

Conference Paper

Decontextualization of History: Fantasmic Rebuilding of the Soviet Past

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Abstract

This article is devoted to a specific case of identification with the Soviet past, when the latter is not given in mobile and individualized forms of a personal, family or social group memory, but in the canonized form of a socially recognized cultural representation. The article analyses different phenomena in contemporary mass culture (films and television series) and also considers the tendencies of official historical politics. Although contemporary post-Soviet nostalgia may be described as a secondary identification with the cinematic representation of one or another era the conceptual nostalgic framework through which post-Soviet society is often considered must be corrected. This article proposes the correction can be made via the following thesis: the modern Russian subject (*en masse*) is no longer nostalgic for the Soviet past, instead nostalgic identification is stylistically mediated by the characteristic modes of their representation in the cinema of the corresponding eras. We should talk about a kind of fantasmic identification, mediated by the specific modes of their cultural representation.

Keywords: history, nostalgia, melancholia, soviet past, post-soviet subject

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1. Introduction

The paradoxical presence of the Soviet past in the culture and common consciousness of present-day Russia cannot be reduced merely to traumatic effects having to do with the ongoing 'relying' of this past, nor with the tension between various modes of perception and description of that past. Nor can it be reduced to the more profound cognitive dissonance between nostalgic identification with former Soviet grandeur and the painful sense not only of loss itself, but also of the impossibility of returning to what is now gone forever. Nor can it be reduced to a sense of resentment in relation both to external and internal enemies, who might otherwise be blamed for this loss.

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2. Materials and Methods

The nostalgic attitudes inherent in the post-Soviet collective consciousness have been the subject of many sociological polls and studies carried out by Yuri Levada [11–13], Lev Gudkov [2], Boris Dubin [3–4] and other members of the Levada Center. Of particular interest are the polls concerning to the reception of Soviet past in contemporary Russia made by the Levada Center [14], as well as their long-term *Homo Sovieticus* project, which has gone through five phases of re-actualization in 1989, 1994, 1999, 2003 and 2008. [11–13]

The official discourse of the contemporary elite, which aims to legitimize and redeploy various forms and symbols of the Soviet past and to rewrite the most dramatic pages of Soviet history in an apologetic mode, has many times been criticized in liberal academic circles and by the political opposition [10]. According to this analytical scheme, Putin's authoritarianism emerged as a result of a 'restructuring of the Soviet system', from which the current regime has adopted the mechanisms of state management and economic control, suppressing social and institutional differentiation. Additionally, the Soviet past has often been described as the main source of the symbolic legitimization of today's regime. The following are the key terms that have been applied in order to conceptualize this situation: conservation (*konservatsiia*), restoration (*restavratsiia*), re-animation (*reanimatsiia*), re-actualization (*reaktualizatsiia*). Generally speaking, these terms refer to various forms of 'a return of the Soviet past' [5]. In this understanding of 'restructuring', the emphasis lies on reproduction rather than transformation: the Soviet past's lingering presence in the post-socialist era is understood not so much as an eclectic accumulation of institutional symbols and social practices, but rather as a systematically reproducible mechanism. Ironically, such a critical logic produces an effect contrary to its intentions: it posits as a whole something that is in fact fragmentary; it endows that which is purely political-technological and instrumental with an inherent logic.

3. Results

My main thesis can be formulated as follows. We are no longer dealing with nostalgia and the desire for a return of the lost object, but with a politics whose objective is the positive recoding of nostalgia for the Soviet past into a new form of Russian patriotism for which 'the Soviet' lacks any historical specificity but is rather seen as part of a broadly conceived cultural legacy. The key premise here is not nostalgia itself, but the

positive 'channeling' of its energy, a translation of the politically loaded language of Soviet symbols into the politically neutral language of a common cultural and historical tradition, the absorption of the Soviet past within the general past of Russian statehood, and, even more broadly – within Russian culture as such.

4. Discussion

Mass culture constitutes more than a space for the extraction of commercial profits, more than a mirror, reflecting the tastes of the mass consumer, and more than a generator of new and alternative cultural forms. Popular culture can also be a space for ideological investment [6]. What is more, the apparent contradictions between commercial interests and ideological investments are often at base rather irrelevant. The extraction of profit and the achievement of cultural-political hegemony may in fact be mutually interconnected processes, supporting one another and, in this manner, achieving maximal effect. Private capital and the state budget may be transformed into connected vessels through which circulate both money and cultural symbols and forms, projected as the foundations of normative collective identity. Mass culture, in turn, becomes an arena in which the economic logic of the generation of profits and the political logic of achievement of symbolic hegemony become mutually convertible. And it is precisely this tendency towards the symbiotic coexistence of the commercial market of cultural production and state cultural politics that may be observed in contemporary Russia.

