



Russian Television Today

Primetime drama and comedy

David MacFadyen

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The most important stories in Russia have traditionally been those of literature; today that function is fulfilled by TV drama. This book examines the role of dramatized narratives in Russian television, demonstrating how they grapple with key questions of both national identity and recent history. *Russian Television Today* shows how visual drama succeeds in offering some answers or consolation, laying claim to a window on past generations and showing Russian viewers what might be salvageable from the Soviet experience. Just as President Putin uses that experience to hone a fresh understanding of what it means to “be” Russian, so TV’s heroes and heroines frequently express themselves with a related, soothing simplicity. Extending and complicating any such harmonies, this book then turns to other important developments: the manufacturing of new “national” on-screen characters and their peculiar relationship to both classic or Soviet literature and Latin-American soaps – all filtered through the enduring emphases of love, fidelity, humor, and irony. Since, however, those filters are often designed to block an unpleasant actuality, this book also pays considerable attention to the pressing problem of domestic crime and its troubled representation on screen – either as Mafia or police adventures.

Overall, *Russian Television Today* provides a detailed account of critical social and aesthetic issues in Russia’s primetime visual media, all the way from historical epics to the recent, more profitable emphases of situation comedy and reality shows.

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Introduction

Sweeping statements and broad horizons

Counter-revolutions always follow revolutions. They, in turn, are followed by a search for people guilty of revolutionary excess – and their punishment. Russian history is full of such examples.

(President Vladimir Putin, 2001)

The most important and popular stories in Russia have traditionally been those of literature; that function is currently being fulfilled by TV drama. In prior decades, socialist media repeatedly boasted to the outside world that nobody reads more than Soviet citizens; nowadays, however, opinion polls reveal with equal frequency that more than half of Russia's public has read little or no literature in recent memory. Elderly arbiters of Slavic culture hang their heads and intone somewhat ominously that the printed page has lost its battle for cultural prominence. The nine chapters that follow, although cognizant of any such wretchedness, aim to paint a less miserable picture; they examine visual tales of artful, hopeful change that Russians are telling themselves in today's primetime. Televised yarns in fact often make considerable and respectful *use* of literature in order to reassess the nation's sad past and/or posit some happier future, at least for social microcosms such as friends, families, and starry-eyed lovers.

In addition, Russian television nowadays can *create* bestsellers. Popular TV series often become big, popular books. Long, peopled chronicles of love, laughter, and despicable intrigue work just as well on paper. They offer the consolation of a crystal ball and do so with huge profits. Weaving both in and out of literature, both with and without the printed page, televised dramas fill broadcasting schedules every evening all across Russia, from the Baltic to the Pacific.

As Putin suggests in the above epigraph, many TV stories display well-structured parallels with the grand narratives of social actuality. They borrow from history (from a shared, recognizable past) and then, willy-nilly, start to color its future. They reflect old views and create new ones. Television shows frequently cast a retrospective glance at Russia's history before debating the futures of their influential heroes; they do so by grappling with two key questions: "What really happened to us?" and, accordingly, "Why?"

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Turning first to the prestige of a literary canon or the partisan influence of an equally canonized history, Russian primetime recurrently conjures sweeping statements in order to join the dots between exciting, engaging stories of two people and those of an entire “nation.” Generalizations are used to connect the past to the present in an entertaining and feasible fashion.

Using historical or collective situations to comprehend and articulate a modern selfhood, television melodrama regularly subscribes to the undemanding, though comprehensive, Hegelianism that Putin notes – or it tries at least to posit some existential agency therein. The results may constitute examples of what he calls “common sense,” but whenever headstrong presidents start employing the rhetoric of historical inevitability to predict, influence, or *correct* the status quo, matters are quickly complicated. This problem has certainly been exacerbated by Putin’s media policy and the type of shows it has supported since the Kursk disaster, all in the name of displaying history’s purported rationale. Russia’s national television stations are today either state-owned or overseen by affiliated companies, so in many instances today’s TV serials do reflect the Kremlin’s views, though this is not always the case and we will examine closely any exceptions.

