

Conference Paper

Unconfusedly but Separably: The 'Others' in Contemporary History of Russia (Russian TV Series of the 2000s and 2010s)

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Abstract

The so-called 'retromania' in contemporary Russian culture includes a whole range of topics, such as bioenergetics and extrasensory or paranormal powers, which for a long time existed in the 'shadow' of popular culture. This article focuses on one of the recent Russian TV shows called 'The Others' (*Drugie*) directed by Olga Dobrova-Kulikova and shown on Channel One in January 2019. This TV series tells the story of people with paranormal abilities or psychic powers in the context of Russia's contemporary history. The topic of 'the others' in the series interlaces with another, equally underexplored topic – that of the Russian history in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century, including the post-Stalin period, Khrushchev Thaw, Brezhnev era, Perestroika and the post-Soviet period. At the core of the film's plot lies the story of one family, more specifically, three generations of women. Thus, the progress of historical time in this TV series goes through the following three stages: the difficult and painful process of eradicating Stalin's totalitarianism, which became fully possible only with the change of generations; the rough 1990s, which ended with the establishment of the rule of law and life going back to normal; the uncertain 2000s, when people had to balance between the law and criminality while striving to maintain the facade of normality.

Keywords: TV series *The Others (Drugie)*, people with paranormal abilities, contemporary history, extirpation of the past

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1. Introduction

The so-called 'retromania' in contemporary Russian culture includes a whole range of topics, such as bioenergetics, extrasensory or paranormal powers and so on, which for a long time existed in the 'shadow' of popular culture. In the Soviet time, for obvious reasons, they were considered taboo as well as the more general topic of the 'other world' explored in a number of cinematic and literary genres. These topics were actualized in the late 1980s as a result of the mass surge of interest in history, in particular recent history, in the period of the turbulent political change in Russia. This

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period is, therefore, described by L.Ionin as the beginning of the 'new magic epoch', which will supposedly supersede the era of modernity [1].

The 1990s brought the topic of the 'others' to the forefront of public attention, not only in culture but also in everyday life. In other words, as A.Panchenko puts it, happened the "habitualization" of cosmology and esoterics' [2]. Many Russian people still remember TV 'health séances' of famous psychics (the so-called *extrasensy*) Anatoly Kashpirovsky and Alan Chumak, who 'charged' water with healing energy and gave advice to millions of excited TV viewers. These 'séances' were broadcast on state TV in prime-time and enjoyed mass popularity, comparable perhaps only to the speeches of famous teacher-innovators M.Schetinin, S.Amonashvili, S.Volkov and others, promoting the principles of humanistic pedagogy. There was no perceived difference between the two groups of speakers since people considered listening to famous psychics and teacher-innovators as a way of 'opening new horizons' and of learning to enjoy the newly acquired freedom of thought and action. In the 1990s, this new kind of 'spiritualism' was a useful distraction strategy to placate society and divert the public attention from the severe shortages of consumer goods. Since the 2000s, this phenomenon has become a focus of serious scholarly research and a subject of reflection in the cultural domain.

2. Materials and Methods

This article focuses on one of the recent Russian TV shows called *The Others (Drugie)* directed by Olga Dobrova-Kulikova and shown on Channel One in January 2019. This TV series tells the story of people with 'paranormal abilities' or psychic powers in the context of Russia's contemporary history. The topic of 'the others' in the series interlaces with another, equally underexplored topic – that of the Russian history in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century, including the post-Stalin period, Khrushchev Thaw, Brezhnev era, Perestroika and the post-Soviet period. Thus, instead of putting the story in some sort of fantastic or mystical context, the series' creators decided to reconstruct a whole epoch of contemporary Russian history. At the core of the film's plot lies the story of one family, more specifically, three generations of women (the magic gift can be passed only through the female line). Such narrative strategy ensures consistency and coherence in the depiction of historical events.

