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PROJECTING RUSSIA IN A MEDIATIZED WORLD

RECURSIVE NATIONHOOD

Stephen Hutchings

Projecting Russia in a Mediatized World

This book presents a new perspective on how Russia projects itself to the world. Distancing itself from familiar, agency-driven International Relations accounts that focus on what 'the Kremlin' is up to and why, it argues for the need to pay attention to deeper, trans-state processes over which the Kremlin exerts much less control. Especially important in this context is mediatization, defined as the process by which contemporary social and political practices adopt a media form and follow media-driven logics. In particular, the book emphasizes the logic of the feedback loop or 'recursion', showing how it drives multiple Russian performances of national belonging and nation projection in the digital era. It applies this theory to recent issues, events, and scandals that have played out in international arenas ranging from television, through theatre, film, and performance art, to warfare.

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Projecting Russia in a Mediatized World

Recursive Nationhood

Stephen Hutchings

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For Donald Hutchings (1929–2019)

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I dedicate this book to my late father, Donald Hutchings, who passed away just before it was completed, after a long, exemplary life. Having first ignited my interest in Russian culture during my teenage years with a casual reference to one of his favourite Dostoevsky novels (lacking any formal education he was, nonetheless, an avid and perceptive consumer of the literary classics), he came to remark of my own more recent creations that they were 'becoming a little easier to follow'. Sadly, he is no longer around to cast his stern eye over the current book, but he has always been, and will remain, my 'ideal reader'.

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Introduction

Rethinking the Russia narrative

This book proposes a new perspective on the troubling juncture at which the Western world finds itself in its relationship with Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. To be more specific, it represents a departure from received wisdom on Russia's much-criticized propaganda campaigns, its longer-term soft power operations, its sense of itself as a nation, and the relationship between these different phenomena. It does so, however, without in any way exonerating the Putin regime of responsibility for Russia's frequently cynical and sometimes illegitimate actions on the international stage or for the repressive authoritarianism characterizing its domestic policies.

Many of the empirical facts about the situation familiar from Western press narratives about Russia are, as we shall see, replicated in the scholarly literature on the topic, albeit in more nuanced and contextualized form. Unsurprisingly, much of that literature is in the fields of politics and international relations (IR) in which linear models of agency and counter-agency prevail and which therefore focus on what the Kremlin is planning, why and under whose influences, which tools or narratives it is deploying and to what effect, and whether or how those effects and narratives are being opposed or moderated by other state agents. I venture onto similar terrain but drawing on paradigms which integrate agency with structure, emphasizing circulatory meaning over cause and effect, and which have been honed over decades of work on the Russian screen media. With its emphasis on language and meaning, my approach displays certain affinities to that of the post-structuralist school within IR, though I distance myself from the relativist proclivities of its most zealous proponents. Without discarding findings reached via traditional empirical methods, I revisit some of Russia's key actions on the international stage, particularly those relating to its soft power strategy and the East–West 'information war' it is currently involved in. My objective is to arrive at a new understanding of how Russia is being projected to the world beyond its borders – one which both refuses subordination to instrumental thinking and accounts for the radically transformed communications environment in which the projection process occurs.

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The stakes in the revisionist reading I offer are high, as is evident from the critical point which Russia's relations with the West have reached. International sanctions imposed on Russia following its illegal 2014 intervention in neighbouring Ukraine have been followed by what is increasingly being characterized as a 'New Cold War'. More recently, the Kremlin was accused of involvement in the computer hacking of the 2016 US presidential election with a view to influencing its outcome in favour of Donald Trump, known, like other right-wing leaders in Europe, to have expressed admiration for Putin, and, indeed, the election's controversial winner. In the meantime, Putin has acted with impunity in the bloody Syrian conflict, successfully supporting the brutal efforts of Assad to suppress the popular revolt against his regime. These events bear witness to a tectonic shift in the disposition of geopolitical power in the world – one in which the hegemony of the forces of liberal democracy appears to be ceding ground to a populist conservatism embracing traditional values and authoritarian modes of government of which Russia is presenting itself as the global flagbearer.

Key to Putin's strategy has been his apparent mastery of a set of media tools, old and new, deployed both domestically and internationally to propagate the Kremlin's worldview, to suppress or discredit dissenting voices, to disseminate unverifiable or false conspiracy theories about Russia's adversaries, to disrupt 'mainstream media' narratives, to sow confusion regarding the truth about controversial events and to engage in the saturation of online platforms with trolling comments and viral YouTube videos sympathetic to the Kremlin line. At the same time, and despite the scandals surrounding some of them, Russia has continued with traditional soft power and cultural diplomacy initiatives, hosting the World Cup in 2018, promoting its Russian World Foundation centres as a rival to the (infinitely more successful) British Council Offices and Confucius Institutes, and making annual entries to the Eurovision Song Contest, and to Hollywood's Global Academy Awards.

I do not attempt to overturn these facts. I do, however, question whether the narratives that tend to be generated from them are appropriate for capturing the key underlying developments which allow us to locate them within a wider global context.

Mediatized Russia

I begin with a three-way historical coincidence which passed unnoticed by many. Mikhail Gorbachev recalls how, on 19 August 1991, held captive in a Crimean dacha as the coup against him unfolded, his communication lines cut, he managed, unnoticed by his captors, to tune in on a small transistor radio to the BBC World Service to learn the truth about the dramatic events unfolding in Moscow (BBC 2007). These events marked the closing chapter of a Cold War which had been on the wane since Gorbachev launched his Perestroika reforms. By a quirk of history, on 6 August 1991, the very first posting to the World Wide Web took place, ushering in an online age which left the transistor technology which Gorbachev availed himself of trailing in its wake. The forging of the new Russia

that emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Union coincided precisely, then, with the revolution in communications whose consequences have yet to fully reveal themselves. This convergence provides the book with its guiding theme. Its overarching objective is to provide the first substantive study of how Russia projects itself on the international stage through its cultural and media outputs under the conditions of this communications revolution.

Among the effects of the revolution is what Castells (1996) calls the 'network society' in which multiple, horizontally linked online publics emerge to compete with the vertical communication vectors typical of the broadcaster/state-to-public model that the BBC World Service followed. This is not to say, however, that in the age of the network society nation states have ceased to matter or to aspire to project influence. To the contrary, new technology offers them new opportunities to enhance and extend that influence. This is particularly the case in the context of the reorientation of Western foreign policy away from the crude ideological exigencies of the Cold War towards subtler forms of persuasion and the exertion of long-term cultural, political, and economic influence. It is no accident that, a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the arrival of the internet, Joseph Nye penned his celebrated and much-cited essay on 'soft power' (1990), a term he is credited with coining, even if the practice it describes predates Nye by centuries.

Nonetheless, the communications revolution that digital technology heralded has been responsible for qualitative changes in human society and behaviour which have significant ramifications for nation builders and projectors and which are gathered under the heading of 'mediatization'. Miskimmon et al. (2013: 156) suggest that mediatization is 'part of a long historical transformation in which institutions and practices assume a media form'. Couldry and Hepp (2017: 2017) refer to 'a social world characterised by interdependencies whose practicality depends on an infrastructure of multiple connected media'. As they cogently argue, we have now reached a phase of the 'deep mediatization' of contemporary social life, when 'media and ways of reflecting on media become part of the stuff on which the social world is built and larger collectivities come together as such'. The ubiquitous and all-embracing role of the smartphone in the lives and identities of young people is perhaps the most obvious example.

The nation, too, is another such 'larger collectivity' whose construction is inflected at every level by mediatization. National government policies are crafted around media opportunities; national debates and identity rituals are presented via media events; the media insert themselves at the heart of the conduct of international conflicts (the US's use of 'embedded' journalists in the second Iraq conflict; Russia's deployment of 'hybrid warfare' in Eastern Ukraine). If post-communist Russia's symbiotic relationship to the communications revolution with which its short history coincides forms the background to this study, its precise focus centres on the ways in which the nation is projected within, and to, a mediatized world.

This is not, however, a study in Russian soft power or public or cultural diplomacy in the received sense. The logic of mediatization refuses the linear instrumentality implicit in these notions, and indeed, the '(dis)information war' of

which Russia's soft power strategy is often accused of having descended into. It would be foolish to deny nation states agency altogether. This would be to fly in the face of the evidence of the Russian state's deliberate and highly disruptive interventions into the public spheres of other nations. However, when we investigate the deep significance of those interventions, the agency–structure relationship acquires special complexity in the context of mediatization. The media forms and discourses which constitute the mechanisms by which mediatization generates meaning do not submit straightforwardly to the intentions, or actions, of single actors. Andrew Chadwick focuses on the heterogeneous networks of interacting media platforms and actors at all levels – subnational, national, and transnational – which shape the contemporary news-making environment. He calls these loose networks 'assemblages' which he defines as follows:

> Assemblages are composed of multiple, loosely coupled individuals, groups, sites, and temporal instances of interaction involving diverse yet highly interdependent news creators and media technologies that plug and unplug themselves from the news-making process, often in real time.
>
> (Chadwick 2013: 64)

Nonetheless, as Chadwick points out, assemblages reflect power differentials in which state media can assert influence over assemblage processes and subjugate them to their goals and needs. It is this that Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin have in mind in their insightful discussion of Russia's selective manipulation of social media activity around the Ukraine conflict. In their account of the 'third stage of mediatisation' in which broadcast media strive to harness, but not control, the explosion of citizen-generated social media activity rather than fully appropriate it (first phase), or attempt to adapt to it (second phase), O'Loughlin and Hoskins refer to:

> states harnessing virality, humour, and the social media logic of shareability to advance political claims about an ongoing conflict. This indicates how 'high politics' and statecraft use mainstream media platforms such as Twitter, recognizing the risks of dynamics unknowable in advance but, having learnt how to work with those risks, thereby arrest and limit the diffusion of perspectives about the conflict.
>
> (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2015: 1333)

To guarantee the success of the harnessing process, intermediary institutions close to or aligned with, but distinct from, the state must play a critical role. The process we are describing is related to, but deviates subtly from, the 'strategic narratives' account of the soft power and information tools used by modern, globalized states to exert influence beyond their borders. In its most nuanced form, strategic narrative models recognize that instrumental appropriations by states of the new media ecology are at best liable to backfire (I shall offer examples of this in Chapter 2),

and at worst no longer possible. They acknowledge tension between structure and agency in this ecology:

> On the one hand, the relation between action and effect is one of emergence: relations, identities and situations emerge that could not be foreseen by simply identifying the constituent units of that society. The proliferation of digital media content and connectivities makes it impossible to know in advance what content will go viral, what movements will form, and what new political or social arrangements will result. This puts states on perpetual alert for leaks, 'rogue' images and counter-narratives.
>
> (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 10)

These scholars see structure and agency as mutually constitutive, also acknowledging that narratives are not sole authored by states but are 'the outcome of intra-societal debates' (34). Nonetheless, as IR specialists, they are willing for the purposes of their analyses to treat states as self-identical actors which monitor digital ecologies, selectively promoting, deploying, rebuffing, and filtering the viral media content circulating within it. This is the approach adopted in the 'third stage of mediatization' analysis. Whilst accepting this account of how more or less univocal states deploy strategic narratives within the new media ecology, my emphasis is rather on the multi-voiced discourses which shape the relationship between state and sub-state actors. In this sense, my own approach is at the 'thick' (structural) end of the 'thin (rationalist)-thick (structural)' spectrum which Miskimonn et al. identify (pp. 13–16) in their account of strategic narratives.

Under the conditions of mediatization, politics becomes increasingly 'dependent in its central functions on mass media' and is 'continuously shaped by interactions' with them (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 205). Like Hoskins and O'Loughlin, Strömbäck (2008) traces mediatization through several phases. However, his sequence of four stages constitutes a progression from the clear primacy of politics to the growing penetration of political communication by media logics rather than the oscillating struggle for power depicted by Hoskins and O'Loughlin. For Strömbäck, media logic entails producing news according to journalistic criteria, commercial imperatives, and technological conditions, as well as prioritizing audience interests. Political logic, by contrast, requires the needs of political institutions and the political system to be placed centre stage. Neither Strömbäck nor Hoskins and O'Loughlin make the techno-deterministic error of positing the ultimate triumph of media over politics and both theories allow for a continued dialectic.

At Strömbäck's first phase of mediatization, the media begin constituting the main communication channel between citizens and politicians. At Phase 2, they cease unconditionally mediating political actors' preferred messages. It is here that commercial imperatives assert themselves as the battle for people's attention prevails over traditional journalistic norms and values (Strömbäck 2008: 237–240). Landerer goes further, redefining mediatization itself as 'the predominance

of audience-oriented market logic in political actors' behaviour in day-to-day decision-making processes' (2013: 240). At Strömbäck's Phase 3, political and social actors must adapt to a fully marketized media logic rather than the reverse (2008: 238). In Phase 4, 'more or less consciously [political actors] allow media logic' and its accompanying commerce-driven standards of newsworthiness to 'become a built-in part of the governing process' (Strömbäck 2008: 239–240).

The Russian case shows that, even when political control over broadcasters remains much higher than Strömbäck suggests in his democracy-based description of Phases 2–4, the existence of partially free internet and social media as well as citizens' access to foreign news outlets provide conditions under which non-democratic politicians have to adapt to the ever-increasing mediatization of politics. State actors, meanwhile, are drawn ever more into the orbit of commercial imperatives and their associated professional norms which do not always coincide precisely with the needs of the state. Furthermore, digitally empowered audiences increasingly evade control, as ordinary citizens become media influencers, and the content of online communications is impossible to subject to comprehensive censorship.

Despite the constraints, non-democratic politicians attempt to harness the process of mediatization to their advantage, for example by using new media technologies to flood online space with contradictory messages, so that audiences are confused as to what narrative to believe. In fact, from Vladimir Putin's first presidency, his government's engagement with the media has rested on the assumption that 'the mediated realities replace . . . a belief in objective realities' (Strömbäck 2008: 240). Importantly, however, Strömbäck distinguishes Phase 3, when, like Putin, politicians still perceive media as 'a strategic tool' external to them (2008: 239) from Phase 4 when they 'internalise' media logic which 'colonises' politics, and when instrumentalization breaks down under the weight of self-contradiction. Moreover, Strömbäck was writing before the internet, let alone social media, had become a central driver for the mediatization not just of politics, but of everyday life. Equally important is Strömbäck's recognition that several phases may operate simultaneously, and that 'different institutional actors in a society' may attain 'different phases' at any one time (2008: 241). This, I suggest, describes the situation pertaining in Putin's Russia.

In such an environment, any notion of a self-identical Russian state projecting stable, coherent meanings and narratives to a discrete world or public becomes mired in contradiction. What this implies, *inter alia*, is that a study of the Russian state's efforts to project power in the world beyond its boundaries must simultaneously be a study of that state's domestic nation-building programme. It is appropriate, then, that in December 2013, Dmitrii Kiselev, a highly influential presenter on Russia's state-owned domestic TV channel, Rossiia, was appointed general director of the new Rossiia Segodnia news agency, created by executive order of President Putin as part of his effort to tighten Russia's international messaging strategy and demonstrating the closer alignment of Russia's international and domestic news output. What our suspicions of notions of a self-identical Russian state mean is that whatever strategies for public diplomacy, disinformation,

or soft power are attributable to the Russian state cannot be viewed outside of their function within larger, geopolitical media ecologies which shape, and in turn are shaped by, individual states and other actors. Relationships of this sort are not fixed but shifting, ongoing, and subject to constant re-enactment. By the same token, they are always reflexive, reciprocal, and mutually constitutive. The first word of this book's title – 'projecting' – lacks a clearly defined subject for good reason. Chadwick is among several media scholars to refer to the term 'recursion' to capture these qualities (2013: 75), noting the opportunities that they reveal for non-state media actors:

> Political information cycles work on the basis of cross-platform iteration and recursion. This serves to loosen the grip of journalists and political elites through the creation of fluid opportunity structures with greater scope for timely intervention by online citizen activists.

Since recursion, and specifically the recursive features of Russian nationhood, provides this book with its overarching conceptual framework, I should spend some time setting out my perspective on it.

Recursive nationhood

To be clear from the outset, nation states are not dissolving into all-subsuming global flows and networks. The history of the accelerated transnational connections in which the new media ecology has emerged is bound up with those of nations. Werner and Zimmerman's (2006) work on *histoire croisée* shows that transnationally connected networks are not specific to the current phase of globalization, a broader concept bound up, as Ďurovičová and Newman (2009) suggest, with totality. The emergence of modern nationhood at the end of the eighteenth century coincides with the advent of technological means of mass communication. Anderson's (1983) seminal theory of nations as 'imagined communities' rests on this coincidence. If there can be no transnational without nations, then nations depend equally on the transnational, which, as Hjort (2009) argues, is no more a single, universal force than nations are its stable, self-identical objects. Media texts embody nationhood through specific combinations selected from a plurality of transnationally or cross-culturally negotiated values (for example ethical 'truths' about colonial or gender oppression; sociopolitical 'truths' about the deleterious effects of urbanization on rural regions). These combinations are performed, transformed, and re-performed as part on an ongoing process. As Schlesinger puts it (2009: 28), the idea of a stable, single, 'national communicative space' is 'implausible'. It is important, however, to acknowledge Hjort's distinction between 'marked' transnationality (in which attention is strategically directed towards a media text's transnational themes or properties) and its 'unmarked' variant (in which its transnational dimensions remain implicit, hidden, or unacknowledged).

The tension evokes Bhabha's (1990: 295) distinction between the impulse to represent nations as the fixed 'historical objects of a nationalist pedagogy giving

the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event' and the competing process by which 'the national life is . . . signified as a repeating and reproductive process'. Bhabha terms this latter process, the 'repetitious, *recursive* strategy of the performative' (297, my emphasis). In developing his performative theory of nation Bhabha cites Bakhtin, whose insistence on the dialogism underlying communication clarifies that the recursive constitution of nations also entails a mutual responsivity. Bakhtin's (1981) account of the struggle of the monologic to subjugate the dialogic is homologous with the 'fixing' function of Bhabha's 'nationalist pedagogy'.

Recursion's etymology links it through the verb 'to recur' (to occur again), to the Latin, *recurrere*, meaning 'running back'. Underdeveloped by Bhabha, it is invoked with subtly different meanings in mathematics, computer science, linguistics, and art history. Common to these contexts is the idea of the repeated application of a single function to an initial element or a set of elements in a succession capable of indefinite extension. In mathematics, the d + (a+b+c) series is a simple form of recursion, with the brackets indicating the point of recursion. An example from visual art is the '*mise en abyme*' effect – the repetitions of an image within an image which appears within a similar but never identical, image, *ad infinitum*, as in Velasquez's famous *Las Meninas* painting.

The only substantive engagement with recursivity in the humanities is Hui's (2019) masterful treatment of its intimate relationship with contingency which brings the history of philosophy into dialogue with cybernetics and life sciences. Hui goes well beyond Bhabha's treatment of the term as virtually synonymous with perpetual repetition which, in the context in which he applies it, links it to the everyday re-enactments of national belonging captured in the term 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995). Instead, Hui stresses that

> Recursivity is not mere mechanical repetition; it is characterised by the looping movement of returning to itself in order to determine itself, while every movement is open to contingency, which in turn determines its singularity.
>
> (Hui 2019: 10–11)

He sees a homology between recursivity's relationship with contingency on the one hand and Being's with Becoming on the other, for through recursion:

> Being is preserved as a dynamic structure whose operation is open to the incoming of contingency: namely, becoming.
>
> (Hui 2019: 13)

Hui acknowledges the influence on his thought of the Hegelian 'Spirit', portraying it as dialectical movement of 'double negation . . . in which spirit recognises nature as the other of the self in order to absorb it into the whole' (37). Recursive nationhood as deployed in *Projecting Russia* takes account of this double negation, conceiving of the act of projection as a looping movement in which the contingency of otherness is repeatedly converted into its own negation, and thus assimilated

to a renewed selfhood. This reconfirms its allegiance to Bakhtinian dialogism's dynamic treatment of the self–other relationship. The term 'recursive nationhood' combines the principle of dialogic performativity with that of the mutual constitution of the national by the transnational, as well as the local, the 'trans-local' (global localities directly linked, without national mediation), and the 'cross-cultural' (links between cultures whose boundaries may not coincide with those of nations). It does so in an extendable, self-renewing series of iterations in which the relationship between these terms is constantly reconfigured. The definition is linked to Giddens's (1984: 25) idea that social structures 'recursively organise social practices'. It also draws on Nick Couldry's and Andreas Hepp's notion of the 'deep recursivity' of the contemporary, mediatized social world:

> Under conditions of deep mediatization both social and media processes become deeply recursive. . . . [T]his refers to processes that reproduce themselves by replaying all or part of the calculative or other rational process that generated them. . . . [T]he social world has always been recursive . . . we keep it going by replaying once again the rules and norms on which it was previously based. In a social world characterised by interdependencies whose practicality depends on an infrastructure of multiple connected media . . . recursivity deepens.
>
> (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 216)

Nationhood as a specific kind of social world is generated via its intricate relationship with, and claim to, transnationally mediated values. It continues to overlay each stabilizing configuration of national, local, and transnational with new enactments of the relationship, projecting the components onto one another to align, complicate, and reconfigure them, thereby replenishing its claim to achieve transcendent meaning at a meta-level beyond the mediation process. But in a world characterized by increasing interconnectivity, the mediation process only intensifies and expands to re-appropriate that transcendent meaning and re-initiate the recursive series.

The notion of recursive nationhood, then, adds to that of performative nationhood the idea that each new re-performance implicitly – and dialogically – incorporates all previous re-performances within it as muted sediments which, however, remain open to reactivation at any point. The looping act of bracketing them and thereby 'asserting ownership' over them – claiming to transcend them – belies the fact that they can never be permanently silenced. There is a clear and profound homology between nationhood in its recursive mode and the linguistic utterance as theorized by Bakhtin:

> Every utterance must be regarded as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere.
>
> (Bakhtin 1986: 91)

> Any concrete utterance finds the object at which it is directed already . . . enveloped in an obscuring mist, or alternatively by the 'light' of alien words

> that have been spoken about it . . . and all this may crucially leave a trace in all its semantic layers.
>
> (Bakhtin 1981: 276)

My interpretation of the term also recognizes that (a) *nationhood is constructed from within and without* ('native' re-performances of Russian nationhood incorporate and respond to non-Russian performances, as well as to prior and competing Russian ones); and (b) in their dialogism – their persistent referencing of the other – the *recursions are also reflexive (they fold back into references to the self-as-performer)*. As Hui argues (63), 'feedback, together with self-reference' is merely 'another name for recursion'. Each of these tendencies gains significant momentum from mediatization which, by extending the reach and penetration of circulating narratives about a given nation and by accelerating the pace of circulation, creates ever greater friction between those narratives, thereby inducing ever greater self-awareness on the part of the performer. Neither of them, to re-emphasize, however, is in any way exclusive to the age of mediatization or to contemporary Russia, though both have gained in intensity within these overlapping and intersecting contexts.

Contingency, rupture, and cause

Although it is not my primary concern in this book, a question, nonetheless, arises over the role of causation in the changing relationship between mediatization and nationhood. Whilst the fate of modern nations has, from the outset, been inseparable from developments in mass communication technology, the very fact that mediatization is a temporal process consisting of various stages means that the role of recursive looping is liable to differ from period to period, receding at certain points and coming to the fore at others, producing a particular set of effects in one context and a quite different set in another. The paradox in highlighting Hui's emphasis on the importance of contingency to the logic of recursion is that, if it is applied in too abstract and generalized a fashion, the unsettling, unpredictable force of specific contingent events will be lost. Linked to this issue is that of the importance of major ruptures in the history of nations – dramatic changes and reconfigurations in the imagining of nationhood that, for example, follow the unanticipated collapse of empires (as occurred in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union, and in 1917 with the Russian Revolution). Such traumas are non-replicable, as are the violence, raised passions, and radical new visions of collective identity associated with them. The image of recursive nationhood as a self-contained, self-perpetuating logic in which layers of meaning accumulate in smoothly layered sediments thus becomes problematic.

There are several connected answers to the twin dilemma of causality and rupture. The first is to emphasize that in the absence of such unpredictable breaks, it is meaningless to speak of contingency at all. A key feature of Hui's account of recursion is that it involves neither a retreat into idealist subjectivism nor a concession to crude materialistic determinism; indeed, he rejects such polarities as

two sides of the same dualistic coin. Rather, he associates the messy complexity of the recursive interplay between selfhood and Otherness as that of life itself:

> Recursion is the movement that tirelessly integrates contingency into its own functioning to realise its telos. In so doing it generates an impenetrable complexity. . . . Life also exhibits such complexity, since it expects the unexpected, and in every encounter, it attempts to turn the unexpected into an event that can contribute to its singularity . . . *contingency acquires meaning* in these operations.
>
> (Hui 2019: 435, 470)

Something is thus contingent only in relation to something which, to the contrary, is organized as a system and becomes so only *when, through recursion, it is incorporated into that system as such*. It is, to invoke Bateson's theory of information to which Hui refers 'the difference which makes a difference' (496). In other words, absolute, irreducible Otherness is as illusory as the sheer solipsism of pure, autonomous subjectivity. Event-ness, no matter how disruptive, is merely an expression of recursion's looping act of integrating contingency into selfhood. For example, the shocking trauma of the attack on New York's Twin Towers in 2001 really transcended its status as random destruction to become an 'event' – a dramatic happening with significance – only when it entered the US national narrative in the form of '9/11'.

The 9/11 illustration is, as Žižek (2008) demonstrates, re-expressible in the lexicon of the three orders described by post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. Thus, the traumatic irruption into the symbolic order of nationhood of the raw, unadulterated real that was the destruction of the Twin Towers was translated back into that order via the irrational, fantastic projections of the imaginary – those terrifying, yet uncannily familiar, scenes of threatening otherness as mirrored inversions of selfhood which were filling Hollywood screens well before 2001 in films like *Independence Day* (1996). Whether we apply a psychoanalytical or a philosophical hermeneutic, the point is that nationhood, like other orders of meaning, is not only forever reshaped by violent, contingent, event-ness; the durability of its narratives relies on such reshaping, central to which is the looping act of returning to the self to redefine it. Moreover, contingent alterity intrudes not only from outside, as with 9/11, but also from within (modern Germany's struggle to transcend the Holocaust; the place of the Civil War and slavery in American identity; Russia's repeated experiences of radical rupture). Recursion is fundamental to meaning and to what it means to be human.

Whilst it accounts for contingency and the unexpected at a general level, such theorizing fails to capture the granular detail of contingent change itself. Without allowing at a lower level of generality for the specific shifts and incremental deviations in how recursion plays out, it is impossible to explain differences between mediatization in the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries or between its respective relationships with post-imperial Russian and British nationhood. A perceived lack of concern for the empirical detail of institutional influences

underpins the trenchant critique of much media-based analysis of nationhood made by Mihelj (2011), who alleges that by privileging text-based analyses, media studies can say:

> relatively little about how nationalism as a particular form of discourse and of cultural imagination is tied to the institutional structures of modern media and to broader economic, political, and social realities.
>
> (15)

We should, of course, distinguish studies, including the present one, which situate their accounts of nationhood in the realm of meaning, and which must inevitably pay close attention to the texts (in the broadest sense of the term) through which that meaning is negotiated, from research which focuses on the external realities that propel nations through their historical trajectories. However, there is an acute danger in replicating reductive text/reality; spirit/body dualisms through such juxtapositions; the best textual analysis must allow for and incorporate the role of institutional and other exigencies in a synthesizing approach which transcends the limitations entailed in remaining exclusively on either side of the dualist dyad. There has, therefore, to be a place in such a synthesis for mundane causality, politics, economics, and linear history as well as for an intellectual apparatus capable of dealing with abstract conceptualizations of nationhood. There is a need, as Roosvall and Salovaara-Moring (2010: 10) argue, to '(re-)politicize the role of the nation in media studies, while explicating it theoretically as well as empirically'. In taking this approach, I hope to contribute to overcoming what Mihelj (2011: 2) refers to as the unhelpful split between 'two sub fields that only rarely speak to one another . . . the analysis of nationalism as a discourse . . . embedded in different media texts and genres' and 'the examination of institutional structures, policies and socio-economic contexts that give rise to nationalist discourse'.

