

Surveying Metaphors in Pussy Riot's Defense Statements

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Following one of the year's most talked-about performances, three members of Russia's Pussy Riot were charged with hooliganism. At trial, band members read defense statements which employed an extensive use of spatial and container metaphors, allowing readers to organize concepts into a new system with respect to one another. The women, for example, use the terms 'up' and 'down' to speak of positivity and negativity, respectively. They also organize their society along a grid to showcase how the average Russian (horizontal axis) interacts with the country's political system (vertical axis). This essay examines how society employs conceptual metaphors and the use of metaphors to represent the band's complex relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin.

The spring of 2012 was the stage for one of the year's most talked-about performances. The world turned its attention towards Russia when punk rock band Pussy Riot stormed the altar of Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral in an effort to protest against the nation's highly controversial leader, Vladimir Putin. The stunt garnered international media attention, in which reports documenting the band's protest were riddled with metaphors – some deliberately, others not. This essay will examine the use of metaphors, most notably of spatial structure, to represent the band's relationship with Putin.

Formed in 2011, the band's foundation is highly unusual. The number of members belonging to Pussy Riot has been known to fluctuate, with one reporter estimating between twenty and thirty women hold membership. Concrete numbers are difficult to identify due to the band's dissident status, reminiscent of the infamous dissident activities during Russia's Soviet era. Their opposition to Putin and their support of controversial topics, including issues of LGBTQ and women's rights, subject the artists to a vulnerable position. They protect their identities and, in turn, their safety by donning colourful balaclavas and identifying themselves by pseudonyms (Clover). In early 2012, however, members of Pussy Riot prioritized revealing a "greater truth" over maintaining their hidden identities. Since his rise to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin has been criticized for running a seemingly corrupt government, exemplified most famously in his flip-flopping "tandemocracy" with Dmitry Medvedev (Hale and Colton 1). The world witnessed an uproar in 2011, though, when Russians seemed to have grown tired of the alliance between Putin and Medvedev. Protesters took the streets in search of fair and just elections, as well as the release of political prisoners, leading to violence against protesters and unlawful arrests. Putin's government responded with the implementation of laws to define strict boundaries for protests. These new laws were accompanied by heavy financial penalties and greater presence of law enforcement at protests (Kashin). Despite the government's threat of punishments, those who sought change were willing to risk their personal wellbeing for the greater good. Pussy Riot famously stormed the altar of Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral in February 2012 to stage their anti-Putin protest. A video documenting the performance showed four band members, dressed in their balaclavas, as they

performed their “Punk Prayer” on the altar of the cathedral before being forcefully removed. Following their arrest, three of the four performers – Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich – were charged with hooliganism. This failed to deter their fellow dissidents, though, who refused to yield to a government they deemed to be unjust. Later that year, September saw the opposition movement, represented by floods of tens of thousands of protesters, and its discordance for Pussy Riot’s two-year prison sentences. A month later, Alexei Navalny, perhaps Russia’s most famous activist and Putin-critic, received a hefty fine of \$1,000 for a protest against Putin. More recently, Navalny was found guilty of embezzlement and received a prison sentence of five years (Englund and Lally). His sentence was short lived, however, as he was released the following day in order to run for mayor of Moscow – a form of opposition that seems to be condoned by Putin’s government (Brooke). Like Pussy Riot before him, many critics speculate that the financial penalty was an effort to extinguish an increase in the nation’s dissident activity by exemplifying a prominent figure (Parfitt). As a result of their protest, Pussy Riot’s trial produced massive amounts of metaphors, both in media coverage and the defendants’ statements.

In its totality, the aforementioned use of metaphors has very real consequences, despite often being dismissed as mere linguistic devices. This stems, in large part, from the fact that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured. From an early age, humans think and live in metaphors. In *Metaphors We Live By*, the authors demonstrate how deeply metaphors penetrate our ability to conceptualize. As displayed in coverage of Pussy Riot’s protest, our society speaks of arguments in terms of war. For example, arguments can be ‘*right on target*’ or we can ‘*attack* their weak points’ (Lakoff and Johnson 4). Similarly, ‘*look how far* we’ve *come*’, ‘we’ll just have to go *our separate ways*’, and ‘I don’t think this relationship is *going anywhere*’ all exemplify the notion of love as a journey. Theories can be understood as buildings through phrases like, ‘What is the *foundation* of your theory?’, ‘this theory needs more *support*’, or ‘*to buttress* the theory with *solid* arguments’ (Kovecses). It is important to note that we do not merely talk about arguments in terms of war, but rather the very nature of arguing is partially structured by the concept of fighting. Because of this, we understand arguments in that way. Our thought processes are, in large part, metaphorical and so metaphors are key players in the way humans reason.