One of the most important phenomena arising as a result of this symbiosis is the effect of the neutralization of history as a terrain of alterity, which demands reflexive analysis that takes into account political difference, as well as the ideological heterogeneity of the past itself, and that describes the distinction between the past and the present. In this capacity, history holds little interest—neither for contemporary commercial neoliberal economy, which is occupied with the eternal present of market circulation, nor for the particular form of cultural politics pursued by current Russian elites. The task of the latter consists in an effort to eliminate all manner of political tension from past history, to extract from it any possibility of alternative possibilities, transforming it into a patriotic museum of decontextualized cultural legacies, encompassing a mosaic of fragmentary elements of the past, liberated from their original meanings, referring only to the singular and indivisible tradition of Russian statehood. This is a process that we could describe as the “transformation of soviet social, political and cultural models into the ideologically neutral, yet remarkably popular forms of post-Soviet mass culture” [15].

Its principles are simple and accessible to all: national culture is more important than political history, while the ethos of serving one's motherland is above any ideological 'controversies'. In the framework of such a narrative, there is no clear-cut difference between Stolypin and Stalin (efficient managers), Nicholas the Second and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (national martyrs), Alexander Nevsky and Georgy Zhukov (victors over the Germans) or, finally, Yury Dolgoruky and Yury Luzhkov (founders of Moscow). Such equivalencies are in fact the foundation for such a construction of history, in which paradigmatic correspondence makes possible a transcendence of syntagmatic gaps. Such a view of history projects a living chain, which on a personal or event-based level can hold together a line that has stretched for a thousand years.

Renouncing its responsibility before the past, this discourse attempts to neutralize history as a political space and turn it into a museum of historical legacy objects, arranged according to the political agenda of the day [8]. This museumification of culture amounts to a fragmentation of the historical past that removes it from its context and makes any external critical perspective impossible [1]. This is a typical attempt to create a grand style from a random mixture of fragments referencing different eras, historical, cultural, and political contexts. Ironically, whenever ideological justification is replaced by technological projection, the eclecticism of this grand style reveals its own inadequacy and internal parody. The paradox, however, lies in the actual desirability of such a frankly autoperodic and nearly auto-self-deconstructing effect for official discourse and contemporary mass culture, which is symbiotic with that discourse [17], [20]. Russian political elites are not interested in a real national uplift and active patriotic participation, they are interested just in passive identification with the past. So this past should be reconstructed as organic and obviously artificial in the same time, should oscillate between a claim for truth and an admission of imitation. Nevertheless people should not take their patriotic identity too serious but just consume it.

The task of this new official patriotic discourse is not to establish a historical bond with the Soviet past, but rather to turn Soviet history into the Soviet past once and for all. This project strives to neutralize the Soviet past as a specific object of either positive or negative political identification. It is meant to transcend historical debates, which threatened to split and actually split Russian society since Perestroika. Everything *Soviet* loses its historical specificity as an ideological or social project or as a political and economic alternative to capitalism. It ceases to be a whole, referring to a specific historical context, and is instead transformed into a part of the historical past of Russian statehood and national tradition. It is in this de- and re-semanticized forms that the Soviet past ceases to reflect an actual ideological choice leading to any political demarcation

and, instead, becomes the foundation for a new social consensus, eliding any kind of difference and overcoming any gulfs of meaning. “After this ideological and political-technological “working through” we are dealing with the soviet-free Soviet (like we used to drink sugar-free coke or caffeine-free coffee)” [9].

In the case of the post-soviet subject an aspiration to surmount the ego’s limits of space and time and to see the continuation of oneself and one’s personal desires in all contexts has its own distinctive condition. The traumatic split with an assimilated symbolic universe; the ruination of a coherent historical narrative; the destruction of a well-known social context (from an everyday practice to factory buildings); a discursive deficit associated with the insufficiency of the new languages required for a depiction of the new reality; the melancholic fixation upon the lost object of desire; the nostalgic attachment to what has gone that then engenders an excess of the past which societal consciousness is unable to digest [16, 23] – such are the basic conceptual schema that a depiction of the post-soviet era is built upon, especially the first post-soviet decade, the period just before the Putin era of the ‘new stability’ [19]. How the post-soviet political elite use this social affection for the past is a whole other conversation. Here the question is how does the mass modern post-soviet subject feel in this seemingly hopeless situation? And I don’t think that it would be exaggerating to say that it feels just fine. Having remained in a condition of transit, having comfortably settled into the spaces of unfinished modernity, having turned the excess of the past into a surrogate future, having converted the discursive deficit into the basis of a new poetics [18], the post -soviet subject feels the personal trauma internally like a fish feels water.

