

# The New Criterion

## Features

November 2009

### Russia before the mirror: reflections on 1989

by [Jonathan Brent](#)

On the realities of cultural transformation in Russia.

Sixty-two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Russian novelist Yuri Olesha's dubious protagonist Nikolai Kavalerov peers into a street mirror only to see someone else, a grotesque parody of himself, coming out of it. Olesha was not envisioning the fall of communism in his novel *Envy*. Quite the contrary. Yet the metaphor for Russian history contained in this moment is extraordinarily prescient. Shortly after Kavalerov's vision in the mirror, the narrative shifts from the first person to the third and then, Olesha writes, "the narrator fell silent." Despite this warning, the "narrator" continues for another twenty pages. Who is telling this story? Who is in control of the plot, the characters, the most basic structures out of which meaning can emerge?

In 1989, Russia looked briefly into the mirror of its past, but ...

**Jonathan Brent** is the author of *Inside the Stalin Archives* (Atlas & Co).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 28 November 2009, on page 15

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Russia-before-the-mirror--reflections-on-1989-4305>