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Destroying Vision, Destroying Hearing: Sergei Kuriokhin and Arkady Dragomoshchenko

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Abstract: The article explores the unique friendship and creative synergy between two towering figures of late Soviet underground culture, the avant-garde jazz musician Sergei Kuriokhin and the poet Arkady Dragomoshchenko. Both outsiders in Leningrad, they shaped its literary and musical landscapes without aligning with any movements. Dragomoshchenko, a seminal poet, defied categorization, while Kuriokhin, a polymath, challenged conventions across music, performance, and politics. Their collaboration epitomized innovation, blending Dragomoshchenko's cerebral poetry with Kuriokhin's avant-garde music. Despite linguistic barriers, their connection transcended verbal communication, rooted in shared modes of nonlinear thinking and creative experimentation. Kuriokhin's revolutionary Pop Mekhanika, a chaotic fusion of genres and sensory experiences, mirrored Dragomoshchenko's relentless poetic evolution. Their friendship catalyzed pivotal encounters, such as with the American poet Lyn Hejinian, expanding their artistic horizons. Dragomoshchenko's poetic vision, centred on perception's fleeting nature and the boundaries of possibility, echoed Kuriokhin's multisensory assaults on audience expectations. Through their unconventional artistry, Kuriokhin and Dragomoshchenko navigated the shifting cultural landscape of late Soviet society, embodying a spirit of defiance and exploration. Their enduring influence transcends their untimely deaths, leaving an indelible mark on Russian avant-garde culture.

Keywords: avant-garde in Soviet Russia; Russian poetry; Sergey Kuriokhin; Arkady Dragomoschenko

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Citation: Pavlov, Evgeny. 2024. Destroying Vision, Destroying Hearing: Sergei Kuriokhin and Arkady Dragomoshchenko. *Arts* 13: 181. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13060181

Academic Editors: Andrew M. Nedd and Dennis Ioffe

Received: 25 June 2024
Revised: 24 September 2024
Accepted: 3 October 2024
Published: 10 December 2024

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Among the giants of the late Soviet underground culture of Leningrad, the names of two friends, the groundbreaking musician Sergei Kuriokhin (1954–1996) and the groundbreaking poet Arkady Dragomoshchenko (1946–2012), stand out, in that both were absolutely central to the city's literary and musical scenes and, while collaborating in various ways with a very wide range of people, were never affiliated with any movements or groups, remaining unique and true to their own paths throughout the last Soviet decades and beyond. Both came to the northern capital from the south—Dragomoshchenko from Vinnytsia in southwestern Ukraine, Kuriokhin from Yevpatoria in the Crimea, where his family had moved to from Murmansk via Moscow when Sergei was a child, relocating eventually to Leningrad after he had finished secondary school. Both were outsiders in Leningrad culture, yet both were equally involved in it, participating in countless events, concerts, performances, and makeshift organizations and unions. One of the most significant poets of his generation, Arkady Dragomoshchenko was a unique figure in the Soviet and post-Soviet literary scene from the late 1960s until his death in 2012. Boldly innovative, cerebral yet passionate, and often imprecise yet astonishingly concentrated and razor-sharp, his poetry came to prominence as early as 1978, when he, alongside Viktor Krivulin and Boris Groys, was among the first recipients of the Andrey Bely Prize, Russia's oldest independent literary award. At the same time, despite the visibility and active participation in Leningrad samizdat circles, Dragomoshchenko never joined literary schools or movements. Always involved and engaged with others, he nonetheless stood apart, skirting the edges of canons, traditions, and trends, intently pursuing his own path.

Kuriokhin eventually became enormously popular as a musician, but also as an actor, performer, and, eventually, also a political figure. Their friendship was not just one of two exceptionally gifted outsiders but rather one that was based in deep underlying affinities that have never been examined. This was a friendship of two radical innovators who each, in his own way, challenged all accepted canons of both poetry and music.

This article is focused on Dragomoshchenko's understanding of his friend's music and his search for the poetic language of relating to it. As I will argue in what follows, Dragomoshchenko recognized in Kuriokhin's unbridled art a deep affinity for his own poetic creed and, although Kuriokhin worked intuitively, while Dragomoshchenko had a well-articulated strategy for his work, the departure point for both men's work was the same.