What makes *The Others* a truly historical film is that it seeks to present a realistic picture of historical events, unlike other popular mystical thrillers, detectives and action movies, which freely mix fantasy elements with reality (for example, two Russian TV series of the same name – *Fortune-Teller* (2019) – one consisting of 16 episodes and

the other, of multiple episodes, – and *Voices*, which has been running for several years already). The only other Russian series comparable to *The Others* is *Black Raven* (64 episodes) based on the novels of St.Petersburg author Dmitry Veresov (a literary pseudonym of D.A. Priyatkin). *Black Raven* was directed by Boris Gorlov, Igor Moskvitin, and Andrey Kravchuk and released in 2001.

In this article we compare TV show *The Others* with its counterparts and put it into the corresponding cultural context of the last decades. The method of hermeneutic interpretation is applied to identify the authors' intention and to explore the concept of contemporary history underlying the cinematic works of this kind.

3. Results

The Others is an historical epic series which reconstructs a family history as a part of the larger, national historical narrative in the way reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Russian novelistic tradition. Similar films were quite popular with the Soviet mass audience as they compensated for the lack of dramatic narrative films. These Soviet films combined elements of different genres, in particular those considered inappropriate in the USSR, and were set not in some fictionalized reality, but in specific periods of Russian history. The topic explored in *The Others*, however, belongs to a different tradition and, therefore, dictates different rules of story-telling.

4. Discussion

The tradition of representing the 'other world' is firmly embedded in global culture. The ideas about the supernatural were strongly influenced by Gothic fiction, which, in its turn, engendered the twentieth-century fantasy literature and a whole range of cinematic subgenres, such as horror films, mystery thrillers, vampire chronicles, and so on. The most influential novel that shaped the development of the Gothic tradition in the twentieth century was Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). This novel can be considered a forefather of the wave of vampire films and books. The only counterpart comparable in popularity with *Dracula* is Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* (17 novels, the first of which was *Interview with the Vampire*, 1976). Some of these books were made into films (1994, 2002). Anne Rice changed the classical tradition of portraying vampires as cold-hearted and soulless monsters: "One crucial thing that distinguishes Rice's vampires is their excessive emotionality, their sensitivity and sensuality, which means that they can

experience deep feelings and all-consuming infatuations” [3]. In other words, sometimes Anne Rice’s vampires are more human than humans themselves.

Apparently, it was the vampire craze, which Anne Rice’s novels contributed to, that prompted Sergey Lukyanenko to write his novels about the parallel world or the world of the others, existing alongside the ordinary human world. Lukyanenko’s ‘other world’ has a clear division into Dark and Light (a similar division is found in Harry Potter novels), although in his later books this boundary is becoming somewhat blurred. In one of Rice’s chronicles, vampire Lestat says that no human is able to resist the Dark Gift and no vampire will lose a chance to become human again [4]. Nevertheless, in the last of Lukyanenko’s *Watch* book series, *The Sixth Watch*, Lukyanenko’s character, who has lost his ‘gift’ and turned into a simple mortal, is pitied by his friends and family, including his wife, a high-level sorceress. The reader is expected to feel sorry for this character, too. All of these texts and films rely on one pervasive archetype of the twentieth-century culture, which most vividly and fully manifested itself in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* concept, a superman or a superhero, whose abilities exceed those of ordinary people. The same archetype is reproduced in those series of Russian novels and films (for example, the novels by Marina and Sergey Diachenko) that stand out from other mass-produced narratives about vampires and other supernatural creatures.

In this context, the appearance of books and films similar to *The Others* does not seem surprising. There undoubtedly is a connection, at least on the level of naming, between the Russian TV series and the popular supernatural horror film *The Others* directed by A. Amenábar and released in 2001. Russian *The Others*, however, disengages from the established mainstream tradition of portraying people with extraordinary abilities (they are often depicted as ceasing to be humans or presenting a new kind of homo sapiens) as belonging to the realm of darkness. The only exception from this general rule is S.Lukyanenko’s *Watch* novels, where the dark and the light are separated from ordinary people and exist in their own, parallel world. The series *The Others* offers a new approach to this theme in mass culture. The main characters are the three women who represent good will and good power: even though this power can be put to evil ends, these women resist any attempts of this kind even if it means exposing themselves to risk or acting against their own interests.