While the use of metaphors can be advantageous in conceptualizing experiences, they simultaneously grant an opportunity for misinterpretation or misuse. Metaphors provide a partial understanding of an argument, known as being partially structured. When they possess a motive, when they seek to influence our reasoning, they are able to redirect our focus, preventing us from noticing some aspects that are inconsistent with the metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 10). As was present in the Pussy Riot trial, metaphors are often used to evoke an emotional response, influencing audiences and swaying their views on an issue. Known as linguistic metaphors, these expressions are often used as poetic devices, comparing two objects or events and drawing similarities between the two. In her closing statement, Tolokonnikova described the band’s protest as *ударить змеиное гнездо* - striking directly at

the snake's nest (Козенко). Here, the band uses its artistic flair to compare Putin's government to snakes. These creatures are often portrayed in literature as evil or untrustworthy, much like the Serpent who appears in the Garden of Eden and tempts Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, deceiving her about the reality of the consequences (*English Standard Version*, Gen. 3.5). By comparing the Russian government to a snake's nest, Tolokonnikova insinuates that it, too, is evil and cannot be trusted. The band uses these linguistic metaphors to depict the protest and negatively influence onlookers' opinions of the government. In this way, they strategically use linguistic metaphors to manipulate their audience.

In their defense trial, Pussy Riot inadvertently explored conceptual metaphors: how, as humans, we use metaphors to understand the world around us, often subconsciously. An analysis of their statements illustrates the use of spatial metaphors. Spatial metaphors allow the readers to organize concepts into a new system with respect to one another. This includes an external systemacity, which defines coherence among the concepts. In fact, most modern fundamental concepts are organized using spatial metaphors. This is illustrated, for example, in the basic notion of up correlating with positivity, happiness, and being 'good' while down is linked to negativity, sadness, and evil (Lakoff and Johnson 14). Pussy Riot touched on the battle between good and evil using a mask. In her statement, Alyokhina describes the allegedly biased trial as *злая гротескная маска* (Козенко) – a grotesque mask of evil. The idea of a mask implies that the government is hiding behind it, concealing its true self or motives, and that the court's power is merely a facade. This falseness serves to hide the truth – what is truly 'right' – which appears to exist below the surface, buried deep inside one's spirit. Later, the band discussed Russia's well-being. In her statement, Alyokhina discusses the catastrophic state of Russian politics, stating that the oppression her band and fellow protesters experienced would have never occurred in a *здоровое общество* – a healthy society. She goes on to say that, as a nation and a political state, Russia is sick – *больной организм* (Козенко). The very idea of health and vitality portrays Russia as being sick, in accordance with the up/down metaphor. Here, the metaphor illustrates the idea that wellness is linked to 'up', as in positivity. When we are well, we feel energized and cheerful; we are active and prepared to engage in stimulating activities, both mentally and physically. Alternatively, when we feel unwell, we are often lethargic, feeling weak and lacking energy. Illness forces us to physically lie down and succumb. We feel poorly and, quite literally, are in negative health. In this way, sickness is tied with 'down'.

In her defense statement, Tolokonnikova often used terms like *над, выше, на низком уровне*, and *приближается*, meaning over, above, low, and close, respectively, in order to describe the band's relationship with Putin and his government: Putin, it seemed, felt that his government was above the band, that Pussy Riot was of a lesser value, hence its position beneath the government. Tolokonnikova went on to discuss *унижать* – to humiliate – the very root of which (*ниж*) can be used to mean 'lower' or 'bottom'. This is later supported by Alyokhina's phrase *отметание в дальний угол* – dismissal in the far corner – allowing the women to express the oppression they were subjected to at the hands of

Putin (Козенко). This allows the women to project their society onto a grid with a horizontally--run 'x' axis representing an ordinary Russian civilian while its counterpart, the vertical 'y' axis, represents the political system. This contrast describes the relationship between those in positions of power (the vertical axis) and the common Russian (the horizontal axis). Alyokhina later references the notion of Putin as much more than just a single man, instead as the infamous political system he created, calling it *вертикаль власти* – the power vertical (Козенко).

However, the band's grid-like relationship with its government is quickly shaken.

Tolokonnikova speaks of *слабость горизонтальных связей внутри общества* – the weakness of horizontal connections within the community. Her bandmate Alyokhina parallels this comment by making note of *горизонтальное распределение* – a horizontal distribution. The women speak of *возбудить народ* – stirring up and exciting the people – and the resulting *встать* and *стоять*, meaning 'to get up', 'to stand up', describing society's opposition to their government. Their journey towards freedom – *по пути свободы* – can be represented by the 'x' axis rising up to meet the 'y' axis, eventually resulting in a *столкновения* or *крах* – collision. In a moment of vivid imagery, Tolokonnikova describes the crash as *ударить то самое змеиное гнездо* – hitting the snake nest (Козенко). This collision of values has resulted not in poisonous snakebites, but rather in prison sentences for Pussy Riot's performers.

