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The Arts in Dialogue

Essays in honour of Fiona Björling

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Televising Soviet Tropes: Reforging a Supraethnic Cultural Identity

Karin Sarsenov

OVER THE LAST DECADE, the Russian media market has grown increasingly resourceful, with television attracting the largest audiences. Since 2001, when the government assumed financial control of the channel NTV, various entities within the Russian state administration have proven to be the dominating actors in the television sector. The government exerts control over all Russian television channels, either through direct ownership of media assets, or indirectly, through state-controlled or state-approved industrial groups' ownership of assets, such as Gazprom-media. A law on Public Service Broadcasting that would grant the public more influence in the sector has not yet been passed, despite proposed legislation by the Ministry of Culture and Mass Communications in 2005.

The television sector is thoroughly commercialized; most channels are partly or completely financed through advertising and are dependent on ratings (Kachkaeva et al, 2006). Because political and financial power over television has merged, we might assume that power would translate into ideology rather transparently, transforming television into a mouthpiece of state policy in a more or less Soviet fashion. However, the harsh competition between TV channels for maximum ratings has given rise to a keen sensitivity to viewers' tastes, unheard of during the Soviet period.

The success of any mass-oriented media project depends on its ability to tap into the existing cultural codes of its intended audience,

to re-enact familiar tropes and confirm the viewers' positive self-identity, while at the same time presenting enough of a challenge to preexisting norms as not to be boring.¹ This feature of mass culture allows us to draw conclusions about a specific cultural community's general semiotic architecture: an analysis of productions that have gained conspicuously wide appeal is likely to reveal a register of tropes that are broadly intelligible despite people's various social, ethnic, religious or gendered frames of references, for example. Most importantly, these tropes support each reader or viewer in forming his or her own identity. In this article, I will demonstrate the importance of two such tropes with roots in the Soviet period: the concepts of *kul'turnost'* ('culturedness') and *Druz'ba narodov* ('Peoples' friendship').

Several scholars working in the field of Post-Soviet culture have commented on the proliferation, recycling and postmodernist use of Socialist Realist motifs in recent film and TV-productions. This is often interpreted as an expression of nostalgia for the Soviet past, or a therapeutic remedy for a lost collective identity (cf. Rulyova 2007, 1378; Lipovetsky 2004, 265). In his article on what he calls 'Post-Sots', for example, Mark Lipovetsky (2004, 361) notes six distinctive features of the Post-Sots subgenre, one of which is 'the mandatory presence of one or more recognisable quotes from Socialist Realist products'. The examples of such recycled products illustrating his thesis – *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o soldate*, 1959) and *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadsat' mgnovenii vesny*, 1973) – are far from typical of the Socialist Realist genre, though. Both from the Thaw and Stagnation periods, these works gained enormous popularity precisely because of their *dissociation* from the psychological primitivism and explicit ideologisation that had characterized the canonical works of Socialist Realism. The central point of reference for

¹ 'Trope' is used in the extended way common within cultural and film studies. See for instance Alexander Prokhorov's definition in his book *Inherited discourse: Stalinist Tropes in Thaw Culture*. 'Literary and rhetorical studies usually define tropes as figures of speech. Scholars distinguish two (metaphor and metonymy) or four (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) major tropes. [...] Tropes constitute operational systems generating meanings and values necessary to maintain the society's existing mode of economic production. Such operational systems manifest themselves isomorphically in different cultural media' (2002, 43f).

contemporary culture is not Socialist Realism per se, understood as the dogma established by party officials beginning in 1932, but rather the Soviet heritage in a broader sense. Often this means that special attention is paid to works that in some way stretched the limits of what was acceptable – or things that were banned outright.

Secondly, the concept of nostalgia, no matter how strong its presence, does not fully account for Soviet references in contemporary mass culture. An equally important factor is the nation-building project associated with Vladimir Putin's period in office – something that has received massive popular support.² A distinctive feature of this project is that it is addressed not only to the inhabitants of the Russian Federation itself, but also to the Russian-speaking populations within the former Soviet Republics, and the large diasporas in countries like Israel, Germany and the United States. In the age of the Internet, file sharing, satellite and cable TV, Russian mass culture is being consumed all over the globe. As a result, it is playing an important role in the formation of a supraethnic cultural identity, based on the audience's common Soviet heritage and command of the Russian language. I would argue that the presence of Soviet elements in contemporary popular culture should not be seen so much as an expression of *longing* for a lost collective identity. Rather it represents an attempt to *reconstitute* and *support* an already existing and increasingly viable supraethnic identity based on the access to Russian language and culture.