The film explores the topic of the ‘other world’ from a new, original angle, showing the ‘others’ as deeply involved into the processes of Russian history. The extrasensory abilities do not save a psychic from the social evil and he or she is still being tossed about like a splinter in the whirlpool of history, helpless in the face of the repressive regime and its servants. Thus, the psychic is not portrayed as a superhuman even

though he or she has the potential to become one. In the series, they are depicted as ordinary people in pursuit of love and happiness. In *The Others*, the characters take an active part in Soviet history and go through all the ups and downs of the Soviet regime. The latter, in its turn, is shown as merciless towards people, manipulating and exploiting them for its own ends. It should be noted that the film takes a feminine perspective on the problems of the 'others' and life in general, accentuating the value of personal and family relationships. It also explains why NKVD officer Grinev personifying the regime is interested in the protagonist –Valentina – not only and not so much as a prospective secret service agent but as a woman whom he admires and whom he strives to possess.

The series covers a rather long period of time: it starts from 1955, the year when after Stalin's death the inmates of the labour camps started to return home and ends in contemporary Russia of the early 2010s. The story concludes on a classic happy ending: the representative of the third generation defeats the arch villain (gangster) and finds her happiness, her family (mother, grandmother) and love. The general message of this film epic is quite simple and straightforward: with the progress of time, the country frees itself of the old dogmas and people become more tolerant and accepting of things that used to be seen as abnormal. There is a general movement of society towards liberalization, more peaceful and tranquil life, in which even people with abnormalities can find a place of their own. Ordinary people are getting accustomed to psychics and this process is shown as 'domestication' of the latter and a part of the general process of humanization of society and the state.

TV show *The Others* comprises two distinct parts: eight episodes about the life of a woman with psychic abilities, Valentina Petrovna Neley, and eight episodes about her daughter Lidia, her granddaughter Marina and, finally, her great-granddaughter Valya-Zlata. The first episodes of the series are the most dynamic and action-packed, focusing on the figure of beautiful clairvoyant Valentina – a unique woman with a strong, deeply harmonious and mature personality. The action in the film is interspersed with scenes of archival video footage of Soviet Moscow for an extra touch of authenticity. The film starts with Valentina's returning from a labour camp, where she spent five years. She finds that in the meanwhile, a childless family has adopted Valentina's daughter Lida from an orphanage.

From the very beginning, the film raises the topic of a hard life of the 'others' in the Soviet period: "She is also one of the 'others'?" asks Valentina's friend, who she stays with after her return from the camp. "Unfortunately, she is", Valentina answers. The theme of 'otherness', of being different from ordinary people is also interpreted as being 'aliens' – this is what Lida calls herself on multiple occasions and Valentina is

also described as an 'alien' by her husband Arkady. 'Aliens' find it difficult to live among ordinary people, which leads to mother's and daughter's repeated attempts to become 'like everybody else' – a recurring theme in their life stories. There are moments when both women realize that their 'otherness' is a source of threat to their own safety and to their lives.