Dragomoshchenko's elusive "in-between" position is readily apparent to most readers of his work, which falls out of the Russian tradition in a number of ways—almost lacking references to the latter but, more importantly, by being unrhymed—an exceptionally rare thing for Russian poetry of that time. Arguably, Dragomoshchenko deterritorialized the literary tradition of his language more than any other poet writing in Russian at least since World War II. In one of the most perceptive essays on his writing to date, Mikhail Iampolsky characterizes his poetry as "fundamentally homeless".[1] (Iampolskii 2000, p. 361). Many key biographical facts reinforce this suggestion.

Arkady Trofimovich Dragomoshchenko was born in 1946 in Potsdam, Germany, where his father, a highly decorated colonel of the railway corps, served in the Soviet occupying forces. The family soon relocated back to the USSR, eventually settling in Vinnytsia, Ukrainian SSR. Dragomoshchenko's formative years were spent in Vinnytsia's bilingual environment: Russian, the language of his mother, was his first; Ukrainian, the language of his father's family, a very close second. Upon finishing secondary school, Dragomoshchenko studied in the Philology Department of the Vinnytsia Teacher Training College, but did not complete the course, moving first to Kyiv and, in 1969, to Leningrad, where he entered the Theatre Department of the Leningrad Institute of Theatre, Music, and Cinematography. Dragomoshchenko's move to Leningrad anchored him in the famously cosmopolitan cultural tradition of the northern capital without, however, severing the link with the Ukrainian line, which goes all the way back to Gogol and further still, to Hryhorii Skovoroda and the Ukrainian Baroque. His Russian literary influences are many, but few if any could be claimed as his direct antecedents. In fact, according to his own admissions, the Russian literary tradition shaped him as a poet to no greater degree than did 20th-century European philosophy, post-war American poetry, and, even more importantly, the tradition of Eastern thought as manifested in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Dragomoshchenko took an interest in all of these even before his move to Leningrad; his growing connections with many eccentric underground figures in Leningrad expanded his horizons even further. Like many fellow artists and intellectuals of the Brezhnev era, Dragomoshchenko was not interested in adapting his work to publishable standards or in pursuing an institutional career. Instead, he chose to make a living as a boiler room attendant and night watchman—shift jobs that required no credentials and allowed ample time to think, read, and write. By the late 1970s, he was well established as a significant poet with extensive publications in various typewritten samizdat magazines, including *Chasy*. It was the novel *Raspolozhenie sredi domov i derev'ev* [A Disposition among Houses and Trees], published as an appendix to a *Chasy* issue, that in 1978 won him the newly established Andrey Bely Prize in the prose category. The Bely Prize, whose winners are awarded one ruble, a bottle of vodka, and an apple, started as a playful gesture that emphatically separated independent literature from its officially sanctioned counterpart. In post-Soviet times, it became one of Russia's top independent awards and one of the most coveted signs of true literary recognition. Dragomoshchenko served on the Bely Prize Committee from its foundation until 1997 and again in 2009–2010. In the early nineteen-eighties, Dragomoshchenko participated in the compromise literary society Club 81, which was conceived by the authorities as a project to legalize a certain part of samizdat culture while keeping its participants in

check. Like many idealistic writers, he saw this not as a collaborationist enterprise but as an opportunity for a dialogue with the regime. The project did contribute to the eventual demise of samizdat literature, but it also anticipated the pluralist cultural environment of the perestroika years.