Stephen Hutchings (2004, 153ff) describes the model of contemporary Russian television broadcasting as the result of an active, discriminate reception of Western forms, which have blended with the myths of the Soviet and tsarist past to create a new myth-making engine. He argues that the residue of *kul'turnost'* – the Stalinist educational effort to acculturate the barely literate working and rural classes to bourgeois standards of refined behaviour and tastes – serves to distinguish Russian television from its Western equivalents, blurring the lines between mass culture and high-brow entertainment. The concept of *kul'turnost'* connotes a normative system in

² Natalia Rulyova (2007, 1378) mentions the annual celebration of Victory Day, and the opening of the TV channels 'Zvezda' and 'Russia Today' as examples of state-sponsored activities that aim at consolidating national and civic values.

which classical literature, music, poetry, figurative art and ballet are accorded intrinsic value. It also assesses a person's moral standards and 'level of culture', according to one's knowledgeability and sensitivity to these art forms. *Kul'turnost'* is one important aspect of the Soviet heritage that continues to inform cultural production, not because of any more generalised nostalgic mood, but because of its function as a positive marker of identity – a code that allows for an intricate ironic play with allusions and intertexts.

The recent boom of serialized TV adaptations of canonical literary works attests to the importance of *kul'turnost'* encoding. The list of productions is impressive: since 2003, when Vladimir Bortko's TV mini-series *The Idiot* surprised the critics, attracting more than a third of the TV-viewers, Russian production companies have delivered over a dozen adaptations of canonical Russian novels. Most of them are TV mini-series, consisting of five to twelve parts. Many have received support from the Federal Agency of Culture and Cinema, and some have been awarded TEFI's (the Russian equivalent of the Emmy Award).³

The choice of novels does not reveal any trace of old Party preferences: on the contrary, adaptations of anti-Stalinist works have been intensely promoted by the central TV-channels, and these productions have also attracted the largest audiences, for example Vasilii Aksenov's *Moscow Saga* (2004, First Channel), Anatolii Rybakov's *The Children of Arbat Street* (2004, First Channel) Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margerita* (2005, 'Rossiia') and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle* (2006, 'Rossiia'). The adaptations have featured some of the very top Russian actors, including both renowned stars of Soviet cinema such as Oleg Basiashvili, Oleg Menshikov and Inna Churikova, as well as established younger actors, such as Vladimir Mashkov, Sergei Bezrukov and Evgenii Mironov, all of whom also pursue acting careers on the stages of the major theatres in both Moscow and St. Petersburg.

There is great variety in terms of the directors' approaches to the material: from painstakingly correct renderings of the novels' plot and dialogue (cf. Bortko's *The Idiot* and *Master and Margarita*), to more unorthodox interpretations (such as Dmitrii Svetozarov's

³ For a selection of recent adaptations and their ratings, see appendix 1.

Crime and Punishment, 2007, and Pavel Lungin's *Dead Souls*, 2005). The productions also differ greatly in terms of their ratings: generally productions broadcast on channels other than the First Channel and 'Rossiia' were watched by relatively small audiences: Bulgakov's *Black Snow*, serialized as *The Theatre Novel* on 'Kul'tura'; *Dead Souls*, *Doctor Zhivago* and Iurii Trifonov's *The House on the Embankment*, all on NTV, attracted fewer than 15% of the television audience.

What links these heterogeneous productions, however, is their engagement with a national treasure – Russian literature – and a preoccupation with history, especially the Soviet period. These are issues to which most Russian-speaking people all over the globe can relate: for those raised in the Soviet Union/Russia, the ambitious high school literature curriculum provided basic knowledge about the canonical works, and thrilling memories of illicit readings of hand-copied samizdat spark interest in the anti-Stalinist productions. To first- and second-generation émigrés, Russian literature often provides a defence against assimilation and discrimination in the host countries, a foundation on which to build a viable multinational identity.⁴

Finally, the novels chosen for serialisation are for the most part written by authors who are highly respected not only in Russia, but also internationally, and also by authors who openly challenged the tsarist or Soviet regimes. As a result, they are likely to evoke sympathy even among those who are most critical of current Russian state policy, such as the residents of the former Soviet republics.

Another important trope nurturing contemporary television is the concept of 'Peoples' friendship' (*Druz'ba narodov*), the Soviet version of the American melting pot myth. 'Peoples' Friendship' was the title of a literary journal specialising in translations from other Soviet languages and the name of a university that educated the

⁴ This process is convincingly described in the bestselling novel *Two Caravans* (2007) by Marina Lewycka. The main protagonist, a Ukrainian girl working as temporary farm labourer picking strawberries in the UK refers repeatedly to Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in order to distance herself from her rough new environment. Lewycka's novel also makes artistic use of the concept of *kul'turnost'* as a marker of Soviet/post-Soviet identity. The Ukrainian uses it actively as a template for classifying her fellow workers, a strategy which eventually proves to be flawed.

elites of ‘friendly’ Third World countries. ‘Peoples’ friendship’ served as a facilitating discourse when it was necessary to subdue the serious conflicts between the ethnic groups of the Eurasian continent, and to establish the implicit supremacy of the Russian ethnos. This process, however violent, was completed with enough efficiency so as not to discredit the concept of ‘Peoples’ friendship’ entirely. During the Soviet period, millions of non-Russians managed to improve their living conditions to such an extent that they were even better than those enjoyed by many Russians. The respect shown to national minority writers such as Fazil Iskander and Chingiz Aitmatov carried substantial symbolic value. ‘Peoples’ friendship’ disappeared from official discourse after 1991, but the idea remains very much alive.