The story of Valentina's relationship with *osobist* (special agent of NKVD) Grinev contains a subplot of 'domestication' as they are trying to 'domesticate' one another. Grinev is trying to fully subjugate Valentina to his will ("I am your king and your God, you are not strong enough to resist me. Just deal with it", he tells her in the third episode). Grinev adheres to the ideology of the totalitarian state, which incorporates the idea of male supremacy. Nevertheless, Valentina decides not to kill Grinev for reasons that remain not quite clear for the audience. The constant process of chase in which they are both involved results in what may seem a bizarre symbiosis of the pursuer and his victim, the two of them becoming one. During their last meeting, which is also the most emotional moment they share together, Valentina kisses Grinev and says: "If it is the only way to make you suffer, let this kiss burn in your soul forever" (a vampire-like motif). She also pronounces a kind of existential diagnosis to Grinev: "You are not running after me, you are running from the emptiness that surrounds you", which means that "if you kill me, you will kill yourself". This is what happens in the end: in the eighth episode Valentina, who is now trying not only to save herself but also to protect her daughter, hunted by Grinev's henchmen, finally decides to use her super-power and casts a deadly spell. She is, however, immediately killed by Grinev's wife, who seeks revenge for her own ruined life and wants to protect her beloved grand-son. For her, Valentina is not Grinev's victim but a witch and a source of evil, who doesn't deserve pity. As A. Etkind puts it, "innocent victims are turned into horrible monsters" [5] right in front of our eyes, and this transformation is fatal for them. The death of Valentina renders Grinev's spiritual (and maybe also physical) death inevitable and in the final scene he is shown hugging her grave. This scene thus evokes associations with a scene from Sergey Aksakov's tale *The Scarlet Flower* (an adaptation of traditional fairy tale about the Beauty and the Beast): the beast is dying on a hill where his flower used to grow. This reinforces the mythologeme of the Beauty and the Beast that the relationship between these two characters (Valentina and Grinev) fits into very well. Both of the characters need to be 'domesticated' – beautiful Valentina and horrible 'bestly' Grinev, who acts on behalf of the even more horrible state machine. To a certain extent, he is also 'alien' to ordinary people as he stifles his feelings and deteriorates as a personality more and more as the plot unfolds.

A similarly painful process of 'domestication' is also faced by Valentina's daughter Lidia. She strives to overcome her inherited alienation from the world of ordinary people, but at times her efforts make this alienation even worse: first due to her teenage desire to attract attention and later to her insatiable urge to help people and know more about her mysterious gift. A scientist from a certain secret laboratory specializing on mysterious and unexplained phenomena of human psyche cautions Lidia against this excessive enthusiasm by asking her why she is interested in the nature of her abilities. He answers this question himself by saying: "Only the God can answer this question, but there is no God".

The film emphasizes the movement of time and the social and political change that comes with it. In the second half of the 1960s, people were subject to criminal persecution for black market trading of foreign-made goods or the so-called *fartsovka*. When Grinev wants to take Lida from her foster parents, Dolnikov reacts strongly against it, exclaiming: "I won't be silent about that... It's not like in the old days now, there should be some law". The motif of the 'changing times' also recurs in the speech of other characters. The attitude of ordinary people towards the 'others', however, changes much more slowly. The tentative interest in the mysterious side of the human psyche is suppressed by the government and by people themselves. At a certain point in her life, Valentina starts to be wary of showing her power ("I am normal, I am like everybody else", she keeps saying to herself) but then she gets ill. The film uses a number of symbolic references to the extraordinary nature of the 'others' as super-human creatures: left unused, Valentina's gift starts to torment and eat her from the inside, causing illness. Only after receiving the letter from her friend that her daughter was found, Valentina cures herself with the help of a special candle ritual and feels a surge of energy to go and search for her daughter. The film provides ample evidence that Valentina is 'not like everybody else', in fact, that she is better than everybody else, that is, 'better than humans' (alluding to the name of another Russian series released in 2018 and directed by A.Dzhunkovsky, whose main character is a robot).

Unlike her mother, Lida is not afraid of using her powers openly to cure people. Lida's peaceful life is again interrupted by Grinev, who is trying to control her, like he once was trying to control her mother. Lida is not only different from ordinary people, she also proves to be different from her mother as she doesn't run away but plays by her own rules and, when her mother joins her, they stand together against Grinev's brutal power. The progress of time, as the film asserts, manifests itself in precisely that – people being able to gradually overcome their fear of the state, regime and its agencies. The series incorporate different genres: action thriller (Lida's struggle with Grinev and his

thugs); melodrama (the story of families and relationships); psychological drama; and to a certain extent a detective story (last episodes). After Lida's husband, who is in the military, gets killed in Afghanistan, she returns to her father with her daughter and lives through the harsh Perestroika years. The film carefully reconstructs the atmosphere of this time: Marina, Lida's daughter, devoid of the magic gift, finds a job selling clothes at a market; TV channels broadcast seances of psychics with 'extrasensory' powers, and eventually Lida, who feels the need to provide for her family and is being pressured by her daughter, agrees to demonstrate her abilities in the local Palace of Culture.