The year 1983 became a crucial landmark in Dragomoshchenko's literary career. He met the American poet Lyn Hejinian during her visit to Leningrad. Hejinian, a key member of the influential Language group of poets, was keenly interested in Soviet underground literature and, upon meeting Dragomoshchenko, immediately took to his work, even though the two did not have a language in common. Years of intense collaboration and mutual translation ensued, with both poets learning the fundamentals of each other's language. At Dragomoshchenko's suggestion, they started a correspondence that grew to over a thousand pages of a deeply personal exchange on poetry, language, and culture. This exchange later became the subject of *Letters Not About Love* (1997), a documentary by the director Jacki Ochs, Hejinian's sister-in-law. Hejinian introduced Dragomoshchenko's work to fellow American poets back home, some of whom also travelled to Leningrad and met the poet during the perestroika years. Dragomoshchenko's visit to the United States in 1988 introduced his work to an even greater number of poets and artists, ranging from John Ashbery to Laurie Anderson. The interest that US Language poets took in Dragomoshchenko's writings is sometimes interpreted as a sign that his own work was similar to theirs or that they exerted significant influence on his poetry. While it is true that Dragomoshchenko and the Language poets shared a great deal of common background (among other things, an interest in Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and in Russian formalism), the distance between their respective points of departure made their relationship one of rapprochement, mutual enrichment, and cross-pollination. This is especially apparent in the two translated volumes of Dragomoshchenko's poetry produced by Lyn Hejinian in collaboration with Elena Balashova, *Description* (1990) and *Xenia* (1994), both by Los Angeles-based Sun & Moon Press. The first of these volumes predated by a few months Dragomoshchenko's very first officially published Russian-language book, *Nebo sootvetstvii* (*Sky of Correspondences*). Overall, the poet's broader recognition in the United States (even though confined mostly to academic circles) in a certain respect came ahead of his rise to prominence back home. It is in the work of the late 1980s–early 1990s that he, by his own admission, "finally learned to write" how he had always wanted to, i.e., by focusing squarely on the inner workings of language, which, in poetry, "constantly overcomes the actual order of 'truth'." In the 1990s, Dragomoshchenko made several lecture tours of US campuses, including the University of California, San Diego, New York University, and the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he participated in Charles Bernstein's poetics seminar. These engagements were important not only for his further development as a poet but also as a source of income. Back in Russia, Dragomoshchenko, as ever, had few material opportunities, as the censorship of the Party was now replaced by the censorship of the post-Soviet marketplace, where poetry did not sell. His post-Soviet occupations included working as a freelance journalist, a glossy magazine editor, a copy editor, and even as a typesetter; later, he also lectured part-time at the Faculty of Liberal Arts of St Petersburg University, leading for many years the Other Logics of Writing seminar. He participated in countless literary, academic, and cultural projects; one of his most notable contributions to Petersburg's intellectual life in the 1990s was his editorship of the journal *Kommentarii*, which published experimental works of young and established authors, as well as introducing Russian readers to the most important texts of 20th-century critical theory and philosophy, especially poststructuralism. Dragomoshchenko continued to publish his own work at home, with two major prose volumes appearing from small Petersburg publishing presses: *Fosfor* [*Phosphor*] (Severo-Zapad, 1994) and *Kitaiskoe solntse* [*Chinese Sun*] (Borey, 1997). Two slim poetry collections also came out in the early 1990s: *Ksenii* [*Xenia*] (Borey-Mitin zhurnal, 1993) and *Pod podozreniem* [*Under Suspicion*] (Borey, 1994). It was not until 2000 that his very first collected poetry volume, *Opisanie* [*Description*]

(St Petersburg: Gumanitarnaia akademiia) was released, with an extensive selection of new and older work.

From the early 2000s, Dragomoshchenko drastically broadened the geography of his poetic and personal journeys and became a truly global poet, now engaging with counterparts in China, Brazil, Slovenia, Scandinavia, France, Belgium, and New Zealand, to name just a few places. He initiated, and participated in, a large number of collaborative ventures, such as festivals and anthologies, tirelessly advocating intercultural poetic encounters. He continued to be translated into English and other languages, and produced a number of significant translations himself. The year 2005 saw the publication of the English translation of his novel *Chinese Sun*; a collected English volume of translated prose came out in 2008. In 2005 he published another poetry cycle, *Na beregakh iskliuchennoi reki* [*On the Banks of the Excluded River*] (Moscow: OGI), and in 2007 a collection of essays and other prose, *Bezrazlichiia* [*Indifference*] (St Petersburg: Borey). The year 2011 saw the publication of his second collected poetry volume, *Tavtologiia* [*Tautology*] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie), the last major collection to be released in his lifetime. In this book, the most explicitly philosophical in his oeuvre, tautology emerges as the principal mechanism of poesis. Dragomoshchenko forcefully demonstrates that poetry's incessant, "tautological" overcoming of itself is propelled by the gravitational pull of meaninglessness, something beyond understanding, which erases any provisionally attained comprehension. To him, this is precisely what distinguishes poetry from what he, in the same volume, calls "literature", the canonical literary tradition with its clichés and fixed, closed-off meanings. "Literature" and poetry share the same historical and geopolitical landscapes, but they exist in entirely different dimensions. This, ultimately, explains Dragomoshchenko's singular position in the literary canon of recent decades and in the Russian/Ukrainian poetic tradition as such.