It is to account for the empirical linearity and causality which necessarily shape socio-economic contexts that I have highlighted mediatization's status as an intensifying process rather than a fixed reality. The accelerated rate at which meanings circulate during technology-induced 'deep' mediatization explains, for instance, how Britain's struggle to reconcile loss of empire with diminished national power on the one hand and the heightened transnational flows of globalization on the other led in under two decades from Blair's modishly vernacular 'Cool Britannia' to Johnson's 'Rule Britannia'-nostalgia for post-Brexit 'Global Britain'. As we shall argue later, it clarifies how the single historical symbol of the 1917 revolution can be revalorized to combat Putin's repressions; neoliberal Western indulgence; and Western media hegemony, with each usage reflexively citing all the others.

To position the examples at a particular point within a historical progression, their association with instability and the fluidity between them identify them with Bauman's 'liquid modernity' phase of globalization. Here, 'beliefs, values and

styles have been decontextualized and dis-embedded', whilst 'the sites offered for re-embedding [are] reminiscent more of motel accommodation than of a permanent (mortgage loan repaid) home'. Meanwhile, identities:

> cannot but look fragile, temporary and 'until further notice', and devoid of all defences except the skills and determination of the agents to hold them tight and protect them from erosion. The volatility of identities, so to speak, stares the residents of liquid modernity in the face.
>
> (Bauman 2000: 178)

Although Bauman does not refer to mediatization, its function as one of the primary facilitators of liquid modernity is self-evident. Moreover, Bauman locates changes to nationhood's relationship with the state – a central issue for this book – firmly within the liquid stage of modernity (and, by extension, globalization):

> The centuries-long romance of nation with state is drawing to an end; not so much a divorce as a 'living together' arrangement is replacing the consecrated marital togetherness grounded in unconditional loyalty. Partners are now free to look elsewhere and enter other alliances; their partnership is no longer the binding pattern for proper and acceptable conduct. We may say that the nation, which used to offer the substitute for the absent community at the era of Gesellschaft, now drifts back to the left-behind Gemeinschaft in search of a pattern to emulate and to model itself after.
>
> (Bauman 2000: 185)

Bauman is careful to acknowledge that this disjuncture of nation from state and the drift towards new patterns of communion that it brings does not spell the end for either entity, or, indeed for their mutual connection. Here his argument coincides with that of Mihelj (2011: 28), who points out that although 'trans-border exchanges . . . had profound consequences for the nature of state sovereignty . . . nation states continue to function as the main building blocks of worldwide systems', in the context, however, of major 'shifts in the balance of power between the three principles of social organization . . . community, state bureaucracy and market exchange' (83). However, Bauman's theory offers a means of incorporating useful, if limited, measures of causality and temporal change into the recursive nationhood model. It is not just that the 'quantitative' rate and complexity of the recursions intensifies under the conditions of a digitally enhanced liquid modernity. Articulating a clearly delineated subject and object for the nationhood in question now becomes fraught with uncertainty and complexity, pointing towards a 'qualitative' change. This has important implications for soft power and cultural diplomacy practices which deal in images of the nation at the sub-state level, generating new opportunities for, and threats to, authoritarian states like Russia, whilst enabling us to account for the specificity of their engagement with recursive nationhood.

Structure and agency/nation and state

The term 'recursive nationhood' that guides my analysis is, as far as I am aware, new. However, it overlaps with Daniel Levy's notion of 'recursive cosmopolitanism', which he characterizes as 'an open-ended process in which centre and periphery stand in a recursive relationship that is reflected . . . in the inter-crossings of global normative expectations and their local appropriations', and in which 'objects of research are not merely considered in relation to one another but also *through* one another, in terms of relationships, interactions, and circulation' (Levy 2010: 580). In addition to complicating Levy's binary logic of 'centre' and 'periphery', 'global norms' and 'local appropriations', my analysis (i) reinstates the nation rather than the *cosmopolis* as the primary nexus at which the meanings of the inter-crossings to which Levy refers are negotiated; (ii) attempts to specify the precise reciprocities and dialogic recursions by which the meanings emerge at the textual level; and (iii) applies the concept to the particular version of the agency–structure tension brought to light in the context of the authoritarian state's efforts to control rigidly the flow of cross-cultural and transnational meanings being projected.

As a critical convergence point between the national, the local, and the transnational, the cultural texts, media, and events I study in this book offer a site in which to explore recursion's capacity for highlighting the contradictions within modern nationhood. They serve particularly to illuminate the heterogeneous efforts by state and non-state actors to project the idea and image of Russia and its values and interests – in all their tensions and contradictions – beyond its boundaries. There is, of course, a certain contradiction in using the single moniker 'Russia' to describe this multi-layered, divided, and ever-shifting entity. Very often when it occurs in the chapters to follow, the term coincides with 'the Russian state', which, is, of course, itself neither internally coherent nor stable. At other times, it serves as shorthand for the equally contingent and sometimes inchoate, 'Russian nation'. I shall briefly differentiate these terms in the next section. A further complication is that several different actors might lay claim to represent and speak for nation and/or state, sometimes as a single entity, sometimes separately. As the following section illustrates, I will make regular use of this shorthand myself, particularly when referring to the Russian state under Putin. I hope that in future chapters the 'Russia', and 'Russians', I have in mind will be clear from the context of usage.

What's new?

Curiously, Sabina Mihelj's assertion in 2011 that, for almost two decades, 'no single book has attempted to advance a general argument about the relationship between nationalism and mass communication' (2) remains current a decade later in 2021. Since her own useful intervention in this area, and that of Roosvall and Salovaara-Moring (2010), there have been virtually no major works that take a general approach to the issues at stake. The majority of researchers who explore the media–nation relationship (and I include myself in this number) do so in a

particular national context – something which, I acknowledge, seems to throw up a contradiction whenever any generalizing, cross-national claims are made (as they must be if specific national manifestations are to be addressed convincingly). One reason is the sense that, because global media developments transcend national borders, it might appear to make less sense to restrict one's scope to individual national contexts, a point which Mihelj herself makes when pointing to the growing influence of transnational commercial imperatives on nation-building (165). One partial exception is Skey and Antonsich's (2017) effort to apply Billig's 'banal nationalism' concept comparatively across a plurality of nations, though this is an edited volume with multiple authors rather than a single argument developed in an integrated manner. I am, moreover, not aware of any book dedicated to the influence of mediatization on nations and nationhood nor of a substantive effort to apply the concept to Russia. The term 'recursive nationhood' is, to re-emphasize, my own, though, as the preceding discussion indicates, it draws on brief references elsewhere to recursion in related areas. As a result, no doubt, my analysis incorporates all the flaws and underdeveloped ideas associated with tentative ventures into virgin territory – shortcomings which more accomplished explorers will correct in time. As to the fact that I have chosen to apply what I hope is a useful new theoretical tool to a specific national context, I might in my defence re-invoke Hui's insistence on the reciprocity of system and contingency, general and particular; my study does not seek to illustrate a stable, systemic concept with a single contingent case study, but it rather strives to elaborate the system through its very struggle to integrate the contingent case of Russia into its own functioning.

Contrary to the surprising dearth of research addressing the media–nation nexus, there is no shortage of existing analyses of Russia's assertive position on the global stage under Putin. Within politics and IR, a steady stream of works, many bordering on polemical journalism, has warned of the dangers of the emergent New Cold War that Russia is stoking (Lucas 2008; Motyl 2015). The threat posed to the West by the surreally corrupt Russian state and the complete disregard for reality displayed by its swollen propaganda apparatus is exposed in the title of Pomerantsev's entertaining *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* (2014). Wilson (2014) and Galeotti (2016, 2019) have analyzed Russia's use of 'hybrid war' techniques during its current intervention in Ukraine, but with the latter work wisely cautioning against the loose conflations of 'hybrid' and 'information' war that seem to be all too common in the burgeoning literature on the 'Russian threat'.

Equally subtle approaches to Russia's interventions in the international arena are to be found in articles by Szostek (2018) and Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015) which adopt, respectively, the notions of 'strategic narratives' and Russia's recognition of the increasingly 'provisional and heterogeneously constructed nature of both news and information' to explain Kremlin thinking, though both work within the confines of the framework of linear intentionality. Whilst it touches upon the implications for Russia's international stances, my own previous work on Russian television (Hutchings and Tolz 2015) has focused primarily on issues within

domestic broadcasting. Similarly, Oates's (2013) nuanced study of the impact of the internet on Russian politics has a strictly domestic focus. A few individual articles have dealt with aspects of Russia's international broadcaster, Russia Today (Hutchings et al. 2015; Strukov 2014, 2016).

Scholarship that tackles the complexities of post-Soviet Russian national identity is abundant. To offer a small sample, Pilkington (1998) focuses on migration, displacement, and identity under Yeltsyn. Oushakine (2009) examines the influence of war and the sense of loss on Russian identity after 1991. Kolstø (2000) has authored and co-authored several books on nation- building in post-Soviet Russia (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2004) and on the new Russian nationalism (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2018). There has been a similar spate of books within IR dedicated to shifting emphases in Russian foreign policy as Putin has reasserted Russia's 'great power' status (Tsygankov 2016; Mankoff 2009). Taras (2013) has produced an edited volume broaching issues of Russian identity in an IR perspective. Rantanen (2002) provides a book-length reading of the role of media and communications in shaping the new Russia's negotiation of the global and the national, but most of the material it draws on predates Putin's period in power and many of the more recent developments in online technology.

The context in which I explore Russian efforts to project to non-Russian publics an image of national selfhood in a mediatized world is the sharply increased tensions with the West that followed Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014. To re-emphasize, this is not a study of Russian soft power or cultural diplomacy as the terms are normally understood, since I reject many of the instrumentalist assumptions behind these concepts – a different reason from the one advanced by those who, like Szostek (2014), oppose the notion of Putin's Russia engaging in 'soft power' because of its crudely propagandistic approach to the matter. Indeed, apart from the aforementioned works explicitly focusing on Russia's status as initiator of a 'new Cold War', there have been several book-length analyses whose titles reveal that they are driven by similar concerns: Marcel van Herpen's *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (2016) is one example. Agnia Grigas's *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Imperialism* (2016) is another. Moreover, neither of these books deals exclusively with Russian nation projection in the aftermath of the events of 2014 (van Herpen's covers the whole of Putin's presidency, and from a narrow, and, at times, highly conspiratorial, 'propaganda' angle, Grigas's deals with Russian foreign policy more generally, again adopting a unidirectional, 'New Cold War' attitude throughout).

There are several journal articles dealing with broad aspects of Russia's soft power in the traditional sense (Feklyunina 2008; Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015), as well as an astute, if conventional, IR analysis of Russia's recent foreign policy strategies (Tsygankov 2016). Several individual articles have attempted to contextualize and interpret Russian contributions to global media events such as Eurovision (Platt 2013; Heller 2007; Jordan 2014; Miazhevich 2013; Cassiday 2014; Johnson 2014). The literature on Russia's 'hybrid warfare' – a leading (and loaded) term – in Ukraine is growing (Wilson 2014). Strukov (2014, 2016), meanwhile, analyses problems of national self-representation in Russia's primary

international broadcaster, RT. Most research outputs addressing Russian public and cultural diplomacy relate to the Soviet period (Gould-Davies 2003; David-Fox 2011; Prevots 2001; Mulcahy 1999). Simons (2014) offers a broad overview of public diplomacy strategy and outcomes under Putin but, understandably, does not engage with specific cases in any detail. Dolinsky (2012) and Shakirov (2013) analyse Russia's attempts to redefine public diplomacy for its own propaganda ends. An extremely insightful and sensible plea to modify and renew the definition of 'public diplomacy' to include much Russian state activity in preference to blanket use of the misleading and crude 'information war' paradigm is provided in Szostek (2020). There is, to date, little or no work dedicated to the deployment of the arts (literature; theatre; film; music) as tools of external influence in the post-Soviet period, though Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) touch on this issue in their analysis of the constraints on Russian interpretations of soft power, and Prevots (2001) dedicates her book to dance. Hudson (2015), too, discusses Russia's (mis)understanding of soft power in its approach to the promotion of the Orthodox Church and the Russian language in Ukraine.

What characterizes those works dealing with contemporary Russian soft power and cultural diplomacy (aside from Strukov's and Hutchings et al.'s articles on RT) is that they situate themselves squarely in the domains of IR or Political Studies. IR enjoys a virtual monopoly on the study of soft power and on public and cultural diplomacy. Despite the presence of terms such as 'culture' and 'soft' in the concepts at stake, there is quite a striking dearth of 'soft-end humanities' or cultural studies literature dedicated to them. This, in a sense, is understandable. The very notions of cultural diplomacy and soft power imply a reified understanding of culture over which equally reified nations exercise a form of ownership enabling them instrumentally to 'project' it in the interests of 'diplomacy'. Also, it assumes a passive role for audiences. Such an understanding flouts long-established cultural studies theoretical principles: those of national (and indeed any) cultures as contingent, heterogeneous, contested, subject to constant renegotiation, and saturated by transcultural flows which circulate according to their own logic and cannot be transmitted unmediated by state agents. Despite their names, the concepts of soft power and cultural diplomacy are considered only worthy of attention within cultural studies if they are subsumed under reassuring paradigms like postcolonialism, cultural hegemony, and national identity construction. Thus, there is a wealth of work exposing the workings of US cultural imperialism in Hollywood films (Miller et al. 2005; Tomlinson 1991), as well as numerous analyses of the projection of, and resistance to, national and post-imperial meanings in globally distributed European and other cinemas (Elsaesser 2005; Tyrell 1999). The specificities of cultural and public diplomacy, soft and smart power, nation branding and state propaganda are lost in such analyses.

However, in a useful intervention Ang et al. (2015) sketch out an approach to reclaiming cultural diplomacy as a productive field of enquiry for cultural studies. They recognize the 'mistaken assumptions' held by cultural diplomacy practitioners – the positing of 'one-way, linear processes' of communication, the elision of audiences as active meaning-makers, and the 'portability' of cultural

meaning – summarizing them as based on 'the illusion of transparency' (374–375). But, accepting the durability of nations as shapers of globally circulating meaning, they advocate a recasting of cultural diplomacy as a 'transnational process' in which governments are not the sole actors and as 'a form of intercultural dialogue based on mutuality and reciprocal listening'. They highlight the 'interface between government-sponsored cultural diplomacy and the free flow of popular culture', drawing attention to 'counter-hegemonic forms of cultural diplomacy driven by forces working against established nation states'. They examine ways in which 'policies are not only remoulded when . . . adopted in a new place, but . . . reshaped in, and through, the process of mobilisation itself' (Ibid., 371–373). The fact that this relational account of *cultural* diplomacy overlaps with Szostek's constructive call for a reinterpretation of *public* diplomacy as 'a distinct set of ideals for international state-sponsored communication: reciprocity, mutual learning, and the search for common interests' confirms the fluidity of definitions in this field (Szostek 2020: 2741).

This book is conceived in the spirit of Ang et al. Because Putin's regime adopts a crudely linear approach to projecting Russia's interests and has such a reductive understanding of how 'soft power' works, it represents a test case for Ang et al.'s approach. Indeed, the overwhelming dominance of linear, 'information war' models of analysis in scholarship focused on Russian media-related topics (in contrast with media research in other contexts) points to an unfortunate confusion of the normative with the descriptive. Moreover, our understanding of peripheral contexts like that of Putin's Russia would benefit from this thinking which brings the broader issues at stake into sharp focus. The argument that, notwithstanding its instrumentalist connotations, cultural diplomacy remains an important area of investigation for cultural studies is driven by a recognition that, in an era of intensive globalization, national narratives continue to shape transnational meaning generation. Culture in all its forms is still deployed at national, subnational, and transnational levels to influence that process, albeit tangentially. Equally, global audiences persist in forming images – positive and negative – of nations from their experience of cultural activities, even if those images are inconsistent, fragmentary, and at odds with official meanings inscribed within them.

When considering other notable exceptions to the hold that IR and International Politics appear to have established on soft power and cultural diplomacy, it is worth mentioning examples of the relatively recently developed field of Popular Geopolitics (the study of media and popular cultural representations of territory, resources, and identity politics) as applied to Russia. Saunders (2016) has usefully applied this concept to issues of nation branding in the post-Soviet world, focusing particularly on how blockbuster films in both the East and the West consolidate and popularize political representations of national selfhood and otherness. Saunders and Strukov (2017) have further developed this approach, expanding the analysis to include other forms of grassroots creativity including computer games and online animations. They identify feedback mechanisms guaranteeing the reciprocity and mutual contamination of both Russian and non-Russian

representations of national selfhood and otherness. The feedback principle informs this book's recursive nationhood framework.

Also of significance at the soft end of social scientific approaches to cultural diplomacy is the media ethnographical work of Marie Gillespie, who has led some pioneering projects targeting the institutional practices of British cultural diplomacy, focusing particularly, but not exclusively, on the role of the BBC World Service (Gillespie 2009) and on social media and audience responses to those practices. Gillespie and her team undertook a large-scale study of the BBC World Service as a multi-diasporic institution and an exploration of the new politics of security via a collaborative ethnography of transnational news cultures. Also, she has studied the interface between international broadcasting and social media, specifically in relation to the BBC Arabic Services (Gillespie 2013). The recursive nationhood framework incorporates important aspects of Gillespie's emphasis on the significance of intermediary institutions in translating (and mistranslating) state policy into cultural diplomacy initiatives and the influence of audience responses on them.

Finally, some leading scholars working at the interface of IR and Political Communication have been involved in theorizing what 'mediatization' means for inter-state relations and for intra-state communication policies and practices (Chadwick 2013), including the securitization of popular political culture (Gillespie and O'Loughlin 2009; Moss and O'Loughlin 2008). Notions of mediatization's transformation of the conditions for production and modes of reception of popular cultural works and performances are at the heart of what is understood by recursive nationhood in this book.

Before identifying the specific issues that the book tackles, I should clarify how I interpret the distinction between nation and state and what I mean by 'nationhood'. A state can be defined as designating as a geopolitical entity having a permanent population, a defined territory, one government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other sovereign states (Shaw 2003: 178). However, the concept of state is amorphous, relational, and bound by context and contingency. It is, as Jessen and Eggers (2019) argue, as much a process requiring perpetual re-enactment as it is a stable entity. 'Nation' is in Anthony Smith's classic definition 'a named community possessing an historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs' (Smith 2002: 15). As with the state, however, contemporary theorists of the nation recognize the contingent and relational nature of their object of study. They have stressed the inter-subjective and ideational quality of the nation as 'an imaginative field on to which different sets of concerns may be projected, and upon which connections may be forged between different aspects of social, political and cultural experience' (Cubitt 1998: 1). As the cited accounts suggest, the two terms (nation and state) overlap. They are necessarily intertwined and each of them resists straightforward definition; nations aspire to statehood, and states gain authenticity and legitimacy when they ground themselves in the unifying qualities of the nation (something of considerable significance for post-Soviet Russia). In the case of 'nation-states', they are purported to coincide fully (France is often cited as an example), but

many entities that self-identify as 'nation states' in fact lack the qualities of a nation. Invocations of 'the British nation', for instance, are palpably contradictory; even the idea of a 'US nation' fails to account for the dramatic rise of Spanish as a language of communication and of the disparate American cultures and identities wrought by years of migration and racial discrimination. Such tensions reveal themselves with special acuity in the context of the challenges faced by post-Soviet Russia in constructing a national identity discrete from that of Russia's centuries-old status at the core of a vast contiguous empire (Hosking 2001) and in reconciling the (still) multilingual, multi-ethnic make-up of the Russian Federation with the perceived need to establish the pre-eminence of the Russian culture and the Russian language (Hutchings and Tolz 2012).

The close intertwinement of state and nation affects the material covered in this book, and in the approach that I have taken to it, I have tried to reflect some of the complexities I have described. I have opted for the lexicon of 'nation' because the interests of the book relate primarily to issues of identity, meaning, and culture rather than to international politics or interstate relations in the empirical sense. I am, however, aware that in all the case studies I treat, the Russian state and its proxies are prominent (and sometimes the most prominent) actors. Nonetheless, I focus, in each case, not on the implications for IR but on ways in which the state pursues its objectives by drawing on the discursive resources attached to the idea of the Russian nation and by using the particular situations at hand to engage in nation-building and the shaping of Russian national identity. In many instances, I highlight contradictions within, resistance to, and failures of, this process. This is in keeping with the recursive nationhood framework as applied in my analysis. As to the third term in the state/nation/nationhood trio, put simply, nationhood is the state or status of being a nation; it is what those seeking to become independent nations aspire to, and what those charged with sustaining or existing nations must repeatedly reinforce. As we have seen, it is the continual, performative aspect of claiming, or enhancing, nation status that the recursive nationhood framework highlights (whilst also going beyond it). For this reason, it provides the book's title and guiding concept.

In applying the framework to specific contexts, I address five related issues:

1) The ways in which recursion inflects the performance of Russian nationhood and the implications for our understanding of the 'soft' aspects of IR and for the reciprocity of Russian and non-Russian self-identification
2) The nature of the agency–structure relationship in activities with an external audience and the extent to which this enables us to evaluate state agency and its implications for the state/nation distinction
3) The contributions of agencies mediating between state and target audiences (broadcasters; arts organizations; state-supported web activists; individuals with allegiances split between Russia and the West) to the construction of dialogic, multi-platform assemblages and the significance of cross-platform commuting in that process

4) The influence of the relationship between internally and externally oriented discourses on the tension pitting nationalist against cosmopolitan values and the contribution of participatory audiences to that relationship
5) Russia's role in reshaping the global media environment and its implications for the debate over differences between soft power and propaganda activities

I acknowledge that my argument will prove controversial or unpersuasive to some. I hope that it at least stimulates a dialogue, not least between the arts and humanities community to which I belong and some of the Politics and IR scholars whose work on Russian soft power and propaganda has informed my own rather different approach to these issues.

Through a glass darkly

The mediatization process at the centre of my concerns extends well beyond media *per se*. It is for this reason that I have included material on cinema, theatre, performance art, and popular culture. Nonetheless, the media feature prominently in several chapters, and this Introduction would not be complete without some discussion of the state-aligned outlets, which provide so many valuable clues (and some equally valuable red herrings) about official thinking on Russian nationhood, and of the broader media environment in which they operate. During the period I cover, that environment was dominated by the political fallout from the Ukraine crisis, which followed what Kremlin sources portrayed as the US's bid to 'wrest Ukraine away' from its 'rightful' position within Russia's 'sphere of influence'. Russia's antipathy to its Western Other (not a new phenomenon in Russian history) has begun to be translated into a paranoid fear of treachery from within; Putin's notorious 2014 speech to Russia's Federal Assembly to celebrate the triumphant 'return' of Crimea to the Russian fold included references to a disloyal 'fifth column' of liberal, Western sympathizers with alien values and decadent morals (here, Putin's anti-Western narrative converges with his traditional values agenda).

The sinister implications of Putin's provocative language elicited disquiet within Russia's embattled liberal intelligentsia (and in the West). For those comments and the ideas behind them have been enthusiastically amplified by a state-aligned media which have adopted the discourses and dispositions of a crude, right-wing populism that goes well beyond the official pronouncements of the Kremlin. It is a truism to note that Putin's long period in power (and especially his third presidency) has been associated with a brutal clampdown on media freedom. The extent of the hegemony the Kremlin has achieved over Russia's complex and diverse media landscape, especially its online and social media terrains, is often overstated. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Russia's main television channels, on which most of the population continues to rely for news and current affairs, are strictly controlled and used as a tool for the dissemination and legitimizing of official government narratives. Within this framework, however, key presenters

and journalists are given leeway to interpret and adapt these narratives to suit their own agendas, to render them more palatable to specific segments of the population, and to suffuse them with popular sentiment (Tolz and Teper 2018). Importantly, this is a two-way process, such that state-aligned broadcasters serve also as the channel via which unofficial views and perspectives, including some with extreme nationalist, and occasionally liberal, colourings, can be either ameliorated and incorporated into official discourse or exposed and ridiculed (Hutchings and Tolz 2015). Equally significant is the fact that the Kremlin, not to mention the Russian state, is not a homogeneous, unified entity with a single, consistent perspective. As is the case elsewhere, Russia's political elite is divided into factions, each with its own interests, and its position often shifts unpredictably. This makes the job of those media executives and leading journalists and presenters whose task it is to interpret and relay the Kremlin 'position' on individual events challenging (Hutchings and Tolz 2015).

It is important to steer away from reductive accounts of 'the Russian media' as an undifferentiated morass of Kremlin propaganda and anti-Western hate speech. The picture is more complex than such caricatures suggest, even with respect to journalists and television channels with a clear Kremlin affiliation. Moreover, to base an overview of the Russian media landscape solely on what is broadcast on state-aligned television news and current affairs programming is to ignore the content of non-news programmes, where more nuance and diversity can sometimes be found (Hutchings and Tolz 215), not to mention the small number of broadcasters with oppositional–liberal sympathies (TV Rain; Radio Moscow Echo), the brave journalism of the consistently anti-Kremlin newspaper, *Novaiia gazeta*, and the vast array of opinion swirling around on the Russian-language internet and social media. Putin has introduced a range of mechanisms to strengthen state control over the Russian internet and limit and monitor free expression, including the highly controversial 2019 'Sovereign Internet Bill' requiring all Russian web traffic and data to be rerouted through points controlled by the state and mandating the creation of a domestic domain-name system. It is questionable, however, whether these measures will have the same force as those applied in China. Indeed, until 2019, Russia appeared to have adopted a different approach to the online domain than its Eastern neighbour. Rather than applying censorship, the Russian government has opted to use technological means to manipulate the algorithms determining the results of web searches and to flood the internet, and increasingly, social media with voices either directly affiliated to it or sympathetic to its goals (Wijermars 2018).

In large part because of the Kremlin's control over Russian television, Putin's popularity ratings have remained high throughout most of his presidency. However, they are prone to dip when a population whose endorsement of his leadership is less complete than some accounts suggest becomes disenchanted with aspects of his domestic policy (for example, pension reform). As we have seen, even when supporting the official narrative, Russian television audiences are not blind to the distortions and falsehoods that it might contain. The simplistic account of a unitary Kremlin churning out propaganda and lies mediated by compliant and

uniform media outlets and absorbed by passive, unquestioning audiences lacked validity at the height of Soviet power. As Greene and Robertson (2019) have argued, it is even less plausible in the era of Web 2.0, citizen journalism, and the democratizing force of digital technology.

Finally, and to bring me back to my central concern, there are significant differences, as well as complex interplays, between the Russia presented by state-aligned broadcasters to domestic audiences and the Russia projected abroad. These, too, tend to be overlooked in reductionist accounts of Russia's centrally coordinated television news and current affairs output. The state-funded television channel Russia Today (rebranded RT in 2010 to downplay its association with the Russian state and appeal to a wider audience) began in 2005 as an experimental project designed in defensive mode to counter negative views of Russia promulgated throughout the Western media. Its perceived success has led to increased funding and a more prominent and assertive role in the Kremlin strategy to reposition Russia as leader of a global movement to rebuff US hegemony and assert the reality of a multi-polar world. To do so, however, RT needed to recalibrate domestic Kremlin narratives for viewers immersed in Web 2.0 cultures, inured to the practices of 'digital democracy' and far more eclectic in their news consumption habits than the average Channel 1 viewer (Hutchings 2019). It is also under commercial pressure to maintain and increase its audience share to justify its burgeoning state budget. Sometimes, this has involved a mere, opportunistic reorientation to specific target audiences in specific contexts (appealing separately to both right-wing Tea-Party opponents of liberal interventionism in the US, European nationalists, and the UK's Corbynite left). At other times it has, as we shall see in Chapter 2, resulted in genuine tensions within, and disruptions to, the RT operation.