The traumatic symptoms bring a particular perverse satisfaction; nationalism and xenophobia compensate for the fall of the empire; the unwillingness to remember one thing is balanced against the heightened feeling of commemoration for others and the nostalgic fixation on the past is recoded into a ‘project of modernisation’ (For a discussion of both the modern Russian modernisation project, announced in the second half of the 2000s during the presidency of Dmitrii Medvedev, and of modernization based on the management of the nostalgic effect see [9, pp. 156–167]). Melancholy becomes a mechanism of manipulation used by both the melancholic subject, who has learnt how to control its feelings of loss, and by the political elite, who have learnt how to control the melancholic subject. Over all of this hangs the warm homely sphere of narcissistic infantilism, which facilitates the feeling that the ‘other’ is oneself, turns the external into the internal and alters the boundaries between the ego and the outside world. The union of melancholy, (made up of the sense of loss), and infantile narcissism spawns a particular interpretation of history and a particular form of historical

representation. The loss of the former symbolic universe brings freedom from the ruling hierarchical system, from the rules, norms and sanctions. Infantile regression allows for the arrangement of a diverse combination of smashed fragments from former eras, their symbols and ideological forms, without distinguishing the familiar from the alien and in general eliminating the very category of the 'other' beyond the limits of narcissistic fantasy.

If for soviet society the sacred was to be found in ideology, including the material subjects of mass propaganda, then now, in a time that lacks any ideological anchor and with capital taking the place of ideology, the memory of a bygone soviet past fulfils the role of an unseen 'toehold'. Having shed its initial sacred references to ideology, this memory cuts through the former era with symbolic fragments. These objectified fragments then become the objects of a new surrogate sacralization upon which the unconscious projections of post -soviet subjects are focused and to which they aspire in their search for self-identification.

A phantasmagoric combination of historic figures, heroic events, mundane items of daily life and fragments of personal memories await the post-soviet subject. This is a world of the sacred which has been tamed and yet remains one of the relatively stable fulcrum of post-soviet society, around which it continues to move. The deconstruction of the soviet symbolic system turns on the regeneration of its ruin in the melancholic and narcissistic unconscious of the post-soviet subject. This system, seemingly destroyed on land, has dived into the social unconscious and dislodged the sediment of new constellations. In their turn these new constellations become the material for the future construction of a collective memory, which is substantiated and ontologised, so making the history of its formation opaque even to itself.

In his work *Mourning and melancholy*, Freud outlines the basic psychoanalytic dialectic of the melancholic anamnesis: having lost the attachment to the object of affection, the subject experiences it as a genuine loss of the object. In the face of such a loss, the libido, which was formerly invested in the lost object, turns on the subject itself and puts it into a state of stupor and self-abasement. The paradox is that this destructive self-abasement is the result of a narcissistic assimilation of the subject with the lost object to which it experiences ambivalent feelings of love-hate: punishing itself, the melancholic subject punishes the other, the loss of attachment to which it experiences as a real loss. Therefore, its melancholic suffering is difficult to distinguish from pleasure.

This mechanism of melancholy can be applied both in a description of the subject of Perestroika and of the subject of the post-Perestroika era [7]. Complaints of the collective fate, lamentations about personal life and the dark pessimism that is the leading genre in

representations of perestroika everyday life [22] have all acted as an actively corrosive element that played its role in the destruction of the soviet order. The loss was played out until it actually happened: the extreme (painful-ecstatic) experience of separation from the communist regime anticipated its fall and, in many ways, predetermined it (completely consistently reproducing the Freudian logic, according to which melancholy induces the loss of attachment as the loss of its object). However, the past twenty years history of post-soviet melancholy has endured more than just one stage [21].

Melancholy, having expanded as a mechanism of reaction to the political, economic and socio-cultural crisis and having acted as a catalyst for its further intensification, has become not only a habitual means of adaptation but a conduit for a peculiar emancipation from that order, whose loss it has dramatized. The loss of attachment, its melancholic experience, the real disappearance of the object, (which doubles the melancholic affect), the narcissistic identification with the lost object led initially to the subject falling into a stupor, repeatedly going over its relationship to what was lost and going over and over its negative experience of loss (the 1990s). But then the ever-repeating movement of the libidinal ballet became so habitual that it allowed the post-soviet subject to assert itself in the wide open space of loss, having internalised the formerly external soviet order (the 2000s). Having arisen thanks to the sense of melancholy, the narcissistic identification with the loss allowed the post-Soviet subject to introject the soviet regime, although not in the form of a prescribed normative system but in the form of its deconstructed and abandoned fragments.