The story of the last member of this family – Lida's granddaughter and Valentina's great-granddaughter Zlata, who was raised by Gypsies and then lost her foster family, – turns the film into a detective with elements of an action thriller, captivating the audience by the final confrontation between Zlata and her enemy. In the end, the good embodied by Zlata and Lida triumphs over the evil. The good in the film's finale is associated with love and solidarity. The last date the film features is 2010.

The way the characters interact with the regime and the state in the series is radically different from other films and books about 'otherworldly' creatures, who are usually shown as antagonistic not only to ordinary people but also to state agencies. For Valentina any idea of cooperation with the state authorities seems inconceivable; she is always on the run from NKVD and Grinev. Her daughter Lidia, after surviving the difficult 1990s, starts to cooperate with the state: she helps a police captain to find missing girls and ends up marrying him. The relationship between 'the others' and the state is thus legitimized. While in earlier periods the totalitarian state was trying to coax the 'monster' into cooperation (see A. Morar's study [6]), later, as the regime became less oppressive and more 'domesticated', the 'monsters' were allowed to gradually integrate into society. The series emphasizes that this process of 'domestication' also affects their appearance: the psychics assimilate and thus become more 'ordinary-looking': mysterious, beautiful and dangerous Valentina is thus contrasted with the less stunning women of the younger generations in her family. A similar transformation can be traced in other films dealing with this topic: for example, *Fortune-Teller* (2019, directed by I.Kazankov) tells the story of a woman who matures from an ugly duckling into a beauty. To a great extent, this transformation stems from the public recognition she receives – she is offered a job at the police, she becomes a respectable member of the community. However, Lusya's gift of 'fortune-telling' is not inborn and she is not 'different' by nature. Therefore, it takes time for her to learn how to use her gift, but she also gets 'domesticated' quite fast and is accepted by her colleagues at the Moscow police station. Her cooperation with

the state authorities is thus the only possible way of mastering her unexplained and intimidating abilities.

5. Conclusion

In general, we can conclude that in the above-described films, the 'others' and their increased visibility and participation in the public domain reflect the concept of a 'different' history of Russia, starting from the collapse of Stalin's regime and reaching its most active stage in the 2010s. To some extent, we may say that the series follows the tradition originating in the Thaw cinema, although *The Others* addresses a wider range of topics while its conceptual frame is much narrower. This TV show is meant for the mass public and the author's intention behind the story about the assimilation of the 'others' is quite obvious: to show how the country progresses towards peace, justice and security, and how the lives of people are becoming better. The growing social stability shown in the film can also be considered as a kind of 'solidification' of the regime, which happens together with the increasing uniformity and standardization not only in social life but also in representations of the 'others'. The fatal attraction, partially irrational, between the main characters of the first part (symbiosis of Valentina and Grinev) gives way to more simple and trivial relationships and events in the lives of Lida and Zlata. The 'others' become martyrs and victims as they remain dangerous (monstrous) for ordinary people (Valentina) or are neutralized and adapt to the current regime (Lida and Zlata).