Dragomoshchenko died in September 2012, only two weeks after receiving a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer. Two posthumous books have appeared since: a Russian republication of *Fosfor* and *Kitaiskoe solntse* in a single volume titled *Ustranenie neizvestnogo* [*Elimination of the Unknown*] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2013), and *Endarkement*, an American bilingual collection of translated poems edited by Eugene Ostashevsky (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014). Dragomoshchenko's widow, Zinaida, has also published a number of volumes of his early poetry and prose, including the collection *Pocherk* [*Handwriting Style*] (2016), *Ten' cherepakhi* [*Shadow of the Turtle*] (2014), *Pagubnaia strast' k teatru* [*Pernicious Passion for Theatre*] (2023), and the novel *Raspolozhenie v domakh i dereviiakh* [*Disposition among Houses and Trees*] (2019).

Sergei Kuriokhin's biography mirrors Dragomoshchenko's to some degree, but with a difference: Dragomoshchenko was never a household name in the USSR or post-Soviet Russia, while Kuriokhin enjoyed prominence and popularity during the perestroika years and in the post-Soviet 1990s as he collaborated with a wide range of musicians, ranging from jazz avant-gardists to the exceptionally popular alternative rock bands, such as Boris Grebenshchikov's Akvarium (see Figure 1), with which he performed for a number of years in the 1980s, created extraordinary collaborations with fellow musicians, starred in films, hosted TV shows, and, eventually, even entered the political stage shortly before his death, aligning himself with the writer Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik movement and the notorious conservative philosopher Aleksandr Dugin (albeit the seriousness of his intention for doing so remains an open question, as most of his performances, including political ones, were always tongue-in-cheek). From his move to Leningrad in the early 1970s, Kuriokhin was always someone who could not stay within the bounds of a singular movement, band, or friend group. He always moved between genres, styles, collectives, and ideas, eventually combining things that would not have been considered combinable and producing astonishingly novel and exceptionally original music with Mozartian ease. Kuriokhin collaborated with a very wide range of musicians, from rock idols, such as his friend Boris Grebenshchikov, to jazz avant-gardists, such as Vladimir Chekasin. Throughout his short life, he himself tried all sorts of musical, artistic, cinematic, and even political pursuits, which eventually climaxed in the insanity of his Pop Mekhanika project, with all

of its musical, visual, and performance chaos, with participants ranging from opera divas to rock musicians to circus and even farm animals.



Figure 1. Boris Grebenshikov, Sergei Kuriokhin, and Arkady Dragomoschenko, late 1980s.

In his 2004 TV documentary on Kuriokhin, produced posthumously for the musician's 50th birthday, Dragomoshchenko dates their first meeting to 1971. Kuriokhin was introduced to him by the former's relative, Yelena Lozinskaya, who, according to Aleksandr Kushnir's 2013 biography of the musician, for which Dragomoshchenko was interviewed, thought the two "equally crazy", and therefore of potential interest to one another (Kushnir 2013, p. 12). She was not wrong. The meeting in the famous café nicknamed Saigon on Nevsky Ave in Leningrad, which in the 1970s–1980s was the hub of the city's bohemian life, marked the beginning of a friendship that spanned nearly a quarter of a century and ended only with Kuriokhin's untimely death in 1996 of cardiac sarcoma, one of the rarest forms of cancer. According to Kushnir, the pair often performed together in those early days, with Dragomoshchenko reciting poetry and Kuriokhin playing the piano. These collaborations continued in subsequent years, often involving other members of the Leningrad underground as it entered a less stringently policed cultural era of the Soviet regime's sunset years, which already anticipated the virtual explosion of creativity brought on by perestroika from the mid-1980s onward. Ceasing to fight the uncontrollable spread

of alternative culture in the late 1970s–early 1980s, the KGB chose to allow underground literary, musical, theatrical, and artistic associations to operate under its control, with the writers' organization Club 81, the Leningrad Rock Club, the Union of Experimental Art, and Erik Goroshevsky's Theatre Studio providing fora for creative realization (see Figure 2). As Dragomoshchenko noted in a recently discovered 1985 interview with German students Bernhard Druba and Judith Elze, this move represented "a more sober view of reality", which by the start of the 1980s had entered a new phase, and allowing non-official cultural outlets within certain boundaries let the authorities control Soviet counterculture more effectively than simply banning it and persecuting its practitioners, which by that stage had become a near-impossible task (Kozlov and Kuzovkin 2019). The interview was recorded literally the day before the death of Konstantin Chernenko, the last of the Kremlin elders, after whom Gorbachev came along to change things forever.