In her investigation of the enormously popular TV-show *Pole chudes* (Field of Miracles, based on the format of ‘Wheel of Fortune’), Natalia Rulyova (2007, 1379) points out that ‘Peoples’ friendship’ is one of its basic underlying ideas. In this respect, the comedy show ‘KVN’ (*Klub veselykh i nakhodchivyykh*, The Club of the Merry and the Sharp-Witted) is of equal or even greater importance. In this show, teams of college students perform funny skits and songs, competing for the jury’s favour. The program made its debut in the Soviet Union in 1961, and has since developed into a popular movement, engaging a large number of students in local competitions off-screen. From 1972 to 1986 it was no longer broadcast on television, but continued in its off-screen variant. It reappeared during Perestroika, with a new political tint. After 1991, competitions emerged in the newly independent Soviet republics; after 1994, these spread to Russian communities in the West as well (Janishevskii 2004). After 1991, the permanent host, Aleksandr Masliakov, turned the show into his own business by founding the production company AMiK. He is also the president of ‘The International Union of KVN’, although the status of this Union is somewhat unclear as it does not have any official registration (see the official KVN website, AMIK.RU).

The Union consists of about twenty central and regional leagues, including Ukrainian, Belarusian and Israeli ones. The most important is the ‘Supreme League’ (*vysshaia liga*), broadcast on First Channel. Teams from ‘still friendly’ former Soviet republics/areas

are regular participants in the contests (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaidzhan, Abkhazia⁵) and occasionally more distant locations are represented, such as Finland and Germany. The international character of the project is enhanced by the fact that the two editors (*redaktory*) of the Supreme League, Andrei Chivurin and Leonid Kuprido, were originally on Ukrainian and Belarusian KVN-teams.

KVN is broadcast on prime-time on both the First Channel and 'Rossiia' and runs about twelve new shows every year. The First Channel shows the regular contests, while 'Rossiia' has the rights to the most popular KVN-event, the 'International Comedy Festival', which takes place in Jurmala, a Latvian resort on the Baltic Sea. 'Rossiia' broadcasts re-runs of this program once or twice a month, often in the same prime-time slot as the regular contest on the First Channel. To sum up, a KVN show is broadcast on average once a week on Russian central television, including re-runs and special events. From 2004 to 2008, the regular shows were watched by approximately a fifth of the TV audience, while the Jurmala festival often attracted a third.⁶ The program receives strong governmental backing: Vladimir Putin has been a member of the audience twice since 2004, and Dmitrii Medvedev attended the opening of the 2008 season on February 29, i.e., just two days before he was elected president in a landslide.

The fact that the single-most broadcast KVN event, the Jurmala festival, actually takes place outside the Russian Federation bespeaks the show's function as a generator of a multi-national identity based on the Russian language. The show creates a communicative space in which people share the same jokes in spite of national and ethnic differences. These very differences are also subjected to kind-

⁵ A joke from 2007, which has gained unexpected timeliness, comments on this 'friendliness': «ходят слухи, что Абхазия по ночам тайно входит в состав России» ('Rumour has it that at night, Abkhazia secretly joins the Russian Federation', Team 'Narty iz Abkhazii', Summer Cup, Sochi 2007). Selected archive broadcast of KVN are available on DVD, but the main distribution takes place through file sharing and YouTube.

⁶ Data on ratings retrieved from TNS Gallup Media, <http://www.advertology.ru>, and <http://www.tns-global.ru>.

hearted ridicule, thereby taking the edge off the existing conflicts between countries and regions in the area.

The programs are rife with jokes on national themes: since 2004, when the Baltic States joined NATO and the EU, this radical change in Russian geopolitical influence has become a central motif in the performances. The accompanying visa restrictions for Russian citizens were for instance illustrated by a remake of Russia's contribution to the Eurovision performance in 2006, featuring Dima Bilan and a ballerina who emerges from a grand piano. In the remake, a Dima Bilan look-alike performs his song while a Latvian border patrol officer checks his passport, and his six less fortunate companions unexpectedly sneak through the hole in the piano (team 'Maksimum', Jurmala 2006).