One Russian proverb holds that “all novelty is simply a well-forgotten past.” Without a doubt, lots of TV dramas show us what is salvageable from the Soviet experience. Putin’s manipulation of past traditions comes on the heels of some revisionist scholarship in the West that has reassessed the core tenets of Soviet culture. These new viewpoints are extremely useful in any broad, if not equally sweeping, assessments of how post-Soviet mores operate; i.e. assessments of what they continue to draw upon long after 1991. Mikhail Epstein has suggested, for example, that a reconsideration (if not dismissal) of history’s received milestones can shed light upon several enduring, if not imposing, “Russo-Soviet topoi” that try to define the quiddity of Russianness. Clichés or not, political rhetoric and its TV audience value these kinds of generalizations very highly.

Paradoxically, such topoi often lie outside language, because here one senses some of the most important platitudes of Russian self-awareness, conceivable as an illogical, “indescribable ‘inner world,’ an expansive, authentic ‘life force.’”¹ These ineffable vagaries might be a reasonable starting place for our examination of today’s narrative tropes, but ultimately they just restate many of the abstractions underlying the clichés. The guilty party here is an often apophatic outline of what the Slavic soul is *not*: “‘Western’ rational articulation, precision, delimitation, reserve, calculation, reflection, or predictability.”² Nationhood on today’s TV is often invoked in a similarly fuzzy social sense, as communal existence beyond the historical lifespan of ideas like “commun-ism,” and is thus habitually associated with loss, with something both unspeakable and absent. It was something abused by the more avaricious, doctrinaire aspects of Soviet materialism and is now being manhandled by modern, corporate Russia. Today’s body politic therefore overlaps with ways in which bodies of suffering or sympathy characterize

themselves: an identity gained either through defeat or something born of nothing.

Soviet revisionism in a wide-ranging ecological context

In a recent essay concerning other elements of Soviet culture that endure in present-day Russian essentialism, Mikhail Epstein offers perhaps the grandest of all such negations. He begins by stating what it means to be “Russian” spatiotemporally, to be the product of a given land or legacy. When Russians speak of the country and history that have made them who they are, their idea of endless space often “swallows up” anything temporal, leading to a specific double entendre in his Russo-Soviet topoi. The sheer enormity of Russia inspires both a sense of nothingness (of a place too big to see) and some insistent awareness of great heroism required to do that magnitude justice – or save it in times of major conflict.

Given, in addition, that this enormity has for centuries been part and parcel of centralized imperial projects, the “provinces” are likewise seen as realms that may once have had their own center, but over time were beaten and annexed, leaving most of the nation as *nothing* in particular. Russians, as a result, do not feel at home in the unbounded, unpeopled place they call home:

This void is terrifying. Nature, the proverb notwithstanding, does not abhor a vacuum, but humans do. In Russia, we all seem to suffer from a love-hate complex towards space. What is that celebrated [Gogolian] “fast driving” that “what Russian does not love?” [sic]. Is it a flight into space or *from* space? It is both. Having rushed into the void, people try as quickly as possible to hurl themselves out of its invisible surroundings, to prevail, to reach a firm boundary, a crowded refuge.³

And yet, in the context of another recent study by Katerina Clark, we are told that the same emptiness and grandeur have often been invoked as an ostensible, ever-*present* embodiment of some long, institutionalized and “extraordinary *time*.”⁴ Enormity and insignificance, presence and absence, are frequently bound together in popular memory; small compressed spaces and private timelines are bound to their possible dissolution in nothingness – or an incomprehensibility synonymous with magical stately presence.