Figure 2. Sergei Kuriokhin, Arkady Dragomoschenko at Klub-81, Bely Prize award ceremony.

In the same interview with Druba and Elzer, Dragomoshchenko briefly characterizes Kuriokhin as someone unique in that "he has one foot in rock-n-roll, rock music, and the other in desperately complex avant-garde." (Kozlov and Kuzovkin 2019) Kuriokhin, according to him, "lives in music because the rattle of a tram, the screeching of a door, it's all music to him. Same as rock music with all its traditions. He aspires to meta-music." (Kozlov and Kuzovkin 2019). Dragomoshchenko saw in Kuriokhin a kindred spirit—one that could not be circumscribed by existing genres and conventions. Dragomoshchenko notes that Kuriokhin, despite often coming across as a simple, child-like spirit, was exceptionally well read and well versed in philosophy, among other things. This is not to say of course that Kuriokhin was a philosopher or that he ever theorized about his work. And it was more than just friendship: the two shared a particular type of thinking that Kuriokhin, in an interview with Aleksandr Kan, described as "linear": "I think in a linear fashion—not in harmonies, but in melodies. Even when I play the piano, I play as though I had just one voice, as though I were singing a song. I can play complicated chords, complicated harmonies, but I think with one voice." (Kan 2020, p. 49). Reflecting on what this meant in the context of the enormously complex shows of Kuriokhin's Pop-Mekhanika of the Perestroika years, Kan admits that despite the unlimited potential for polyphonies that Kuriokhin's assemblages presented, the structure of his pieces was always linear and horizontal, and the multiple layers were more of a visual kind.

It was the linear transitions, horizontal overlays, juxtapositions, and seemingly endless metamorphoses that made Kuriokhin's music so extraordinary. The movement of Dragomoshchenko's poetry is much the same: it is relentless; in it, forms disappear and

morph into new ones, and before they too can be visualized, i.e., not only apprehended, but also comprehended by the imagination as a certain picture, these new forms have already begun to turn into something else, so the full picture can never be captured, always remaining a mere possibility. Reality as something contemplated by the poet "slips behind the shoulder" in the processes of perception, description, and remembrance, and temporal non-coincidence between these three. Forms in such poetry are "desire that gets fulfilled in nothing" and therefore cannot be brought together in any finite "picture." What matters then is the precise moment of transition—that infinitesimal moment when something has stopped being what it was but has not yet turned into what it will be. Forms, meanings, and representation as such are suspended in this moment, erasing for a split second the boundary between "this" and "that." This utopian moment is by definition a blind spot that can never be represented directly, but the residue of the erasure is what constitutes Dragomoshchenko's poetics of indifference. Dragomoshchenko noticed the same pattern of thinking in Kuriokhin. As he put it in his interview to Aleksandr Kushnir for his biography of the musician, "Kuriokhin had a distinct literary gift. [. . .] It's a very mobile, very light way of thinking with a constant awareness of the inevitability of erasure, undermining of the meaning that has just been produced. This device impresses and demolishes any inertia of perception: we expect one thing and get something completely different! This is how you get the impression of an extraordinary volume and an extraordinary amount of information. I would call this device 'intuitively masterful syntax'."(Kan 2020, p. 47). He was speaking more in reference to Kuriokhin's hilarious and at times outrageous TV programmes, such as his legendary performance on the Leningrad TV show Fifth Wheel in 1991, in which he asserted and scientifically "proved" that Lenin consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms and eventually morphed into one, but, as we will see, this equally applied to Kuriokhin's music, as the latter had an inner intuitive understanding of what he wanted to do in his music, and it resonated powerfully with what Dragomoshchenko was doing in his poetry (Figure 3). (Kushnir 2013, p. 152).

