogy of post-Soviet sincerity debates. We are speaking of the musician's choice to foreground an aesthetics of imperfection as a hallmark of artistic sincerity – a choice that matches the online tendency to praise the non-polished and imperfect that we mentioned earlier. This trend resonates in our textual sources and in the sound of especially Leningrad's early productions, but is most conspicuous in Shnur's visual self-presentation. At the same time, as we discuss in more detail below, he paradoxically (and increasingly) pairs this aesthetics to an outspoken insistence on *glamur* – as the idiosyncratic post-Soviet variation on high-end glamour and celebrity construction is called (Goscilo and Strukov 2010).

We start with the texts – and with Shnurov's usage of the terms 'holy fool' ('iurodivyi') and 'harlequin' ('skomorokh'), terms that hark back to classical jester-like figures in Russian folklore history. In the joint interview with Peppershtein, the musician presented these historical tropes as crucial metaphors for his artistic persona:

> I think that this [playing the harlequin] is the only possible mode of existence for an artist in the Russian semantic field. Everything else simply doesn't survive and looks ostentatious. If we have a market square, a crowded place, you have to play the harlequin (Antsiperova 2017).

In the same interview, Shnurov bases his self-image on the 'role of the rocker who is absolutely uncompromising, drunk and – let us put it in quotation marks – honest' (Antsiperova 2017).

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'A role', 'in quotation marks', playing the 'harlequin' or 'holy fool', and the other terms that Shnur uses in this self-comment underline the performative and *stiob*esque nature of his public pose. He presents this pose as a pragmatic strategy to survive on the 'market square' of contemporary Russian showbiz: after all, it prevents artists from coming across as too 'ostentatious' ('narochitym') (Antsiperova 2017). The last term is chosen with care: it reveals a deliberate aesthetic foregrounding of 'unintentional', 'unplanned', and imperfect looks – one that cannot be isolated from Shnur's habit of celebrating insincerity.

To understand how this aesthetic works, it helps to examine the aesthetic vocabulary of expert, fan, and self-comments on Shnurov's appearance. In these sources, the words 'imperfection/imperfect', 'trash', 'untidiness', 'neglect', 'messy', 'sloppiness', and 'sabotage' recur persistently (for these terms, see Antinova 2017; Antsiperova 2017; Kutlovskaia 2005; Zorkii 2016). If the words in question traditionally rank as undesirable aesthetic categories, in the hands of Shnur and his fans, classic value hierarchies again flip-flop: each word turns into an object of valorisation or, in some cases, downright praise.

Shnurov himself has put much effort into illustrating how this aesthetic reversal works – and he has done so both during the 2010s (the period that we study here) and in the years leading up to that decade. In an interview with the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* in 2005, for instance, the artist explains:

> What is beautiful is precisely what is terrible. And vice versa. To me, the best fashion designers are the homeless. Their imagination is without boundaries and there is a special kind of beauty in that. [...] Another example: a crumbling, half dead wing in Petersburg. There is tragedy in that, as well as messiness, neglect, and history, and at the same time there is beauty in this dilapidated wing (Kutlovskaia 2005).

'Terrible', 'crumbling', 'messiness', 'neglect': beauty, this statement implies, is for Shnur that which traditionally ranks as a defect or as deviating from aesthetic and social norms.

In songs, the singer similarly upturns aesthetic hierarchies. A case in point is the early Leningrad song 'Menia zovut Shnur' ('My name is Shnur') (2002). In this sonically simple parody on other musicians (think short repetitive lyrics and monotonous 4/4 time), Shnurov's textual alter ego emerges in a female addressee's dreams together with 'invalids', 'freaks', and 'addicts' – that is, with figures who traditionally rank as social outcasts.[12] It is hard not to identify this lyrical I – who makes a zombie-like appearance but addresses his 'beloved' in gentle French – with the norm-transgressing figure of the trickster. As Slavist and cultural historian Mark Lipovetsky (2011, 34) has demonstrated, this charismatic mythical figure, for whom 'transgression, that is the breaking of boundaries and reversal of social and cultural norms is the most important device', boasts cult status in (post-)Soviet culture.

Shnur's interest in that which traditionally ranks as defective and imperfect has not been left unnoticed by scholars and critics. Cultural historian Maria Engström (2018) interprets Leningrad's aesthetics as a blend of an 'avant-garde aesthetic of imperfection' and 'political populism', and journalists wonder: aren't Shnur's songs first of all a coping strategy for the 'imperfection of life' (Siianova 2010) – one that, we add, brings to mind Andrei Tarkovskii's famous claim that 'art only exists because the world is not perfect' (Pedikone 2008, 240).

