

“Produced by some chemical waste and cum”: TOMMY €A\$H and His Concept of Signifying “post-Sovietness”

Matthias Pasdzierny

Abstract

Artists like Tommy Cash transfer certain aesthetic practices of hip hop such as Eminem’s “signifying whiteness” to the context of post Socialist countries and regions. By doing so they create “bastardised” forms of pop culture, inverting the role of the “Eastern European” underdog and cheap imitator of “Western” pop culture into an advantage. Comparable to bands from other transforming societies like the South African Die Antwoord, Cash draws significantly upon aspects of white trash culture, in his case the Russian gopnik style. On the other hand he offers a very hybrid star persona, situated on the borders of “west” and “east”, gaining the attention of international as well as Estonian and Russian audiences especially with his meme videos. By doing so he is less a mouthpiece, for example, for the Russophone minority in Estonia, and more a representative of the so-called generation of the Children of the New East, their own collective memories and often liminal identities.

“I’ll be post-Soviet ‘til I die because those things are really my home.” Asked by an interviewer just recently, Estonian rapper and artist Tommy Cash¹ once again had to explain that his own genre invention, “post-Soviet rap”, was more than a clever marketing tool. The question had been “Do you feel that [post-Soviet] tag’s still relevant to what you’re doing, or are you starting to move away from it?”, with Tommy Cash replying “I’m one of the guys who’s *really* from this place, not just robbing somebody’s subculture.” (Bulut 2018; highlighting original).

At first sight it seems quite remarkable to read and understand (and also to emphasise) something like “post-Sovietism” as “home”, as a sub-culture, similar to the hip hop (sub)cultures that emerged from urban African American communities in the 1970s and 1980s (which have since been exploited by a mostly white music industry establishment). What would the sub-part of such a construction be, what kind of culture could that be at all, who would belong to such a “scene”, and, as regionality is a powerful resource for almost all contemporary hip hop scenes, where would it be located? This paper tries to shed some light on these questions, talking about and scrutinizing

Tommy Cash and his work, following the traces of his aesthetics not only in his music and lyrics, but also – perhaps more importantly and specifically – in his visual style as manifested in the vocabulary of fashion, body language and the imagery of his music videos.

“I call it the Detroit side of town” – The Tallinn-Ghetto and Tommy Cash’s Hybrid post-Soviet Identities

It would be an act of oversimplification to label Tommy Cash as an Estonian artist (despite the fact that this is exactly what is done everywhere). Born in 1991 as Tomas Tammemets, Cash grew up in Kopli, which was back then a rather neglected, poor district of Tallinn, known mostly as an area of crime and drug abuse.² In telling the story of his becoming a hip hop artist, it is particularly this biographical background that delivers the necessary dose of street credibility: “I call it the Detroit side of town, because it’s dead. [...] It was all tiny, rotting wooden houses and there was always a bad smell on the street. I swear I could spot a junkie from a kilometer and tell you exactly what drug he was on.” (Zadeh 2017) Cash’s statement recalls the stereotypes of the urban ghetto

¹ The correct spelling of the artist’s name would be TOMMY €A\$H (for an explanation of the name see below). Because it is more easily readable, the simplification Tommy Cash is used throughout the text.

² For an insightful view on today’s Kopli, including a series of impressive photos, see: <http://hiddentallinn.com/kopli-lines/>, last access June 30, 2018.