Russian teams are eager to point out shared Soviet roots, even if these are of disputable value: «Сейчас Латвия – это индивидуальное европейское государство. А как увидишь электричку, сразу вспоминаешь, что когда-то одной страной были» ('Now Latvia is an individual European State. But when you spot a commuter train, you immediately remember that once we lived in the same country', Jurmala 2003, team Vladivostok). During a very thorough-going display of mutual Russian-Latvian prejudice, a Latvian protagonist asks «Кто гордится о великим могучим, но разговаривает на обычном обидном?» ('Who is proud of the great and mighty [Russian language], but speaks the usual, offensive one?', '4 Tatarina', Jurmala 2003), alluding to the working class culture of the Russian minority in Latvia. In the most ominous contribution, a uniformed team from the Voronezh military academy reminds the Latvian audience: «Если когда-нибудь вам или вашей стране понадобится помощь, расчетное время полета МИГ-29 от Воронежа до Юрмалы – 12 минут» ('If you or your country would need some help some time, a MIG-29 makes the distance Voronezh-Riga in only 12 minutes', 'Sed'moe nebo', Jurmala, 2004).

One of the most successful teams from 2002-2007 was RUDN, representing Peoples' Friendship University of Russia in Moscow. The team was composed mostly of international students, who cleverly use their racial features and the right as the 'out-group' to joke about themselves as a means of targeting everyday Russian racism. For instance, playing on the standard muttering in Moscow

public transport directed at dark-complexioned fellow travellers, «Понаехали тут» ('Too many of them have come here'), a Buryat participant announces: «По нашим данным 15% населения Москвы – коренные москвичи», to which an Armenian replies: «Понаоставались тут!» ('According to our data, 15 percent of the Moscow population consists of people born in Moscow' – 'Too many of them have stayed here!' – RUDN, Quarter final, Supreme League 2004).

An African team member creates a striking contrast between his visual appearance and his vocal performance by making an almost perfect imitation of the Russian national icon Vladimir Vysotskii, paraphrasing his anti-Stalinist song 'Bath-hut' (*Ban'ka po belomu*).⁷ With only a minimal modification of the lyrics, he manages to change the implicit narrator from Vysotskii's labour camp prisoner to an unfortunate, repatriated African student, and the denotation of 'white' from 'clean' and 'free from soot' in Vysotskii's bath-hut, to the Russian 'white' life style, climate and language which the student misses so badly. An oxymoronic image of [African] bananas with [Russian] sour cream illustrates his feeling of displacement:

Протопи ты мне баньку по-белому –
Я от белого цвету отвык.
Угорю я, и мне, угорелому,
Пар развяжет русский язык.

Проклинаю жару окаянную,
В холодильник залезу, реву.
На тарелке бананы с сметаной,
Разлеглись как китайцы в снегу.

Warm the bath-hut, set it steaming white
I have lost contact with the colour white.
I am getting poisoned, and for me, the poisoned [mad] one,
The steam will loosen my Russian tongue [language].

⁷ The literal translation is 'Bath-hut provided with a chimney', as opposed to *Ban'ka po chernomu*, a bath-hut without a chimney.

I curse the damned heat,
I steal into the fridge and cry,
Bananas with sour cream on a plate
Laid out like Chinese in the snow.⁸

Here, the comic effect of a black man sounding like Vysotskii reveals the rigid notions of the listener, who cannot reconcile the artist's black skin colour with the intrinsic Russianness that Vysotskii represents. Moreover, the somewhat far-fetched simile connecting bananas to Chinese people on the basis of their 'yellow' skin colour, further emphasises the absurdity in associating people closely with their racial features.

During one of RUDN's last performances, in 2007, in honour of KVN's 46th birthday in Siberian Krasnoyarsk, a contest between 'Europe' and 'Asia' was organised, in which teams were assigned to each continent depending on their origins relative to the Urals. The RUDN team captain Sangadzhi Tarbaev, himself of Kalmyk descent and therefore having an Asian appearance, summarizes the multi-national theme of the contest with a remake of the Adygean singer Aydemir Mugu's 2005 hit 'Black eyes' (*Chernye glaza*):

Почему вокруг поют про черные глаза?
Ведь Россию заселяют узкие глаза
На КрасГЭЦе всем торгуют узкие глаза
В Подмосковье дачи строят узкие глаза
Узкие глаза – когда сплю, не замечают
Узкие глаза – летом пыль не попадает
Узкие глаза: Шойгу, Цзю и Хакамада
Узкие глаза, узкие глаза, узкие глаза
Как-то Русь завоевали узкие глаза
И с тех пор у всех немножко узкие глаза
А сейчас я вижу в зале русские глаза,
А на утро с дня рождения – узкие глаза

Why does everyone sing about black eyes?
You see, Russia is populated by narrow eyes
At the Krasnoyarsk thermal power station narrow eyes are
selling everything possible

⁸ All translations are literal and mine [K.S].