Whenever this magic is challenged, as in 1917, immobile presence then contemplates its *own* absence, in this case its obsolescence at the hands of modernist progression. That which always “was or is,” i.e. an antique essence beyond the ken of historians and cartographers, then stands face to face with that which “can, will or should be,” i.e. socially desirable but not (yet) existent. Thomas Lahusen has synthesized these spiraling oppositions in twentieth-century Russian self-awareness as the competition between what is “now” or unchanging, and that which is “evolutionary.”⁵

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Elsewhere Epstein has suggested other ways in which stasis and growth, all and (maybe) nothing, might be involuntarily wedded by popular or generalized Russo-Soviet custom. “Circles of repetitive celebrations” went round and round as socialist culture enjoyed the demarcation of its achievements, month after month, to the point where it ended up going nowhere in particular. “Practically every day was the anniversary of something [magnificent], and the noise of the celebration died out, with each gala evening passing into a festive matinee.”⁶ These recurrences resulted from what he calls the synthetic, “serious eclecticism” of socialist realism, which would later metamorphose into a repeatedly “playful” eclecticism, a strange harbinger of postmodernism.⁷

Other scholarly work of late by Evgenii Dobrenko has asserted that socialist realism was indeed a great synthesizing force, over and over again, because it operated almost exclusively in the domain of mass taste and the most popular, accessible aesthetic possible. The reason for this choice, he claims, was that “Soviet power was a pragmatic of *pure* power, its strategy dictated by the logic of self-preservation, the logic of keeping power.”⁸ There was nothing it would not do or adopt as it yearned, like the hero of Fedor Gladkov’s *Cement*, for “a world more boundless than it was for Spinoza.” The willful involvement of Russian book-buyers or readers in this yearning simply amplified and extended it. Thus, adds Dobrenko, in socialist art:

The consumer [of truly expansive/inclusive art] becomes a creator, and the creator a consumer. There is no end to creativity. It has no obstacles. It is actually popular and “organic.” [As Aleksandr Fadeev said,] “Art cannot be considered real art if it does not become profoundly popular, necessary to the people and loved by them. The people do not want to smother anyone’s artistic individuality. They stand behind an organic, great free and content-rich creativity.”⁹

With this Spinozistic organicity there emerge additional contradictions. How, for example, can today’s scholars or politicians, even, conflate conservative, Stalinist tales of Russia’s “subdued nature” and the simultaneous fight for Gladkov’s and Fadeev’s sprawling ecology? This book will maintain that there is, in fact, no difference or inconsistency between a Leninist drive for everything and a growing proximity towards Epstein’s nothingness. That same paradox is embodied by today’s TV tales, by the engaging chronicles that state-sponsored television endorses, since they so often employ the Soviet past to reflect or model a post-Soviet future. Today’s reconsideration of Soviet literary culture helps us reconsider and understand the most popular television, too.

It is sometimes said that Russian TV dramas (and news) have become “more apolitical” since 2003.¹⁰ This popularized, eclectically middlebrow aesthetic and the avoidance of political extremism or experimentation have

been included in other reassessments of socialist art. The first and perhaps most famous of these was Vera Dunham's study of middleclass cultural "mediation" after World War Two. Our own study concurs, but aims to move middleclass eclecticism away from cultural pragmatism and further in the direction of a risky, essentially socialist romanticism. A vertiginous, ecologically expansive romanticism was, it seems, always a key element of Soviet rhetoric, of its speeches and most conventional realist stories – the invocation of Epstein's tightly bound dyad: everything and/or nothing. This Spinozistic romanticism was dragged into Soviet storytelling from pre-revolutionary experience, and in television productions of today it remains of equal value to Russia's state-funded media, trying to reinstate a sweeping sense of national, post-Soviet pride. A vacuity is never far from today's omnipresent, calming rhetoric or cozy dramas, from the "small crowded refuges" of soap operas – and it may in fact be brought even closer by them.