At risk of stating the obvious, when projecting itself in the international arena, Russia is inescapably subject to processes of a global order to which it must accommodate itself. This means on the one hand that the Russian state is effectively projecting not 'itself' but a version of itself adapted for foreign consumption and to the laws and practices of a communications environment over which it exerts little control. On the other hand, precisely owing to the global penetration of such processes, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate 'domestic' and 'international' projections which incorporate, rebuff, reformulate, and re-incorporate one another in a recursive series, whose complexity acquires further layers when we recognize that neither the Russian state nor the self-identity of the 'Russia' that underpins it are stable or unitary. Both are contingent, shifting, and internally ruptured such that, like other nationhoods, Russia's is never self-equivalent and ever subject to contestation from outside and from within. When it projects its image, it does so through a glass darkly. Here, not only is the glass that is Russia's intended audience darkened by that audience's complexity, diversity, and unpredictability; the projecting process is itself made dark by the recursive intertwining of a plurality of domestic and international selves.

Another dark glass – or global communications quagmire – into which Russia invariably stares when it is projected beyond its borders in whatever form is that

formed by the explosion of online practices associated with post-truth, clickbait journalism, and fake news – concepts whose analytical value is, as I shall argue in Chapter 1, limited. Suggestions that Russia was responsible for these phenomena are themselves far from the truth. However, there is no question that it has actively striven to appropriate them to its own ends, whilst simultaneously adopting the terms that describe them to denigrate its opponents and even passing its own legislation to outlaw fake news (BBC 2019).

Notwithstanding Russia's efforts to nourish the political environments which produced Brexit and Trump, those environments have a complex and broad range of developments – economic, cultural, societal, and political – which stretch way beyond Russia. What is less well recognized is that Russia's attempts to instrumentalize these developments, to which it is subject no less than other states, are by the same token limited and prone to backfire.

The case studies

This book is both continuous with, and a departure from, my previous work on Russian state-aligned broadcasters. Because it targets mediatization rather than television, an individual medium, broadcasting provides only part of my material. I consider six very different case studies forming a broad spectrum of political and cultural creativity and providing the focus for the book's individual chapters. They trace a sequence stretching from what appears to be the most crudely instrumental effort on Russia's part to exert force against another nation state, through 'softer', more ambivalent activities reflecting an aspiration to accommodate Russian cultural identity to global tendencies, to projections of Russia performed by the state's most defiant internal critics. The sequence thus follows a progression in which the tools of the state gradually recede in prominence. On the face of it, then, agency eventually gives way to structure, though, as we shall see, the relationship is revealed to be far more complex than appearances might suggest. The cases are these:

1) The disguised use of Russian military personnel to accomplish the annexation from Ukraine of Crimea, and the attempt to pass them off as 'Crimean self-defence forces' (the infamous case of the 'Polite Little Green Men')
2) The role of the international broadcaster, RT (Russia Today) in negotiating the tensions generated by the convergence of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics with the crisis arising from Russia's annexation of Crimea
3) The popular geopolitics of the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest in which, because its selected entrant was banned by the host country, Ukraine, for having previously sung in Crimea, Russia boycotted the competition
4) Tensions arising from the deployment under Putin of Russian cinema, a field with relative autonomy from the state, as a form of cultural diplomacy
5) Cultural projects undertaken by cosmopolitan figures operating within both Russian and Western cultural contexts and aimed at negotiating Russia's relationship within a commodified global modernity

6) Theatrical expressions of Russian state oppression performed in the West by the rebellious Pussy Riot collective which first attained global prominence with its harshly punished 'Punk Prayer' escapade in a Moscow cathedral

I will situate each case within the mediatized environment as characterized here, highlighting how it shapes the recursive articulation of Russia's values, interests, and identity. The source materials I examine include media broadcasts covering specific incidents, full-scale global 'media events'; web page content; YouTube videos; social media activities; theatrical performances; performance art protests; and multimedia projects involving several platforms.

The complete time frame runs from 2010, the date of the earliest film I examine in detail, to August 2018, when Russia hosted a World Cup Final briefly interrupted by a Pussy Riot pitch invasion. However, the events of 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, and the subsequent crisis over its actions in East Ukraine, loom large, as a primary theme, as the context for my materials, and as a point of reference for the associated step change in relations between Russia and the West that continues to influence the performance and substance of Russian identity discourse.

The second theme recurring repeatedly across the six chapters centres on a cultural form specific to post-Soviet Russia. It enables state (and sometimes) non-state actors to navigate the contradictions that arise from living in a mediatized world in which the multiple identities and conflicting meanings they inhabit are experienced via their public mediations. The adoption (sometimes calculated, sometimes involuntary) of a self-aware stance of ambiguity towards this specific consequence of mediatization is captured in the notion of *stiob* – a phenomenon traceable to a certain trend in late Soviet art and defined by Yurchak (2006) as:

> [A] peculiar form of irony that . . . required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object . . . at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture.
>
> (249–250)

With the boost that it receives from the digital revolution of the 1990s, I shall argue for the distinctiveness of post-Soviet *stiob* as a phenomenon, though it is worth pointing out that, in collaboration with a colleague, Yurchak himself has attempted to identify its tell-tale presence at the peripheries of recent American political culture (Boyer and Yurchak 2010). This book will demonstrate that its role in contemporary Russian culture is far more mainstream and ubiquitous. It will align the trend with other 'distancing' strategies adopted by Russian cultural agents whose very immersion in, and intuitive grasp of, mediatized logics impart to them a capacity to engage in ambiguous critiques of and challenges to those logics (including their links to certain forms of neoliberal commodification).

Theory-wise, the six chapters comprising the book are unified by the overarching recursive nationhood framework. The precise methods differ from chapter

to chapter and depend upon the context of the individual cases. They include the application of the concepts of 'media assemblages' (Crimea's 'Little Green Men'); 'media events' (tensions with RT's coverage of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics); 'popular geopolitics' (the 2017 Eurovision controversy); cinematic 'modality' and 'narrative structure' (Russian film and cultural diplomacy); 'intercultural mediation' (cultural projects aimed at negotiating Russia's relationship with a globalized modernity); theatre semiotics (the performances of Pussy Riot members on UK stages). Each concept will be introduced and explained at the point at which it is deployed.

In many instances, the phenomena underpinning my argument are revealed through the lens of a seemingly peripheral issue, cultural figure, or text, or one that appears misleadingly to have a meaning so obvious that it needs no scrutiny. Such is the case with Crimea's notorious 'Little Green Men', with whom I start.

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1 Well-mannered aliens brandishing new truths

Putin's 'Polite Green Men' and the (non)-occupation of Crimea

Mediatized annexation

We live in a period in which war and conflict, like other aspects of our social world, have been mediatized, through and through. Rather than merely being central to the ways in which acts of war are communicated, sanitized, and explained, the media are now pre-inscribed within those acts from the very moment they are contemplated. As Couldry and Hepp (2017: 181) put it: 'media and ways of reflecting on media become part of the stuff on which the social world [i.e. the nation] is built and larger collectivities come together as such'. Mediatization, as Couldry and Hepp clarify, means that the mediation of events becomes inextricably bound up with how those events play out. It is entirely logical that these principles should apply to the military domain. O'Loughlin and Hoskins (2015: 1323) describe mediatization in a military context as 'the process by which warfare is increasingly embedded in and penetrated by media, such that to plan, wage, legitimize, assuage, historicize, remember, and to imagine war requires attention to that media and its uses'. An early instance of this can be identified in the pre-planned and active use by the US military of 'embedded journalists' in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a strategy replicated by Russia in 2018, when BBC Moscow correspondent Steve Rosenberg accepted an invitation to join Russian troops on a combat mission in Syria (Rosenberg 2016).

A less obvious, but thoroughly compelling, earlier example of the phenomenon could be observed in February 2014. Here, the world was confronted by images of insignia-free, unidentifiable armed soldiers in green camouflage stationed at strategic points throughout Crimea, as Russia took steps to seize the peninsula from Ukraine, following what it saw as the illegitimate, and US-sponsored, overthrow of President Yanukovich by a popular rising in Maidan Square, Kiev. This act is now seen as a classic example of Russia's growing strategy of hybrid warfare, in which traditional military might is combined with the use of special forces, local insurgencies, intelligence operations, psychological techniques of persuasion, and the affordances of digital propaganda. As Balasevicius (2017) put it:

> What was remarkable about the annexation of Crimea and subsequent fighting in Eastern Ukraine was the fact that Russia's conventional military forces,

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> which traditionally lead such operations, played only a supporting role. Even Russia's high-profile Special Forces, which organized much of the resistance, secured key infrastructure, and established many of the checkpoints that sprang up throughout the peninsula, were not the decisive element in this conflict. In the end, it was the extensive and well-coordinated use of intelligence, psychological warfare, intimidation, bribery, and internet/media propaganda that undermined and eventually collapsed Ukrainian resistance.

The Kremlin's official explanation for the sudden appearance of these mysterious warriors was that they belonged to Crimean citizen-defence forces which had intervened to ensure that the hastily convened referendum on whether Crimea should secede from Ukraine, and rejoin Russia, unapproved by the new Ukrainian authorities, could be carried out peacefully. Few in the West were convinced by this account, not least because the soldiers were so well armed and because their appearance had coincided with the sudden emergence of Russian battleships in the Crimean straits. The sight of President Putin flippantly dismissing sceptical foreign correspondents enquiring about the provenance of the uniforms by suggesting that they were 'freely available in local shops' only confirmed that the denials of Russian involvement were barely intended to be taken seriously (Walker 2014). Fewer than two months later, at a similar international press conference, Putin brazenly acknowledged that the anonymous troops were indeed serving Russian military personnel who had been deployed to oversee the referendum at which, by this point, Crimea had voted overwhelmingly to re-unite with Russia, and the annexation had been completed (RT 2014).

There is little question that the Kremlin was taken aback by the turn of events in Kiev, and it struggled to produce a response that it considered feasible and appropriate. Nor is there much doubt about the illegality of the annexation. Nonetheless, that response was not merely mediatized in the sense that it was shaped from outside by the media-saturated environment in which the conflict unfolded. The very decision-making of its perpetrators was correspondingly mediatized, such that the actions they took were pre-inscribed with the meanings attributed to them by the various platforms on which they were reported.

The current chapter will elaborate on this contention. It will then examine the status and structure of the barefaced lie that the Kremlin told in relation to the identity of the 'Polite Little Green Men' who had occupied Crimea, arguing that it involved a form of knowingly contradictory double-voicedness in which the denial of Russian involvement was both true and not true. As Mickiewicz (2008: 104) has shown, Russian television viewers are well trained in recognizing the 'multiple truths' contained within the news narratives foisted upon them by state-owned channels, so Putin was operating on familiar territory as far as his domestic audiences were concerned. I will link this phenomenon to another feature of mediatization: its reliance on complex assemblages of hybrid media sources (Chadwick 2013) located at the centre, periphery, and extra-periphery of Kremlin discourse, some of which endorse that discourse, whether openly or ambiguously, whilst others mock or critique it, but all of which interact with, and react to, one

another. Under these conditions, the *process* of configuring the assemblage outweighs the role of any one *actor* within it. Whilst downplaying the significance of notions of a linear campaign of disinformation, I acknowledge that assemblages reflect power differentials that enable dominant voices to prevail, especially in neo-authoritarian contexts. In this case, the emergent meme of the 'Polite People' was appropriated by official sources aligned with the Kremlin and, through a mythologization process, superimposed on the history of the annexation, such that the initial contradiction (the annexation was both 'real' and 'not real') is resolved via the concluding 'Crimea is [and was always] ours' meme.

I associate the 'Polite People' phenomenon with a form of *stiob* (the ambiguously hyperbolized over-identification with official discourse) which, through its grounding in grassroots culture, facilitates a mode of recursive nation-building based around the construction of an 'in-group' of compatriots (including sympathetic and unsympathetic Russian-speaking Ukrainians) able to 'appreciate' the double- and triple-voiced humour. It is recursive both because it re-enacts the key relationships around which Russian national identity-building has revolved: Russia and the West; Russia and the former Soviet Union; and because it does so on an ongoing, responsive basis: each counter-assault is incorporated in turn into new articulations which recognize and rebut that assault.

Finally, I expand my analysis beyond the Russian context by questioning the validity of the term 'hybrid warfare' (which retains the implied separation of military action and disinformation tools, subordinating the latter to the former as a 'supplement') to argue that the wider phenomenon of what is commonly referred to as 'post-Truth' news, which now extends to all corners of global media discourse, is in part always a product of complex media assemblages. I conclude by speculating that the consequent erosion of sharp distinctions between authoritative truths purveyed by respectable 'objective' mainstream news outlets and the lies and conspiracies propagated by grassroots online sources is evidence of the advent of what Davies (2018b) calls a 'new regime of truth'. Unlike 'post-Truth', which implies a rejection of truth per se, this concept refers to 'a different way of organising knowledge and trust in society', one which replaces faith in 'publically available facts' with trust in 'heroic truth-tellers' who 'break consensus' to 'call bullshit on the establishment' responsible for generating and authenticating those facts (Davies 2018b). As Davies acknowledges, such heroic truth-tellers can be political leaders as well as internet trolls or Wikileaks activists, and the fact that their truths often fly in the face of the conventional facts in which mainstream liberal politicians deal testifies to their grasp of the principles of the new regime. Donald Trump was one such leader. In his own way, Vladimir Putin is another.

Truth, lies, polite (little green) men, and media assemblages

How, then, was mediatization inscribed within the very act of annexation? First, it is significant that the faces of the anonymous troops were carefully obscured by balaclavas and headscarves. As Yurchak (2014) argues, this tactic was aimed partly at preventing the identification of the individuals involved on social media

platforms such as Facebook. It is certainly the case that, as Shevchenko (2014) suggests, the disguise constituted a contemporary example of the tactic of *maskirovka* which can be traced back to a century-old strategy of masking and making invisible instances of Russian military presence. But in this instance, anonymity was very different from invisibility; there is every reason why Russia would want to prevent individual soldiers from being identified via their online social media profiles, but, as the Kremlin well knew, neither the existence of the insignia-free soldiers nor their likely identification as Russian was likely to withstand the tide of online imagery and global rumour for long. As Yurchak points out:

> These curious troops were designed to fulfil two contradictory things at once – to be anonymous and yet recognized by all, to be polite and yet frightening, to be identified as the Russian Army and yet, be different from the Russian Army.
>
> (Yurchak 2014)

Mobile phone and other amateur footage of the mysterious troops soon swamped Western news reports, all of which openly speculated that the soldiers were from the Russian army. The comically perfunctory denials issued by Putin at the hastily convened international press conference following the annexation were distinctly, if instinctively, double-voiced: a superficial negation designed to maintain Russia within the parameters of legality in the eyes of the world press, combined with a defiant acknowledgement of the fact of Russia's intervention – an act corresponding to what, for Putin, was the truth on another, higher, level (that of the US's 'shameful' involvement in the overthrow of Yanukovich and of Crimea's 'rightful' status within Russia). Putin's doublespeak finds its corollary in what opposition blogger Aleksei Kovalev perceives as an ingrained tendency towards 'doublethink' within Russian media audiences:

> There is a certain degree of doublethink in Russia . . . At any point in time, they believe two opposite things. For instance, there are no Russian troops in Ukraine, but we are winning the war . . . Because Russians can never lose. But there are no Russian troops in Ukraine. So whatever is broadcast, they will believe, because it's instinctive. Even if it's lies, we'll believe them because it's *our* guys who are telling the lies. Because everyone is lying, and we're going to stick to *our* lies.
>
> (Quoted in Rothrock 2015)

What is significant is that this same double-voicedness was to an extent shared by the Russian-speaking Ukrainian opposition to Crimea's annexation; it is from this source that the ironic appellation 'Little Green Men' began to be applied to the insignia-free troops. It soon became viral and was picked up and deployed by Western media outlets; the ironic stance at once acknowledges Putin's denial of explicit knowledge as to the identity of the troops and through its very comic hyperbole (the term is habitually associated with popular clichés referring to

invading Martians) reveals that the denial is ultimately rejected in favour of the truth: that these invaders are from just across the border and not another planet.

According to Kiev-based private TV channel One Plus One, the term 'Little Green Men' was coined by local residents in Crimea (Shevchenko 2014). It was frequently mentioned on Ukrainian TV, by a Ukrainian defence ministry spokesman in his Facebook posts, and even by strongly anti-Russian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk in his addresses to the Ukrainian parliament. But many Ukrainian journalists sympathetic to the new Yatsenyuk regime criticized the use of this term. Journalist Stiatoslav Tseholko tweeted: 'Colleagues, stop using the affectionate term "Little Green Men" to describe the Russian troops . . . Otherwise you get the impression that we trust Putin more than we do common sense' (Ibid.).

Putin himself implicitly recognized the term in a response to a question at a Q&A session from Russian opposition politician, Irina Khakamada, who asked him to confirm that 'the little green men' were in fact Russian soldiers all along – something that Putin now generously conceded (Isachenko 2014). The Little Green Men episode represents a prime example less of tightly managed, linear, hybrid warfare than of the circulatory, loose hybrid media assemblages that Andrew Chadwick associates with the news-making process in a mediatized world and with 'the integration of non-elite actors in the construction and contestation of news at multiple points in a political information cycle's lifespan' (Chadwick 2013: 64).

It is in keeping with Chadwick's account of assemblages that in Russia, the associated online moniker 'Polite People' emerged in parallel with the 'Little Green Men'. This was in reference to the widely commented-upon non-aggression of the troops, captured typically in relaxed, static pose engaging courteously (and in Russian) with curious, but admiring, onlookers. The two terms became intertwined, as in Alexei Yurchak's insightful analysis of Russia's 'polite little green men' as symbols of a new anonymous, boundary-less state capable of appearing at any point: 'They were designed to be a *pure, naked military force* – a force without a state, without a face, without identity, without a clearly articulated goal' (Yurchak 2014).

A similar argument was invoked in a parallel drawn by a TASS correspondent, Vladimir Zinin, with the static, little green toy men that can be packed away in boxes ready to be redeployed in some future, unspecified, polite 'game' of soldiers:

> The notorious 'green men' who appeared in Crimea – they're like the toy soldiers that children play with, without a name or a face. Their past and their future is a cardboard box, which can be opened when it's time to begin playing a new game.
>
> (quoted in Haines 2016)

The intertwinement of the two monikers ('Little Green Men' and 'Polite People') is in part a reflection of the deep mediatization of the Russian-speaking community's approach to the annexation on both sides of the political divide: each became

an online meme circulating freely across the divide, pitted against one another in polemic and conjoined in satirical jest. As with the 'Little Green Men' trope, uncertainty abounded as to the source, and the intended satirical target, of its 'Polite People' alternative. A BBC report associated the term with 'Russian journalists less aligned with the Kremlin', quoting the centrist daily newspaper, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, as reporting that ' "polite, armed men" are in charge of Crimea now'. Crucially, the BBC pointed out that the term was initially *avoided* in official state media, which initially referred merely to 'volunteer forces' and 'self-defence forces' (Shevchenko 2014), showing few images of the troops in question.

The origin of the ominously 'Polite' people has in fact been traced to *Zhivoi zhurnal* blogger, Boris Rozhin, the chief editor of the website Voice of Sevastopol. Vera Zvereva appropriately positions Rozhin in what she terms the 'grey zone' of the Runet in which 'the agency of state authorities . . . is impossible to prove' (Zvereva 2020: 228–229). Rozhin reported on a Ukrainian airport security chief who said the Russian military had 'politely asked' his staff to leave. Rozhin's coining of the term 'Polite People' was clearly intended as a semi-sympathetic 'in-joke' about the true identity of the soldiers:

> The expression 'polite' occurred to me in connection with the unknown people seizing strategic objects without formally unmasking their incognito; so it was intended as a sort of joke (since everyone in Crimea knew very well who they were and where they were from), in the style of 'Well you and I at least know who they are'. I used the expression 'polite people' a couple of times without any ulterior motive, or sense that there would be any consequences other than laughter from some readers.
>
> (Rozhin 2014)

Thus, just as official Ukrainian sources discouraged the use of 'Little Green Men', so their Russian equivalents were wary of the use in official media of the term 'Polite People'. Indeed, Rozhin's post was illustrated with images of the Russian military that could well have appeared menacing and aggressive, as America's *Newsweek* magazine reported (Lidz 2015).

Moreover, the parallel ambiguity towards the respective terms coined by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian online sources ensured that the game of simultaneous denial and acknowledgement was joined on both sides of the conflict, with each side re-inflecting the other's intended meanings. Thus, in response to the Ukrainian mockery of Putin's knowingly brazen denial of the truth, Russia's Minister of Defence Dmitrii Shoigu offered a highly ambivalent and contradictory variant of the 'black cat in a dark room':

> As far as assertions about the use of Russian special forces in the events in Ukraine are concerned, I will say just one thing: it is difficult to look for a black cat in a dark room, especially if it is not there; the more so if it is intelligent, bold, and *polite*.
>
> (Quoted in Skibina 2014)

In a humorous response to Shoigu's statement, the online creative LiveJournal blogger Sergei Luk'ianenko invoked the quantum physics paradox of Schrödinger's cat – the idea that an invisible cat in a box can be both dead and alive at the same time; by analogy, the Russian army 'is', and 'is not', present in Crimea. In his short, online entry, Luk'ianenko developed the paradox further:

> There exist legends stating that Shoigu's cat can only be found by Polite People. This is probably connected to the fact that the cat itself is polite. The expression 'Shoigu's cat' is used in situations when it is impossible to prove a fact, and it just has to be either accepted or denied.
>
> (Lukanen'ko 2014)

The 'Polite People' meme thus adopted an online life of its own, acquiring new layers of ambiguous, dialogic meaning at every new instantiation.

In the non-Russian speaking Western media, the terms 'Polite People' and 'Little Green Men' became hopelessly entangled and were used interchangeably, assumed to be equally satirical polemics against Russian falsehood. For example, the *Daily Telegraph*'s report on the occupation, highly critical of Russia's actions, headlined with 'Ukraine crisis: "Polite people" leading the silent invasion of the Crimea' (Oliphant 2014). However, in the Russian-speaking mediasphere, the pro-Russian source of the 'Polite People' moniker rapidly distinguished its semiotic trajectory from that of its 'Little Green Men' double. It became, in due course, the basis for a popular online mythology of the annexation.

'Polite people' as mythology and monument

In the mythologization process, the non-threatening but efficient demeanour of the troops served as a form of ludic wish-fulfilment. Several forum comments from sympathetic Russian citizens expressed the desire that the 'Polite People', so well turned out and courteous, should indeed turn out to be Russian troops rather than self-defence forces, for this is just how such patriotic citizens would ideally want their national army to look and behave. As an anonymous interviewee of the RIA Novosti press agency put it:

> Nobody expected that the Russian army could demonstrate this new appearance with such efficiency and elegance. It is very attractive and positive and deserves a high evaluation.
>
> (RIA Novosti 2014)

As their identity was finally confirmed, and the 'return' of Crimea to Russia triumphantly announced, the Polite People began to generate a wave of celebrations of one kind and another, many of them now managed and initiated by forces associated with the state and capable of mediating between the Kremlin and the realm of popular culture, principally the Russian army. As *Newsweek* reported (Lidz 2015), some Russian military officials' offices began to be decorated with

photos bearing the slogan: ‘Politeness is a power that can open any door’. During the Victory Day holiday, the Ministry of Defence launched its own ‘Polite People’ clothing line, sparking a curious trademark dispute over the brand. In reference to the fashion line, Russian blogger Ilya Varlamov wrote of ‘an image of a Russian liberator-soldier wearing a nice new uniform and armed with beautiful weapons, who has come to defend peaceful towns and villages’ (Ibid.).

During 2015 Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Moscow, ‘Polite People’ were showcased in a winter menswear collection designed by Leonid Alekseev in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence, called ‘Army of Russia’ and intended to honour Alekseev’s ‘patriotism and love of Russia’ (Ibid.). The collection included black T-shirts featuring silk-screened ‘Little Green Men’, aviator jackets with the words ‘Victory 1945–2015’ on the back (a reference to the 70th anniversary of the World War II victory against Nazi Germany), and sweatshirts and jackets featuring the word ‘POLITE’ (Ibid.). Here, then, in an act of symbolism, the ‘Little Green Men’ appellation is appropriated, evacuated of its negative, sardonic meaning, and recombined with the dominant ‘Polite People’ moniker. In another brazenly symbolic secondary appropriation, the general director of the official army products company, Voentorg, Vladimir Pavlov, called the clothing line a homage to the ‘Crimean Spring’, claiming the pieces were designed for people ‘leading an active lifestyle and sharing military values – patriotism, camaraderie and mobility’ (Ibid.).

Further bolstering what was rapidly becoming a popular, if tongue-in-cheek, Russian army cult, the official army choir, the ‘Aleksandrov Ansambl’, composed and performed a song of praise for the ‘Polite People’, linking their achievements to the great feats of the Red Army during World War 2. The song rapidly became a YouTube hit.[1] The cult culminated in two developments: (a) the proposal by Russia’s State Duma to declare October 7th each year as ‘Day of Polite People’ in recognition of the army’s role in overseeing the peaceful referendum in Crimea[2]; and (b) the construction of several permanent monuments to the Polite People throughout various Russian cities, some of them based on photographs widely disseminated on the web.[3] Significantly, these were depicted in relaxed poses, often accepting flowers from grateful children, and always with their masks and headscarves removed.

The monumentalization of the ‘Polite People’ is thus re-inscribed into their initial manifestation via a multi-modal, multi-platform process of transformation involving mobile phones, television images, photographs, online videos, and stone statues. Mediatization effectively inverts time. The newly Polite People are mythologized as distinctively, permanently, and proudly, Russian, as ‘belonging to us’, just as Crimea is now, and always was, ‘our Crimea’. Indeed, the ubiquitous ‘Crimea is ours’ (*Krym – nash*) meme had begun to go viral even before Putin’s infamously defiant speech to both chambers of the Russian Federal Assembly in which he proclaimed that ‘Crimea had always been an integral part of Russia’. In this (distorted) sense, Putin’s initial coy description of the Russian occupiers as ‘Crimean self-defence forces’ becomes less a barefaced lie and more a rhetorical manoeuvre designed to delay the revelation of the ‘real truth’ about

Crimea's status. In this way, too, the explosion of online 'Polite People' discourse contributes to the nation-building effort that Putin's regime engineered from the hastily concocted Crimean intervention, closing the mediatization circle. The use of unidentified military personnel in the annexation of Crimea was conceived with its subsequent mediation inscribed into its implementation and via multi-platform remediations became an integral part of the nation-building narrative with which the annexation concluded.

In this light, the notion that the Kremlin commissioned the whole sequence linking the sudden appearance of the anonymous troops to their mythologization as 'our Polite People' loses credibility. There is no mistaking Putin's shifty irritation about initial foreign media questions concerning their status and role. The process was, as we see, generated by a complex media assemblage of which the media-ready, masked, insignia-less 'green men' created by sub-state actors were only the start.

Stiob and viral videos as double-voiced discourse

It is the context of the emphasis on sub-state actors that I now consider the 'Polite People' cult as a form of multi-vocal *stiob* (Yurchak 2006) in which official patriotic discourse is knowingly developed to an absurd, comic extreme from within a consciousness which is distinguishable from that discourse but belongs within its parameters, ambivalently endorsing it by over-identifying with it. Seen in this light, the 'Polite People' represent a mirror image of their 'Little Green Men' doppelgänger. The latter likewise emerged from within a Russian-speaking community which, because it falls within official discourse's target audience, 'knows' its hidden truths and methods. It is therefore able to undermine them by under-identifying with, and parodying, them.

Often (wrongly) equated entirely to self-parodic satire, *stiob* should rather be considered as a form of double-voiced, or even triple-voiced, discourse in which official culture is both endorsed from within and objectified from outside, either to assert a modicum of parodic intent, and/or to undermine that intent precisely by mimicking it, displaying knowledge of it, and generating a means of escaping its satirical effects. It is in this form, deeply recursive. Acknowledging that 'parody in some form and to some extent will always be in a *stiob* utterance or gesture', Mark Yoffe characterizes the phenomenon as falling 'under the category of double-voiced utterances' and as a speech act which 'becomes a battlefield of opposing intentions', thus rendering the direction and status of the parodic element ambiguous (Yoffe 2013: 211).