In theory, Shnurov blithely dismisses such readings of his work. 'Who knows', he responds when a journalist asks whether some of his songs are inspired by life's shortcomings (Siianova 2010). His affirmative words about the 'terrible' and the 'messy', however, do

[12] For the original lyrics that the chorus parodies, see the song 'Eto po liubvi' ('Because of Love') (2002) by Mumii Troll'.

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imply that for Shnur, imperfections and defects can play an empowering aesthetic role. In a more critical reading, one could argue that he instrumentalises failure, in a populist aesthetics that celebrates – or, put less favourably, commercially appropriates – the aesthetics of the Russian working class that has become a trend in Russian popular entertainment. The same conclusion can be drawn from his visual self-fashioning. His Instagram account @shnurovs – started in 2013 and closed in 2021 – featured multiple pictures of the musician posing in kitschy or dated outfits in grubby St. Petersburg alleys or next to run-down buildings (Figure 1). Leningrad videos are set in similarly ramshackle indoor settings. The video clip 'Antinarodnaia' ('Anti-popular') (2011), for instance, builds on the trope of a cheap-looking Russian kitchen as background for Shnurov's performance. The older video 'Nou Fiuche' ('No Future') (2003) – featuring the singer in a worn dressing gown, slippers, and socks – is set in the kitschy-but-familiar interior of a living room with old wooden furniture and a purple striped wall with a poster of Soviet pop icon Alla Pugacheva hanging prominently in the middle.

Both these and other Leningrad videos foreground imperfection both thematically – by addressing social and personal failure – and technically. Some feature blurry or lo-fi shots and glitch sounds or aesthetics (a notable example is 'Vse, poka' ['Enough, Goodbye'], 2011), others build on wobbly camera work ('Gdeblia' ['Where the Fuck'], 2014) (on glitch art, see Betancourt 2017). The same formal imperfection, which experts observe as a recurring feature in digital cinema and photography (Rombes 2017), can be seen in Shnurov's Instagram photos. Several @shnurovs pictures would traditionally rank as poor shots: they are unsharp, taken from unflattering angles, or they catch the artist at a 'bad' moment – looking startled into the camera, for instance, or while poking his teeth (Figure 2).

The artist not only appears amidst shabby spatial settings and in technically flawed visuals, but an aesthetics of imperfection also resonates in the way he dresses. Shnur has both celebrated and, at times, grotesquely exaggerated the informal or grubby looks that have long been a prerogative among musicians – whose identity is, in Miller's words, 'historically required and understood to be an artistic, creative and bohemian one' (2011, 15). '[A]lcoholic chic' is how the musician typifies his own style and his preference for '[p]reposterous fake fur coats [...] and other wild outfits' (Zorkii 2016). The teeth-picking and kitschy clothes on Instagram are cases in point. So are the many Instagram photos and (especially older) Leningrad videos in which Shnur blithely appropriates the aesthetics of Russia's economically underprivileged working-class, this time by toying with the so-called

Figure 1. Shnur posing in a grubby St. Petersburg alley.
Source: Uznayvse.ru n.d.

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Figure 2. Shnur caught in a 'bad' moment, picking his teeth.
Source: The voicemag.ru 2017.

Figure 3. Still from the video clip 'Antinarodnaia' ('Anti-popular') (2011) (0:49).
Source: Leningrad 2011.

slav squat or *gopnik* looks. Adepts of these hypermasculine, stereotypically 'Slavic' styles wear informal name-brand male sports clothing and trainers or soccer slides, and they often adopt squat postures – in imitation, some believe, of loitering prisoners who use this pose to avoid sitting on cold surfaces (Figures 3 and 4).[13]

Some fans have dismissed Shnur's choice for non-polished fashion styles as fake or inauthentic – a response that does not surprise at a time when, in the words of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, 'the bohemian and the bourgeois were all mixed up', and '[i]t was now impossible to tell an espresso-sipping artist from a cappuccino-gulping banker' (2011, 10). Distrust towards 'bobos' – as Brooks has called the new bourgeois bohemian – is especially poignant in the music industry, where celebrity equals radical wealth and

[13] While the origin of the term *gopnik* is the subject of different theories, the word entered into mainstream Russian language in the 1980s as a reference to members of a lower-class, criminal youth subculture, Michele Berdy (2014) explains. *Slav squat* and *gopnik* subcultures are, as yet, understudied by scholars. For helpful student analyses of *slav squats* and their appropriation by high-end fashion brands, we refer to Duerschlager (2017) and Naydenova (2018).