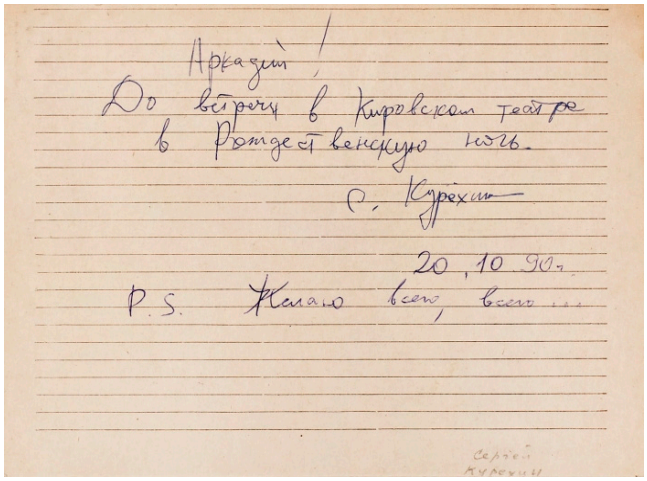


Figure 3. A personal handwritten note by Sergei Kuriokhin, addressed to the poet Arkady Dragomoshchenko. Leningrad, USSR, 1990.

It was thanks to Dragomoshchenko's involvement with Leningrad's musical avant-garde that one of the most important meetings of his life took place, that with the American poet Lyn Hejinian, who travelled to the USSR with her husband Larry Ochs' ROVA saxophone quartet in June 1983. Aleksandr Kan, who was a fan of ROVA's work, had invited the musicians to visit the USSR two years earlier, but since he could offer neither an official platform for their performances, nor any kind of funding for the trip, he had little hope of them coming. The San Francisco Bay Area musicians, however, were so keen to perform in the Soviet Union that they managed to raise enough money to make the journey, which became just as big an event for Leningrad musicians and writers as it was for ROVA and

their family members. Despite the setback of the Contemporary Music Club's closure a year before (mainly due to this venture not being officially sanctioned by the KGB), Kan managed to persuade Leningrad KGB culture curators that the Americans had nothing but friendship and music on offer, and that no politics would be part of the visit; the quartet eventually played to the jam-packed auditorium of the Dostoyevsky Museum. (Rogers 1984). Kuriokhin joined in the performance at ROVA's historic concert at the Dostoyevsky Museum in Leningrad in 1983, and he too met the American visitors, even though his interaction with them would have been more musical than verbal as, according to Kushnir's biography, he did not really speak much English at the time. Kan, too, relates that he had to translate for most of the Russian party because he and the British researcher and translator Michael Molnar were the only two bilingual people present (Kan 2020, p. 79).

Reminiscing on this meeting in her online lecture at the penultimate Dragomoshchenko Poetry Prize (2020) before the prize was suspended following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, during the memorable evening in June 1983 when she met Dragomoshchenko for the first time in his apartment, Lyn Hejinian had this to say:

> About his own poetry, Arkady said that he was trying to create a world—a world that was and was not this one. There is an observation that is so often repeated that it's become a cliché; namely that literature creates worlds. Or, to put it another way, that writers engage in worldbuilding. Of course, this is true. The imagination [. . .] is perpetually creating worlds. [. . .] But what Arkady meant when he said that he was trying to create a world had little to do with any of this. His point of departure—and, ultimately, of arrival—was not imagination but perception. Perceiving occurs in flashes—flashes of arrival (the arrival of the perception) and flashes of disappearance. Ultimately, one perceives nothing. Nothing, however, is something: a large or small hole, a puncture, a gap, a void, an abyss, empty space between visible stars, brief silence between words. But it is also an aperture or portal; the opening into impossibility, or sheer potentiality. (Hejinian 2020)

Challenging the boundaries of perception is at the bottom of Kuriokhin's musical art, where all senses could be assaulted—not just hearing, but also sight, which clearly happened in the Pop Mekhanika performances. One of the most extreme such performances that took place in Helsinki in 1995, not long before Kuriokhin's death, also included olfactory weapons, with a huge sheet of plastic descending on the audience and strong-smelling substances being sprayed (one Finnish newspaper described the smell as that of fried human flesh) (as cited in Kushnir, p. 4). What did Kuriokhin pursue through this? The answer may be gleaned in Dragomoshchenko's poem dedicated to Kuriokhin, which he included in his first comprehensive collection, *Opisanie* (*Description*) (2000). In the posthumous collection *Velikoe odnoobrazie liubvi*, prepared by Dragomoshchenko's widow Zinaida, the poem is dated to 1974. It was first published in the fourth issue of Dmitry Volchek's *Mitin zhurnal* in 1985, along with three other poems, with a note that in the same year they came out in Michael Molnar's translation in *Poetry Nation Review* in the UK. (Dragomoshchenko 1985, p. 49). Clearly, Dragomoshchenko wanted to include it in his 2000 volume as a tribute to Kuriokhin, who had died only four years prior. The poem appears slightly edited for this collection in terms of layout and one punctuation mark compared to its 1985 version.