The post-Soviet Russian-speaking online world is awash with examples of *stiob* of all shades. Much of it is generated from sources either within, or aligned with, official patriotic consciousness. As Julie Fedor's and Rolf Fredheim's research on the activities of the patriotic grassroots video-maker Iurii Degtiarev acknowledges, whether such activity is 'state-commissioned' from above or spontaneous and 'from below' is often hard to determine; there are clearly examples of both. For instance, Degtiarev's provocative and scandalous handling of the World War 2

victory celebrations, which succeeded in infuriating Kremlin-loyal film director Nikita Mikhalkov, clearly did not correspond to any state commission (Fedor and Fredheim 2017: 18).

Related to the *stiob* effect of the 'Polite People' cult was the infamously defiant, but self-objectifying, online 'I am a Russian Occupier' (*Ia russkii okkupant*) video, made by Siberian blogger Evgenii Zhurov and retweeted by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitrii Rogozin. The video, which defiantly, yet absurdly, lists in litany form Russia's historical conquests and achievements, effectively exposing the aggressively imperialistic attitudes that official Kremlin discourse persistently sanitizes and masks, ends with an 'email' from the occupier to US President Obama warning that he loves peace but knows how to fight better than anyone in the world.[4] In a demonstration of the recursive effects of the mediatized environment in which the video emerged, it, a Ukrainian video with the same title soon emerged and achieved similarly viral status (Porter 2015). The latter adopted the same structure as its original but dwelt on the damage and oppression caused by Russian imperial aggression.

Another example of the multi-voiced *stiob* culture dominating the vast nether-region of online space between officially commissioned/approved Kremlin discourse and a popular patriotism often tinged with self-parodic intent is the '*Niash-miash*' video celebrating in Japanese comic-book form the patriotism of the new young, female Crimean Prosecutor General Natalia Poklonskaia. She was appointed by the Russian authorities in the aftermath of the annexation.[5] The origin of the term '*niash-miash*' was Poklonskaia's own statement that she refused to tolerate any 'niasha-miashas' – a request precisely *not* to be made the object of affection, expressed in a phrase of Japanese pop-cultural provenance (Suslov 2014: 602). The clip is a heavily edited mash-up combining footage of Poklonskaia delivering harsh, anti-Kiev homilies, with her words converted into a simple song, and comic-book style sequences depicting a blond, big-eyed girl wielding a sword against the dark forces of evil. The song's recurring chorus is the rhyming couplet '*Vlast', Krov', niash-miash/Krov' Vlast', Krym – nash*' ('Power, Blood, *Niash-Miash*/Blood Power, The Crimea's ours'), as Poklonskaia ventriloquizes the patriotic mantra that came to define popular Russian discourse.

Again, it is important to view the over-identification which defines the Poklonskaia clip neither as mono-vocal nationalism nor as mocking self-parody. Rather, it is a form of triumphalism which at once signals its own absurdity and the unreasonableness of the claims that underpin it, but, *through that very signal* identifies a variant on what in his dialogistic interpretation of the discourse of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, Bakhtin terms the 'loophole' (*lazeika*) enabling him to evade the mocking contempt of his adversaries:

> A loophole is a retention for oneself of the possibility to alter the final, ultimate sense of one's word. . . . In condemning himself, he wants and demands that the other refute his self-definition, but he leaves himself a loophole for the eventuality that the other person will agree with his . . . self-definition.
>
> (Bakhtin 1973: 195–196)

The *stiob* effect is epitomized in the good-mannered (non)-occupation of Crimea by Polite Green Men who are, and are not, Russian troops. The synchronicity of the effect is expanded in the form of diachronic sequences formed of denials, and then acknowledgements of 'the truth', of defiant defences of the indefensible followed by (self-mocking) counter-defences against the inevitable accusations of falsehood. The phenomenon can be interpreted as an act of nation-building based around the construction of an in-group of compatriots (including sympathetic and unsympathetic Russian-speaking Ukrainians) able to appreciate the double- and triple-voiced humour. It is recursive both because it re-enacts the key relationships around which Russian national identity-building has revolved – Russia and the West; Russia and the former Soviet Union – and because it does so on a responsive basis: each counter-assault from pro-Kiev or Western media sources is incorporated in turn into new articulations which recognize and rebut that assault.

Mediatization and recursive nation-building

The recursion process relies on the heavily mediatized environment in which it is enacted. This is an environment featuring complex, shifting assemblages that include, amongst other things, centrally controlled broadcast Russian television news; online, seemingly pro-Russian ultra-patriotic videos, some undoubtedly of a semi-commissioned nature (Fedor and Fredheim 2017), others more spontaneous and emanating from a liminal space just beyond the parameters of official discourse; and online discourse produced with parodic or semi-parodic intent by dissident, non-aligned, or pro-Kiev actors.

In such an environment, the distinction between the meanings of military actions (an annexation facilitated by disguised Russian troops) and the meanings of their multiple mediations becomes difficult to disentangle. The mediation becomes integral to the action itself. Inasmuch as it is a useful term, this, perhaps, is the true significance of 'hybrid warfare'. But the environment and the assemblages it encompasses reach far beyond the arena of military action, and well beyond the spectrum of pro-Kremlin opinion, as we have already seen with the reverse mirroring, and then conflation, of the 'Little Green Men' and 'Polite People'.

I will explore further examples of the capacity of such assemblages to spread into surprising and seemingly contradictory configurations, and of the curiously symbiotic effects of mediatization, in the chapters to follow. As will become evident, the effects of mediatization sometimes bring pro-Kremlin actors and committed opponents of the Putin regime into curious and counter-intuitive alignments. It is for this reason that the personas and actions of the Pussy Riot collective feature periodically throughout the course of the book. Pussy Riot's performance art provocations consistently position their own future mass mediations at the core of the meanings they generate. Thus, the 'staging' of the annexation of Crimea and the staging of Pussy Riot's daring provocation at the heart of the Orthodox establishment each offer compelling evidence of the way in which, in a mediatized world, the communication of political (and now, military) action – whether

pro- or anti-state – is inscribed into, and inseparable from, the action itself. The parallel is symbolized in the shared trope of the wearing of the anonymizing, identity-concealing balaclava, which, following the initial action, is eventually removed in a secondary media performance in which the proud identities of the perpetrators (Putin's Polite People in their monumental form; the now iconic faces of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Mariia Alekhina) are revealed to an admiring public.

The uncertain and undecipherable meanings that cluster around phenomena such as the mockingly 'courteous' occupation of Crimea and the carefully staged 'spontaneity' of Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer are linked to *stiob* in its post-Soviet variant. Yurchak's account of Soviet *stiob* does not allow for its penetration to the heart of official culture nor for its practice to extend beyond art. Nowadays, Putin's inner circle operate intuitively within the *stiob* mindset, situating themselves, albeit hesitantly, within complex assemblages of media actors over which they struggle to assert control and engaging in *stiob* gestures to compensate for that loss.

A post-Crimea instance of official *stiob* behaviour came to light in 2018, following the fallout from the disastrous interview that the international broadcaster RT ran with the two suspects identified in relation to the Salisbury poisoning by British intelligence from extensive CCTV footage. In the interview, the two suspects, Ruslan Boshirov and Aleksandr Petrov (later revealed to be GRU agents Anatolii Chepiga and Aleksandr Mishkin respectively), implausibly and clumsily denied involvement in the poisoning, despite the clear evidence linking them to it (Tolz et al. 2020). They were barely challenged by Margarita Simonyan, RT's Editor-in-Chief, who had unusually taken upon herself the role of interviewer. The interview generated universal disdain, incredulity, and mockery with RT's own audiences, as well as across the online world (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2018). The Runet in particular was flooded with comical re-enactments tinged with crude homophobic tropes; during the interview, Boshirov and Petrov rejected a question from Simonyan about the nature of their friendship as being an 'intrusion' into their privacy (Tolz et al. 2020).

One of the interview's most embarrassingly comical exchanges came when Simonyan asked Boshirov directly if he worked for the GRU. She received in response an excruciatingly lame attempt at a deflection: 'Well, do you?' Following the interview's devastating online reception, however, Simonyan herself engaged with the creative spoofs and satirical skits on her performance, turning to social media to celebrate the appearance of a new brand of sweatshirt bearing the RT logo and featuring variants on her exchange. The most common slogan read simply 'Do you work for the GRU?' Others included the limp reply, 'Do you?' Whom did these satirical sweatshirts target: the two suspects?; Simonyan herself?; the nosediving Kremlin narrative claiming UK responsibility for the poisoning?; or Western 'Russophobic' rejections of that narrative? As with the tongue-in-cheek army clothes range promoting Russia's polite occupiers, and in line with Yurchak's original definition of *stiob*, there is no single answer. Moreover, like their 'Polite Men' predecessors, Simonyan's sweatshirts perform a reification

of this peculiarly post-Soviet brand of *stiob*, submitting it to a form of pseudo-monetization in which market logic itself is both enthusiastically endorsed and lightly mocked. As we will see in subsequent chapters, the simultaneous embrace and refusal of global commodification is a feature of the recursive logic of post-Soviet nationhood which necessarily binds the global and the national in iterative re-expressions of one another. This logic does not submit to the intentions of individual actors, meaning that, as Simonyan intuited, broadcasters like RT cannot neatly separate 'domestic' and 'foreign' audiences (with their Cyrillic-script slogans, the sweatshirts clearly targeted domestic Russian audiences but as a hastily improvized reaction to the fallout from an interview aimed largely at shoring up RT's core international viewership). Here, my account intersects with the strategic narrative framework which likewise questions domestic/foreign audience distinctions, and in which:

> Strategic narratives can be used to unify a public (domestic audience) via the identity claim and to delineate and communicate this claim and position it within the international sphere.
>
> (Miskimmon et al. 2013)

The intertwining of the national and the international is facilitated by the advent of a digital media environment, with meanings commuting in circular fashion across platforms, from centre to margins, official to oppositional discourse, and subnational to transnational. The unprecedented dialogic intensity of this process, however, torpedoes the very notion of an outward projection of an inwardly coherent, self-identical nationhood and exposes the limitations of the strategic narrative model, at least in its dominant manifestation, with its implicit assumptions of linear instrumentality and of states as uniform agents.

Conclusion: hybrid warfare and the new regime of truth

There are two related phenomena uncovered by my analysis that form the basis of a conclusion that can be applied beyond the Russian media environment. First, the analysis raises questions about the values and uses of the term 'hybrid warfare', of which Russia's actions in Ukraine are frequently cited as classic examples. The term implies a linearity of intent and a disjunction of functions (hybrid war involves military action accompanied, and followed, by a subordinate campaign of propaganda and disinformation) which is not borne out by the full story of the Little Green Men. Here, I identified a process in which the future mediation of their deployment is inscribed at the heart of the action itself. The mediation process is, moreover, the decidedly non-linear product of a complex assemblage of interventions emanating from official, peripheral, extra-peripheral, and oppositional spaces of discourse. Thus, the mythology of the Polite People and of the return of Crimea to Russia indeed commenced with a straightforward military intervention instigated, denied, and brazenly lied about by the Kremlin. But from the outset, it was articulated with a set of utterances which ultimately diminished

the role of the lying agent and dispersed the myth within a symbiotic assemblage of contradictory and opposing meanings. This is part of the sense of what is referred to as the post-Truth world. However, the Polite People mythology also indicates that post-Truth should not be equated to falsehood, and that there is an urgent need for a rigorous typology of a range of subtly different phenomena (including the populist truth of affect; the phenomenon of personalized news agendas and social media 'echo chambers'; the growth of conspiracy theories; and Fake News), to all of which the label post-Truth is currently applied without discrimination. This is something at which Italian researchers Fabio Giglietto, Laura Ianelli, Luca Rossi, and Augusti Valeriani have, in fact, made a first, tentative stab (Giglietto et al. 2016).[6]

As subsequent global developments have shown, the misleadingly labelled post-Truth phenomenon is not exclusive to the Russian-speaking communications environment. Recent colourful examples can be found in the antics of the administration of US President Trump. Having peddled items of conspiratorial fake news generated by right-wing online outlets such as Breitbart, and hyperbolic commitments to protective patriotism (banning all Muslims from entering America), Trump then readily portrayed himself as the victim of fake news perpetrated by mainstream broadcasters such as CNN which, indeed, were awash with conspiratorial narratives, some more fantastical than others, about collusion between Trump and Putin and Trump and the Russian intelligent services. Here, too, as Giglietto and his co-authors recognize, rather than a straightforward, linear teller of lies, the Trump administration forms just one part of a complex assemblage involving official government pronouncements, Twitter storms, right-wing news outlets, mainstream broadcasters, and global conspiratorial narratives (Giglietto et al. 2016). Several other analyses are emerging which situate the 2016 US Presidential election, and before that, reporting of the Brexit campaign in the UK, in a similar context (Harsin 2015; Berghel 2016; Viner 2016).

The second general point to derive from the focus on mediatization that our questioning of the appropriateness of terms like 'hybrid war', 'information war', and 'post-Truth' brought to light is that it is bound up closely with the recursive performance of nationhood. The complex, multifaceted media assemblages characterizing the contemporary global mediascape mean that nation-building must be forged through repeated and profoundly dialogic reconfigurations of the relationships from which national identity is derived. For those who wield national power, this need carries both threats (configurations are unstable and constantly vulnerable to challenge and collapse) and potentials (the perpetual reconfigurations offer powerfully productive opportunities for community building).

Finally, it is precisely because nationhood is reasserted dialogically via assemblages which intertwine multiple, contradictory, and conflicting discourses from above and below that truth and lies themselves become entangled. The maintenance of a sharp distinction between objectively verifiable truth and subjective fabrication (or popular misconception) is a phenomenon characteristic of a modern state that, according to William Davies, is currently in crisis because its post-Westphalian, rationalist foundations are being superseded by a set of interlinked

logics so inexorable as to render the entire edifice of representational democracy vulnerable to collapse (Davies 2018a).

Davies further contends (2018b) that ‘ordinary’ people are increasingly dissatisfied with how their interests are represented by elites. Rather than a nation-building resource, ‘the people’ present a mobilizing force for extreme nationalism. In this context, the old regime of truth gives way to a new one in which the uncovering of truth is no longer a consensus-based process based on transparent analysis and debate. Knowledge under the new regime is produced through ‘sudden and voluminous series of revelations’ whose claim to truth rests on their correspondence to popular sentiment at any given time – what ‘feels’ true, rather than what corresponds to ‘the facts’. It is here that Davies’s notion of a new type of heroic truth-teller enters the frame (2018b). Davies links the ‘new regime of truth’ to perceptions that the relationships between ‘mainstream media’ and actual events are ‘a scam’ (2018a: 26). This means that the legitimization function of the independent press as a stable fourth estate with a shared commitment to objective truth is eviscerated. The epistemology of these heroic new truth-tellers (a clan to which, incidentally, RT, claims to belong) is one in which old rules about consistency – between words and realities, across multiple accounts of reality – become redundant. If what is true is what feels true at a given moment, a single person (Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin) can endorse, ignore, or refute the same version of events at will.

The world described by Davies is one which permits Tump first to claim that global warming is a scam invented by the Chinese, then to deny ever making that statement (Schulman 2018). It allows Putin’s ‘Polite People’ to be first ‘not there’ in Crimea and then ‘there’, or even simultaneously ‘there and not there’ – ‘occupiers’, yet also ‘non-occupying self-defence forces’. Each president selects the version of the truth which best corresponds to where he locates the centre of gravity of the public sentiment whose often contradictory essence he aspires to capture. To use the concept of post-Truth to describe this situation is to underestimate the challenge we face. Its associations with relativity (the equal validity of multiple versions of events), and its linked insinuation that the commitment to truth itself has been lost, do not do justice to what is effectively an – albeit quite alien – new popular epistemology. This is not to say that increasingly desperate calls for journalists and politicians to re-commit themselves to standards of objectivity, and to respect for verifiable facts, are futile or without foundation, as the post-COVID 19 reaction against statements from senior politicians like Michael Gove expressing disdain for experts testifies. However, such calls must be made in the full knowledge that the new epistemology, turbocharged by the digital assemblages across which it is perpetually re-circulated, forms part of an inevitable reaction to the crisis in neoliberalism which followed the 2008 financial crash. This has guaranteed, amongst other things, the slow penetration of a potent anti-elitist populism right across the Western world – a world in which Putin’s well-mannered alien invaders are now quite at home. So, too, is the subject of the next chapter, in which I describe an attempt to work the recursive logic defining the new truth regime directly into the grain of Russia’s nation projection strategy.

Notes

1 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpp8bHn0Yu8.
2 See http://asozd2.duma.gov.ru/main.nsf/(SpravkaNew)?OpenAgent&RN=604055-6&02.
3 A bronze statue was erected in Simferopl, Crimea, in June 2016 (www.interfax.ru/russia/513048). This was preceded in 2015 by the appearance of permanent statues in other Russian cities, including Belogorsk in the Amur region (https://ria.ru/society/20150506/1062919252.html).
4 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=T65SwzHAbes.
5 www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4I1VP1M3Lw.
6 See also Hutchings 2017.

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2 Projecting Russia on the global stage

International broadcasting and recursive nationhood

An information warrior is born

I begin this chapter by taking a short step backwards in time from the period of the Crimea crisis, before returning at the end to re-invoke its central presence in this book. I referred in the Introduction to the coterminous advent in August 1991 of the digital transformation of our media environment and of post-Soviet Russia. Barely more than two decades had passed since these two convergent revolutions when, in April 2012, BBC World News (the BBC's international television news service) agreed an innovative deal with Russia's alternative web-based television channel, Dozhd, whereby BBC World News bulletins were made available free to viewers of Dozhd viewers. The BBC's ability to exploit technological advances to speak directly to audiences eager for credible alternatives to the sanitized output of state-controlled broadcasters carried the familiar echoes of its success in penetrating Gorbachev's makeshift Crimean 'prison' during the short time the Soviet coup plotters held him there. Yet, the world had changed. In an almost simultaneous gesture, Russia's own international broadcaster, Russia Today (RT), launched the 'Julian Assange Show', featuring the scourge of the British and US governments, himself now sequestered in the Ecuadoran embassy in London and, by the same token, able to voice the deepest fears of the West's liberal intelligentsia. Immersed in digital culture, RT, which also broadcasts via Britain's digital Freeview Service, was as alert to the ideological opportunities offered by online forms of 'citizen action' as the Dozhd journalists. These opportunities had already been bolstered by the adversities and multiple forms of online protest and resentment unleashed by the economic crash of 2008.

The minor coincidences point to a more significant transformation. For as neoliberal ideology was boosted, yet also threatened, by the individualizing and democratizing potentials afforded by online technology, and by the post-2008, 'new regime of truth' described by Davies, these factors combined to change how nations positioned themselves in the world and how they projected their values onto it, altering forever the very purpose of international broadcasting. On the one hand, the fall of communism and the advent of online modes of communication provided broadcasters with unprecedented access to global audiences inhabiting a 'post-ideological' environment, seemingly united by a shared openness to free markets, democratic government, and a new, participatory, politics.[1] On the other

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hand, as online terrains expanded, broadcasters came under pressure to granulate their output more finely, with audiences demanding particularized media content and increased access to media production tools (Jenkins 2006).

The parallel emphases on market forces and participatory citizenship posed challenges to the state's pre-eminent role as a sponsor of centralized broadcasting operations, let alone as the sole representative of national public spheres subject to the contradictory pressures unleashed by global migration. Additional problems were generated by the continuing fallout from the 2008 financial crash. Those same challenges created new opportunities for international broadcasters. Indeed, in an effort to capitalize on RT's success in projecting Russia's image abroad, December 2013 saw Russia's primary news agency, RIA Novosti, replaced with a new entity in which Margarita Simonyan, RT's Editor-in-Chief, was appointed to the same role, cementing ties between the two organizations. Finally, it became clear that concepts such as free speech and citizen democracy were, in the globalized media environment, open to visceral opposition from the multiple religious, nationalist, and other fundamentalisms which have been competing with neoliberalism to fill the ideological vacuums left, first by socialism's defeat, then by capitalism's new crisis. They were also subject to appropriation by unscrupulous state elites seeking cover for policies which appeared to bear some of the hallmarks of older, 'Cold-War' practices but which in fact constituted a new form of East–West conflict (Russia's stance on the Ukraine crisis is a vivid example).

In sum, international broadcasters must negotiate a double paradox:

1) The rise of the web and the fading of 'hard' Cold War tools of influence afford national communication strategies unprecedented status and penetration; yet these phenomena diminish the control that, in an era when media outputs circulate through online networks of users who are also producers, can be exerted over meanings and audiences.
2) The array of new media tools and the dissolution of ideological blocs maximize the capacity to 'sell' national influence. For the same reasons, the role of the state in sponsoring that influence must now be masked, placing an onus on broadcasters to promote impartiality and cosmopolitan values of participatory citizenship whilst still clinging to the vestiges of imperial/totalitarian legacies.

Werner and Zimmerman (2006) rightly insist that global connectivity is not specific to the contemporary era; indeed, as I suggested in the Introduction, the emergence of nationhood at the end of the eighteenth century is contemporaneous with the advent of globalization in its modern form and of technological means of mass communication. Benedict Anderson's seminal theory of the nation as imagined community, to reiterate, rests on this coincidence (Anderson 1983). The goal of the current chapter is to add a further dimension to the argument developed in Chapter 1: that constructions of nationhood nonetheless play out in a particular way within the hyper-globalized media environment that gave birth to post-Soviet Russia. In doing so, they propel us to the heart of the dual paradox that the Gorbachev/Dozhd/Assange juxtaposition highlights.

The paradox undercuts the binaristic Cold War paradigms pitting a repressive, authoritarian Russian regime against a 'West' unified by a shared commitment to liberal democracy which, as we saw in Chapter 1, continue to shape Russia's external image. My analysis aims to capture the richer complexity of how projections of Russia are enacted in the context of complex flows of global news and interactive communications. It recognizes that Cold War teleological master narratives (Marxist socialism or Western-style democracy as the universal developmental end point for all societies) have yet to be replaced by credible alternatives. Also, it acknowledges that what might therefore be termed the 'post-ideological' age has not been accompanied by the advent of a corresponding 'post-national' era, despite predictions to the contrary (Appadurai 1996; Hobsbawm 1991). Instead, we are witnessing a resurgence of nationalism. Cosmopolitan and diasporic forms of belonging are a constitutive feature of the remodelling of national identifications (Barker 1999) – a phenomenon I treat within the recursive nationhood framework which continues to form the spine of my analysis.

Different broadcasters experience the paradox in different ways, reflecting their varied histories. All deploy new media tools to negotiate it, and all adopt sophisticated digital strategies to enable them to engage national audiences in the post-Cold War world. The near hegemony of neoliberalism and the displacement of government power by global market forces introduce a new challenge to state-aligned broadcasters. RT's imperative to compete in the global market conflicts with its duty to adhere to the prerogatives of a Putin administration with a poor external reputation but prepared to invest significantly in its soft power operations. This problematizes the relationship between channel branding and cultural diplomacy.

Observers of the current media landscape could be forgiven for thinking that little had changed since the Cold War. Russia's degeneration into populist authoritarianism has been accompanied by international alarm over Putin's expansionist aspirations. These trends underpinned the Ukraine conflict and its conjuring of virulent counter-narratives aimed at positioning Russia at the forefront of a global effort to challenge a unipolar US-led world (Hutchings and Szostek 2015). A prominent role is accorded to RT. A Kremlin-funded network founded in 2005, it runs cable and satellite television channels and produces internet content directed mainly at foreign audiences. Its primary output is in English, but it also broadcasts in Arabic, Spanish, and French, with additional online content in German and Russian. The coordination of its elaborate (dis)-information strategy with an aggressive online campaign has shaped the context of what some call a 'New Cold War' (NCW) (Lucas 2008). RT's semi-militarized propaganda campaign on behalf of a repressive Russian state was targeted by US Secretary of State John Kerry, who described the channel as the Kremlin's 'propaganda bullhorn' (LoGuriato 2014). The defensive posture RT adopted in response was expressed in an editorial piece by its Margarita Simonyan:

> Every . . . single hour the guys who work for us are told, 'You are liars, you are no journalists, you are the Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece. You've sold

> yourselves to the Russians' . . . I can see very clearly why I continue to work for a channel that stands alone, showing everybody the other side of the story. It's my country. I have no choice.
>
> (Simonyan 2014)

RT views its mission as being no different from that of its rivals. As Simonyan puts it:

> Information-propaganda weapons are deployed by all those who have the opportunity. There are many examples . . . Strictly speaking this is how the success of CNN began; it became precisely such a weapon.
>
> (Simonyan 2013)

The term New Cold War is a misnomer. Proponents of dichotomous New Cold War theses downplay the wider security–media nexus in which the new East–West conflict is evolving, representing the information war as an asymmetric barrage of deceit, with RT at its forefront, to which its targets must respond with the weapons of truth. Such accounts rarely acknowledge that RT exists in a rapidly evolving, non-binary international media environment. Nor do they find space for the multi-platform, interactive news content that appeals to audiences, who, in turn, influence RT's output. NCW accounts overlook the interactive processes by which Russia and modern nations more generally project their interests and identities; official state broadcast narratives are refracted through journalistic conventions, media cultures, intellectual debates, and the popular discourses of non-state actors (Hutchings and Tolz 2015).

Limited scholarly interest in RT reflects the public image of the regime of which it is seen as an adjunct. Even as policy analysts ridicule RT's blatant distortions, they exhibit increasing concern about its apparent influences (Halliday 2014). This is evidenced in plans to launch new TV channels to rebut Russian 'lies' and advance democratic principles (Bonch-Osmolovskaya 2015). RT's tagline ('Question More!') established its aspirations to function as 'counter-hegemonic news flow' (Painter 2008), but other than passing references, it has not been analyzed as such. Some scholars touch on RT in the context of Russia's soft power (Feklyunina 2008; Burlinova 2015) and its 'hybrid warfare' in Ukraine (Wilson 2014). Strukov (2014) skilfully highlights RT's problems of national self-representation in an earlier phase. Yablokov (2015) reveals the channel's immersion in conspiracy theory culture. None, however, consider it in the context of the key paradoxes highlighted earlier, with the exception of Strukov (2016), who broaches some of them in an essay focusing primarily on the social media practices of RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan. Meanwhile, polemical NCW literature (Krickovic and Weber 2016) merely fosters the phenomenon it seeks to explain. The shifting news media landscape means that derisory depictions of RT as a Kremlin mouthpiece must be investigated, not presumed.

In attempting to correct the omissions, I recognize that, as I argued in the Introduction, globalization's accelerating pace is changing what it means to project

a nation within an international arena. In the context of mass population movement, the creation of multiple diasporas and the emergence of competing forms of allegiance (religious, cultural, ethnic), it is increasingly difficult to pin down the precise borders and identity of the nation to be projected. Those same phenomena restrict the power of political elites to determine who articulates patriotic narratives and precisely whose version of patriotism to prioritize (Strukov 2016). Extreme voices from the margins must now be accommodated, even by authoritarian regimes which face familiar pressures from groups opposed to mass migration and from an intellectual class steeped in global discourses. This group provides the media personalities responsible for shaping the processes of projection and, no matter how loyal they are to the regime they serve, narratives of nation inevitably undergo further mediation at this level. Finally, the powers of reach and the burgeoning channels of remediation that new technologies have afforded national political elites also reduce control over audience reception. Web 2.0 modes of networking and interactivity transform the transaction between 'mediator (projector)' and 'mediated (projected) to', problematizing that duality.

State actors operate in a complex global ecology in which Cold War bipolarity and the unidirectional linearity of national media projections are replaced by a multi-polar geopolitical landscape characterized by interacting transnational cultures of news and audience constituencies and by conflicting spheres of influence which disrupt journalistic value systems and challenge the very meaning of 'news'. Broadcasters like RT are more than passive vessels for transnational currents. Attitudes reflected in Simonyan's defense of RT now enter the global media ecology and, together with postures adopted by other state-led upstarts like Al Jazeera, with which RT is often aligned, and by pseudo-cosmopolitan trends such as Assange's Wikileaks movement, influence audiences wary and weary of 'mainstream media' domination of news agendas and values. Approaches to nation projection must account for a blurring of the boundaries between news, information, propaganda, and public diplomacy. In the context of their encounter with the Kremlin's media machine, governments responding to Russia's disruptive presence on the international stage now recognize that they are embroiled in a multi-directional information war – a term which, however, draws them onto their opponent's ideological territory (Halliday 2014).