TV's limited language, "surmounted" by nostalgia for the 1970s

Civic pride and patriotic television invoke profoundly social states; to that extent the following chapters are in agreement with Dobrenko whenever he brings myriad Soviet readers into the history of semantic negotiation. There is, however, good reason to take polite issue with Svetlana Boym's recent assertion that Soviet art and stories "manipulated the consciousness [of recipients], using the techniques that automatically secure emotional responses."¹¹ Similarly, one might question Epstein's contention that socialist art "used ideological force on the [public's] consciousness."¹² There was no automatic security in these processes, and TV now is having the same problems as socialist cinema and literature in "guiding" social consciousness. The quandaries faced nowadays by screenwriters and directors often begin with a difficult renegotiation of Russia's historically validated platitudes, the views of spatiotemporality suggested above.

Putin's narratives of socialist dignity *redux* are likewise made on the scale of Epstein's shibboleths, designed to fill an empty nation and/or voided nature. They work both verbally *and* visually, contemplating the ineffable or undoable, and in doing so they unavoidably bump up against their representational limitations. With regard to this issue, in my 2005 study of Russian animated film, *Yellow Crocodiles and Blue Oranges*, I showed how the screenplays of many Soviet cartoons, facing the same problem, grew *smaller* over time. Language considered its limits; notions of perfect interaction grew less wordy or effable and more musical or visual. In justifying this process as illustrative of what socialist art was often doing elsewhere (or Putin is today), that particular study also sketched the history of phenomenology in the USSR.

The argument was made that the most fundamental, ideal basis of desired socialist interaction, of everybody everywhere, was best investigated as an

issue of consciousness, rather than quotidian, mappable reality. Phenomenology, after all, does not deny the existence of material phenomena that demarcate Soviet existence; it merely posits them as “phenomenal occurrences” of objects with acts of intending. Things exist as they occur to us, an aphoristic truism that leads us to admit, perhaps, the primacy of intuiting over the things we intuit. The workings and troubled reputation of phenomenology in Russia show us a path that dialectical materialism, from its idealist, Hegelian roots, could (and should) have taken to discover more about social consciousness and emotional, nationally social essences (which are pre- or *extra*-linguistic). What Soviet language wanted most of all, just like Gladkov’s hero, was something that could not be said.

Following attention will therefore define the “politics” of socialist-inspired storytelling, its factional scheming as follows: Did it (or does it now through Putin) rely upon feasible, effable schemes or a phenomenological awareness beyond itself, an overcoming of the subject-object divide? Some kind of silent, apophatic *membership* with the void or uninhabited nature, especially if untitled and unspeakable geography outlines and *drives* the desires enacted on its playing field? I will contend that Soviet stories “then,” just as Putinesque drama now, have done precisely that by drawing upon a deeply romantic consciousness, demarcating a yearning for something that never was (or never could “be” in its entirety). The empty object of desire was and remains not so much a lost past or borderless map, but an undoable, unutterable future.

In respectful contradistinction to recent reassessments of socialist realism, therefore, this study will not dissolve the significance of rhetoric wholly into outdoor social practices, nor stress its role in quotidian reality, but will attempt a return to the oratory *per se*, a reconsideration of its social function *within itself*. After all, if the stories examined in this book embody the search for undoable prospects, they also contain within themselves the seeds of their own demise, long before they become the social tools of other, disparate people for other purposes. Dogma and the stories thereof will be shown as *intentionality*, as endlessly pondered steps towards the ineffable, unmanageable ecological grandeur and emptiness of which Epstein and Lahusen speak. They intend doing a great deal. This task, if undertaken to the full, would be an encounter with the Real in the Lacanian sense and the construction of eternally wedded, social networks of verity in the Badiouian. It would be really social and truly real.

The perfect, organic union of Soviet cultural creator and consumer, of artist and reader, was supposed to be waist-deep in the endless “situation[s] of creativity itself” on the scale of Fadeev’s “naturally popular” networks noted above. These goals of organic production are exactly the metaphors investigated by TV today. Their ontology originates in some vertiginous aspects of socialist art; yet if we turn on Moscow television, they are fashioning the most popular stories in the world’s biggest country in four, eight, twelve episodes or more. It is on TV that the long, traditionally serialized

Russian narrative can now be found. Television picks up where a socialist reworking of Golden Age prose left off.