These metamorphoses may be explained by each character's desire to deal with their individual 'traumas': Valentina, an ex-convict of a labour camp, who lost her daughter and is under pressure from NKVD, is trapped inside her vicious circle, reproducing the same negative experience despite all the changes around her. As A. Etkind puts it, "the cyclical time of traumatic experience is not easy to combine with the linear time of history" [5]. This vicious circle can be broken only through the deaths of the executioner and his victim, since Valentina's trauma, despite her 'otherness', is in fact the trauma shared by many of her contemporaries, it is the trauma inherent in the historical period itself. After Valentina dies and Grinev 'exits the stage', Lida is liberated. Going through a number of trials (together with her country), she finally succeeds in achieving some sort of compromise with the state. The latter, according to the film's authors, has changed together with the time: now among those in power there are more good, moral people, such as the captain/colonel whom Lida marries, although there are also bad and corrupt ones, such as his superior – the general – or the mayor, whom Zlata

robs, and so on. Zlata, Valentina's granddaughter, embodies the spirit of the 2000s and maintains a delicate balance in her relations with the law. She also single-handedly defeats the evil, but her triumph is also the triumph of her whole family. The state intrudes into private lives of people in Russia and tries to control them, any opposition to government agencies is doomed to failure, but the harder is the pressure of the state, the more terrifying becomes the monstrosity of its servants and the stronger and the more resourceful become the 'victims' of this oppression.

Thus, the progress of historical time in this TV series goes through the following three stages: the difficult and painful process of eradicating Stalin's totalitarianism, which became fully possible only with the change of generations; the rough 1990s, which ended with the establishment of the rule of law and life going back to normal; the uncertain 2000s, when people had to balance between the law and criminality while striving to maintain the facade of normality. At the last stage, the pace of the film grows slow and the dynamics of historical events is replaced by the dynamics of a detective thriller, the same way as the struggle with the NKVD officer is replaced by the struggle with a gangster. The film itself performs the role of a 'witness' of history (using the words of Aleida Assman, "the figure of a witness is central to external evaluation" [7]): The film's opening credits contain reflection about the past: each episode is preceded by fragments from Valentina's life accompanied by a dramatic and suspenseful score.

The model of time and history in *The Others* goes beyond the level of national history to a higher, supra-historical level through the film's 'peculiar' protagonists. It should be noted that this model of the present/future based on the past and treating it as its own alternative is also found in astrology forecasts for the epoch that has recently begun. This epoch is spoken of as radically different from all the previous ones, as the Age of Aquarius, the New Age and similar, and this 'new historical epoch is expected to be the time when the psychic and physiological abilities of people will change dramatically' ([2]; also see [8]). A. Panchenko contends that "throughout the last decades of the twentieth century, ideas, practices and beliefs belonging to the New Age...are no longer shared by a few but have turned into a major driving force behind the global mass culture – from everyday practices to cinema and literature" [2]. The Age of Aquarius, which, as prophecies say, officially arrived in 2012. According to other opinions, however, it may take a little longer and the new era will begin in 2029. According to astrologists and magicians, the Age of Aquarius is going to be the time of outstanding individuals with paranormal abilities. One of the 'intellectual' astrologists, K. Daragan believes that

what we are dealing with now is the change of the historical epoch that started in the 1840s-1860s, which means that the new trend was formed two

hundred years in advance! The leading countries dominating the world now will be replaced by others and even the customary world order will change: it will no longer be the arena for the struggle between leviathan states [9].

The progress of time goes hand in hand with mythological models of the 'large cycles' based on the logic that does not entirely reject the role of human activity but sees it as inferior to the more powerful 'laws of the universe'. Therefore, we can assume that the new history of the country, as contemporary TV shows are trying to persuade us, is just a harbinger of the 'other' history of the Earth, Solar System, Galaxy and so on, which prompts analogies with the much discussed Hindu cycles of universe, ending up with the 'other' creatures taking over the world. The contemporary mass production of culture reveals a certain historiosophic model closely connected to contemporary anthropology. Mass interest in history can be regarded not just as a manifestation of people's desire to gain a better understanding of the past in order to avoid making mistakes in the present and future (traditional concept of history as life's teacher) but also as an attempt to hold on to history while feeling adrift in the present, to find rational explanations to current events, sometimes dramatic and violent, and to search for at least some kind of meaningful 'laws of history', even if they are grounded in galactic shifts.

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