From Sochi to 1917, via Ukraine

One consequence of the accelerating transnationalization and reciprocity of mediated nation projection is the proliferation of multiple feedback loops in which the anticipated responses and interpretative strategies of particular media actors are pre-empted and incorporated into the pitch made to those actors, and to others, who reciprocate in turn. RT's Assange show offers one example. Another was the controversial poisoning in London of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. Here, narratives of Russian state subterfuge dominating BBC coverage of the event were tracked, stage by stage, and re-projected by Russian state television onto their own accounts of UK state involvement in the murder, a move which served to

re-confirm British media suspicions of a vast cover-up operation (Hutchings and Miazhevich 2009).

The feedback loop phenomenon confirms that, within globally networked media spaces, national projections amount to encounters between self-renewing transnational processes that aggregate localizing (subnational) and universalizing (cosmopolitan) currents and are mutually constitutive. In exploring how this framework, familiar from the Introduction, helps us better understand RT's outputs, activities, and audiences, I proceed through four case studies and a concluding discussion which reprises some of the concerns of Chapter 1. The first three are selected strategically from a corpus of 37 RT UK television broadcasts including news, discussion shows, interviews, and current affairs and occurring between 7 and 23 February 2014, the opening and closing dates of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, as well as several later recordings relating to the subsequent Crimea annexation, when the Olympics converged with the emerging Ukraine crisis and the 'information war' reached fever pitch. As an international broadcaster, RT UK normally focuses primarily on world and UK news, but the period of the Sochi Olympics obviously provided an opportunity to pay close attention to and 'represent' Russia. Constituting moments of global significance in RT's coverage of this period, each foregrounds a particular form of recursion (a process which, to re-emphasize, in no way applies uniquely to Russia). The first relates to the wave of negative publicity that surrounded Russia's blatant flouting of LGBT rights in the lead up to the Sochi games and highlights difficulties deriving from recursive logic's need to reconcile competing patriotic and cosmopolitan imperatives. The second arose in the immediate aftermath of the annexation and concerns a dramatic statement of protest issued by a star RT presenter and reveals a commuting of meanings across multiple media platforms. The third depicts a controversial event that occurred in Sochi whilst the Games were in progress: the attack by a group of patriotic Cossacks on the punk protest band, Pussy Riot. It brings into focus the reciprocity of hybrid, domestic versions of patriotism and their complex external projections. The final, brief, case study explores this reciprocity further via a multi-platform project RT launched to commemorate the centenary of the 1917 revolution. It reveals that, in certain contexts, reciprocity leads to a full bifurcation of domestic and international perspectives whose potentially disruptive impact on the consistency of state narratives is, however, ameliorated via the adoption of an ambivalent *stiob*-like modalization of RT's claims to be speaking from the position of truth. This leads me to a final discussion of the broadcaster's relationship with the fake news and disinformation phenomena with which it is frequently associated.

My approach is shaped by the principles of discourse analysis understood as a study of the 'role played by . . . structures . . . and strategies of text in . . . the exercise of power and . . . concealment of dominance' (Van Dijk 1993: 250). I highlight narratives shaping broadcasters' coverage, the political and other inflexions they give them, and the coherence with which they are applied, drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the 'addressivity' of an utterance and on Fairclough's theory of 'interdiscursivity' (Fairclough 2003).

The media ecosystem within which I place RT is multi-platform and multi-modal. A multi-modal approach requires attention to an environment in which post-Cold War ideological and technological transformations converge, one in which news is broadcast on screen, mediated online, re-mediated through other platforms, and disrupted by political developments in which residual Cold War legacies still resonate. The analysis therefore also draws selectively on web-based news content and on a small social media corpus collected as part of an analysis of RT's #1917Live Twitter project to commemorate the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution: over 1,000 daily tweets of ten of the key 90 historical characters set up within the scope of the project. The data were examined qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

Performing human rights and the risks of recursive nationhood: RT as LGBT champion?

In reacting to the human rights controversies surrounding the Sochi Olympics, RT's self-image as a contra flow channel aiming to subvert 'mainstream media' orthodoxies came to the fore. Its mission to provide an alternative view of world events and draw attention to issues avoided by other broadcasters coincided with the need to rebut the barrage of hostile anti-Russian commentary. The response was multifaceted, taking the form of direct refutation, rebuttal by inference, and performative negation. RT's overarching metanarrative asserted that as a rapidly advancing nation threatening to disturb the hegemonic balance of power, Russia was being subjected to a hysterical propaganda campaign whipped up by hypocritical nations which it would shame by laying on Games true to the Olympic spirit (Hutchings et al. 2015).

RT was most concerned with countering the 'excessive' focus on human rights which it attacked as fabrications concocted to undermine Russia. This subnarrative was enacted on several levels. First, the campaign against Russia's human rights record met with direct refutation in the form of interviews with dignitaries pointing out that, contrary to Western 'disinformation', a dedicated space for political protest had been set aside on the outskirts of Sochi (RT Sophie & Co 7/2/14), or assertions that gay people lead fulfilled lives in Russia. This line was inserted into the broader context of the geopolitical 'information war' being waged against Russia. Second, RT repeatedly invoked invidious comparisons. An edition of its investigative documentary series, Truth Seeker, focused on the repression of gay rights in southern states of the US. In a *Worlds Apart* programme, the host, Oksana Boiko, interviewed Greg Louganis, a gay American athlete, repeatedly citing instances of US homophobia (RT Worlds Apart 23/2/2014).

The feature of the RT counter-narrative I want to focus on here was a bold, performative gesture highlighting what RT 'does' in support of LGBT rights rather than what it 'says' about them. One of the lead anchors for RT's Sochi coverage was Martyn Andrews, an openly gay British journalist working in Russia. His anchor role constituted an active rebuttal of the mainstream media account. He persistently reminded viewers of his pride in his sexuality, both verbally and

para-linguistically. Andrews gave extended, tabloid-style insights into 'Sochi fashion, tourist and lifestyle scenes' and 'Sochi celebrity gossip' delivered in an overtly camp style. He also participated in the *Cross Talk* international discussion show edition devoted to the 'New Cold War' frenzy whipped up by Western media outlets in the lead up to the Games. Andrews's interventions were impassioned, but nuanced, and highly personal:

> I do not defend the Russian government. Also, I do not agree with this law. That said . . . if I were not happy . . . in Russia, I would not live here. There is a club here in Sochi called Maiak, the gay club . . . It shows you the bubbling and thriving subculture that gay people have here . . . You have to think what Russia is, where it comes from. It is new. Places need time, they need patience; they need understanding.
>
> (RT Cross Talk, 8/2/14)

Andrews polemically asserts a 'truth', performatively authenticating it via his affirmations of his own gay self-identity. Also, he provides an on-air demonstration of Russian free speech and seeks to ameliorate Russia's shortcomings by placing them in the context of a new nation striving to modernize.

Encapsulated within Andrews's performative role is a tension pitting the broadcaster's national prerogatives against the conflicting cosmopolitan strategies deployed to realize them. He epitomizes RT's efforts to reflect a Russia aspiring to embrace progressive values and appeal to a global, 'metrosexual' community steeped in the shared tabloid discourses of consumerist lifestyles. Yet those efforts are at odds with (a) RT's pitch to niche international leftist and ethnic minority audiences sympathetic to the counter-hegemonic agenda pursued in RT's Assange show but hostile to degenerate tabloid culture; and (b) the official line on Russia's mission to lead a worldwide conservative backlash against Western liberal tolerance, based on the values of family, religion, and tradition (RT frequently interviews social conservatives like Nigel Farage when attacking Ukraine's integration into Europe).

Andrews presents himself as a cosmopolitan journalist with commitments to Canadian television as well as to RT and as a member of an international community of fellow journalists without allegiances to the Russian state. He has an active Twitter account, with many followers from the English-speaking LGBT community. During Sochi 2014, he engaged in vigorous polemic with that community and was the butt of accusations of professional prostitution (the response to his tweet defending Russia from the @Gay Games Twitter account was, as we see here, 'Keep cashing the checks, Martyn'). This highlights a dual threat to RT. The first is that of attempting to re-deploy the culture of the margins (the fact that Andrews's sensibilities are at odds with those of the official values that RT endorses raises the danger of the contamination of centre by margins). The second is that of the strategy of expedient eclecticism – adopting positions without regard for their coherence. Andrews's interventions may rebut Western attacks on Russian homophobia, but they hardly accord with the Russian state's promotion

of traditional values or serve to build stable audience constituencies. However assiduously RT strives to efface its source and purpose (an effort concretized in the replacement in 2008 of 'Russia Today' by 'RT'), its public image is, as controversies over its coverage of the Ukraine crisis and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency attest, invariably that of an agent of the Russian state.

A key context for the dual threat is the paradox that is the elastic condition of post-Soviet Russian nationhood. Notwithstanding Putin's aggressive assertions of Russia's 'patriotic interests', the point of origin, or subject of discourse, in the articulation of what the Russian nation 'is', remains opaque. Accounts of Putin's cynical exploitation of institutions such as the Orthodox Church, the creation of pseudo-populist movements like *Nashi* to legitimate Kremlin agendas amongst Russia's alienated youth, and even the deployment/manipulation of Russian-speaking East Ukrainian militant groups in the campaign against Kiev as crude, instrumentalist propaganda are simplistic. They ignore the contradictions at the heart of Russia's patriotic project – its tendency to oscillate between selectively endorsing, and repudiating, extremist elements at the political margins of official culture – downplaying the ability of some of those elements (e.g. rogue actors in the East Ukrainian insurgency) to operate semi-autonomously (Hutchings and Tolz 2015).

The hyper-inflated excesses of Putin's patriotic rhetoric and the rigid control he exerts over Russian state media point to a corollary to the contradictions outlined: the inability to create a stable consensus, a set of parameters capable of containing within it a broad spectrum of voices sharing a commitment to a single set of values, or, to invoke Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, to 'articulate' the assortment of disparate 'elements' that constitute the predicates of Russian nationhood:

> We will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice we will call discourse. The differential positions . . . we will call moments. By contrast, we will call elements any difference that is not discursively articulated.
>
> (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105)

In his related theory of populism, Laclau describes the populist principle as proceeding 'by articulating . . . dislocated demands around a new core' (2005: 76–77). That new core acquires 'a non-partitive meaning: not a part of a whole, but a part that is the whole', transforming 'its very partiality' into the name of a 'transcendent universality' (Laclau 2005: 226). It is this gesture which enables a populist ideal, or a transcendent nationhood, to be embodied in a particular reality (e.g. the BBC as the essence of all that is good about Britain'). RT must articulate as a discourse of nationhood a set of barely reconcilable elements: Russia's commitment to traditional values; its economic vitality and ease with neoliberal modernity; its place within European civilization; its embrace of the new, multipolar reality; its status as a great power. In foregrounding its mission to 'Question

More' (the channel's tagline), RT identifies as its guiding principle its function as counter-hegemonic bulwark against mainstream media endorsements of Western global policy. It posits its leading role in the counter-hegemonic struggle as the part that embodies the whole, as evidenced by the gloss on its news mission that appears on RT's website: 'RT provides an alternative perspective on major global events, and acquaints an international audience with the Russian viewpoint'. But does the conjunction 'and' denote a relationship of accretion or equivalence? If the latter, then the Russian viewpoint can be said to equate to the alternative perspective (RT provides an alternative perspective and *in doing so* embodies the Russian viewpoint). If the former, the two parts remain disparate (RT provides an alternative perspective *as well as* the Russian viewpoint).

RT's failure to resolve the ambiguity encapsulates its inability to fully articulate Russian nationhood. It is reflected in the disjunction between RT's mission and the Anglophone lexicon of the presenters tasked with voicing that mission. Andrews's camp musings on the different nations' Sochi sportswear could not be further removed from the mindset of RT's state sponsors. When he praises the fetching rainbow colours of the German athletes' costumes with tongue in cheek, he cites the symbolism of the German choice: the rainbow colours were those of the global LGBT alliance (RT Olympic Special 7/2/14). Andrews's ludic, ambivalent distance from the stance of his Russian sponsors finds its inverted correlative in the infamous bare-chested photographs of a muscular, ultra-masculine Putin widely circulated to global news sources since 2007. Presented as evidence of Russia's strong, decisive leadership, the hyperbolized ambience of the ever less plausible photoshoots highlights the role-playing dimension to performative nation-building captured in the dual sense of performance as both enactment and staging, noted in Borenstein's (2019) colourful characterization of Putin as 'a live-action simulacrum of his own self'. But the manner in which the images play up to and reinforce stereotypes of Putin's self-image rendered them vulnerable to appropriation within the homoerotic iconography which Russia vehemently rejects (*BuzzFeed* 2013) – one of the many risks of recursive nationhood.[2]

RT's counter-hegemonic moles

The transnational circulation of the Putin images and the intersecting interpretations attributed to them confirm that post-Soviet Russian identity has been forged in an age of global networks which represent fertile territory for recursion. The ways in which meanings commute to and fro across the multiple media platforms constituting them are the subject of our second case study – that of the Abby Martin scandal which unfolded at the height of the Crimea crisis.

A product of the Occupy movement's protests against global capitalism, Martin's countercultural background and leftist, conspiratorial opinions, like those of Assange, suited RT's 'Question More' mission. Although her collaboration with RT attracted criticism from her former Occupy allies, she claimed that RT provided a platform for her to promote her agenda to large audiences. The show she hosted, Breaking the Set, became an RT flagship. Notwithstanding RT's low,

overall television audiences, its brassy, polemical journalism proved popular with viewers hungry for an alternative to the bland, unquestioning patriotism of America's mainstream. The show's title captured its convention-shattering content and its calculated disregard of television-genre rules.

It was a 'breaking the set' moment which sparked the scandal that briefly reverberated across the global mediasphere following Russia's shock annexation of Crimea. Concluding a post-annexation Breaking the Set edition (3/3/2014), Martin turned dramatically to the camera and issued a carefully prepared protest against Russian aggression, declaring that 'What Russia did was wrong' and that she would 'oppose acts of imperialism wherever she saw them'. In the heightened international tension surrounding the Ukraine crisis, the protest swept across leading global media outlets, along with RT's reaction to Martin's action (a polite offer to 'educate' her by assigning her to a reporting role in Crimea) and Martin's response to that reaction (an equally polite refusal).Three days later (6/3/2014), an RT newsreader, Liz Wahl, went further, citing Martin and resigning her position at the end of the news bulletin, claiming that she could no longer work for a network that 'whitewashes Putin's actions'. RT immediately denigrated Wahl as an agent of neoconservative forces who had infiltrated the channel.

Yet, international outlets tended to skirt over Martin's framing statement emphasizing that she was able to protest only because she benefits from 'full editorial independence', a point that an RT-sympathetic blogger makes when contrasting the channel's current affairs anchors with the 'bland' neutrality of its peers (Arbolioto 2013). Moreover, it was no coincidence that Martin's protest came a day after Simonyan herself had come under sustained attack on Twitter for RT's propagandistic support for Russia's actions in Ukraine. Suspicions were aroused that the whole episode was planned by RT, with Martin's collusion, as a means of countering audience perceptions of the channel as a Kremlin mouthpiece. The BBC later pulled an interview recorded with Martin, an action portrayed by Martin on Twitter as evidence of BBC censorship: 'My entire interview w/ @BBC just got #censored. I'm sure my calling out UK media & partnership in crime w/ US during it is wholly unrelated' (https://twitter.com/abbymartin/status/457913833101996032; 20/04/2014).

As comments on the YouTube videos of the protest that went viral in Russian-speaking online communities suggested, interpretations diverged radically.[3] Much outrage was expressed at Martin's 'treachery', but some were convinced that her protest was a ploy, arguing that her dramatic gesture was too slick for it not to have involved the Breaking the Set production team. Others suspected that the protest was genuine, but that Martin was pressured to reinterpret her act in a manner favourable to RT narratives (Martin issued subsequent statements in her Twitter account emphasizing her contempt for the hypocrisy of her US critics). Still others were inclined to take the episode at face value, arguing that it led to the related Wahl incident, and that Martin's protest was part of a wider fracturing of support for Russia's Ukraine intervention at the heart of Russian state broadcasting.

The scandal rapidly faded from global news agendas. RT nonetheless continued to exploit it via a YouTube video made by an independent Australian comedy

collective called ‘Juice News’ whose mission is to subvert ‘mainstream media’ orthodoxies and imperialist aggression (its output appears on Al Jazeera’s website, confirming its appeal to the progressive, cosmopolitan Anglophone community that, along with minority ethnic groups and supporters of some far-right organizations, is among RT’s target audiences). The video focused on both Russian imperialist actions and the hypocritical responses of an equally hegemonic US. Because the annexation occurred after the Sochi Olympics, it was satirically titled Putin’s ‘Paramilitary Games’. Since it also vilified dishonest ‘mainstream media’ attacks on the Kremlin’s repression of free speech by including extracts from Abby Martin’s anti-Russian protest, RT uploaded it to its website, enabling it to link Sochi and Ukraine via a single narrative and to reinforce Abby Martin’s own refutation of the notion that RT eschews independent thought.

The Juice News video prompted none of the doubts over its authenticity surrounding Martin’s original protest because it targeted a select community of like-minded viewers. RT frequently exploits YouTube’s chronotopic specificities; YouTube videos are at once cast into the spatially indeterminate realm of the web and limited by the platform’s ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ temporality. RT works with the grain of the indeterminacy characterizing an online world in which, rather than being broadcast from a centre to a periphery, meaning develops in decentred, rhizomic mode – just as certain plants and flowers send up new growth shoots in vast underground networks of roots with no clear point of origin.[4] It monitors emergent social media trends, aligning itself with their tones and discourses. But it also uses social media tools to promote its ‘Question More’ ethos. Its dissemination via these platforms of contradictory narratives and unverifiable rumours rather than one-sided propaganda are, as Pomerantsev (2014) argues, designed to sow confusion, to work with the impulses of contemporary news audiences immersed in online gaming cultures actively to piece together inherently ambivalent facts. It forms part of the broader ‘post-truth’ environment facilitated by new technology that, as Viner (2016) suggests, has corrupted news reporting across the globe (though see Chapter 1 for my critique of ‘post-truth’ as a concept).

The commuting of indeterminate meanings across platforms is also conducive to the recursive application of one procedure to an initial function in an extendable series. The passage of the RT on-air protest scandal – from Twitter, to television, to Twitter (the intensive RT Twitter campaign launched following the Wahl on-air resignation was a mirror image of the Martin on-air protest sparked by anti-RT tweets), to YouTube, to website – echoes that of the response and counter-response, identification, counter-identification, and re-identification mechanisms by which the task of negotiating Russia’s outward projection is managed. Critiques of Russian imperialist aggression are internalized within RT via Martin’s protest, represented by Western outlets as the fracturing of the Russian state propaganda operation, then re-projected by Martin to negate the associated charges of suppression of free speech. The BBC’s cancelling of its planned interview with Martin is in turn portrayed as an indication of problems with free expression in the West which, however, celebrates Wahl’s free speech sabotage, responded to on Twitter through accusations that the episode was a conspiracy carried out by

hegemonic US neoconservatism. Lastly, the intersection of the entire free expression/neo-imperialist aggression series as applied to Russia and its opponents is framed by a YouTube satire in a meta-gesture by which RT strives to extricate itself from the recursive series and occupy a position external to it. Through a familiar, nation-building sleight of hand, it identifies Russia with a universalism corresponding to the ideals of one key constituency in its politically diverse target audience: the cosmopolitan anti-globalist community which cuts across and subverts old Cold War dualisms.

Cossacks and punks

YouTube plays a critical role in my third case study. Like the Abby Martin episode, this took the form of a sideshow to the Sochi Olympics–Crimea nexus which was briefly propelled onto the world stage, and which, like the Martin incident, brought meanings associated with the free speech domain into interplay with national identity issues and new performative forms of global activism.

Dismissed by many as a stunt, the Sochi space sanctioned for political protest came to the centre of attention thanks to the world-renowned punk protest group, Pussy Riot, two of whose members were imprisoned for their scandalous Punk Prayer, performed in 2012 at the altar in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow. In a characteristically provocative gesture, Pussy Riot chose Sochi to launch their latest, bitterly sarcastic, protest song, 'Putin will Teach you to Love the Motherland'. As they were performing to a gathering crowd, uniformed Cossacks appeared and lashed them with horse whips, brutally tearing their iconic masks from their heads. The event disintegrated, with the women bearing lash marks on their skin. Later, the regional governor denounced the Cossacks' actions. The incident was widely reported and BBC World News broadcast extracts from an interview with two Pussy Riot performers, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Mariia Alekhina (BBC WN 19/2/2014).

Less widely acknowledged was the fact that it was an RT crew which had captured the incident on film, having received prior notice that the event was to occur. RT immediately uploaded the video to its website, confounding many of its viewers. Comments on the numerous YouTube videos of the event included 'Why would they do this?'; 'I am confused!'; 'I think it is strange that RT, Russia's semi-official news TV source would actually show this. Why would they go out of their way to do that?' Twitter disseminated speculations that RT approved of the whipping: 'RT is airing this because they think it's a good thing' but also outrage and incomprehension: 'Horrific: Pussy Riot whipped, pepper sprayed, thrown to ground by Cossacks in Sochi. Why is RT airing this? No idea'. Praise for RT's 'balanced' approach was also to be found: 'RT is pro-Russian but they are not delusionally pro-Russian. That's why I like them, I can expect more real news from RT than any other MSM network'.[5] The RT website retained a still from the video in which the cossacks are seen whipping the women[6] but under the headline 'Pussy Riot in Sochi Performance Fail' (a tongue-in-cheek reference to

the #SochiFails hashtag initiated mischievously to track the problems – technical, political, economic, and sporting – besetting the Sochi Games organizers).

The undecidability characteristic of digitally circulating meanings dovetails with the logic of recursive nationhood: accusations of Russia's fear of free expression are rebutted through the creation of a public space for protest, dismissed as an empty gimmick by its detractors but realized in the shape of the Pussy Riot performance. The latter is rejected in abhorrence at the Cossack intervention but then recuperated via RT's decision to publicize the whipping. This gesture is in turn complicated both by RT's mocking choice of headline for its website account of the event and by conflicting perceptions that it either sympathizes with extreme nationalist condemnations of Pussy Riot's anti-Russian treachery, or, contrariwise, aspires to expose such condemnations as antithetical to the image of a modern Russian state.

Recursive series do not unfold chronologically. Instead, each element can be activated at any point. The lack of a dominant discourse of Russian nationhood means that no single element can serve as a 'moment', capable of integrating the other elements and stabilizing the play of recursions. This very lack explains how RT accommodates itself to the global media environment.

Recursive performativity relies on the complicity of each media actor in the role assigned to them by their opponents. Charges of literal collusion between Pussy Riot, the Cossacks, and RT voiced in certain corners of the online world are implausible. This is despite the fact that the Cossacks appeared in uniformed attire, whips on hand, at a suspiciously convenient moment that the RT film crew was at the ready, that Pussy Riot played the part of victim with consummate authenticity, and that prior performances carried out by the Voina collective in which Pussy Riot took part also seemed to have required mutual complicity (e.g. the 'hanging' of three dummies representing a Jew, a homosexual, and a *Gastarbeiter* in a Moscow supermarket, whose managers remained impassive as the provocation proceeded).[7] Nonetheless, the RT film was in a real sense a staged performance, synthesizing the two meanings of performativity – as enactment and as a staged playing of roles. Pussy Riot's own global publicity interests and distinctly media-centric mode of global activism were well served by their success in exposing the brutal forces of reaction in Putin's Russia. Nor can they have been in any more doubt that their performance would be permitted to proceed uninhibited than was the case of the Punk Prayer performed at the heart of Russia's Orthodox establishment. Indeed, both performances would have lost their value had they not been curtailed.

The Cossacks, too, played their part, and their actions attracted coverage on domestic digital platforms, with a spectrum of opinion running from the appalled liberal fringes to conservative nationalists who portrayed them as heroes representing traditional Russian values and meting out just punishment to traitors. The image of a patriotic whipping as an appropriate punishment for Pussy Riot had been circulating since the Punk Prayer incident. A group of Cossacks who appeared on Channel 1's popular current affairs talk show, Let them Talk [Pust' govoriat], in the aftermath of the Punk Prayer scandal called for them to be whipped. Maksim

Leont'ev, a staunchly pro-Putin commentator, offered a variant on the same trope, proposing that they be spanked on their backsides 'to re-establish a link with reality through tactile contact' (Hutchings and Tolz 2015: 199–202). Whether these prescriptions were intended to be taken seriously (Leont'ev's were accompanied by humorous animations depicting his recommendation) or as figures of speech is unclear. If the latter was the case, the Sochi whipping amounted to the dramatization of a popular media trope and a further demonstration of the incestuous relationship between performance as staging and performance as enactment and of the power of media tropes to continue circulating across platforms, and into actuality, in the hyper-networked global communications landscape.

The Cossack episode also points to the reciprocity of external projections of a nation's image and the struggles that characterize its internal nation-building programme. RT's ambivalent purpose in filming the incident echoes the tensions between the Kremlin's efforts to appropriate the patriotic extremism at Russia's political margins via the official endorsement of an anti-Western identity incorporating conservative values, yet also to assert its membership of the community of progressive, civilized European nations (with which it shares an attachment to global modernity). We thus observe the superimposition upon the axis of Russia's responses to globally generated meanings of a second axis incorporating the hybrid forces within Russian society. Together, the two axes apply a severe constraint on the power of loyal, centrally positioned media outlets to radiate power out to the state's peripheries and beyond.

Revolution from the margins

Indeed, notwithstanding what Hepp and Couldry call 'the continuing lure' of a mythical 'mediated centre' over which the 'power-related, hegemonic imagination' of the media continues to claim control (Hepp and Couldry 2010: 9), the radical disruption of centre–periphery structures has severely restricted the power of states to shape meaning within a political environment which is increasingly mediatized. One consequence of this phenomenon is a transformation in the nature and function of large-scale state-media collaborations – Royal Weddings, historical anniversaries, sporting events, and so on – what Dayan and Katz (1994) first dubbed 'media events'. The stabilizing, nation-building myths and rituals for which such occasions were traditionally ideal vehicles are increasingly exposed to and challenged by alternative narratives, discourses, and voices of diverse, often transnational, origin. Moreover, the creative 'event-ness' of the multi-platform act of mediation is now prone to displace that of the historical or ceremonial occasion being marked.

An illustrative example, and my last, brief case study, is RT's highly impressive multimedia project to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the 1917 revolution, of which the centrepiece was a full-scale Twitter re-enactment of the whole of the year 1917. It included over 90 Twitter accounts set up in the names of historical figures such as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and the tsar. Also featured were tweets – often humorous and expressed in self-consciously anachronistic,

contemporary Twitter jargon – by fictional characters whom ordinary users imagined participating in what amounted simultaneously to a carnivalesque dethroning of the sanctified heroes and epic temporality of the revolution, and a problematizing of the documented fact/fictional invention distinction that has become such an article of faith within the contemporary quality news industry. Meanwhile, the bold gesture of handing 'control' of the project to the #1917Live 'Crowd' of ordinary Twitter users transposed the drama of revolution from the historical events of 1917 to the mediatized celebration marking their anniversary in 2017.