Furthermore, the band members go on to question the positions on the *вертикаль власти* – the power vertical. They explain that the government has declared its position at the top of the vertical line, placing it above the band and suggesting it is of more importance and value. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina, however, question the legitimacy of this claim. In their defense statements, they discuss both a public sphere and a private sphere (Козенко). The government exists in the public sphere, one that is worldly. There, Putin is high, noble and ethical, and Pussy Riot is low, existing as unrespectable bottom feeders. The band members suggest, however, that this concept is inverted. In reality, they believe, it is Pussy Riot who represents nobility and ethics while Putin's corrupt government belongs at the bottom. They go on to discuss the notion in performance metaphors. Tolokonnikova refers to the trial as a *спектакля* – a spectacle – and to the band as *оппозиционное искусство* – opposition artists. At one point, Alyokhina speaks of *не просто злая гротескная маска* – a grotesque mask of evil, suggesting that the court's power is merely a facade (Козенко). This falseness serves to hide the truth – what is truly 'right' – which appears to exist below the surface, buried deep inside one's spirit.

The use of spatial metaphors in Pussy Riot's defense statements extends even further, leading the band to discuss their disagreement in militant terms. Consciously or otherwise, the band likens arguing to war. This stands to reason as, in its most basic form, the band is defending its position in the argument. Samutsevich described Putin's rise to power – *с приходом на руководящий пост в Русской* – noting that the very people he rules over have been *задавленными и поврежденными советским тоталитарным режимом*, crushed and damaged by the Soviet totalitarian regime, describing their broken spirits and the oppressive nature of their government. She later refers to 'media assaults' as

медианабеги during Putin's efforts to "protect" Russian values – *оградить общество от нас и нашего нонконформистского мышления*, as well as the *потери*, the losses, suffered by the group. Her friend and bandmate Tolokonnikova described the trial as *репрессия*, a repressive act being executed as the command of an all- powerful ruler who dictates *определяющими слова, действия и решения всех троих*, defining words, actions, and decisions of all three, suggesting that the panel of three judges presiding over the band's trial were merely Putin's puppets. Later, in a bold move, she goes on to call the triad of judges *куклы*, the Russian word for dolls, once again suggesting that they are merely puppets, carrying out Putin's wishes. The performer spoke of her friends as *подсудимых*, its prefix *под* meaning 'under' and *суд* meaning 'court' literally place the defendants under the court, perhaps at its mercy. This further divides territory between the band and the government. The speech she references – *выступление* – is quite literally built around the war metaphor. With its root *стун* meaning step, the word implies that the speaker is stepping outside of her boundaries, crossing a line. She went on speak of *потерпевших*, the victims, extending war metaphor to include the band members and recognize them as injured parties. Soon after, Tolokonnikova pled with the court to abandon the concept of *вешать ярлыки*, assigning the roles of winners and losers. Instead, she asked them to focus their attention on a greater issue: seeking the truth. She went on to speak of her civilian supporters *со всеми, кто нашел осколки процесса в себе*, who found pieces of the process in themselves but perhaps were too afraid to speak out against the nation's infamous leader (Козенко). This militant metaphor paints a picture of war in a seemingly civilized Russia, one that is spiritual instead of physical. Alyokhina describes the trial as a bomb that has exploded during battle, leaving pieces of the trial to be found in ourselves – again, *найти осколки процесса в себе* (Козенко). The shards she speaks of correlate with shrapnel which, when lodged into innocent bystanders, remain a haunting memory of the explosion long after they have been surgically removed. Whenever the victims look down at their scars, they are reminded of the explosion and resulting damage.

Confusion presents itself; it seems, over what is 'right'. The band members discuss this using *правда* and *права*, meaning 'truth' and 'right', respectively, the very root of which suggests a moral truth and rightness. Later, Tolokonnikova speaks of *прямоты* when she discusses the concept of 'straightness' (Козенко). In this metaphor, straight represents the truth, supported by morals. Confusion over the idea of what is truly 'right' leads the members of Pussy Riot suggest that concept of the private and public spheres has been subjected to inversion, though. While the government exists in a public sphere where Putin is high and Pussy Riot is low, the band is rooted in the private sphere. There, Pussy Riot's search for the truth and morality has placed them above Putin. In her statement, Tolokonnikova declared that *пути правды всегда торжествуют в итоге над путями лукавства, коварства и лжи*, that the path of truth always triumphs over the ways of guile, deceit, and fraud. On two occasions, she warned that *торжествует над ложью* and *они торжествуют всегда над ложью и злом* – good will always triumph over evil. The band members added to their point by noting that, on the power vertical, there was a divine figure that was above even Putin. They spoke of spirituality, discussing *связь с*