In some ways, the subject only became soviet when it could make the 'soviet' part of its infantile narcissistic fantasy. If, formerly, its 'sovietness' was the result of an interpellation by an external ideological instance, then now this 'sovietness' has become an effect of its personal narcissistic identification, brought about by 'democratic and market choice', when the object of such an identification is selected by the desire of the subject itself. It is true that the 'authentic witness' of the past, having fallen into the disposition of the post-soviet subject that trying to build a new identity, turned out to be the product of its very own narcissistic fixation on a lost tradition, a symbolic thesaurus of which has been fragmented and decategorized. So now the narcissistic – melancholic libido swims freely in the flowing space of tradition, having divested itself of its former rigid structure. The details of the destroyed symbolic carcass of the USSR have now acquired a second existence, settling on the bottom of the collective memory

Mass cinema and television production respond to this demand, creating filmic representations of the past in which, one way or another, rather curious results are achieved. Paradoxically, the more precisely and painstakingly these works recreate everyday life

and the material world of things, the less this reconstructed past appears to be realistic. The more they strive to render the past close at hand and significant for the spectator in its visual representation, the more there arises a sense of inexpressible distance. Patriotic war film (for instance *We Are From the Future*, *We Are From the Future 2*, *The Fog*, *The Fog 2*; N. Mikhalkov's *Burnt By the Sun 2*, F. Bondarchuk's *Stalingrad*, etc.) articulate a construction in which empathy towards the pedantically recreated material substrate of the past and the affective charge engendered by various dramatic plots collide with an allegorical load that is extraordinarily potent, yet completely anachronistic in relation to this history – transforming the war itself from the status of historical event to that of allegory, representing an absolutely contemporary agenda.

Memorial division may concerns not only to spatial or geopolitical dimension (Poland, Ukraine, Russia, for instance) but also temporal one divided memory in each particular culture. As well as we could see the official memorial project in Russia tends to transcend or even to neglect any possibilities of such divisions. Thus, president Putin informed the Federal Assembly in 2012: “For the rebirth of the national consciousness, we must link the historical epochs together as one and return to an understanding of the simple truth that Russia began not in 1917 and not even in 1991, but rather that we possess a single, thousand-year-long history. When we turn to this history for support, we acquire internal strength and the significance of our national development” (Address to the Federal Assembly, 12.12.2012).

Who, other than the cinema, is capable of fulfilling this task of national development, in order to “link the historical epochs together as one”? Some directors, like Aleksandr Sokurov in his *Russian Ark*, connect the epochs by creating a feature film out of a single shot, without one montage cut. Genre film works in simpler, but more effective manner: by reinforcing the technical recreation of material contexts, while still more emphatically underscoring the internal unity of Russian history.

The director of *We Are From the Future*, Andrei Maliukov, who has specialized in patriotic war action films since the early 1980s, spoke precisely about this same link:

In my film I am seeking to show the linkage of time. We are all disunited, so it is crucial to tie these knots together in order to understand that everything that came before us belongs to us, and to no one else. And the things we are living through now also belong to us, and to no one else. We are not trying either to criticize the present or to praise it. In this film, contact between the epochs is shown so that the viewer can understand for himself what there is of value in the present era and what of value we have lost from that other era. [24]

Let's attempt to take this seriously. The central question here is: what is there of value, in the opinion of the creator of this film, tied to the Soviet era and to the present one, respectively?

The answer that comes to the fore in the course of viewing this film is as follows. Our post-Soviet era is valuable for the sex-appeal of modern gays and for its cool modern gadgets. The Soviet era is valuable for its patriotism and for a willingness to die for the motherland. A journey into the past makes it possible to unite these values, rendering patriotism sexy and a willingness to die for the motherland technologically advanced. War not only carries with it a concentrated patriotic message, but also constitutes an excellent frame, making it possible to show what contemporary cinema is capable of achieving. If there had been no war, it would have been necessary to dream it up. War provides a perfect excuse to use special effects, and what kind of affective impact can one have on a modern viewer without special effects? The film's producer, Sergei Shumakov, addressed precisely this topic:

In order to make the viewer think, we needed, of course, our entire technical arsenal. War, whatever you say, is a highly impactful event; it makes an impression. And it seems to me that there should be quite enough impressions here. It's important that, ultimately, the viewer should come to the proper conclusions from the things we are showing him [25]

I doubt Shumakov's musings need much interpretation.