Near Moscow narrow eyes are building summer houses
When I sleep no one notices my narrow eyes
Narrow eyes – summer dust doesn't get in them
Narrow eyes – Shoigu, Tzsyu and Khakamada
Narrow eyes, narrow eyes, narrow eyes
Narrow eyes once conquered Rus'
And since then everyone's eyes are a bit narrow
Now I see Russian eyes in the audience,
But tomorrow, after the birthday party, they will turn into
narrow eyes

The sound track is influenced by Caucasian folk music, which is complemented by choreography that also features typical Caucasian dance steps. With visual, musical and textual devices, Tarbaev reminds the audience of three things: first, the music and choreography emphasizes the enormous popularity of Caucasian artists in Russian popular musical culture. Mugu is just one of many extremely successful performers having roots in the Caucasus (including Dima Bilan from Kabardino-Balkaria, Soso Pavliashvili of Georgia, and earlier Soviet stars such as Muslim Magomaev from Azerbaidzhan and Vakhtang Kikabidze from Georgia). This is a popularity clearly at odds with the inter-ethnic hostility often seen as inherent to the Russian-Caucasian relationship (see for instance Lillian Helle's contribution to this volume).

Second, the text emphasises the importance of Asian peoples to Russian society – as a cheap workforce, but also as prominent statesmen (Sergei Choigu, Irina Khakamada) and sportsmen (Kostya Tzsyu). Also emphasised is the important Asian genetic contribution to the modern Russian ethnos that occurred as a result of the Mongol domination of the Slavic lands from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. This last argument underscores the impossibility of making a sharp distinction between the different ethnic groups on the Eurasian continent. This point is made also in the last line, where a hangover is hailed as a common denominator, one which erases inter-ethnic differences.

Third, Tarbaev's typically Kalmyk facial features include the aforementioned very 'narrow eyes', and are associated in the text with the 'uncivilised' strata of society (such as peddlers and Mongolian warriors). These associations contrast effectively with his per-

fectly trained voice and academic Russian pronunciation. The artist thus fashions himself as emblematic evidence of the irrelevance of ethnic extraction, and the importance of a command of Russian cultural and linguistic codes.

The RUDN performance as a whole therefore makes a strong point about the absurdity of vernacular Russian racism, but also about the superiority of Russian language and culture, access to which unites the community being addressed. This is the main idea generated by the trope ‘Peoples’ friendship’ – a concept that the team revitalises through subversive jokes and effective artistry.

For three weeks in December 2007, the television channel ‘Rossiia’ showed the miniseries *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsiia*) during its weekday prime-time slot. It received impressive ratings: 37% of viewers and 13% of the total population watched the first part. This period of time was politically charged: the broadcasting of the first part coincided with the Parliament elections, and the Presidential elections were only months away. Without falling prey to conspiracy theories, it is reasonable to assume that a heavily promoted television series broadcast on a state-owned channel during this period would contain elements endorsing some of the ruling elite’s basic ideological principles. Once again, the notions of ‘Peoples’ friendship’ and *kul’turnost’* take centre stage.

The series is set in post-war Odessa, famous for its multi-ethnic population (including Jews, Greeks, Russians, Armenians and Ukrainians), organized crime and particular dialect. All have been vividly described in Isaac Babel’s *Tales of Odessa* and Valentin Kataev’s novels. In a radio interview, the director of *Liquidation*, Sergei Ursuliak, cited these authors as having inspired his work (Telekhranitel’ 2007-12-16). As with the adaptations discussed above, this literary heritage cannot truly be categorised as Socialist Realist in any pure form. Isaac Babel’ wrote his major work in the 1920’s, i.e., before the adoption Socialist Realism as official dogma. It also does not appear on the ‘short list of exemplars’, i.e., the list of works on which the dogma was based (cf. Clark 1981, 262). Moreover, as a posthumously rehabilitated victim of Stalin’s repressions, Babel’ enjoyed both great popularity with the liberal members of the Soviet intelligentsia during the Thaw, and international fame (Freidin 1990). Valentin Kataev, who was also editor of the literary journal

Iunost' (Youth), was a leading figure within this liberal intelligentsia. By supporting the poets Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Bella Akhmadulina, he was actively engaged in denouncing the Stalinist past.