This study will pay much attention to the importance of literary adaptations. The relationship between verbal and visual narratives has been a troublesome aspect of Russian filmmaking since its inception, when silent adaptations of classic literature helped to allay directors' insecurity in the face of St. Petersburg's serious dramatic theater. We will examine ways in which early, visualized Soviet storytelling (then) and the status thereof (now) are interrelated; they both seek to mirror and manipulate more serious times. The two periods in greatest thematic demand for television now are Stalinism (such as the autumn 2006 series *His Wife [Ego zhena]*)¹³ and the much safer years under Brezhnev, which repeated Stalin's emphasis upon "cultured" and educated aesthetics. These periods uneasily interwove a zealous, self-assured patriotism and bureaucratic, self-satisfied security. Both are sought today.

In particular, the 1970s are affectionately, earnestly remembered. They were a fine age for filmmaking: between 1965 and 1980, Soviet citizens went to the movies on average twenty times each year.¹⁴ Brezhnev's term in office likewise witnessed an explosion in television drama, driven frequently by adaptations of popular World War Two and spy stories. Not only did concern over brash Western culture lead to more "tasteful" adaptations of respectable Russian literature, but television became the venue of a warmed-over Stalinist contrariness, as noted by Stephen Hutchings. The Stagnation once gave birth to and now inspires small-screen stories along these same lines (written or filmed by that 1970s generation); it was a time of serious, significant TV:

Under Brezhnev, television adaptations assumed greater importance. The televisual appearance of stock characters from the international literary canon like Sherlock Holmes, Tom Sawyer and the heroes of J.K. Jerome helped sate the mounting curiosity of ordinary Soviet people about all things Western. Such adaptations also complemented international policies of détente, promulgating cosy stereotypes of the eccentric English gentleman which enabled official culture to claim that it was 'fostering international understanding,' but at the same time, to ensure that progressive views of the iniquities of capitalism prevailed.¹⁵

Hutchings' observation comes in the introduction to a collection of articles dedicated to cinematic adaptations of Russian literature. This field will be of use to us in that we are examining the shift from the wholly linguistic to the mainly visual: "fidelity" to a serious, once-cherished original in the creation of patriotic myths is always important in the creation of dogmatic, political adaptations for TV.

All things considered, television drama is not the loss of literature but its next logical step, perhaps, beyond the promotional or political zeal of the

Soviet novelistic project. Film not only moves beyond the linear workings of metonymy, as already contended in the above animation monograph; it also breaks down the division between author and creator.¹⁶ As a *collaborative* project, television and film enact a cherished dream of socialist culture: the organic positioning of author in (and wholly reflective of) Dobrenko's "life as it is." Television series today frequently give voice to a virtual, never-realized potential of socialist custom that in turn slips and slides away from the current administration. Born of a realist tradition, these tales of love, lust, and adventure embody several social states that are always desired, but never attained. They are – ultimately – excessive.

This striking elusiveness, so closely tied to the Stagnation and Putin's own youth of the 1970s, has led of late to TV films such as *December 32nd* (dir. Aleksandr Muratov, 2004). Three pensioners are magically made "thirty to forty" years younger, a wrinkled trio played by stars of Brezhnev's cinema: Andrei Miagkov, Armen Dzhigarkhanian, and Ada Rogovtseva. They relive a "wonderful" past but are eventually brought back to the present, where "happy faces around us" are only possible "if we're together." Both artistically and actually, this observation rings true for our study – though never for long. It gives voice to a spiraling ideal that may evanesce further with each passing year; a yearning towards other, absent people and places such that the credits of *December 32nd* dedicate the film "with love" to three icons of the Soviet 1970s – J.B. Priestley, Evgenii Shvarts, and Èl'dar Riazanov. Stable presidents and mentally unstable pensioners, it would appear, are looking for approval in the same places.