

## Young and Fearless

by Silvia Bombardini



J.W. Anderson, FW15

The first generation of post-soviet youth is coming of age, and the whole world is watching. Factually still, if no longer politically secluded, an inside culture that prospered after the fall of the Iron Curtain is ripe for the appetite, among a certain niche of global media, for genuine radical sentiment within the overarching theme of recent-past nostalgia. Confinement allowed it to ripen, yet the reason why it's youthful rather than simply traditional is that it's still a fusion culture if you squint. It assimilated the fervently outspread influence of its western neighbours, albeit filtered and often lost in translation, inside the idealistic mindset that those with no actual recollection of soviet life can freely afford to romanticize. They called it *Ostalgie* in unified Berlin: a wistfulness of sorts, for the gone days in the East – or *Ost*, as it's spelled in German. Unveiled so far mainly digitally, and only just enough to pique the curiosity of dedicated international followers, post-soviet youth culture owes to the internet the better part of its fledgling popularity: the World Wide Web is opening wide doors that the fall of the Berlin Wall and years of EU expansion had barely left ajar.

Although from a western point of view, it's all the more intriguing as it is mysterious. Just think of Gosha Rubchinskiy's success, and his trademark use of Cyrillic lettering, incomprehensible to many. It's a formula

that worked before – KTZ perhaps most of all has built upon the charm of cryptic streetwear, and the Slavic alphabet, more hardcore, maybe more mystical, less kawaii than the by now familiar Japanese, conveys a mood for which proper translation might not be necessary. It’s risky, yet we tend to trust it. I got my Rubchinskiy t-shirt translated by a friend who studies Russian, and malachite green on black, it says: *always be prepared*. Even when the patriotism is tuned down and slogans switch back to English, the witty, uncompromising attitude that we’ve come to associate with the area remains, and wins native talents the sympathy of more relevant authorities than our own. CSM alum Tigran Avetisyan, who stole the show in 2012 with a graduation collection overlaid with chalky statements including *no jobs, much pressure* and *nothing more to say*, in an interview with [Drop Magazine](#) a few seasons later mentions Opening Ceremony’s wish to focus on his motherland for the year to come. While packing his garments in the Moscow he left London for, to send them over to one of the most respected fashion retailers worldwide, he adds: *“it’s really exciting to be a Russian designer right now”*.



ZDDZ, FW15

Raspy and bleak, but not without poetry, the principles of post-soviet youth culture agree with the unprecedented suburban longing that has seen other artists leaving downtown for the outskirts, or somewhat more cautiously, saturated metropolis for more forgiving ones, such as Vilnius or Riga, or the rise in Kiev of a glorified rave scene. The impression of relative freedom from an overbearing corporate system, coupled with the virtual backing of far-reaching online networks to keep them company and reassure, both appeal to the Millennial romantic but sensible soul, and hubs and fashion weeks are flourishing in the former Eastern Bloc. Or, as it was suggested we should call the territory now that we’re doing away at last with long outdated western-centric perspectives, the *Former West*. More than just a

stimulating backdrop, the boxy contours of its architecture, its chintz wallpaper and lo-tech colour palette are seeping into the work, both locally and abroad, of those perceptive enough to keep an eye on the scene – and lend themselves almost too easily to fashion in particular. New designs may be ironed flat or laundered so heavily as to appear almost weathered, putty where they could have been white and charcoal rather than black. The monotony and the crisp melancholia of their surroundings, enigmatic aesthetic and tough, streetwise temperament of the young make up a ready-made moodboard creatives seem more and more frequently tempted towards.