Liquidation, a detective story, meets the requirements of the mass cultural format. The series features an ingeniously constructed crime mystery, spectacular action scenes with just the right amount of violence, as well as minor romantic side plots. Unlike the adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*, which was broadcast during the same period with lower ratings, this mini-series did not burden viewers with existential dialogue or in-depth studies of the characters' inner worlds. This rather run-of-the-mill crime/espionage story became something special thanks to a dazzling performance by some of Russia's most talented contemporary actors: Vladimir Mashkov, Mikhail Porechenkov, Vladimir Menshov, Sergei Makovetskii, Konstantin Lavronenko and Svetlana Kruchkova, most of whom have appeared in art films. Together with its literary allusions, this helped to make the mini-series a typical *kul'turnost'* product: addressed to the masses, in a format adjusted to their tastes, but with elements of 'high culture'. It conformed to recognisable standards of Soviet cinematic heritage, while also spurring national pride of a culture whose entertainment manages to evade the perceived primitiveness of its American counterpart.

In addition to conforming to a well-known standard, *Liquidation* also presents a challenge to the norm by problematising the very concept of *kul'turnost'*, which is used as a structural element in the film. The main protagonist, a Jewish lieutenant-colonel named Gotsman, is marked by his unpolished manners, dress and speech, contrasting with the refinement of his colleague, Vitalii Krechetov, a.k.a. the mole Akademik. In a romantic subplot between Gotsman and the former Moscow resident Nora, the detective's lack of *kul'turnost'* is emphasised: when for example Nora must instruct him about how to properly handle a cognac glass, and Krechetov must train him in the gentlemanly art of courting.

Vadim Volkov (2000, 221) notes that three elements in particular became fetishised during the battle for *kul'turnost'* in the 1930's: curtains, lampshades and tablecloths appeared as emblems of the 'cultured' home. These elements are present both in Nora's and Krechetov's homes, but conspicuously absent in Gotsman's scan-

tily furnished rooms. Initially, *kul'turnost'* is provided with positive connotations (romantic love, male friendship), but after Kretchevov's brutal murder of his pregnant fiancée among the embroidered cushions of his apartment, these connotations are subverted. Historically, *kul'turnost'* functioned as a non-repressive disciplining technique, a response to the rise of domestic violence, hooliganism and other offences related to public order among the recently urbanised rural population in the 1930's (Volkov, 2000, 216). The way in which curtains, lampshades and tablecloths in *Liquidation* are used to signal corruption represents covert criticism against this part of the Stalinist heritage.

Set in 1946, *Liquidation* deals extensively with the Stalinist period, including Socialist Realist aesthetics. In their introduction to the volume *The Imprints of Terror*, the editors describe these aesthetics as based on the notion of sacred or mythical violence, one that evades the rule of law and serves as an end in itself, functioning as a Soviet 'transcendental signifier' (Lipovetsky & Spieker 2006, 26f). According to them, this implicit transcendental signifier begs to be revealed, which is precisely what the authors of a series of cited contemporary literary works have set out to do (Sorokin, Pelevin and Petrushevskaja, among others). This contrasts with works in the aforementioned 'Post-Sots'-subgenre, which according to Lipovetsky 'do not try to expose the absurdity or violence hidden beneath Socialist mythology' (2004, 358).

At a first glance, *Liquidation* seems to fall neatly into the 'Post-Sots'-category – it meets all six criteria mentioned by Lipovetsky (2004, 361), at least superficially. In its treatment of unlawful violence, however, the series diverges from other works used by Lipovetsky to exemplify his idea of 'Post-Sots'. Here, I will show that while *Liquidation* both overtly comments on and criticises Stalinist violence, it nevertheless refrains from a complete demonisation of the institutional practices of the time.

In *Liquidation*, the subject of arbitrary Stalinist terror is treated explicitly, and no attempts are made to justify it: Gotsman is arrested by a state security [MGB] officer for anti-Soviet activities after making a careless comment in a conversation with Marshal Zhukov; his beloved Nora tells him about how she was widowed when her husband, a NKVD officer, fell victim to Stalin's

repressions before the war. Most importantly, the plot line is propelled by Marshal Zhukov's banishment to Odessa – 'the Marshal of Victory' himself had become a victim of Stalin's paranoia.

This arbitrariness is contrasted with the norms prevailing in Gotsman's circle: he is surrounded by his close-knit Jewish community, with strong ties to the world of *blatnye* – organised bands of thieves, murderers and smugglers, who are subject to a well-defined code of behaviour (*vorovskoi zakon*). Gotsman moves freely between the world of Soviet law enforcement and its antipode, the world of thieves, and is equally respected in both. Gotsman's transitional position dispenses with any simple division between heroes and villains depending on profession – cop or robber. Instead, it is the very notion of a rule of law that is at stake here: those who are willing to subject themselves to a common set of norms emerge as the 'good guys' – which law it is, thieves' or Soviet, is of no consequence. This point is illustrated further by the figure of Fima, played by Sergei Makovetskii, and Mishka Karas', Gotsman's adopted son: both are inveterate pick-pockets. While constantly committing various misdemeanours, they nevertheless ardently help Gotsman catch more serious criminals. Their home-made moral code, based on their loyalty to Gotsman, suffices to place them squarely among the 'good guys'.