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Figure 4. Shnur sporting a *slav squat* look.
Source: Spletnik.ru 2016.

privilege (Miller 2011). For others, however, the singer's love for dingy appearances and ditto language only heightened his cult status. Commenting on a news article on the singer in October 2017, user BC 293 writes: 'Shnur does not owe anything to anyone – he is simply a "Man" with a capital letter, despite the mat and the external untidiness! As opposed to a bald guy in a suit and tie' (BC 293 2017). BC 293 claims to believe in Shnur's moral integrity *despite* the latter's love for swearing and untidy looks – but as his own comment illustrates, both the looks and the *mat*, in truth, cement rather than undermine the singer's trustworthiness.

Campy indoor interiors, shabby alleys, glitch, *mat*, *slav squats* and worn looks, poorly shot photos: what dominates Shnur's self-fashioning strategies are images, sounds, and words that ooze messiness. What defines this form of self-fashioning is, put differently, an aesthetics of imperfection – one to which the cliché of Russia as a proudly imperfect-but-authentic nation is formative (on this cliché, see Ely 2002; Pesmen 2000, 280). Not coincidentally, both Russian and Anglophone fans and critics have observed an 'obvious Russianness' (Donskaia 2017) in Shnurov's appearance and work – an image that is actively encouraged by the singer himself, who once commented on his use of *mat* as 'it's all very Russian' (Malashenko 2023).

Shnur's self-fashioning strategies are no straightforward affair, however. They are also fundamentally self-contradictory and subject to diachronic change. In the 2010s, the artist participated in top-end glamorous, minutely styled media appearances and entrepreneurial projects – including a house clothing brand – together with his then-wife, culinary socialite and media personality Matilda Shnurova (Nagovitsina 2015). In 2016, musician Vasilii Zorkii (2016) observed that Shnur was becoming 'kind of fashionable, sophisticated'. Zorkii referred to a gradual transition in Shnurov's looks, who exchanged shabby outfits more and more for costly design and restrained chic (Figure 5). This personal visual transition matched a rupture between early Leningrad videos and the videos that the band started producing in the 2010s. Admittedly, in 'Plachu' ('I Cry/Pay') (2013), 'VIP' (2015), and 'Eksponat' ('Showpiece') (2016), the beloved Leningrad theme of failure persisted. These videos were, however, extremely costly media projects, produced in cooperation with directors Anna Parmas and Ilya Naishuller, among other high-profile Russophone filmmakers. In these new videos, blurry

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Figure 5. A new look (2020).
Source: Glamour.ru 2016.

shots and kitchen talk made way for high-end-fashion tragedies and polished, blockbuster-like imagery. The female protagonist in 'Showpiece' fails to recreate the look of her role model Victoria Beckham for a date; in 'VIP', a lack of money (initially) gets in the way of purchasing a T-shirt; and 'I Cry/Pay' cynically subverts billboard images by showing women crying and committing suicide over high fashion prices (Figure 6).

Leningrad's persistent and self-contradictory aesthetics of imperfection is no isolated case. Elsewhere, Ellen Rutten (2019) has contextualised it, first, as part of broader present-day tendencies to promote the imperfect as a token of authenticity, sincerity, or well-being in digitised times; and, second, as a new chapter in the rich transnational history of valorisations of imperfection. Her analysis juxtaposes Shnurov's insistence on quasi-shabby, punk-fashion-ish looks to historical cults of imperfection in ancient Japan, in European Romanticism, and, later, in Soviet-era writing and art. Here, we focus on its affective function, and on the question: How do Shnur's various aesthetics of imperfection relate to the problem of artistic sincerity?