внутренним божественным голосом, communication with the inner divine voice, and suggested that a God-like figure would guide them freedom and *воцаряться над правоохранительной и судебными процессами*, reign over law enforcement and judicial processes. The women also noted that during the trial, lawyers for the prosecution misspoke and referred to the band as victims – a misstep which, in their mind, confirmed that a higher power was guiding the trial: *высшие силы направляют речи наших противоположной стороны адвокатов*. Confident in the support of their *высшие силы*, higher power, Tolokonnikova ended her statement with a hint of positivity, trusting in divine figures to lead her band to freedom: *откройте все двери, снимите погоны, запах свободы* (Козенко).

Finally, Pussy Riot's closing statements extended the use of spatial metaphors to include container metaphors, drawing boundaries between the container, its contents, and the external factors, allowing for distinct territories and quantities. This allows for differentiation between political Russia, those who protest against it, and that, which divides them: freedom. This was exhibited by Tolokonnikova's use of the terms *закрывать* and *открыть*, to refer to the closed/open nature of the argument. The terms *внутренний* and *внешний*, internal and external, to divide territory within the trial: Pussy Riot's values are held inside the container – *внутренний* – while those belonging to Putin are outside of the container – *внешний*. Here, the container metaphor represents the division amongst the band and its government. The two parties are separate and unwilling (or unable) to work together. Like oil and water, they do not mix. This is later illustrated by Tolokonnikova when she speaks of the prosecution at trial *сидеть напротив нас на стороне обвинения*, to sit opposite us on the prosecution, both literally and metaphorically seated on the opposing side. Additionally, the band members spoke of pressure. In their statements, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina repeatedly used words with the root *дав*, meaning 'press', as was the case in *придавать* – to attach. The women made note of the *репрессия* and *подавления* – repression and suppression, respectively – their society has suffered at the hands of Putin's government (Козенко). The government pressed down on its people, including Pussy Riot, who are systematically below them, in an effort to force them to conform to Putin's ideals. They furthered their argument by noting their government *над нами посмеяться*, laugh over us (Козенко), suggesting that the government is above them (*над*) and is laughing down at them, essentially demeaning their values.

Similarly, Alyokhina then explored the container metaphor when she described Russia as a prison *тюрьма – это Россия в миниатюре*, meaning 'prison --is Russia in miniature form', and belittled the notion of it being a truly free state. She described her role in Russian society as a *заклученный* – a prisoner. The women went on to discuss their time in prison – *сидеть в местах лишения свободы*, to sit in prison, and *посадить в тюрьму*, to go to jail, – and how they arrived there. The use of *сидеть* and *посадить* describes their location and how they arrived there, that they are seated in prison, a position they did not choose. This implies a more forceful placement, one that occurred at the hands of someone else. They spoke extensively about their time in jail: *тюрьма* (prison), *в клетке* (in a cell), *сажать в тюрьму* (put in prison), and *в заключении* (in detention), *в заточении* (in prison). Imprisonment itself is metaphorically structured. Prison confines an individual, separating

him from the rest of society, as a punishment for wrongdoing. The negative behaviour is contained in order to prevent it from impacting the rest of the group. This concept was reinforced in the women's statements by their use of *задержание*, *находящийся в заточении*, and *следственно изоляторе*, meaning detention, who is in prison, and investigative detention, describing their containment within the prison. Their cell's bars – *решеткой* – contain them, preventing them from leaving or spreading their non-conformist ideas. The band's defense statements mentioned various forms of the verb *держат*, meaning 'to keep' (Козенко). Here, the band again references the fact that they are being held there against their will, by an outside force.

Pussy Riot's now infamous protest gained the attention of the international media. Their storming of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral and subsequent performance opposing Putin were discussed in metaphorical terms, showcasing a society that is partially -structured by metaphors. The massive amounts of spatial metaphors present in the band's defense statements suggest that society understands the concept of "good/bad" in terms of "up/down". The nature of their trial, given their charges of hooliganism and subsequent prison sentences, exemplifies the container metaphor. Here, Putin's government has isolated the band, effectively containing it, in an effort to prevent its negative behaviour from negatively impacting the greater society. A survey of the use of these metaphors illustrates how the band members understand these concepts and organize them in relation to one another. This unique opportunity to experience the nation's complex culture has demonstrated the value of metaphorical analysis, that the linguistic device warrants scholarly appreciation after all.

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