At the other end of the spectrum we find Gotsman's archenemy, Akademik, who completely lacks any moral standards. His organisation of anti-Soviet rebels with ties to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army is dissociated from the thieves' world. Populated by former collaborators with the Germans and Romanians, it is marked by an atmosphere of general distrust. This point is further emphasised by the largely unmotivated execution of three key members of the organisation – Chekan, Ida and Shteikhel' – by their own men during the final scenes. Akademik's organisation is the ultimate expression of 'the logic of terror', where violence escalates so rapidly that one loses sight of its motivations. Akademik's scanty explanation for his involvement in anti-Soviet activity only underlines the conspicuous normative emptiness of his project:

ГОЦМАН: – Чем же это мы тебе жизнь так испортили?

АКАДЕМИК: – Не мне, а всем. Вы все время воюете, когда не воюете, друг друга убиваете и чужое делите.

Gotsman: – In what way did we ruin your life?

Akademik: – Not my life, everyone's. You keep making war, when you don't fight you kill each other and take what's not yours.

Although this might be a historically correct description of the behaviour of Soviet authorities of the time, the viewer is acutely aware of the fact that, within the frames of the film, this description actually suits Akademik's organisation better.

The various bodies of Soviet power are located on the moral continuum between Gotsman and Akademik. Gotsman is the head of 'the Department of struggle against banditism' within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), i.e., the recently renamed NKVD. In 1946, this department constituted a parallel structure to the Department of counter-intelligence and also to the militia. Marshal Zhukov, in his capacity as commander of Odessa's military district, was ultimately responsible for all. However, in 1943, certain directorates dealing with state security had split off from NKVD, forming an independent People's Commissariat of State Security (NKGB), which in 1946 was renamed the Ministry of State Security (MGB).⁹ This reorganisation is thematised in the film: the MGB officer's gratuitous arrest of Gotsman illustrates the competition between the two ministries, and sets up a comparison in which the MVD comes out favourably. The utter arbitrariness of the arrest – Gotsman is accused of anti-Soviet activity after expressing disagreement with Zhukov on a matter of strategy – is underlined when Zhukov orders Gotsman's release. Hence, the film associates the logic of terror rather with the MGB than the MVD.

The historical Zhukov occasionally exceeded his authority in order to achieve results, and was generally (in)famous for his brutality in warfare. In *Liquidation*, this part of the Zhukov myth is contrasted with the sense of justice that Gotsman represents.

⁹ For details on Soviet state organs dealing with state security see Kokurin & Petrov, (2003).

During the film, Zhukov twice sanctions the Department of Counter-Intelligence's use of clearly unlawful methods in the struggle against banditism: during the first operation, the Odessa criminal elite (*avtoritet*) is arrested during a concert despite an absence of any evidence to support charges against them. During the second, counter-intelligence officers provoke crime by walking elegantly dressed in dangerous parts of the town at night, killing anyone they suspect of trying to rob them.¹⁰ Both actions end up in riots and are called off at Gotsman's initiative. Gotsman finally identifies the undercover Akademik and comes up with a plan to overpower the enemy without infringing on the law, convincing both the head of counter-intelligence and Zhukov of its effectiveness.

The series thus effectively denounces any instance of unmotivated/unlawful violence, yet does not try to hide its prevalence within the state apparatus. At the same time, it nevertheless shows a striking optimism regarding the potential of self-reform, primarily within the ranks of MVD.

According to Lipovetsky and Spieker's definition, Socialist Realist aesthetics promote violence that evades the rule of law. *Liquidation* clearly takes the opposite ethical stance. In this respect, it polemises directly with one of its main sources of inspiration, *Can't Change the Meeting Place* (*Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia*, 1979), where the main protagonist, played by Vladimir Vysotskii, advocates a 'the end justifies the means'-approach to police work.¹¹

The film is deeply embedded in the 'Peoples' friendship'-discourse: set outside the borders of the Russian Federation, featuring a Jewish hero speaking the characteristic Odessa dialect, it appeals to the numerous descendants of Jews who left the city during pogroms

¹⁰ The first murder of this operation is followed by a close-up of a portrait of Joseph Stalin, leaving no doubt about the source of inspiration. Then the camera drops in order to fix a troubled Gotsman in front of a glass of milk, prescribed for his heart condition. Since the source of Gotsman's troubles turns out to be the glass of milk, rather than the terror exercised by his colleagues, the effect is more comical than ominous. It might function as a covert parody of the deadly serious adaptation of *The First Circle*, in which state terror also is a central theme and where the camera keeps returning to a Stalin portrait in a similar manner.