Курехину С.

Пять цветов разрушает зрение
Пять звуков разрушает слух.
Лао-Цзы

Есть простота в речах и есть печаль зимы –
основа летнего ночного удивленья.
Не полусвет свечи в нагаре сновиденья,

сквозит звезда средь умных разветвлений
на дни и ночи. Свет в вещах поник
и не пятнает марлю радужной сетчатки.
Томленье скудное воды
не смеет повторить течение деревьев. Какая смерть!
–
симметрии свеченье: он, кто уже как пыль,
она еще не пылью, и вертикаль реки раскалена.
Вот ствол и лист. И пристальность листа.
Вот, лист кружит, но ствол недвижим,
и тень отсутствует, и света нет,
и слово жизнь, как кварца друза
в прожилках меру пустоты хранит
залогом легкости и смысла,
подобно черепу, хранящему любовно
немного глины для перстов Творца,
или для ласточек, слюной крепящих гнезда,
или для жернова рябого гончара.
И всё–не свет. Не тень. Не тетива,
гремящая рекою в час разлива,
дыханье слепнет, слух приемлет мощь,
ущерб звучания избегнув. Нет, музыке не быть.
Как временами ее укрыть от воплощенья?
Настолько совершенна эта ночь,
что нет нужды в ее продлении.
Туман, как стеарин, пытается заполнить,
или запомнить, или увести в прорехи,
выжженные голосами.
Встает зимы отвесная стена,
а в языке черствеет простота,
перерастая хищно в известь.
(Dragomoshchenko 2000, p. 335–36)
For S. Kuriokhin.
Five colours destroys vision.
Five sounds destroys hearing.
Lao-tse
There is simplicity in speech and there is winter's sadness –
the base of summer nights' wonder.
Not the half-shimmer of a candle in the snuff of a dream.
a star shines through the clever bifurcations
into days and nights. The light in things has sunk
and doesn't stain the retina's cheesecloth.
The water's scanty languor
dares not repeat the flowing of trees. What a death!
—
symmetry's shimmer: it [masc. *on*] which is like dust already,
it [fem. *ona*] is not yet dust, and the river's vertical line is red-hot.
Here's the tree trunk and here's the leaf. And the steadfastness of the leaf.
There, the leaf is whirling, but the tree trunk is still,
and the shade is absent, and there is no light,
and the word life, like a druse of quartz
keeps the measure of emptiness in its cracks.
as a guarantee of lightness and sense,
like a scull, that keeps with love

a little clay for the Creator's fingers,
or for the swallows that glue their nests with spit,
or for the grindstone of a pockmarked potter.
And all—neither light. Nor shadow. Nor bowstring
that roars like a river when it floods,
the breath goes blind, the hearing takes on might,
avoiding the damage of sound. No, music there shall not be.
How to hide it from its embodiment in time?
This night is so perfect
that there is no need in its extension.
Fog, like stearin, attempts to fill
or remember, or lead into the jags
burnt through with voices.
Winter's sheer wall emerges,
and in the language, simplicity goes stale,
ravenously morphing into lime. (Dragomoshchenko 1985, p. 46)

The lines from the *Tao Te Ching*, which Dragomoshchenko chose for his epigraph, call for moderation in everything (as the general purpose of the book is to teach how to achieve harmony and equilibrium). One should move beyond the senses, not pay too much attention to outer perceptions, and choose inner contemplation. Dragomoshchenko, however, subtly reverses the meaning of Lao-tse's verse: where in the original it is the five colours traditionally identified in Chinese culture that destroy vision and the five notes of the Chinese pentatonic scale that destroy hearing, in his version, what should be the plural "*unichtozhaiut*" becomes the singular "*unichtozhaet*", which changes the syntax by swapping the subject and the object and asserts the opposite—now it is perception that becomes the destroyer: vision destroys colours and hearing destroys sounds. This is very much in keeping with what Kuriokhin intuitively tried to do in his art, particularly in the later years, as he assaulted all senses of the audience at once with a cacophony of eclectic music and performance bacchanalia. Hearing and vision aspire to the empty space that is the absence of music and spectacle. Ultimately—in death—as Hejinian reminds us, "one perceives nothing", but then again, this nothing is something that essentially is a portal to "a sheer potentiality", something that is and is not there.