In his visual self-fashioning, Shnur often pairs bohemian imagery with the pose of the stereotypical Russian 'ordinary bloke', whose normality equals sincere behaviour and a lack of political correctness. Sociologist Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2018) has demonstrated how Putin

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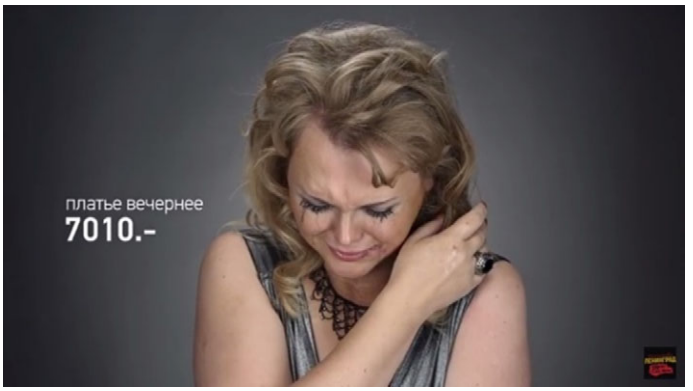

Figure 6. Still from the video clip 'Plachu' ('I Cry/Pay') (2013) (1:15).
Source: Leningrad 2013.

instrumentalises the same 'hypermasculine' pose – of an 'ordinary bloke' who 'breaks through the veneer of political conventions' and reveals 'sincerity' in 'moments of transgression' – to consolidate political credibility. She adds that, like Trump and other populist politicians, Putin 'employs "sincerity" as an instrument of power' (ibid.). Shnur, one could say, similarly instrumentalises classic sincerity tropes when he exchanges aesthetic 'sophistication' for 'common-bloke' poses in unpolished settings. The two strategies should not be conflated, however. To explain why, it helps to return to Engström, who warns for mistaking Shnurov's artistic project for plain populism. In 2018, she argued that the artist constructs an 'image of Russia as a unique "zone of imperfection," resistant to false hierarchies':

> Here it is important to emphasise that the mobilisation does not come from the centre of power but from the sphere of (independent) culture. [...] It is not built on the ideology of "traditional values", but based on transgressive emotion – on the rejection of any forms of hegemony, order, norms, and established rules of the game (Engström 2018).

Rejecting order and norms: this practice, as we saw, also preconditions Shnur's take on sincerity – from which his aesthetic preference for imperfection cannot be isolated. Where Putin's 'normal-guy' image oozes masculine normativity, Shnur performs this role with outright travesty and overidentification – possibly (although his troubling new work and murky cooperations with actors with close Kremlin-ties require separate study) even in the disturbing 'No Entry' video with which we opened this analysis (on Shnurov's involvement with Wagner, see Laruelle and Sanz Pascual (2022). *His* 'normal guy', after all, is a shabby-looking trickster-harlequin who appears in campy settings. And where Putin weaponises a politics of sincerity to 'appear as [...] "one of us"' (Zhurzhenko 2018), Shnur's straight-talking 'common bloke' is a product of norm inversion, whose imperfect looks and language match and intensify the artist's broader politics of *in*sincerity.

8. Conclusion

Our analysis prompts new questions that this study left unanswered. When, for instance, are Shnur's aesthetic preferences at play, and when those of other Leningrad members and their team? How do gender norms complicate our findings? And how do age-related transitions relate to diachronic shifts in Shnur's self-fashioning strategies? These

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questions merit more attention in future research. In this analysis, we focused on explaining how Shnurov upturns two classic value hierarchies, which posit perfection and sincerity as aesthetic and emotional ideals. Unpacking the rationale behind this artistic strategy, we discovered that Shnur reverts to two recurring artistic strategies. First, his pleas for insincerity follow an older trend among artists to counter concerns about sincere expression and commodification by confirming rather than alleviating these concerns. Second, we connected Shnur's politics of insincerity to an insistence on the unpolished and imperfect in his visual self-fashioning. Shnur responds to media suspicions about his true intent by posing as not only an *ethical* but also an *aesthetic* bad guy. His increasing involvement in the world of Russian *glamur* complicates the picture, but one could still call this a consistent choice: the artist uses imperfect looks to further cement his politics of insincerity.

Shnurov's interest in the non-perfect and unpolished also demonstrates a paradox, however. In theory, the artist showcases an ambivalence towards or even downright rejection of sincerity. But in practice, he keenly resorts to areas of the 'non-perfected' (the profane, the hypocritic, the glitchy, or shabby) in order to produce what Groys calls 'sincerity effects' (2009, 3). As we mentioned, Shnur is not alone in practising this paradox, and his case helps to understand the broader history of sincerity anxieties in twenty-first-century art and popular culture. His story tells us that, in early twenty-first-century Russia, a rhetorical insistence on insincerity can become an artistic strategy to counter fears of selling out – and it teaches us that an aesthetic of imperfection can serve to deepen this politics of insincerity.

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