Capitalizing on the cultural capital that the 1917 revolution enjoys within progressive, leftist movements across the globe, RT effectively sidelined the domestic Russian media narrative depicting the event as Russia's tragic descent into needless chaos and bloodshed. Moreover, it exploited the gradually unfolding, quotidian temporality of the #1917Live project as a means of adapting to, and ultimately neutralizing, hostile efforts to draw it into the arena of information war, and of weaving the meaning of the Bolsheviks' audacious act of revolt into the protective fabric surrounding the project itself. During the course of 2017, for example, the British Embassy took strong exception to the Twitter account set up in its name as part of the #1917Live project's efforts to re-create the key actors in the lead up to the allied intervention in Russia following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power. With the assistance of none other than Julian Assange, a former RT presenter, the project team managed at once to pour scorn on the embassy's poe-faced, legalistic indignation, and insinuate that its reaction was motivated by fears of what its archives might reveal about the history of Western interference in Russia's affairs. On 3 September 2017, Assange tweeted: 'UK government gets Twitter to suspend RT account showing what the FCO was saying in 1917 about Russian revolution'.[8]

As its discarding of the Kremlin's approved, negative line on the significance of the 1917 revolution attests, however, RT's approach hardly facilitates a grand public diplomacy strategy in which Russia's key soft power tool captures national audiences with a Russian strategic narrative. Critics correctly identify this failure, highlighting the channel's low audience ratings; it has rarely exceeded 500,000 in reports issued by the UK's main ratings agency (BARB 2017), as compared with the several million scored by broadcasters like Sky and the BBC. However, quite apart from ignoring the channel's more impressive YouTube showings and ability to work within a decentred, mediatized environment, such observations overlook its appeal to small, subnational constituencies with anti-establishment leanings networked across national boundaries: right-wing extremists attracted by Putin's conservative hostility towards liberal democracy; left-wing global activists who share Russian antipathy to the US; environmentalists; ethnic minority diaspora in the West, alienated by the xenophobia of their host communities. These constituencies cannot coalesce into a coherent whole nor do their values always coincide with those of the Russian state. But RT's appeal to them, however partial and transient, with a broad-brush narrative opposing US-style liberal democracy and promulgating 'traditional values', demonstrates the channel's capacity to

assimilate to a media landscape in which, accelerated by global connectivity, Cold War geopolitical and ideological boundaries are being reconfigured.

The fact that the narrative RT projects is internally ambivalent reflects its recognition of the modes of viewing prevailing across its younger audiences. The position that emerges from its #1917Live Twitter project is a rejection of the domestic line on the revolution, yet also a carnivalesque dethroning of the sanctity of the revolution's heroes as imagined within the mythology of seasoned global leftists. There is a convenient matching of RT's narrative ambivalence with the eclectic news tastes of its young followers who, rather than pledging loyalty to one channel, tend to use new technology to sample many outlets, and who accept that every political happening has multiple interpretations, placing on them the onus to piece together their own versions of the truth, and fostering tongue-in-cheek, *stiob*-like modalizations of all claims to certain knowledge. In this context, RT's 'Question More' ethos comes to the fore as a means of legitimating RT's apparent willingness to air (though, contrary to the claims of its critics, rarely to endorse) some of the most scandalous and controversial, not to mention absurdly conspiratorial, theories about world events. For example, in March 2018, during the Salisbury poisoning scandal, RT broadcast a far-fetched Worlds Apart edition in which the invited guest suggested to a suitably quizzical interviewer that double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned by the British intelligence services under CIA instruction rather than by Russia (Tolz et al. 2020). At the same time, it aired semi-humorous theories suggesting that the pair were merely suffering the ill effects of narcotics abuse.

Post-truth and the transformed media ecology

Such practices, of course, can readily be assimilated to the relativist, post-truth age in which, it is claimed by many, we are fated to live. Generally accorded negative meaning by commentators who, like Pomerantsev, use the term (hence its constant invocation in diatribes against RT), post-truth as a concept oozes imprecision and inconsistency, which is why, in Chapter 1, I adopted William Davies's term, 'new truth regime' as a preferable alternative. This better reflects the fact that, behind the deployment of techniques designated post-truth, invariably lie deeply held, unitary world views, as is the case with the patriotic mantras of RT's sponsors. It is no accident that these techniques coincide with the rise of absolutist religious and other fundamentalisms for which truth is all-too singular and unquestionable. The relativist posture Simonyan adopted in response to attacks on RT betrayed professional values quite different from those adhered to by Western journalists, but they are, nonetheless, values. In privileging patriotic partiality over scrupulous neutrality, RT views its mission as identical to that of its rivals, embracing a relativism reminiscent of Marxist–Leninist fundamentalism. Far from languishing at the margins, such attitudes now penetrate the global media ecology.

Respectable broadcasters like the BBC respond by vigorously defending traditional journalistic standards. Yet, as the BBC acknowledges, impartiality is an

elastic concept. This is partly because of the rise of anti-establishment populism and the recognition that impartiality is measured in relation to shared consensus (BBC Trust 2013); ignoring consensus could compromise impartiality, even when that consensus seems skewed ('the preferred BBC formulation is therefore not 'impartiality' but 'due impartiality'). The BBC's recent difficulties over its perceived under-representation of the negative consequences of mass immigration is an example. Another tension arises from the BBC World Service's parallel commitment to sustain civil society by facilitating a 'global conversation'. As it discovered when hosting a debate among ordinary Russian citizens on the eve of the Sochi Olympics, it is one thing to give them a voice in shaping broadcasting output and another for them to reflect the pluralism that is impartiality's lifeblood when exposed to polarizing rhetoric from monopoly state broadcasters (Hutchings et al. 2015). Gillespie (2013) identifies similar tensions in her analysis of an experiment in which a BBC Arabic political debate television series was co-created with citizen producers.

More recently, the BBC World Service has expanded its Russian-language broadcasts in response to Russia's 'democratic deficit' (BBC 2015). This is part of a wider Western reaction to Russia's international disinformation campaign, of which RT is the primary proponent. The BBC is thus drawn into a battle fought largely on Russia's terms, a strategy which further complicates its commitment to impartiality.

The information war belongs to a broader, transnational development. A combination of the communications revolution, the post-1991 reconfiguration of geopolitical forces, and the crisis of trust precipitated by the 2008 financial crash is changing the very meaning of news. The rise of alarmist concerns about the spread of post-Truth belongs to this context. The term's promiscuity and lack of definitional parsimony are traceable to its function as an umbrella for related meanings that should be separated out, yet in all of which RT undoubtedly has a stake. As recent events in the US demonstrate, however, RT does not enjoy a monopoly. Post-Truth is used to denote the truth of affect that appeals to grassroots populists ('what is true is what feels true'). This accounts for the influence of conspiracy theory throughout anti-establishment politics of both the left and the right – an influence that RT embraces (Yablokov 2015). It is also employed in the context of the individualized news consumption fostered by big data targeting tools: the replacement of public news agendas by personal feeds allowing people to select what appeals to them. This, in turn, is linked to the echo chamber effect in which exchanges of opinions become the sharing of similar views presented as debate (Krasodomski-Jones 2015); programmes like CrossTalk involve up to four guest commentators reinforcing one another's anti-US sentiments, with a token dissenting voice. Again, the Russian channel's strategy of targeting discrete communities at the margins of Western societies, as well as its unorthodox presentation style, accords with this development and with the principle that all news is driven by ideological interests.

Fake news represents a version of post-truth with a direct connection to the blatant disinformation of which RT regularly stands accused. The currency of fake news within grassroots anti-establishment politics emerged out of the 2008

financial crisis which has shaken the entire political process and the credibility of establishment institutions and mainstream media. Actors like the influential right-wing US outlet, Breitbart News, have also embraced this crisis, disseminating rumours and, often, deliberate falsehoods. The phenomenon reached a crescendo in the lead up to the 2016 US presidential election, when unsubstantiated stories about Hilary Clinton's alleged criminality were rife. RT was prominent in giving credence to these myths. Before then, it had followed domestic Russian outlets in reporting unfounded rumours that the Malaysian airlines passenger flight (MH17) shot down over Ukraine, almost certainly by pro-Russian separatists mistaking it for a Ukrainian fighter, had in fact been destroyed by Ukrainian forces thinking it was Putin's presidential plane.

To temper the moral panic surrounding RT, however, we should categorize types of fake news based on the intentions of the source and the purveyor, the attitude of the receiver, and the mode of dissemination (Hutchings 2017). A news story can be deliberately intended as 'fake', whether cynically to deceive or as satirical mockery of gullible audiences. Alternatively, news can be purveyed in good faith as true but interpreted as false by its recipients (many conspiracy theories fit this category). Moreover, in a post-truth world, the propensity to believe fake news may depend less on its source and more on the identity of the disseminator. Considerable credence was given in the West to far-fetched, unverifiable stories promoted in established media outlets, including the BBC, about Trump's purported sexual misdemeanours in Moscow. Had they been disseminated by the likes of RT (whose role in this instant, ironically, was to subject them to the cold light of rational analysis), it is likely that they would have been dismissed as irresponsible conspiracy theories.

Fake news stories can be double-voiced, that is, intended to mislead one audience but not another or to deceive and not deceive the same audience on different levels. As we saw in the previous chapter, Putin's blatant denials of the fact that the 'Little Green Men' who occupied Crimea in 2014 were Russian military personnel were, on the one hand, intended to hoodwink Western media audiences into believing that they were Crimean self-defence forces. On the other hand, the denials were so shameless as to indicate that Putin knew that they would not be believed. RT's playfully disreputable approach to news means that it is at ease with such double-voicedness, as we saw with Abby Martin's anti-imperial protest, her subsequent castigation by Margarita Simonyan, and her rebuttal of the castigation.

The double-voicedness is in turn linked to RT's affinities with (self)-satirical *stiob* discourse. RT's puzzling PR stunt at once exposing, endorsing, and making light of the Cossacks' 'punishment' of Pussy Riot readily submits to this account. It is critical to understand, however, that the contradictory readings generated by the stunt reflect an interplay of (a) sympathy with the Cossacks on the part of conservative Russian patriots; (b) alignment with Western horror at their behaviour; and (c) a discursive position ridiculing both reactions. Rather than occurring as the result of a linear strategy of obfuscation, or even fakery, on RT's part, the *stiob* effect represents the point of intersection of a nexus of intra-national and

transnational flows of ideological meaning within which the broadcaster enjoys only limited agency. This phenomenon is linked to that of the 'double agency' of Russia's intercultural mediators to be explored in more detail in Chapter 5. RT's need to navigate the treacherous waters separating its Anglophone operating environment from the territory of its vigilant Russian state sponsors indeed accords it some of the attributes of the double agent. And as the Abby Martin and Liz Wahl incidents demonstrate, double agents are inclined to go rogue; Wahl was, in fact, accused by RT management precisely of being a CIA double agent.

Moreover, in a global media environment characterized by ever-expanding transnational flows, obfuscation in the form of fake news becomes detached from its empirical definition and free to inhabit that environment as a rhetorical trope available for incorporation in polemics. Trump resorted to it to dismiss speculations about links between his election campaign and the Kremlin, even levelling the allegation against reputable broadcasters like CNN. It became a regular theme of his press conferences and Twitter output. A cross-national organization called 'Stop Fake' has been set up to counter Russian fake news about Ukraine. Meanwhile, on 15 March 2017, RT itself launched 'Fake Check' – an 'interactive, multi-media project' to monitor 'the fake news distributed in mass volume by the mainstream media'. This is more than an example of the cynical mimesis strategy that van Herpen (2016) associates with Soviet propaganda, which, he claims, regularly appropriated Western critiques of Soviet behaviour and applied them, in reverse, to Western policies. It exploits fake news' currency as an anchorless global meme which acquires new semiotic momentum from each stage in a perpetual doubling-back process in which it is hurled as an insult back and forth across boundaries national, cultural, and ideological. It also illustrates the breakdown in trust eroding Western political culture that did not apply during the Cold War period.

We live in a topsy-turvy world in which a democratically elected American president suspected of collusion with the Kremlin joins Russia's primary instrument of international propaganda in accusing respectable media outlets (a favoured target of the right-wing organizations behind Trump's rise to power) of peddling disinformation. RT's approach to news belongs to developments which extend well beyond Russian state borders and which have transformed the transnational media landscape.

What the analysis in this chapter confirms, then, is that familiar, Cold War inflected accounts of RT as the linear instrument of a single-minded state propaganda machine are, as Chapter 1 showed in a different context, both simplistic and misleading. They fail to reflect fissures within the Russian state apparatus and issues affecting the inner coherence of RT itself, including sharp cultural differences between its non-Russian staff and their Russian counterparts. They ignore both the significant modification and tailoring of style and substance that state narratives must undergo for transmission to the heterogeneous transnational audience constituencies which RT targets and the disorienting geopolitical reconfigurations which invalidate reductive Cold War paradigms pitting Western democracy against Russian totalitarianism. They downplay RT's ability to work

creatively to exploit the undecidable, decentred meanings that abound in a digital media ecology criss-crossed by transnational flows but also the limitations that these flows place on RT's own agency.

The central argument this chapter has advanced, however, is *not* one about the tensions and opportunities that arise when a 'tool' intended to promote national interests is 'deployed' in a transnational environment. Crystallizing in the concluding discussions of *stiob* and fake news, it rather posits that the deeply mediatized environment immersing RT places its national and transnational dimensions in a relationship of mutual dependency and of a doubling back (of national assertions upon transnational mediations, and vice versa). This process ultimately erodes the distinction between national and transnational. As a consequence, both RT's pariah status within Western public discourse and the audacious counter-discourses it embraces in response, are the structural effects of a dynamic but impersonal process over which state actors exert minimal control, yet of which, in RT's case, they sometimes demonstrate an acute, self-reflexive awareness. An illustration of RT's capacity to project that self-awareness as part of its mercurial, ever-shifting brand image is the scandal-seeking poster campaign it unleashed on the London Underground and elsewhere in 2017 and featuring humorously provocative slogans such as 'Beware! A Propaganda Bullhorn is at work here', and 'Missed a train? Lost a vote? Blame it on us!'[9]

Conclusions

The complexities of the RT strategies are born of the dual paradox characteristic of the post-1991 global communications environment with which this analysis commenced: (a) the enhanced technical capacity for media actors to reach the margins of that environment and the concomitant loss of control over, and likelihood for contaminations of, the meanings they project; (b) the greater potential for political influence that arises in a post-ideological age, yet the increased need to occlude that influence.

All four cases highlighted the performative aspect of Russian nationhood in its recursive dimension: the repeated calling into being of Russia through the enactment of its disposition towards what it simultaneously constructs as other to itself. Each case study also pointed up the second meaning of performance: that of the staging and contingent adoption of, or 'playing up to', external images of Russia. The third corollary of performativity is its dialogic nature; each stage in a recursive series is driven by the desire to deflect or abjure the anticipated response of others. This undermines the distinction between soft power (a strategy pursued by nation states in the legitimate pursuit of global influence) and information war (naked propaganda ploys adopted by nations prepared to dissemble to the point of falsehood). The instrumental expedience at the heart of the notion of information war (the adoption of whatever positions are required to gain advantage at a specific point) fails to incorporate the addressee's role. No matter how expedient Russia's information war strategy, its target audience will form a unified image of

it – an image that Russia must in turn anticipate in a circulatory effect that defies the principle of information war in its purest, linear form.

The reciprocal logic entails a constant realignment of the respective positions of margins and centre typical of the digital age. What is now in the mainstream of globalized Western, cosmopolitan culture (the broad acceptance of LGBT rights) remains at the margins of official Russian nationhood, until it is propelled to the centre of RT's Sochi coverage via Martyn Andrews's anchor status. Conversely, Abby Martin's role as RT figurehead reflects her earlier position at the anti-globalist fringes of mainstream US political culture, until she reverts to type and is temporarily re-expelled to the margins (whether actually or as a ploy depends on the extent to which one adopts a Kremlin-like conspiratorial interpretation of Martin's protest). Representation is an act of repeated deferral: an imagined essence can be embodied only in something that is endlessly displaced as distinct from itself (Derrida 1998). Equally, what is perceived by an audience community as an embodiment of the essence of a specific nation may deviate from that nation's official imagery. Many viewers of the attack on Pussy Riot portrayed the Cossacks as the epitome of Putin's authoritarian, retrograde values. RT's coverage, however, displaced the Cossacks to (even beyond) the subnational fringes of official culture. The constant interplay of margin and centre, intended or unintended, dovetails with the infinite series of recursions.

The interplay refuses to respect national boundaries, necessarily binding the national and subnational, the transnational and the global, nation-building and nation projection in complex ways that do not submit to the intentions of individual actors and which mean that neither broadcasters nor those who study them can neatly separate domestic and foreign audiences. This process is facilitated by a digital media environment whose meanings commute across platforms, from centre to margins and subnational to transnational, with an unprecedented intensity that torpedoes the very notion of an outward projection of an inwardly coherent, self-identical nationhood. Nation-building and nation projection in this context are inflected with the paradoxical (and, in Russia's case, woefully unfulfilled) desire to curtail the very generative impulse that drives them, to articulate the discrete elements constituting a series into moments within a unified discourse of nation or stable narrative organized around an embodiment of what that nation is. Emerging during an era of expanding global connectivity, the non-articulated feedback loops of post-Soviet nationhood recall other recently foregrounded features of official culture under Putin, including the notorious 'Polite People' meme explored in Chapter 1.

The cases we have explored here demonstrate how, by living up to and exceeding the other's stereotype of oneself, one might create a loophole from which to evade that stereotype. They typify communicative practices conceived, like post-Soviet Russia, in the digitally mediated age. ISIS's notorious execution videos are another example. By addressing Russia's fraught, three-way relationship with its European other and its close neighbour, Ukraine, Chapter 3 will demonstrate how such loopholes are fundamental to Russian national self-expression as it plays

out in media events conceived on a transnational rather than, like #1917Live, a national scale. In Chapter 3, too, the role of staged performance as reflected in this book's deliberately ambiguous title comes into sharper focus.

Notes

1 A year earlier, Nye (1990) formulated his theory of 'soft power' to account for the new, 'post-ideological' mode of advancing national interests.
2 For a similar analysis of the Putin photos, see Foxall 2013.
3 See for example www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=ZolXrjGIBJs&app=desktop (12.02.2017). The video has currently received 2,225,363 views, 15,279 like/dislike responses, and 2,424 comments.
4 For detailed analyses of YouTube's transformative role in the new communications landscape, see Hilderbrand 2007; Seib and Janbek 2013; Jenkins et al. 2013.
5 See for example www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiw0fw_sJOk and www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2CQrf9QYsI (12.02.2017).
6 www.rt.com/news/pussy-riot-sochi-cossacks-748/ (12.02.2017).
7 For further analysis of the Pussy Riot scandal and its links to previous *Voina* protests, see Hutchings and Tolz 2015: 194–220.
8 See https://twitter.com/JulianAssange/status/904251492122681348.
9 For more details on the controversy generated by these posters, see www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/dec/14/rt-london-transport-ads-tfl-transport-for-london.

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3 A little girl dreams of Kiev

Projection as abjection, the invalid nation, and Russia's 2017 Eurovision (non)-performance

Introduction: a European psychodrama

Despite the unwelcome intervention of the Crimea crisis, RT's coverage of the Sochi 2014 Olympics, which occupied centre stage in Chapter 2, revealed a certain aptitude on the part of this state-aligned international broadcaster to exploit the digitally networked news environment in the interests of Russian cultural diplomacy. By 2017, memories of Sochi 2014 were already indelibly stained by a mass doping scandal which had erased any soft power benefits accrued from the efforts of RT and other Russian cultural diplomats. Russia, and RT itself, were rapidly acquiring the unenviable status of international pariahs. It was this that rendered RT's humorous and sophisticated #1917Live project surprising and, seemingly anomalous, in the context of the broadcaster's wider output. An illustration of the more crudely propagandistic approach to cultural diplomacy which the embattled Putin had come to prefer came with a rather different media event also dating to 2017: the saga generated by Russia's entry for that year's Eurovision Song Contest, long seen as a key tool of the cultural diplomat's trade, particularly for post-Soviet nations (Jordan 2014; Ismayilov 2012).

Eurovision 2016 had seen the jury rally around Ukrainian entrant Jamala's controversial lament about Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tartars after World War 2, ensuring that the 2017 competition would be held in Kiev. Russia had, not unjustifiably, complained that this expression of European support for Ukraine after Russia's shock annexation of Crimea in 2014 broke Eurovision rules on political impartiality. For months, it appeared that Russia was preparing to boycott the 2017 competition in protest (Balforth FFERL: 2017). But, three days before the March 13 deadline, Channel 1, the country's official Eurovision broadcaster, announced in a fanfare of publicity that it had selected Iuliia Samoilova and her song, 'Burning Flame', as its 2017 entry (Channel 1 2017a), and that it would be broadcasting the final live on 13 May. Within days, however, a large shadow appeared above Samoilova's head in the form of a threat by the Ukrainian security services to refuse her a visa on account of her having performed illegally in Crimea in 2015.

The growing scandal's final component was the fact that Samoilova was a wheelchair user (she performed at the Closing Ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter

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Paralympics, just as Russia's Little Green Men were politely seizing the Crimean Peninsula). Speculation about the reasons for Channel 1's selection centred first on Russia's purported calculation that the Kiev audience would refrain from booing a severely disabled singer – a fate that may well have awaited any able-bodied Russian entrant (Brenner 2017a). But when the visa refusal issue came to light, suspicions shifted to the notion that Russia had set a trap, knowing full well that Samoilova had performed in Crimea, tempting Ukraine to ban her from entering the country in order then to encourage other European nations to pin upon it the charges of discrimination against the disabled and the breaching of Eurovision rules (Brenner 2017b; Shekhovtsov 2017). Ukraine obediently fell into the trap, issuing Samoilova with a three-year ban on entering the country, enabling Russia to implement its plan.

Because Ukraine had technically broken Eurovision rules, for a brief period the European Broadcasters' Union which sponsors the event considered moving the 2017 competition elsewhere and banning Ukraine from future participation (Chazan 2017). These threats failed to materialize, though Ukraine was fined after the competition. Following Russia's rejection of the offer to either provide a new entrant or have Samoilova perform by video-link, the competition passed off successfully, without Russia. Needless to say, Channel 1 did not broadcast the event but, like other Russian media outlets, including international broadcaster, RT, focused instead on various security failures and other hitches tarnishing the Kiev hosts and on Russia's commitment to enter Samoilova in the 2018 contest (RT 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). The scandal concluded with a fitting finale closing the circle which began with Samoilova's ill-fated 2015 trip to Crimea: a defiant performance of 'Burning Flame' in Sevastopol', Crimea.

The optic through which Russia appears as a cynical manipulator of events generates a credible interpretation of its actions. This view assumes a single, self-identical actor enacting a premeditated plan with a fixed purpose and targeting defined external antagonists. What, however, if we change the lens and view the Samoilova scandal as a deeply recursive act of identity building involving multiple actors, not always in coordination, and a fragmented nation insecure in its self-image? This is the approach I will take in this chapter. Eurovision is a classic 'media event' – the term coined by Dayan and Katz (1994) to describe occasions when media and state collaborate to celebrate rituals of national (or in this case, continental) unity. The fact that Eurovision is the collaborative responsibility of a group of European national television broadcasters aiming to assert a common vision of the continent they collectively represent is captured in the name: Eurovision. However, I adopt the modified notion of media events offered by Fiske (1996: 8), who reinterprets them not as collaborative showcases but as 'sites of maximum discursive turbulence' that expose political and social tensions and power differentials. The turbulence surrounding Eurovision 2017 centred on Russia's provocative projection of itself on an international stage characterized by the growing New Cold War divisions that gained in intensity following the Ukraine crisis of 2014. This self-projection – which ultimately turned into

a non-projection – reflects the inner turbulence resulting from the clash of discourses shaping official Kremlin rhetoric.

The nation that Kremlin patriotism invokes is no stable entity but rather, as Brubaker (1996: 10) argues of all nations, a category of 'social praxis'. It is, as Brubaker contends elsewhere (2004: 10), an example of 'groupness' as 'an event rather than a phenomenon or a mere "construction"'. For the key element in my interpretative scheme I turn to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to illuminate the specific variant of nation as event represented by Russia's Eurovision debacle in terms of the act of self-expulsion that Kristeva associates with abjection, and to centre my analysis on Russia's recursive relationship with Ukraine – the perpetual and liminal self-as-other that both marks and erases Russia's border with Europe, its external Other. However, if Ukraine designates Russia's border with its self-as-other (the word 'Ukraine' means 'borderlands' – it is both 'in' Russia and outside it), then Russia signifies Europe's own self-as-other: its vast frontier with Asia.

The act of abjection in Eurovision 2017 is a two-sided drama in which Europe drives Russia from its borders, just as Russia enacts the expulsion of Ukraine. But the relationship is asymmetrical. Whilst Europe has historically hesitated to fully acknowledge that it incorporates Russia, Russia, on the contrary, has difficulty in accepting that Ukraine is *not* part of its territory. In Borenstein's (2019: 212–213) highly perceptive reading:

> The underlying psychodrama of Russian-Ukrainian relations rests on a frequent assertion that Ukraine is not at all Other, but instead simply a variation on 'Russia' that has no legitimate reason for existence . . . What makes the actions of Russia-aligned interests in Ukraine legible, tolerable, and even desirable . . . is a disbelief in Ukraine as a concept: . . . it has no place in the popular imagination or Symbolic geography . . . Ukraine is not simply a failed or failing state; it is a state whose very existence is something of a historical joke. In the propaganda campaign against Ukraine, then, the Russian media have an unusually complex task: maintaining the sense of Ukraine as 'self' . . . while demonizing the opposition as 'other'.

It is via Russian television coverage of the Samoilova scandal as a media event – in both its visual and its verbal dimensions – that I approach the recursive knot described by Borenstein. His psychoanalytically informed application of the logic of fantasy to Russian conspiratorial narratives inflects my own analysis throughout, albeit in a form in which Lacan's mutual modulations of Self and Other are re-read through the Kristevan prism of abjection in order to address a self-for-the self and self-for-the-other distinction related to the slightly different place that Europe occupies in the Russian imaginary than the United States (the main counterpoint to Russia in Borenstein's account); moreover, for Europe's own imaginary, Russia occupies a similarly ambivalent peripheral space to that of Ukraine for Russia, and this is factored into my interpretation of the 1917 Eurovision scandal. My primary sources are news bulletins and talk shows broadcast by Russia's

Channel 1 – a member of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the channel selected to run Russia's Eurovision selection process.

Performing Russia (and Ukraine) on the Eurovision stage

There is a growing body of scholarship that treats the Eurovision Song Contest as a space for the enactment of changing popular representations of Europe, and of the competing European identities of individual contributing nations. Topics analyzed include the post-imperial angst underlying the ironic distance adopted by the BBC's legendary Terry Wogan in his gently mocking Eurovision commentary (Coleman 2008); the celebration of Europe's tolerance and capacity for self-objectification embodied in the culture of camp and kitsch typified by German and Austrian entries (Baker 2016; Miazhevich 2013; Allatson 2007); and the enthusiastic ethno-folk literalism of the New EU accession nations (Björnberg 2007).

As other scholars have noted (Cassiday 2014; Heller 2007; Johnson 2014), the recent history of the competition serves as an illustration of shifting post-Soviet Russian attitudes to Europe – from the faux-lesbian duo, TaTu, through the winning entry of Dima Bilan, Russia's answer to Euro-camp, to the ambiguously comic 'Grandmothers of Buranovo', complete with ethnic costumes and Udmurt-language lyrics, and the retrograde femininity of Iuliia Gagarina's 2015 entry. Eurovision has functioned also as a stage on which Ukraine has performed its efforts to free itself from the Russian hegemony of its Soviet past and assert its new European identity, with the endorsement of Eurovision audiences (Pavlyshin 2006). In 2007, the cross-dressing Verka Serduchka achieved second place for Ukraine with her song 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai', a title bearing an unmistakable phonetic similarity to 'Russia Goodbye', though the fact that the song elicited outrage from conservative sections of Ukraine's own audience reconfirms the inextricable links between external and internal enactments of national selfhood (Miazhevich 2012).

The geopolitics of Russia's increasingly strained relationship with Europe has dominated Eurovision in recent years. In 2004, Ukraine won Eurovision with Ruslana's ethno-pop anthem, 'Wild Dance'; the singer went on to participate in the 2013 Euro-Maidan protests. In 2014, Russia's angelic Tolmacheva twins were booed by sections of the audience in Copenhagen, incensed by the annexation of Crimea and Russia's intolerance of sexual minorities (Wyatt 2014). That year's contest was won by the gender-bending 'bearded lady' of Austria, who became an object of contempt for Russian nationalists in thrall to the cult of traditional values. In popular nationalist discourse, she embodied 'Gayropa' – the term invented to convey Western Europe's notional descent into sexual deviation and amoral decadence (Adams 2014). In 2015, Russia entered the quintessentially feminine Iuliia Gagarina, complete with girlish giggles, revealing white dress, and effusive tears of joy and sadness. Although she came a creditable third, her image was cultivated by Russian state television coverage as a platform for expressions of patriotic indignation at European 'Russophobia' (Channel 1 2015).