But as the boundaries between underground and mainstream grow more and more permeable on both sides, some would worry about the known dangers of such a peak of interest for these countries and their youth – mainly, the lure of globalization, and a consequent loss of authenticity. And yet, while the curious westerners entertain mostly harmless, if naïve, illusions of cultural discovery, the number of hip young designers from the post-communist world who still stay true to their roots seems to denote a new awareness, and a desire to both export and preserve. The winter 2015 season of Ukrainian label Ksenia Schneider for one pays tribute to the local figure of the *Zarobitchanin* – the hard hat or ploughman, working class fellow who works hard to feed their family. Estonian Marit Ilison takes it one step further, and inspired by the native stockbreeders and milkmaids, upcycles original Soviet woollen blankets into soft outerwear for her *Longing for Sleep* collection. ZDDZ's Dasha Selyanova browses through the photos and memories of her youth in post-soviet Saint Petersburg, when, she tells *Dazed*, she was “*hanging out with a group of rappers called ‘The Dragons’*”, while Rubchinskiy refers to the style, if not perhaps the extremist views, of the Nazbols members of the National Bolsheviks movement, illegally founded by Eduard Limonov in 90s Russia. He takes the edge off by superimposing some of the defining details, and mullet hairstyles, of the unabashedly materialistic Paninari subculture popular in Italy throughout the 80s. There may, however, be more than one reason for the reference. Indeed, what could easily be read as an attempt to divert our attention abroad, maybe to better reach those foreign audiences that really don't require any further persuasion, is exactly what makes of Gosha Rubchinskiy the finest representative of *post-soviet* youth culture rather than just a nostalgic Soviet: the decontextualized, but eloquent, impact of only the most flamboyant of western archetypes. It's an impact that over the past 25 years was felt in the Russian capital most of all – enough so that another young brand, diametrically opposite but no less genuine than the ones just listed, has set up to cater ostensibly to the still rather new slice of Moscow's demographic pie that more enthusiastically has bought into their own rendition of capitalist ideals. Favoured at home by savvy editors such as Ksenia Solovieva at Tatler or Aliona Doletskaya at Interview, and abroad by the likes of Elle Fanning, Andrey Artyomov's Walk Of Shame is sold at Opening Ceremony along with Avetisyan, yet compared to the rest of their stock maintains to some extent a ruble-friendly price-tag. Artyomov appears to reference both the hedonistic, expensive lifestyle of the 90s Russian nouveau riche stereotype, and the

even more hedonistic, expensive-looking one of the nouveau riche wannabe. Among the label's best-sellers his *I'm A Luxury* sweater, not unlike the one Princess Diana was photographed wearing once.



Gosha Rubchinskiy, FW15 & ravers in Kiev by Lesha Berezovskiy – both via Dazed Digital.com

An approach akin to Rubchinskiy and Schneider's, less subtle if we will than Walk Of Shame's, is shared still in Moscow by model agency *Lumpen* and the unconventional beauty they choose to stand for. Short for *lumpenproletariat*, *lumpen* literally means *lower class* – it also means *rags* in German. The agency is one of many players in the setback of elitism in recent fashion, which finds its best expression in the widespread reevaluation of workwear, and among its spoken advocates no less than Donatella Versace, hers a logo not so long ago closely associated with New Russian gaudiness. Blue-collar liveries such as the mechanic's overalls, blacksmith's apron or fisherman's oilskin, janitor coat and carpenter pants are revamped and sentimentalized by brands the likes of Kenzo, 3.1 Phillip Lim and Lemaire, YMC or MSGM – the classic wrench among other tools repurposed in pendants and brooches as surrealist menswear jewellery by both KTZ and J.W. Anderson. When the repairman came to fix our boiler in June, it could have been an exclusive preview of the SS16 season. And if their original intent as a mean of caution and care in a specialized milieu couldn't help but get lost in the process, the urge to get rid of the uniforms' adopted connotations, symbolizing limited social power rather than expertise, is palpable. In doing so, designers rediscover the merit of those traditional values that this clothing effortlessly conveys: honesty and modesty, the discipline of regimental tailoring, the practicality of placket pockets, even solidarity and the esprit de corps that can result from something fashion has often strived to eschew – uniformity. It is no wonder that an exhibition on the subject of *Workwear* was held last summer in Milan of all cities: for the largely unemployed youth of the economic crisis is realistic rather than ambitious, more sensitive, and understandably irked by the



yuppie notion of dressing to impress. Anastasiia Fedorova at [The Calvert Journal](#) links to this consciousness of an unreliable future lying ahead Europe's recent fascination with the post-soviet region: "After the fall of the Wall we all ended up in the east. The dream of consumerism has failed us all", she writes "we're looking to those who grew up in the ruins of a collapsed system hoping to get some useful lessons for the future".