¹¹ Elena Prokhorov (2008) and Greg Dolgopolov (2008) comment on this connection in detail. Dolgopolov's discussion on the ambiguity of the ending is very illuminating, and supports the claims advanced here.

and other disturbances since the late nineteenth century, as well as to the residents of contemporary Ukraine. According to a review on Advertology.ru (2007), the series was first shown in Ukraine, where it was an enormous success.

Although it turns out that the Ukrainian Insurgent Army is one of the master minds behind the anti-Soviet plot carried out by Akademik, the film is careful not to target Ukrainians specifically. Akademik's accomplices show a striking variety as to their ethnicity: Ida is Polish, Shteikhel' is German, and Akademik himself is Russian. Among Gotsman's subordinates, the simple but kind-hearted Ukrainian Iakimenko turns out to be one of his most reliable friends.

Finally, the series appeals to the Russian population, for whom Odessa occupies an important place in the historical imagination. The city witnessed the Potemkin drama in 1905, and as a result of fierce battle scenes during the Second World War, Odessa was granted the honorary epithet 'Hero City' (*gorod-geroi*).

From the productions discussed here, it becomes clear that neither a general re-embracing of Soviet values, including the sacralisation of violence, nor nostalgia suffices to explain the presence of Soviet elements in contemporary television. In order to account for the numerous remakes of Soviet block-busters, the prevalence of Second World War themes and the popularity of Soviet TV-formats like *Pole Chudes* and KVN, (at least) two additional factors must be taken into consideration: First, the need precipitated by market forces to reach a maximum number of viewers, who are now scattered around the globe prompts television to search for cultural codes that are both intelligible and politically flexible. Second, there is a political necessity to construct some kind of ideological consensus within the country, and to foster goodwill among the Russian-speaking populations outside its borders. The tropes of *kul'turnost'* and 'Peoples' friendship' have proven instrumental in meeting these demands, operating successfully as devices in the process of creating a viable, supraethnic cultural identity.

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Karin Sarsenov

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Appendix 1. Adaptations of classical Russian/Soviet novels into the television mini-series format, 2003-2008

Title	Based on work by	Director	Channel	Broad-casted	Share of TV-viewers (%)	Average rating (%)
Idiot	Fyodor Dostoyevsky	Vladimir Bortko	'Rossiia'	May-Jun 2003	> 30	
Teatral'nyi roman	Mikhail Bulgakov	Oleg Babitskii, Iurii Gol'din	'Kul'tura'	May-Jun 2003	No data	
Moskovskaia saga	Vasilii Aksenov	Dmitrii Barshchevskii	First Channel	Oct-Nov 2004	32.8	13.7
			repeat	Feb 2006	13.0	4.6
Deti Arbata	Anatolii Rybakov	Andrej Eshpaj	First Channel	Nov-Dec 2004	29.8	11.8
Delo o mertvykh dushakh	Nikolai Gogol	Pavel Lungin	NTV	Sep 2005	No data	
Master i Margarita	Mikhail Bulgakov	Vladimir Bortko	'Rossiia'	Dec-Feb 2005	30.0	12.9
			repeat	Feb-Mar 2007	17.2	6.4
V krughe pervom	Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn	Gleb Panfilov	'Rossiia'	Jan-Feb 2006	28.7	12.9
Doktor Zhivago	Boris Pasternak	Aleksandr Proshkin	NTV	May 2006	9.3	3.5
Tikhii Don	Mikhail Sholokhov	Sergei Bondarchuk	First Channel	Nov 2006	34.6	14.2
Pechorin	Mikhail Lermontov	Aleksandr Kott	First Channel	Jun 2007	18.0	5.6
Besy	Fyodor Dostoyevsky	Feliks Shul'tess, Valerii Akhadov		2007	No data	
Prestuplenie i nakazanie	Fyodor Dostoyevsky	Dmitrii Svetozarov	First Channel	Dec 2007	16.8	4.6
Dom na naberezhnoi	Iurii Trifonov	Arkadii Kordon	NTV	Nov 2007	11.9	4.7
Tiazhelyi pesok	Anatolii Rybakov	Anton and Dmitrii Barshchevskii	First Channel	Oct 2008	26.1	9.4

Data on audiences have been retrieved from TNS Gallup Media, <http://www.advertology.ru>, and <http://www.tns-global.ru>. 'Share of TV-viewers' refers to the percentage of all viewers watching television at the time, while 'rating' refers to the percentage of all possible viewers, in this case everyone in the Russian Federation over the age of four. Shares and ratings represent averages of data from the period the broadcast was aired. Data are available only from 2004 onwards, and only about the 100 top-rated programs. As a result, no information can be found on older or programs with low ratings.