The 2016 competition placed Russia's intervention in Ukraine quite literally centre stage, as the jury awarded the winning prize to Jamala's anti-Stalinist

protest song, despite its overtly political orientation and despite the public vote favouring Russia's entry, Sergei Lazarev. With the 2017 contest moving to Kiev, it seemed logical, then, that the Ukraine–Russia rivalry would develop into a full-scale international scandal, entering the ongoing information war between Russia and the West. And so it did, though not quite as expected.

Celebrating diversity, Russian-style

When Channel 1 (2017a) announced that, after an internal selection process, it had chosen its 2017 Eurovision entry, it surprised Eurovision pundits who had been predicting a Russian boycott because of the outcome of the 2016 competition. Still more striking was the bold choice of entrant – Iuliia Samoilova – a diminutive wheelchair-user from early childhood. Eurovision organizers had selected as their slogan for 2017 'Celebrating Diversity' and Samoilova fitted the bill perfectly, allowing Russia to sideline the diversity represented by sexual minorities (the slogan was a slight on Russia's homophobic traditional values agenda) and instead promote a version of the principle with which it was comfortable; Samoilova had performed at the 2015 Winter Paralympics in Sochi, where Russia enthusiastically championed disability rights. Unsurprisingly, recognition of the potential of the disabled to match the achievements of the able-bodied, and of the triumph of inner human qualities over physical hardship, suffused Channel 1's reporting of Samoilova's selection. However, until she became an international news story, the language used was that of a populist sentimentality centring on individual exceptionalism rather than the formal, enlightenment rhetoric of universal human rights:

> Nothing – neither age nor physical limitations – can get in the way if people want to achieve something for themselves, their family, for everyone. This is what one remarkable girl has done. Now Channel 1 can reveal the big secret of who will go to Kiev, to Eurovision in 2017 . . . the incredible Iuliia Samoilova who has proved throughout her life and her career that there are no barriers for her.
>
> (2017b)

> The story of this exceptional young woman . . . about how she overcame herself, about the long and complicated path to her dream, about the love which gives wings to the belief that there is no such thing as the impossible . . . Frail and strong, charming, and profound . . . she always receives standing applause, not because she is in a wheelchair, but because in each performance it is as if she is singing of her destiny.
>
> (2017c)

Based on biographical profiles and extended interviews with Samoilova, Channel 1 (2017c, 2017d, 2017e) crafted a life narrative for the singer, telling of her tragic and incurable illness; her loving parents; her fight to be allowed to lead a normal life; her determination to overcome barriers and those who said 'no' to her;

her early musical talent and childhood performances; her first meeting with her future husband and his readiness to see her as an attractive woman; her dreams of stardom and of representing her country at Eurovision. The resonance of her life trajectory within the national consciousness echoes that of the legendary Soviet World War 2 pilot, Aleksei Mares'ev, who, like Britain's Douglas Bader, lost both legs when his plane crashed but fought naysaying medical and military bureaucrats to earn the right to defend his country again – a story immortalized in Boris Polevoi's novella, 'Tale of a Real Man' and its 1948 film adaptation.

There are two closely related contradictions to note about the media construction of this myth. First, despite emphasizing Samoilova's request at an early age not to be pitied, the whole thrust of the presentation of the narrative is intended to generate sympathy for her predicament, and to see her bravery as heroic and exceptional:

> With her unique voice and improbable fate . . . Iuliia will be supported by the whole of Russia. It is she who is going to the Kiev contest . . . to win over the European musical Olympics and tell her very personal story – about how she didn't give in after the mistakes of her doctors, how determinedly she followed her dream, finding strength in love and inspiring people . . . there is no doubt she will melt the hearts of millions of viewers.
>
> (Channel 1 2017f)

Second, the obsessive manner in the channel treated Samoilova's victory over her disability and insistence on her desire to be treated as normal served precisely the opposite end. The two contradictions were epitomized in the popular show, 'Let them Speak' in which the host, Andrei Malakhov, addressed Samoilova throughout in the familiar second-person singular form (*Ty*), first pushing her wheelchair from behind, then looking down on her with a fixed, condescending smile. Extensive amateur footage of Iuliia's childhood, and her tearful face when confronted by her first music teacher, added to the sentimentalizing effect. In his questions to her, Malakhov referred obsessively to her handicap, even whilst praising her for overcoming it. The visual editing colludes with him, alternating rapidly between close-ups and mid-distance shots as the camera pans repeatedly back to reveal Samoilova's tiny, childlike torso and wheelchair.

Malakhov's approach bordered on the prurient. As he interviewed Samoilova's husband, Sergei, he dwelt on their internet dating site encounter when Samoilova disguised her disability. Attracted by her portrait, Sergei arranged to meet her and, pressing the point, Malakhov enquired how he reacted to her handicap when he saw that she was in a wheelchair. At this point, the camera zoomed in to a long close-up of Samoilova's heavily made-up and, indeed, appealing face, as she pouted awkwardly. Despite Sergei's assurances that the wheelchair left his love for Iuliia undiminished, the juxtapositions, implicit and explicit, re-emphasized Samoilova's disability in a combination which rendered her an object of both overt desire and subliminal disgust.

Russia has struggled to internalize equal rights discourse (Preclik 2012). The official term to describe the disabled – people of 'limited abilities' (*ogranichennykh sposobnostei*) – sounds contrived to the Russian ear. In vernacular usage,

the older word 'invalid' (*invalid*) is the preferred term, and when converting into reported speech quotes by the EBU expressed in measured, politically correct language about the Samoilova situation, Channel 1 journalist, Konstantin Paniushkin inadvertently revealed Russian attitudes to disability in their unvarnished form:

> It was not just a matter of the reputational excesses of a country that had taken up arms against a young singer permanently restricted to an invalid chair. It was a question of whether, if Ukraine doesn't let Iuliia Samoilova in, next time Ukraine itself won't be allowed into Eurovision.
>
> (2017o)

More significantly, the presentation of Samoilova's biography as a fairy tale about a little girl's victory over adversity and accomplishment of her impossible dream constructs her achievement as the exceptional feat of an unusually courageous hero. The tale's heroic dimension underscores its function as a dream-like ideal to which the average disabled person can only aspire. It also stimulates allegorical readings that lend the tale to integration into political contexts. This aspect of the Samoilova myth is signalled in the characteristically banal, clichéd lyrics of the song chosen for her Eurovision entry. The flame of the title is both that of the powerful fire of love capable of transcending all obstacles and the unbreakable human spirit of hope and endeavour:

> Day and night and all I do is dreaming
> Pacing sick and staring at the ceiling . . .
>
> All I wanna do is find the feeling
> I wanna feel the power
> I wanna go to places I don't know . . .
>
> If there's a light then we have to keep dreaming
> If there's a heart then we must keep believing inside . . .
>
> After the night there's a light
> And in the darkest time a flame is burning
> It shines so bright . . .

As it ends, the song's ambiguous referent subsumes Samoilova's aspiration to overcome the limits imposed by her disability within her desire to realize her dream of sexual love:

> Deep in the night love is alight
> And in the dark a flame is burning.
>
> An open window for love
> And let the wind blow into the hearts
> And we're never apart and you'll know

After the night there is a light
And in the darkest time a flame is burning (4Lyrics 2017).

'A Flame is Burning' transforms Samoilova's story into a tripartite allegory. First, it functions as a metatextual figure for her fairy tale-like pathway to the 2017 Eurovision final. In a secondary coding, supported by the universalizing use of English, it converts this pathway into an enactment of a general human triumph over physical adversity. Third, it draws a sign of equivalence between Samoilova's own triumph over disability and her success in realizing her desire for sexual love. A song that, if sung by an able-bodied singer, would be interpreted unequivocally as a love song becomes one about overcoming physical handicap which suddenly doubles as one about the legitimate erotic desire of someone to whom societal prejudice often denies this universal human right.

As noted earlier, Ukraine's Eurovision entries have a history of encouraging coded, anti-Russian readings: from Serdiuchka's 'Lasha Tumbai' to Jamala's '1944'. The fact that 'Flame is Burning' is likewise coded to generate allegorical readings has prompted some to see in it a fourth hidden message: that of a rebuff to Ukraine's provocative declarations of independence from Russia: a cancelling of 'Russia Goodbye' and an assertion that the two nations are ultimately 'never apart', to quote the song:

> The wheelchair-bound Julia Samoylova was set to 'invade' Ukraine with her song 'Flame Is Burning'. But since she and her country are banned, everyone will just have to ask Chechnya how their Russian flame is burning.
>
> (Outcast F.C. 2017)

This interpretation (one of diversity as sameness) seems less far-fetched when we examine Russian media responses to the proposed banning of Samoilova.

Russian diversity spurned

The Ukrainian threat not to grant Samoilova an entry visa generated a predictable wave of indignation across official Russian state media channels. Initially, the blame was laid at the feet of the Ukrainian security services, who initiated the ban:

> The SBU [Ukrainian Security Service] is currently checking a certain claim [*nekoe zaiavlenie*] that Samoilova performed two years ago in Crimea at the Festival of Sport and Kindness. This fact could prevent her from crossing the border and getting to Kiev.
>
> (Channel 1 2017g)

The spotlight subsequently broadened to include 'Ukrainian bureaucrats' (*ukrainskie chinovniki*), more generally (2017h), and then the extreme right, Russophobic nationalist forces under whose thrall the political class had fallen:

> The nationalists have begun writing that Iuliia has no place in Kiev because she performed in Crimea . . . her personal details have appeared on the scandalous website, 'Peacemaker', where information about everyone considered an enemy or a traitor in Kiev is uploaded.
>
> (2017i)

As tensions grew, some commentators began to vent their contempt first on Ukrainian online communities, then on the nation as a whole:

> Today information on the singer's social media accounts has been thoroughly trashed by Ukrainian bloggers who've accused her of calling for Russian troops to be dispatched to Ukraine.
>
> (2017j)

> The proud Ukrainians have decided not to allow Iuliia Samoilova to participate in Eurovision.
>
> (2017k)

The slippage (which was not consistently in one direction) reflects Ukraine's split status in the Russian political imagination: as both Self and Other. When the former dominates, the target must be limited to a small segment of the population (bureaucrats; politicians; the security forces). When the latter resurfaces, it becomes legitimate to demonize an entire people.

If they were to be taken by the outside world as anything other than the petulance of a spurned outcast, Russia's attacks on Ukraine required legitimization. The discourses selected to achieve this effect also shifted in response to changing contexts. Prevalent in the early period after Ukraine's announcement that it was considering a ban was the adoption of the discourse of European values: that of equal rights and tolerance. Ukraine's actions purportedly breached the spirit of Eurovision and the Celebrate Diversity slogan. A statement from the EBU expressing dismay at Ukraine's decision was replayed in successive news bulletins: 'We are deeply disappointed by this decision, because we consider that it contradicts the spirit of inclusivity (*inkliusivnosti*) which lies at the base of its values' (2017l) and adapted by the spokesperson of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mariia Zakharova, whose comments on the Eurovision conflict were repeatedly cited: 'The West faces a choice: to continue to give support to the Ukrainian radicals, or finally to adhere to basic European values' (2017m).

Wilfully ignoring, or downplaying, Samoilova's 'illegal' 2015 performance in Crimea, and constructing a false debate between those who favoured equal rights for the disabled and those who do not, Russian political and media figures attributed the ban to a profoundly 'un-European' prejudice against the disabled. As the ban was implemented, the rhetoric intensified, and Ukraine was portrayed as a barbaric country whose lack of basic decency disqualified it not only from Eurovision but also from membership in the European family of nations.

Recourse to the awkward-sounding linguistic import '*inkliusivnost*' (inclusivity) – a principle that Ukraine had flouted – confirmed that state-endorsed media actors were adopting rhetorical tools that they found uncomfortable. Again, the liberal quotes from EBU warnings addressed to Ukraine offered legitimizing material: 'If your administration confirms the ban, it will have negative consequences for Ukraine's international reputation as a modern, democratic European state' (RT 2017d). A foretaste of the incendiary turn this line took in talk-show coverage of the Samoilova crisis is provided by Andrei Malakhov who, referring to a quote, supposedly from Ukraine's previous Minister of Culture, describing Samoilova as 'a monster sent from Russia' (*urodstvo so storony Rossii*), asks his audience pointedly 'Can we really use the term "monster" in relation to Iuliia?', in response to which a suitably ashamed Ukrainian guest apologized to Samoilova for the 'moral monsters who have seized power in Ukraine' (Channel 1, Pust' govoriat 2017).

A separate mode of reasoning – one more organic to Russian state television – was that of artistic purism. Interminable sequences of Russian popular music celebrities, including Alla Pugacheva and Dima Bilan, were lined up to praise Samoilova's musical talent and on-stage charisma and remind audiences that Eurovision was a song contest not a political theatre, and that Samoilova's earlier performance in Ukraine should not be under scrutiny. In a familiar variant on this argument, several prominent celebrities deviated from the line and argued that, because Samoilova's fragile talent was bound to be abused, she should never have been selected, and that Russia should have boycotted the competition from the start. Foremost amongst these figures was long-time Kremlin supporter, Iozif Kobzon (RT 2017e). This deviation rendered Russia's Eurovision choice seem even more reasonable, reinforcing both Samoilova's and Russia's status as 'wronged parties'.

Notions of artistic purity are somewhat foreign to Western Eurovision *aficionados*, for whom the competition's carefully nurtured culture of excess is more important than its musical merits. Nonetheless, there are significant nuances in approaches to this culture: the dry, sarcastic wit and performative weariness of Terry Wogan's legendary BBC Eurovision commentaries; the gentle, camp jibes of his successor, Graham Norton; the more bombastic, if still double-voiced, exuberance of their continental counterparts; the musical literalism favoured by EU accession countries with far shorter Eurovision lineages.

Russia is more adept at utilizing the bureaucratic language of international law. The artistic purity approach dovetailed neatly with accusations that in threatening to exclude Samoilova, Ukraine was breaking a Eurovision competition rule on political impartiality. Channel 1 further pointed out that Kiev did not own Eurovision but was hosting the competition on behalf of the EBU, and that the rule requiring the host to guarantee the participation and safety of all finalists was also being flouted:

> Channel 1 acted in full accordance with the rules of Eurovision and chose a contestant who was registered by the EBU. According to Eurovision rules, the host nation is obliged to guarantee all participants an entry visa for the

> duration of the competition. Thus, the ban on Iuliia Samoilova entering the territory of Ukraine is in breach of the rules of the competition.
>
> (2017n)

There were financial corollaries: that in endorsing the exclusion of Channel 1's chosen participant, the EBU was jeopardizing one of its biggest audiences, and that having paid its subscription to the organization, Channel 1 was entitled to expect its wishes to be respected. With an international audience more likely to be exposed to anti-Russian counter-narratives, RT, however, did briefly report comments from the Ukrainian contestant Evgenii Galich that Samoilova was being ingeniously used by the Russian secret services as a soldier in its information war (RT 2017f).

As the likelihood of a Ukrainian ban came to light, and after Channel 1 had rejected EBU proposals that it should select a new participant, or enable Samoilova to participate by video-link, efforts to identify Ukrainian breaches of international Eurovision regulation were accompanied by examples that indicated inconsistencies in Ukraine's application of its own rules. Presenters, celebrities, politicians, and others adduced multiple examples of Russian singers and artists who had, like Samoilova, given concerts in Crimea, having entered the territory via Russia, but had subsequently been granted visas to perform in Ukraine. Several commentators referred to the Bulgarian 2017 finalist, who had also performed in Crimea prior to his Eurovision selection but had been granted a visa for the Kiev event (RT 2017g). Ukraine rebuffed this claim by pointing out that the singer in question had been underage when he visited Crimea.

Ukraine's purported failure even to adhere to its own principles served as a helpful bridge to a level of state media discourse that subsisted beneath that of the formal language of objections to Ukrainian breaches of rules and of the European system of values. This was the vernacular level of, on the one hand, the vicious ridiculing of Ukrainian behaviour, and on the other, the condescending sympathy evinced for the innocent and vulnerable Samoilova's 'tragic and undeserved' fate.

Broadly speaking (though with crossover), the two levels corresponded to (a) the official discourse of news bulletins and the pronouncements of politicians and other officials, and (b) the informal or semi-formal, populist language and attitudes aired on talk shows. It is, as I shall show, in the latter that the acting out of a tortured and unstable national identity dynamic is exposed. However, the language adopted for the benefit of external publics by politicians and representatives of Russia's official position on the Eurovision scandal cannot be bracketed off as a dilution of, or distraction from, the 'true' prejudices and psychoses played out for domestic audiences.

Nor do I endorse the account of Russian behaviour favoured by suspicious Western commentators – that of an opportunistic eclecticism or willingness instrumentally to deploy whichever idiom, genre, or rule system happens to suit the Kremlin's political purposes in any given context. A proleptical glance ahead beyond the scandal at the heart of this chapter is instructive here. Three years later, Europe witnessed an equally scandalous, but very differently valorized,

controversy around the Tadzhik singer Russia chose for the Eurovision 2021 song contest. Selected, as usual, in a process overseen by Channel 1, the woman, Manizha, was viciously attacked by nationalists for her liberal views on gender, misogyny, and sexuality and her non-Russian ethnicity. Her provocatively titled song, ‘Russian Woman’ (in which, to the dismay of her detractors, the ethnocentric term ‘russkaiia’ was reinvested with the liberal universalism of the civic term ‘rossiiskaia’) was examined by the Russian state’s Investigative Committee, which eventually cleared it of ‘Russophobia’ (Richards 2021). Channel 1, which operates at one stage removed from the Kremlin and which itself came under fire from rival forces within the Russian state, intuited that Russian cultural diplomacy was better served by a strong performance from a singer whose own sensibility aligned with Eurovision’s liberal principles than by parroting the Kremlin’s conservative values agenda. The notion of a single-minded, homogeneous Russian ‘state’ opportunistically picking Eurovision ‘strategies’ from year to year looks decidedly flimsy in light of this experience.

Rather, the adoption of various ‘alien’ international discourses is an external symptom (in the psychoanalytical sense) of an uncontrolled, quite un-strategic inner clash of identity positions. By temporarily speaking in terms associated with international legalese or the European value system, state officials and media commentators don, and then cast off, the mask or persona of an ‘other’ they at once aspire to coincide with and are repulsed by. This donning of masks also places Ukraine (an aspirant European nation) in the position usually reserved for Russia: that of the renegade intruder whose lack of civilized values bars it from membership of the European community. Here, the double meaning of ‘repulsed’ as designating both a physical rebuff from outside and a feeling of inner disgust towards the source of that rebuff is all too appropriate. To explore the inner dynamic in more detail, let us turn to level (b).

From pitiful invalid to in-valid nation

The key to the dynamic is Iuliia Samoilova herself. For the more that Samoilova’s Eurovision dream edged inexorably towards disappointment and failure, the more powerfully her biographical myth began to assert itself, mutating in response to the changing facts of the scandal and acquiring new vitality in the process. Once it became likely that she would be banned from participating, the narrative became one of an innocent little invalid girl whose naive dream is thwarted by the forces of evil but then finally realized thanks to the intervention of her kindly elders – a tale whose structural correspondence to Vladimir Propp’s influential theory of the folk tale (Propp 1971) is uncanny. What is also significant is that commentators in a plethora of talk shows devoted to the scandal started pointedly to emphasize Samoilova’s diminutive appearance and vulnerable status. The phrase ‘little girl’ (*malen’kaia devochka*) rose to prominence in the scandal’s Russian lexicon, most notably in the rhetorical question posed first by Samoilova herself on learning of the ban and which became a recurring motif in Russian media discourse about her fate: ‘What threat can a tiny little girl like me pose to anyone?’ (‘*Komy ugrozhaet*

takaia malen'kaia devochka?'). In its meme-like iteration by outraged talk-show hosts and guests, the supplementary phrase 'in a wheelchair' ('*v koliaske*') was added to the 'little girl' mantra to reinforce Samoilova's vulnerability and further stir feelings of sympathy towards her in their audiences.

The narrativization of Samoilova's predicament acquired the element of sentimental pity that we identify with classic melodrama (Brooks 1995), and which Russian television audiences have fully internalized as a result of the popularity on their television screens of Latin American soap operas in the 1990s. One of the keys to sentimental pity is that it places the audience/readership in a position of superior knowledge over the object of that pity; the audience knows only too well that the victim is doomed and can foresee her fate, even as she naively and pathetically fails to perceive it herself, continuing to trust the villains about to thwart her. As the clouds gathered above Samoilova's head in the form of the increasing likelihood that the Ukrainian ban on her participation would materialize – a threat whose 'cruelly unjustified' and 'cynical' nature Channel 1 viewers are made fully aware of – she continues to assert her disbelief that anyone could see her as a threat and to plan enthusiastically for the realization of her life-long dream. It is no accident that as Channel 1 talk-show hosts ratchet up the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and the sense of foreboding about Samoilova's fate, footage of Samoilova's sincere and impassioned performance of 'Burning Flame' is projected in a continuous loop on a giant screen behind the hosts' heads, in full view of the studio audiences. In this way, anger and indignation at the actions of the Ukrainian villains unfold in coordination with rising pity and sympathy for their innocent victim, a sympathy which reaches its climax at the point the ban is confirmed. In the final peripeteia, her attentive 'elders' commit to entering her for the 2018 Eurovision contest, a promise she receives with appropriately effusive gratitude, and the audience's tears of unbearable pity are transformed into tears of uncontrollable, if patronizing, joy.

The close relationship between the eliciting of sentimental pity for Samoilova and the vituperative belittling of her enemies repays closer attention. As the scandal gathered pace and controversy, both phenomena grew in intensity. In the six talk shows devoted to Eurovision during the period of the dispute, the belittlement began to apply not just to logical inconsistencies in the Ukrainian authorities' stance towards Samoilova but, as hosts and audiences became ever more incensed, to Ukrainian people in general. In a gesture that would have been ruled offensively racist in most other national broadcasting contexts, the host of the 'Time will Tell' (Vremia pokazhet) show pointed twice at the small handful of Ukrainian guests he had invited to present the Kiev viewpoint, turned to the audience, and shouted contemptuously, 'Look at these people. Look at what they are like. This is what we are dealing with'. He addressed them throughout in scornfully familiar tones, using the second-person singular form and parroting back to them their replies to his aggressively sarcastic questions before dismissing them with barely disguised disdain.

The inclusion of the same Ukrainian guests in each of the talk shows reinforces their token status (very little pretense is made at creating a sense of balance and

impartiality; the hosts are openly hostile to Kiev and 'loyal' to Samoilova). Also, it confirms the ritualistic nature of their contribution to the 'debate' which is noisily shouted down and drowned out by their 'patriotic' Russian assailants, each of whom is handed a microphone in a deliberate effort to ensure that the expressions of Ukrainian resentment are lost in a barrage of noisy rebuttals. What they are subjected to, and on repeated occasions, is nothing short of a ritual humiliation; on two occasions (both occurring on the 'Time will Tell' programme), security guards are compelled to remove from the studio angrily gesticulating Russian-speaking Donbass Ukrainians who threaten physical violence against their pro-Kiev compatriots. One of these, in a curious but significant reversal, is currently a Russian citizen in the process of applying for a Ukrainian passport. In the second fracas, the female host notes that Donbass emotions are understandably running high and warns the Ukrainian guest that had his assailant not been ejected, he would have received a sound beating, with the implication that this outcome would have been thoroughly justified.

There is, however, a curious equivalence between the sentimentalized, condescending pity shown towards Samoilova and the belittling humiliation of the pitiful Ukrainian talk-show guests. Both are addressed in the second-person singular form. Both are treated in an over-familiar fashion. Samoilova is, quite literally, 'talked down to', albeit with the affection and sympathy appropriate for her 'poor little girl' persona. The token Ukrainians are figuratively talked down with the scorn and ridicule more often applied to a jealous ex-spouse, an interfering in-law, a spiteful sibling or, more appropriately, an uncouth neighbour. Here, the superior position of knowledge characteristic of melodrama applies both to the pitiful victim and the pitifully ignorant villains. They are each pathetic (one in the original sense of the word, the other in its modern version). It may seem perverse to draw parallels between what, on the face of it, are opposing poles in the official Russian value system. But, paradoxically, the stronger the anti-Ukrainian sentiments, the more that they come to light. This is most evident when certain talk-show hosts and guests appear to lose control completely of their emotions and their language. On several occasions, the rules of political correctness which they obediently, if uncomfortably, obey in relation to Samoilova (a 'person of limited abilities') are abandoned as they shower the Ukrainians with offensive epithets that would normally be deemed beyond the pale. Terms whose semantics designate them as physically or mentally inferior recur repeatedly. They are called *debily* (morons) and *idioty* (idiots).

More significantly, there is a recurrent tendency to re-project onto Ukraine variants the term *invalid* (invalid). When their politically correct guard slips, even representatives of Russia's liberal tendency, such as Leonid Gozman, revert to this term to describe Samoilova. Sometimes, this gesture takes a more controlled, figurative form: 'The true invalids are not our little Iuliia, but the Ukrainians themselves'. At other times, the offensive insult is bandied around without the restraining force of metaphor to legitimize it. Ukraine is even, tellingly, referred to as a 'country of invalids' (*strana invalidov*). In neither case is there any awareness on the part of those hurling the insults that they are revealing their true prejudices about the disabled; at these points the polite European persona they have

hitherto been inhabiting (one which forces them to speak of 'people of limited potential') slips. But the mask does not fall to the ground entirely. It is when it is at its angriest and most abusive that the mob of outraged Russian patriots rounds on its neighbours and portrays them as a barbaric, uncivilized people unworthy of belonging to the community of European nations. At these moments, the mob occupies a position that is both inside and outside of Europe.

At these moments, Ukraine loses its status as nation altogether. One of the most insulting epithets with which Ukraine is tagged during the noisy 'debates' about Eurovision 2017 was 'stinking rural hamlet' (*voniuchii khutor*). It is, in other words, not a separate nation at all, but rather a godforsaken, dilapidated periphery of Russia itself. Or, to put it differently, it is a nation lacking in validity – an *in-valid* nation. Here, then, the etymology of the English word 'invalid' serves us well. The portrayal of Ukraine as a 'country that is not one' (Borenstein 2019: 204), that lacks validity, gathers pace. In an edition of 'Time will Tell' (the show devoted no less than three editions to the Eurovision controversy), and in direct response to an angry intervention from one of the Ukrainian guests, the male host called up on screen a graphic depicting a map of Ukraine. The map divides the country into a number of segments, each of which is labelled as a gift from one or other Russian/Soviet leader: 'A gift from Khrushchev'; 'A gift from Stalin'; 'A gift from the Russian Tsars', and so on.

Elsewhere, however, contrary to being depicted as Russia's stinking periphery, Ukraine becomes the passive, despicable puppet of Russia's scheming, amoral Western adversary. It is through Ukraine's oscillation between these two opposing poles that Channel 1 mirrors the psychodrama of Russia's relationship with Europe, for which it serves in turn, as the stinking, underdeveloped periphery and the evil, scheming nemesis. In Channel 1's six Eurovision talk shows we witness the hall of mirrors effect that characterizes recursive identity: Ukraine ejects Russia from Eurovision (i.e. Europe); Channel 1 ejects Ukraine/Europe from Russia; Russia appropriates Ukraine for itself and in doing so ejects itself from Europe. In this sense, we can reconcile the two lenses through which the 2017 Eurovision scandal might be viewed. The notion of Russia as a cynical schemer fully aware that Samoilova had performed in Crimea and would be subjected first to Ukraine's naïve ban, then to Russian accusations of prejudice and barbarism, and finally to an outpouring of European 'Russophobia', is fully commensurate with that of a deeply recursive and fluid process of identity enactment. Russia performs Ukraine's expulsion from its own national body and its own from that of Europe as one and the same event. Indeed, the convergence reveals itself in the repeated ejection from the 'Time will Tell' studio of Donbass residents – Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine who align with Russia – threatening violence against their pro-Kiev Russian-speaking enemies and in the mutual accusations of treachery.