Kenzo, SS16 – via Essential Homme Mag.com

Based in London but looking exclusively at the new east, *The Calvert Journal* might be the most auspiciously focused in geographical terms, but it joins several more glossy magazines that have been in latest seasons as fundamental as DIY zines to uphold and circulate working-class aesthetics, and a new and essential distinction between fashion and privilege. Many, probably due to the country's prized denim heritage and near-legendary working habits, are Japanese titles, like *Clutch* or *Workwear*. But then there's *LAW* in the UK, that stands for *Lives And Works*, and *DUST* in Berlin that's distinctly partial to the gritty, supposedly lowbrow sensuality of post-soviet youth. Publications are in this instance especially important, because just as much as via new designs, that differ from their inspiration at times so slightly they could be vintage deadstock themselves, the industry's interest has declared itself through styling. So much so that a word for coined for it, *coldcore*. Take Alexander Wang's spring 2016 suede boiler suit, or Céline's wintry one in boiled wool – they're still luxury items, fanciful ones. You wouldn't wear them to clean the soot from inside the firebox of a steam locomotive, but on location in peripheral Minsk, worn by Lumpen models, they might just look like you could, and that's good enough. J.W. Anderson recently unveiled a FW15 campaign shot in Estonia with street-casted models. Young photographers, filmmakers and stylists from the post-soviet world, hot as the *coldcore* trend can get, gifted with homebred scouting insight, fresh, eager and way

more affordable than their western counterparts, are courted by big media companies on the hunt for the next bright thing, as soon as they get a glimpse of their work on Instagram or flickr.

Ultimately though, it's not on paper, in the museums or even down the catwalk that the downfall of elitism can be noticed clearer than on the street. The number of social gatherings for which we forgo ACNE or A.P.C. to wear instead brands like Carhartt or Levi's has increased exponentially, now that higher-up labels appear to be doing their best to look just like them, and collaborations are multiplying. One of Carhartt's most recent is with Slam Jam, an Italian streetwear company whose own online store truly goes by the URL of [slamjamsocialism.com](http://slamjamsocialism.com). Dungarees, a workwear style almost proverbially unflattering if you don't have the mien of a celebrity off duty, preferably Alexa Chung's, are flying off the shelves. We've seen them in leather on the runway from Chalayan to Hermès, but it's at Asos that sales are up to over 160% compared to last year, according to [The Guardian's](#) Lauren Cochrane. Those of us left with obviously pricey wardrobes walk around almost bashfully. The days of in-your-face opulence are over: the logo hides in the care label, and no one but you will know it's there.

It's hard to fault those who think the style disingenuous. A different article on [The Guardian](#) website about the likewise unfortunately nicknamed British *nu-lad* styling quotes Andreas Branco, founder of second-hand e-tailer Wavey Garms: "*These people want to look working-class when they're not*". The author argues on about the very nature of fashion as a way to identify with a certain tribe, regardless of one's payslip. But back to the east, it just wouldn't be possible for post-soviet designers on their own, on the rise though their influence might be, to shoulder such a shift in fashion's long-term relationship with luxury as the one we might just be witnessing, in youth culture at least – even with localized international instances like the nu-lad trend working towards a similar goal. The relevance of their authenticity, on the other hand, both as a role model and as promotion, should not be underestimated. In her study for *The Calvert Journal*, Fedorova compares the FW15 collection of Kiev-based, 2015 LVMH semi-finalist Anton Belisnkiy with the "*expensive incarnation of cheap*" womenswear by J.W. Anderson: under the tongue-in-cheek title *Poor But Cool*, the former looks at contemporary life in post-soviet Ukraine, while the latter dives back into the mood of a 1980s girls' night out in East Berlin – a mood also echoed this season by Giambattista Valli in his diffusion line Giamba. The editor tells apart the insider's perspective of a post-soviet young designer from that of the outsider, who approaches the area firstly through history. But there's something to add to that too.

Because when Yulia Yefimtchuk reprints Vrubel's renowned Berlin wall graffiti, *My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love*, all over the fabrics of her winter collection, it doesn't feel like aimless lingering on past events half as much as it would in a westerner's work. Or as feisty and militant, but at long last removed, as those pixelated Marx, Lenin and Mao portraits in KTZ's FW15 menswear. It feels relevant, personal, and defiant. I wrote above how post-soviet talents effortlessly seem to earn our sympathy and trust: and what are they but the seeds of future loyalty? It's their identity that we buy into, and nothing, not even craftsmanship, has ever been more valuable. Like the not-yet as wealthy Muscovites who proudly wore in

the 90s blatant Gucci knockoffs for the ideals and dreams that they represented, so do big, familiar, and expensive western brands help to ease into our system the values we're looking for in post-soviet youth culture, that so naturally transpire in their homespun designs – as we face a yet uncertain, but certainly austere future looking more like their past than we had expected. The paradox would be funnier if it weren't so ominous. *Always be prepared* Gosha Rubchinskiy has preached. It suddenly sounds much more sombre than before.

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