It was a patriotic version of soviet past. Let us look at its liberal version. Here, we are dealing with a very specific case of identification with the Soviet past, in which history figures not in the heroic experience, but rather in the canonized forms of stylistically marked cinematic representation. As examples, we may refer to a number of films and television series which not only represent various periods of Soviet history, but which also thematize in their very construction the cinematic formal poetics of that same period (the Stalinist era and its style are represented in the film *Soviet Period Park*, 2006, dir. Iu. Gusman, and in the series *Orlova and Aleksandrov*, 2015, dir. V. Moskalenko; the Thaw era – in the film *Stiliagi*, 2008, dir. V. Todorovskii, and in his series *The Thaw*, 2013; the late socialist period – in the films *Vanished Empire*, 2008 and *Love in the USSR*, 2012, dir. K. Shakhnazarov, as well as the series *My 1980s*, 2012–2013, dir. F. Stukov, and the series *Departing Nature*, 2014, dir. D. Iosifov). In all of these films and series, a marked tone of nostalgia (or of the non-critical ridicule of nostalgia) is connected with the fact that historical past is presented as a fundamentally secondary cinematic reality. In this regard, it is absolutely symptomatic that frequently enough, these series

offer a representation of one or another era in light of the cinematic process, which constitutes a significant plot element in itself (as in *Orlova and Alexandrov*, *The Thaw*, and *Vanishing Nature*).

In this manner, filmic and televisual representation of the Thaw (for instance in Todorovskii's *Stiliagi* and *The Thaw*), un-realizes, or virtualizes, that era, transforming it into a stage set. The emphatic generic nature of Todorovskii's films endows the cinematically represented era with an aura of 'innate cinematicity': cinema becomes not merely the means of representation of the Thaw era, but rather its immanent quality (the Thaw is equal to the cinematography of the Thaw).

For instance, in the film *Stiliagi*, the genre of the musical makes it possible to recode utterly both Soviet everyday life and Soviet history. This creative reworking transforms Soviet material into an object of ironic deconstruction, while at the same time inscribing it into a contemporary cultural frame, turning the Soviet simultaneously into an object of both exotic materiality and of aesthetic and emotional empathy. In some sense, the Soviet becomes in this way both somewhat outlandish and strange, and organically part of post-Soviet contemporaneity.

The series *The Thaw* (2013), as a whole, thematizes Thaw-era Moscow as a space of cinema production. Its main characters are actors, directors and cameramen for Mosfilm, and the entire plot is constructed around the shooting of a new film comedy. The history of the cultural and social transformation of the second half of the 1950s (destalinization) is presented here as the shift from the genre of the kolkhoz film comedy of Ivan Pyr'ev to that of the new musical comedy of El'dar Riazanov and Leonid Gaidai. In some sense, the movement of history itself is articulated in this film as a motion from one set of stylistic forms to another (in fashion, in bodily mechanics, in behavioral norms, in film genres, etc.). In other words, the sociocultural emancipation of the Thaw is shown in the film as a stylistic shift in the various possible forms for representation of the Soviet. In this case, this shift is shown through the film rendition of a story of love, that is initially presented in its canonical Socialist Realist Stalinist version, and subsequently in the form of a Hollywood musical (which is offered up as the new Soviet comedy of the Thaw era). In this manner, Soviet history (as political regime, social practices, and ideological project) is un-realized into a collection of forms for its representation.

In the same way the later socialist era of Brezhnev – a beloved period for contemporary television production and cinematic biopics – becomes a visual projection, transferring to the past contemporary values of mass consumption, private life in complete autonomy from politics, and individual success. It is for this reason that the 'golden era' of really existing socialism, corresponding to the central ideological demand of the

Putin era – ‘consume and depoliticize!’ – turns out to be the period of most active nostalgic identification for contemporary Russian society.

5. Conclusion

The viewer is offered identification not with a concrete era in itself, but rather with an already habitual filmic poetics that is associated with the era in question (Stalinist music comedy, the lyric cinema of the *Thaw*, or the film of the 1970s and 1980s, focused on familial and everyday concerns). In light of this situation, contemporary post-Soviet nostalgia may be described as a secondary identification with the cinematic representation of one or another era. In this way, one may correct the conceptual frame of nostalgia, so often applied to post-Soviet society, with the addition of the following thesis: the post-Soviet subject is not nostalgic for the different Soviet eras in themselves; rather, nostalgic identification is stylistically mediated by the characteristic modes of their representation in the cinema of the corresponding eras.

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