The poem revolves around the "shimmering of symmetry", which is that of day and night, winter and summer. The simplicity of the winter's sorrow is the foundation of the summer nights' wonder (one would assume this to be St Petersburg's trademark white nights). The ray of light, as it moves, flashes in a number of forking meanings that join together and separate an indeterminate pair of feminine and masculine pronouns, which substitute a number of lines further down for light/*svet* (masculine) and shadow/*ten'* (feminine). As Michael Molnar points out in his astute commentary on his translation, "its sense is founded on sound, not logic—on the fact that eight words are constructed from variations of six phonemes—s, v, n, i, t, e—and that light, *svet* and shade, *ten',* visibly or audibly re-form into a bowstring, *tetiva.* The senses are crossed: breath or utterance goes blind, hearing creates images." (Dragomoshchenko 1985, p. 49). In the end, the ideally simple essence of speech is to be burnt through in the process of speaking, but the destruction of simplicity is the rebirth of language. That which restores language is the nature of the river, its forgotten flow. The crossing of senses is very much what happens in Kuriokhin's performances too, with music and performance deliberately attacking both vision and hearing. One only needs to watch recordings of Pop Mekhanika's concerts to become aware of this conflation. Different styles of music, from opera to rock to folk alternate with costumed dances, people wrecking metal pieces, animals marching across the stage, etc.—all of this assaults the senses in a way that essentially kills the music as it kills comprehension, leading the listener into the realm of the sublime which Dragomoshchenko acknowledges by name in his last collection, *Tavtologiia*, when he invites the reader to

renegotiate meanings, peering into the gaps and in-between spaces that signify blind spots at the heart of experience.

Concluding my analysis, it would be pertinent to emphasize that Arkady Dragomoshchenko's poem delves into the complexities of sensory perception, weaving a tapestry of imagery and philosophical inquiry around the avant-garde Soviet jazz musician Sergey Kuriokhin. At its core, the poem explores the interplay between sensory experience, language, and artistic expression, drawing inspiration from Taoist philosophy while also subverting its traditional meanings. The epigraph from the *Tao Te Ching* sets the stage for a contemplation on moderation and inner contemplation, but Dragomoshchenko subtly twists its interpretation. Rather than advocating for moderation in sensory perception, the poem suggests that perception itself becomes the destroyer—vision destroys colours, and hearing destroys sounds. This inversion aligns with Kuriokhin's artistic endeavours, which often aimed to overwhelm the audience's senses with a cacophony of eclectic music and performance. The poem's imagery oscillates between simplicity and complexity, drawing parallels between winter's sorrow and summer nights' wonder. This juxtaposition serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of existence, where simplicity gives birth to complexity and vice versa. Dragomoshchenko employs linguistic playfulness, manipulating gendered pronouns and phonemes to evoke a sense of fluidity and ambiguity in meaning. Michael Molnar's commentary highlights the intricate construction of the poem, noting its reliance on sound rather than logic. The repetition and transformation of phonemes create a sense of rhythm and musicality, mirroring Kuriokhin's experimental approach to music and performance. The crossing of senses—where breath goes blind and hearing creates images—reflects the sensory overload experienced in Kuriokhin's spectacles, where music and performance blur the boundaries between sight and sound. The poem's main message reflects on the destruction and rebirth inherent in language and artistic expression. The act of speaking burns through the simplicity of language, yet this destruction paves the way for renewal and reinterpretation. Dragomoshchenko invokes the metaphor of the river's forgotten flow, symbolizing the cyclical nature of creativity and the fluidity of artistic expression. Ultimately, the poem invites the reader to explore the gaps and blind spots at the heart of experience, embracing the sublime and transcending conventional modes of understanding. In Kuriokhin's performative spectacles, as in Dragomoshchenko's poetry, the boundaries between art and reality blur, leading the audience into the realm of the unknown and the ineffable.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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