Projection as abjection

To better understand the paradoxes of the process, we might turn to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Offering an account of identity formation inflected

by, but not reducible to, psychoanalytical models, Kristeva centres her theory on the disgust that bodily excretions, gaping wounds, the taste of certain foods and, above all, the smell of human corpses evoke in us. The automatic gagging response such experiences produce indicates the body's impulse to reject what it finds alien. But the underlying aetiology of disgust is attributable to the fact that the phenomena evoking it are of the body yet separate from it.

> These body fluids, this defilement, this shit, are what life withstands . . . on the part of death. I am at the border of my condition as a living being . . . The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything . . . the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 3)

Whilst she writes in uncompromising personal mode, for Kristeva, the principle of abjection clearly operates, too, at the level of culture. Indeed, she recognizes, to engage with issues of identity (whether national, community, group, personal, or other) is *unavoidably* to deal with affinities in the relationships between self and other, internal and external, individual and collective, with the liminal, and with acts of transgression:

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness . . . that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour . . . By abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture to remove it from the threatening world of animals.
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 4; 12)

Importantly, rather than a secondary process, abjection is the act by which the subject, collective or individual, is constituted:

> I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself; it is thus that they see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.
>
> (3)

Equally crucially, the 'constitutive other' common to identity theories in multiple disciplinary domains (political, anthropological, sociological, or cultural) dwells not beyond but *within* the borders of the subject:

> I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me' . . . an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be.
>
> (10)

It is no accident that the English verb ‘express’ in the term ‘self-expression’ is used to also convey the forced pressing out of an inner liquid when referring to the manufacture of fruit juices, or, more appropriately, to the process that allows an infant to be fed by a mother’s milk without suckling at her breast. Kristeva’s theory can help us explicate the associations linking several features we have identified in our analysis so far: the visceral disgust expressed towards Ukrainians by sections of Russian society and cultural perceptions of their treacherous ambiguity: they speak Russian but align themselves with alien forces (the ‘illegal’ Kiev ‘junta’; US hegemons; European decadence); they are idiotic and barbaric yet belong liminally and ambiguously within the Russian homeland. Moreover, in the act of expressing disgust and contempt towards their despicable brothers, Russians constitute themselves also as a national community.

Also consistent with the Eurovision episode is Kristeva’s account of the links between abjection and the sacred, according to which ‘a whole facet of the sacred, true lining of the sacrificial, compulsive, and paranoid side of religions’ has to do with invoking ‘rituals of defilement’ in order to ‘ward off the danger’ that the emergent community might yet slide back into an earlier state in which its boundaries lack distinction (66). Paradoxically, the same aggressive certainties spouted by the hosts of ‘Time will Tell’ betray a deep-seated fear of the loss of a community identity that has yet to acquire enduring authenticity.

But what of the connection between Ukraine’s in-valid status and Samoilova’s invalidity? Here, the full meaning of Kristeva’s insistence on the visceral presence of otherness within the body of the self attains its full force. For the disgust she describes in her account of abjection really is a disgust for something that belongs to the body of the self but must be excreted from it. Phobia and disgust are merely what Kristeva calls the ‘opposite correlative’ of narcissistic self-regard (43). Thus, the disturbing liminality of the abject underlies the mirror-like close-up of the desirable, yet repulsive, features of Samoilova, the pitifully invalid, or in-valid, self:

> The more or less beautiful image in which I behold . . . myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed . . . Abjection is therefore a kind of narcissistic crisis.
>
> (13)

This paradoxical synthesis of disgust and desire is what Andrei Malakhov experiences as he attempts to elicit from Samoilova’s husband the prurient verbal details of the couple’s sexual relationship. It is echoed visually in the movement of the camera from close-ups of Samoilova’s pouting, heavily made-up face to mid-distance shots of her tiny, twisted frame hunched in what appears to be an oversized wheelchair. Malakhov’s disgust emerging from beneath a superficial, semi-sexualized affection is precisely the sundering of narcissistic self-desire that Kristeva associates with abjection. It is only when the abjected self (as other) is projected onto the Ukrainian other (as self) – when the invalid is rendered in-valid – that illicit desire is replaced by sheer, visceral disgust.

Significantly, in the shots of Samoilova performing her Eurovision song on stage, she wears a long, flowing dress pulled down to mask the lower part of her body and much of the wheelchair, simulating the stance of a woman standing and reinforcing the sense that her handicap does not prevent her from performing on a par with her able-bodied rivals. At the same time, the image does little to disguise her diminutive frame (the latter is reinforced by the vast expanse of surrounding stage that the long-shot angle incorporates within its field of vision). This legitimates the audience's feelings of pity for Samoilova prompted by her difference from her rival competitors. In Samoilova's planned performance on the Eurovision stage we witness the formal projection of the Russian self for the European other. But, of course, Samoilova did not perform at Eurovision and, even in the most generous reading of Channel 1's intentions, it must at least have been aware of this possibility when entering her as a finalist. In the scandalizing, trickster-like Russian behaviour that led to Samoilova's non-performance in Kiev, we see a projection of the unvarnished self-for-the-self. This, in turn, coincides with an abjection of the Ukrainian other which mirrors Europe's abjection of its peripheral Eastern self.

The notion of an unvarnished self-for-the-self is an unattainable ideal. The self is always ultimately the self-for-an-other. The second, provocative performance that Samoilova gives in Crimea – a kind of anti-Eurovision – is a deliberate repetition of the original provocation that led to her ban from Kiev. In this act, Russia intentionally conforms to the negative behaviour model which prompted its ejection from Eurovision proper and which confirms European views of it as an unruly, disgustingly stinky periphery that must be repulsed. (It is in this context that the US, or even the West broadly conceived, proves a less precise counterpoint to Russia than is the case for Borenstein's necessarily more expansive exploration of Russian conspiracy narratives which, however, is entirely appropriately attuned to paranoid Russian fears of American involvement in the 2013 Euromaidan revolt.)

In the manufactured, noisy chaos of Channel 1's Eurovision talk shows the temporal logic of scandal is inverted. Rather than a pre-existent, patriotic Russian community, expelling the disgusting otherness inside it, that community is constituted *by the very act of repulsion*. For abjection, and the accompanying repression, coincides with the constitution of the 'social dimension of man' (Kristeva 1982: 68). In Kristeva's schema, full sociality is preceded by an immersion in an *imaginary* phase, in which the emergent community suddenly recognizes itself in the other, and as other, and is thus able to constitute itself as whole and integral. For Fredric Jameson, the imaginary, 'whose logic is essentially visual' marks 'a fundamental gap between the subject and its own self or *imago* which can never be bridged' (Jameson 1977: 353). It is characterized by obsessive narcissism and by a transitional phase in which, struggling to come to terms with the realm of alterity, the emergent subject misattributes its own actions to others. Jameson refers to this as the 'indifferentiation of subject and object', when 'the child who hits says he has been hit, the child who sees another child fall begins to cry . . . slave [is] identified with despot, actor with spectator, victim with seducer' (354). This is the logic of the 2017 Eurovision scandal, when (West) European

disgust *towards* Russia is projected back *onto* it via the pathetic, repulsive invalid that is the alien, Ukrainian self-as-other.

Conclusion: recursion, feedbacks, and loopholes

Like all scandals, the Samoilova affair eventually ran its course. The singer's (illicit) second performance in Crimea took place without incident, as did the Eurovision final itself. Russian outrage subsided once it became clear that Ukraine was holding the line on Samoilova's participation, as did the frenetic talk-show denigrations of its actions. They gave way to formulaic, mechanical sniping from the sidelines as every minor security lapse, incident of vandalism, or transport failure in the host city was highlighted in brief but sardonic reports on all of Russia's main news broadcasts. The unscheduled, but fleeting, appearance on the Eurovision stage of a prankster exposing his bare backside attracted a flurry of derision, as did the belated imposition on Ukraine of a small fine imposed by the EBU. The final itself was covered only cursorily, and in broadly neutral terms, the day after it took place.

What, to conclude, are the implications of this brief, ephemeral scandal for post-Soviet Russia's efforts to project itself externally? First, the 2017 Eurovision saga served to highlight the inextricable ties between (a) the agonized post-Soviet identity dynamic intertwining Russia, Europe, and the former USSR (in particular, Ukraine – the contested borderland both separating Russia from and conjoining it to, Europe), and (b) the role of a transnationally interconnected media in, quite literally, providing the stage on which this dynamic is re-enacted over and over. This is one sense in which Eurovision confirms the revisionist account of media events as 'sites of maximum turbulence' rather than as celebratory collaborations between state and media.

The analysis in this chapter reconfirmed the fallacy of ideas of soft power or cultural diplomacy as either the projection outwards of a fully formed, unified inner national self, or of a carefully packaged, coherent self-for-the-other. The Russian case demonstrated that domestic and international representations of national selfhood are both shifting and unstable and entirely codependent. At the very least, we must concede that the strategic narrative depicting a cynical and self-identical Russian state engaged in a provocative and elaborate chess match in which it thinks two steps ahead of its rivals, setting traps and engineering deliberate deceptions at every point, is, as the subsequent Eurovision 2021 controversy was also to indicate, not the only game in town. Not only is this narrative placed into question by the mutuality and instability of Russian self-identity and the external image the nation projects to others, it is also undermined by the internal multiplicity of conflicting views of what Russia is: those (liberals) for whom the Putin state is the antithesis of the European values of tolerance and democracy with which they identify; state patriots like Kobzon who, in carefully exceeding official antagonism towards Ukraine, serve to underscore the reasonableness of that position; Donbass New Russians who effectively advocate an expansion of Russia inside Ukraine's borders; extreme Russian nationalists such as Limonov who conflate a Ukraine perceived in its entirety as an illegitimate entity with

Russia; 'treacherous' Russian-speaking Ukrainians who portray Russia as the illegal aggressor. Notwithstanding the crude imbalance in representation, the inaudible cacophony of angry voices in the 'Time will Tell' shows is a figure for the clashing polyphony from which the Kremlin perspective on Ukraine is forged.

The codependence of internal and external projections of Russian nationhood in television coverage of the Samoilova scandal rests on a distinction between (a) news reports driven by official statements generated from within Russian government circles; and (b) talk-show discussions featuring populist and other non-state views of the reasons for Samoilova's predicament, amplified, rebutted, and renewed in the still more cacophonous online domain.[1] In the former, we appear to witness the mischievous donning of masks that forms the basis of accusations of cynical game-playing against Russia. In rebuffing attacks on its behaviour, it adopts the personae, first of the starchily neutral Western diplomat, deferential to the rules of interstate relations, in order to justify its own accusations of Ukraine's flouting of EBU principles, then of the progressive, politically correct, liberal activist, outraged by the breach of the Eurovision spirit of diversity and tolerance implicit in the banning of Samoilova from the competition, and finally of official Russian patriotism – the world's bulwark against hypocritical Western hegemons. This does indeed, on the level of interstate diplomacy, represent a form of opportunistic eclecticism. However, the noisy talk-show encounters expose an undisguised, barely controlled, visceral contempt for Ukraine, Europe, and the decadent permissiveness of Eurovision itself. Here, the external mask of wounded political correctness is shattered by the inner cauldron of emotions driving populist versions of patriotism. The timeline of the Eurovision scandal plays out on in a sequence of outrageous Channel 1 talk shows, each of which traces the displacement of Samoilova, the vulnerable 'person of limited abilities', by Ukraine, a despicable non-nation of 'invalids and morons'. This recurring trajectory confirms that the relationship between 'core' and 'mask' is, in fact not one of inside (domestic) and outside (international), truth and falsity but rather that of a Moebius strip in which inner twists into outer and back, rendering the distinction between deceptive surface and authentic core redundant, or rather, in-valid.

The figure of the Moebius strip captures, too, the perpetual interplay of response and counter-response, internal expression, and external projection – or rather, the single process of 'self-ex-pression' – underpinning the account of Russian nationhood throughout this book. Facilitated by the multi-platform, pluri-genre media event that is Eurovision, Russia acts out on the symbolic terrain of its periphery (its distant, yet all-too-proximate, frontier) the roles of self-as-other (Europe) and other-as-self (Ukraine). In his account of Russian conspiratorial narratives, Borenstein astutely identifies a country afflicted by a

> disease of the Imaginary, a dogged insistence not only on the integrity of the Imaginary constructs at stake . . . but on the argument that the creators and consumers of these narratives have themselves bypassed the deceptions of the Imaginary and truly reached the Symbolic.
>
> (2019: 20)

The Samoilova scandal reveals Russia at a less precisely defined stage in the Lacanian theory of identity, suspended between the imaginary order – the 'Mirror' stage – and that of the symbolic, the big Other constituted by language and culture – the Name of the Father – in which the self is constituted at the expense of the eternal loss of its ties to the maternal body. In its manipulation of the Samoilova crisis, it explores an identity formed not just via the image of an evil twin reflected back incessantly to it in the mirror, but through the eyes of multiple others, both those positively disposed to it (Russia in its rule-bound, cultured European mode) and those of its antagonists (Russia as the uncouth, inadequate peasant persona it projects onto Ukraine). It is this contradiction that Borenstein captures in his aptly humorous image of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine as 'a proxy war between Russia and itself' (227).

On the level of the transnational information war between Russia and its European Other, recursion manifests itself as a self-renewing series of which the current segment consists in Russia's multidimensional polemic with Eurovision's 'Celebrate Diversity' slogan adopted in defiance of the Kremlin's traditional values agenda. However, Samoilova's own defiant re-performance of 'Burning Flame' returns us to the infinite identity loop of the Moebius strip. Her appearance in Sevastopol on the one hand re-invokes her earlier misdemeanour. On the other hand, it provides the loophole via which Russia provocatively acts up to the negative European image of it as a despicable imposter to escape the fixity implied by such a caricature and thereby continue the looping process. In turning to Crimean dust, the little invalid girl's dreams of Kiev return to the ancient soil from which Russia's tortured relationship with Europe was born, watering it with the (crocodile) tears of sentimental melodrama.

Note

1 For analysis of how the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest played out in the online Russophone community and of the problematic implications of this process for the 'information war' narrative about Russia's relations with Ukraine, see Kazakov and Hutchings (2019).

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4 Film narrative and cultural diplomacy

The (not so) peculiar cases of *Ovsianki* and *Belyi Tigr*

Introduction: Cold War revisits the Oscars

How, then, might a state like Russia, effectively outlawed from much of the Western world as the result of a bitter diplomatic conflict over its actions in Ukraine, yet keen to change perceptions of itself, approach the multiple international nation branding opportunities afforded to cinema? The difficulties this task pose can be extrapolated from the analysis of Russia's fraught relationship with Eurovision in Chapter 3. However, they are exacerbated by the fact that the context here is not television (which allows states like Russia to exercise significant influence in the choice of entrant and coverage of the competition) but film – a profoundly globalized, multi-agent industry over which even neo-authoritarian states struggle to maintain full control. Although they do not provide the focus for the substantive part of this chapter, the Academy Awards of 2015, which took place just over a year after Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014, offer a vivid insight into how Russia is engaging, or failing to engage, with this dilemma and help to frame my detailed reading of two films which precede it. Indeed, the 2015 Oscar for Best Foreign Language film spawned a minor international controversy which reveals much about the issues I will address. The winner, Pawlikowski's *Ida*, was widely acclaimed, but the highly regarded runner-up, Andrei Zviagintsev's film *Leviathan* (*Leviafan* 2014), became embroiled in the post-Ukraine 2014 crisis. Because, amongst other perceived infringements against the Russian state, *Leviathan* offered a coruscating critique of the Putin regime's abuse of power, the fact that it won a pre-Oscars Golden Globe Award attracted the ire of Russia's Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii, who declared that the film's characters 'are not Russians' and that Zviagintsev made it for 'fame, red carpets and statuettes'. As the Oscars ceremony approached, Putin's press spokesman, Dmitrii Peskov, grudgingly endorsed the film, but it was later subjected to vilification by the Kremlin-backed conservative establishment.[1]

Leviathan had been submitted for a distribution certificate at the point when new legislation banning vulgar language (featured abundantly in the film) was introduced. Attacks on it belonged to a broader campaign of prohibition against artworks that contradicted 'patriotic' values, with the Church playing a leading role.[2] Yet, oddly, *Leviathan*'s bad language and searing indictment of corruption,

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including that of the Church, did not prevent it from being Russia's official submission for the Academy Awards and, in that capacity, an intended cultural diplomacy tool. Moreover, Medinskii's own ministry even supplied 40% of its funding. The puzzle deepened when Zviagintsev, whilst acknowledging *Leviathan*'s Russian grounding, insisted that it was inspired by an American story and on its universalist intentions. Significantly, his assertion is supported by the twin historical precursors that the film's narrative and title each invoke: the biblical story of Job and Hobbes's seventeenth-century treatise on the state (Rozgov 2014).

Although I do not examine Zviagintsev's film in detail, the links between *Leviathan*'s dual intertexts, the controversy surrounding its Oscar nomination and the conundrums this presented for the Kremlin provide me with a point of departure and the connective tissue which conjoins this chapter to the others: that of the radical break in Russia's relationship with the West precipitated by the Ukraine crisis of 2014, and its meaning for projections of Russian nationhood on the international stage. I therefore return to these links at the end of the chapter. They also, however, point to the central conceptual concern addressed in my analysis: how the fraught relationship between the different sensibilities and cultural backgrounds of implied domestic and international audiences plays out in the textual features of films which are deliberately assigned or spontaneously acquire cultural diplomatic meanings, particularly in neo-authoritarian contexts. In the substantive part of my analysis, and in order to identify the key principles driving that conceptual concern without distorting them with the specifics of the international crisis of 2014, I deliberately step temporarily back in time to two films which predate both the *Leviathan* scandal and the annexation of Crimea: Aleksei Fedorchenko's *Bunting Birds* (*Ovsianki* 2011) and Karen Shakhnazarov's *White Tiger* (*Belyi tigr* 2013). I also extend my scope beyond Russia to consider what the transformation of cinema's role as a linear instrument of cultural diplomacy by the globalized dynamics of film production and reception, and by the transnational underpinnings of nationhood itself, mean for any film assigned a cultural diplomatic function. My case study selection is deliberately contrastive, consisting of one film that ostensibly cleaves close to official state narratives and aesthetic formats yet retains a level of creative independence and another which seems far less bound by them without overtly breaching them. The films are thus situated on either side of a notional boundary designating the limits of direct state influence on cultural production. This enables me to orient my discussion of the transformation of cinema's cultural diplomatic function specifically to Russian nation projection under the neo-authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin.

My primary concern is not with identifying empirical evidence for this transformation. Nor is it to provide an in-depth analysis of how state structures, neo-authoritarian or other, deploy film for cultural diplomacy uses or of the success of their chosen champions with specific audiences. Rather it is to explore: (i) how these processes are refracted through the representational strategies and symbolic architecture of cinematic texts; (ii) why, despite their transnational inflections, the texts remain rooted in national imaginaries and thus an enduringly appealing tool for cultural diplomats; (iii) what it is that enables the meanings within which

such imaginaries are inscribed to escape the primary intentions of states, including those that exercise tight control over the funding and political orientation of film-making; and (iv) how states, especially but not exclusively neo-authoritarian ones, nonetheless strive to re-appropriate those meanings. The chapter thus relies primarily on critical text analysis, not on assessing empirical data relating to production and reception contexts, to which, however, I have selective recourse when appropriate. The narrative form and visual rhetoric of two Russian films, I suggest, can, when read against this background, illuminate the complexities of cultural diplomacy as practised by nation states. These features have ramifications for our understanding of how cinema negotiates the competing national identity paradigms imposed on it by audience constituencies within and beyond the borders of the state it is mandated to promote and of what this means for Russia in particular.

In challenging the transitive models of cultural diplomacy underpinning state soft power strategies, I rely on the critical framework which guides the analysis throughout this book. In addition to capturing the self-renewing interplay between local, national, and transnational that drives nation-building, this framework also accommodates the various levels of mediation – institutional, textual, and cultural – that further reshape the meanings states aspire to convey through their soft power output. Homi Bhabha's insistence on the ties between nation and narration, meanwhile, establishes films as a privileged source of access to the refractions that these meanings undergo.

The two contrasting Russian case studies were selected for comparison owing to their position on either side of the periphery of state-endorsed artistic production (one, an unconventional war blockbuster, was Russia's official Oscar submission; the other, a niche, art-house film, was only drawn into the cultural diplomacy ambit retrospectively). My argument, and the key to answering the questions I pose earlier, is that the recursive logic films adopt when accorded cultural diplomatic functions generates dual claims to universalizing and concretizing meaning, corresponding to the films' need to face towards both domestic and international audiences. However, persistent reversals in the relationship between these claims highlight the interplay of national self-image and external perception that characterizes nation projection. Traceable through the ambivalent modality and fractured narration such films display, the interplay reflects the involvement of multiple actors and institutions within and across states. The clarity with which it emerges through Russia's authoritarian practices sets in relief its function within the top-down, transitive models of cultural diplomacy dominating elsewhere. In showing how non-state actors sometimes unknowingly become cultural diplomats, and how cultural diplomacy can work both for and against state interests, I re-invoke the anthropological agenda of Ang et al. (2015), repurposing it for text analysis.

Let us first briefly revisit the Academy Awards. When making submissions to the competition's first stage,[3] the Russian state inevitably enters the arena of national cinema as soft power or cultural diplomacy.[4] But in projecting cultural influence beyond its boundaries, it cannot, altogether ignore the international

values liable to shape the jury's aesthetic judgements, however uncomfortably they sit with its (geo)political priorities. There is a distinction between state-controlled television's tightly managed propagandistic mission and the more varied output of state-sponsored cinema which, until recently, has remained at arm's length from the state. Cinema's imperative to secure box-office success and international acclaim distinguishes it from state-supported TV, which, despite relying partly on private funding, enjoys a near monopoly on domestic audiences. Because of the global prestige that the Academy Awards bring, they represent a primary arena for projecting national images and thus for cultural diplomacy in the broad sense in which I understand it. Meanwhile, although Putin loyalist Nikita Mikhalkov remains President of Russia's Filmmakers' Union and an influential member of its Oscar selection commission, he competes for the attention of audiences – domestic and global – with independent-minded directors who, as previous winners of top international festivals, also serve on the commission.

The exigencies of a globalized cinema market, the manner in which film heeds market logic, and the absence of state-aligned television's audience monopolies mean that even in the context of recent licence fee legislation, the medium remains less bound by Kremlin control (it is difficult, for example, to imagine *Leviathan* being commissioned by Russian Channel 1). As the Oscars indicate, cinema is transnational in its production, distribution, and consumption patterns.[5] It is bound up with the economy of the festival scene (Czach 2004; de Valk 2007; Wong 2011) and of the various awards ceremonies (English 2005). In Bourdieu's terms, it is an autonomous field with its own habitus, lacking direct, instrumental ties to the political centre.[6]

Russian films are a permanent fixture at film festivals, and Russia submits entries annually to the Academy Awards; Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* (*Utomlennye solntsem* 1994), a portrayal of Stalinism's corrosive effects on human relationships, won the Best Foreign-Language Oscar in 1995, during a markedly different period in post-Soviet Russian history. But other entries reveal no clear ideological strategy. In the last ten years, all in the Putin period, the entry list has encompassed, alongside patriotic fare like Fedor Bondarchuk's *Ninth Regiment* (*9-aia Rota* 2005), and *Stalingrad (Stalingrad 2012)*, and Mikhalkov's excoriatingly bad sequel to his earlier Oscar success, *Burnt by the Sun 2* (*Utomlennye solntsem 2* 2010), films that flout Kremlin views of Russian nationhood. Apart from *Leviathan*, they include Karen Shakhnazarov's off-centre take on World War 2 mythology, *The White Tiger* (*Belyi tigr* 2011), Anna Melikian's transposition of a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale to a class-divided contemporary Moscow, *The Little Mermaid* (*Rusalka* 2007), the critique of provincial Russia's encounter with global capitalism that is Andrei Kravchuk's *The Italian* (*Italianets* 2004), Zviagintsev's next film, *Loveless* (*Neliubov'* 2017), a bleak portrayal of institutional indifference to personal tragedy, and Andrei Konchalovsky's riveting yet nuanced account of the tragic 1962 mass shooting of striking Soviet workers in Novocherkassk, a film whose nomination for a domestic 'White Elephant' award

incurred the wrath of the director because of the award body's support for the dissident films of political activist, Aleksei Naval'nyi (Blaney 2021).

The inconsistency and political complexity reflected in the list of Russian nominations are indicative of the general workings of cultural diplomacy and the global cinema industry. A detailed analysis of Ministry of Culture funding policies exceeds my remit. However, explanations for the apparent inconsistency might range from cock-up (the Ministry of Culture inadvertently overlooks the politics of projects it funds), through the desire for international prestige,[7] to conspiracy (the selective promotion of oppositional artworks dupes naïve audiences into thinking Russia is freer than it actually is, illustrating what Nye calls 'meta-soft power' – 'a nation's . . . introspective ability to criticise itself that contributes to its international attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility' (Ang et al. 2015: 367)). As Strukov (2016b: 47) shows in his perceptive reading of what he terms *Leviathan*'s 'manipulative smart power' value, the Russian government

> capitalised on the available opportunity of Zviagintsev's Oscar nomination by personifying its soft power – using a select number of cultural figures . . . who advocate, either critically or not, in the interests of the Russian Federation – to achieve global visibility.

The Russian state, nonetheless, increasingly requires cinema to endorse official patriotism. In 2016, the Ministry of Culture named eight patriotic storylines it considered worthy of funding, one of multiple such directives over the past decade (Child 2016). Putin is in a line of Kremlin occupants to have recognized cinema's effectiveness as a tool of persuasion, beginning with Lenin's 1922 dictum that 'of all the arts, cinema is the most important', a refrain reprised by Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev. Film's nation-building role exploits the suitability of its audiovisual mode and populist reach to the large-scale projection of national fantasies and myths. But cinema has always been more thoroughly traversed by transnational flows – economic, aesthetic, and cultural – than other mass entertainment forms. As Andrew Higson argues, 'the paradox is that for a cinema to be nationally popular it must also be international in scope . . . it must achieve the international standard' (Higson 1989: 40). Canonic, Stalin-era films, produced at the height of Soviet isolationism, were heavily influenced by Hollywood (including Aleksandrov's legendary escapist musicals). In the era of accelerating global connectivity into which post-Soviet Russia was born, international film markets, products, and audiences converge with domestic ones. The plethora of cross-national co-productions – one index of this convergence – include Mikhalkov's paean to tsarist culture, *The Barber of Siberia* (*Sibirskii tsiriulnik* 1997) but also art-house masterpieces like Sokurov's *Moloch* (*Molokh* 1999), co-produced with a Berlin-based company, which provided Russia's Oscar entry (Bergfelder 2000). This further complicates the national deployment of cinema for cultural diplomatic purposes – and not for Russia alone – by ceding some control to the partner nation, whilst attracting new audiences (Leontyeva and Bezenkova 2016).

Film and cultural diplomacy: lacuna or contradiction?

Nye's inauguration of the field of soft power and its associated terms (public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, smart power, and nation branding) spawned extensive scholarly discussions. Soft power is taken here as the umbrella term designating a nation's ability to 'shape the preferences of others by appeal and attraction' (Nye 1990: 166), within which 'public diplomacy' describes 'the actions of governments to inform and influence foreign publics' (McDowell 2008: 7) and cultural diplomacy represents 'a prime example of . . . the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas' (Schneider 2005: 147–148).[8] I thus interpret cultural diplomacy to encompass not just overt state diplomacy in cultural form (British Council English-language courses; China's Confucius Institutes; BBC Shakespeare adaptations; Russian state ballet tours) but also indirect modes of extending cultural influence that may not enjoy the state's sponsorship but which promote its values or add to the charismatic appeal of the nation it claims to embody (Hollywood blockbusters; Japanese anime cartoons). As these examples demonstrate, and as diplomacy scholars recognize, the performance of cultural diplomacy is not restricted to state-affiliated actors (their success is often guaranteed by the lack of such affiliation).[9] It is a short, but rarely taken, step from this notion to that of cultural diplomacy as spontaneous cooperation between independent actors in ways that challenge state values or promote alternative national narratives. The meanings that such relationships generate when refracted through artistic texts, and the implications of these meanings for the stability of cultural diplomacy as a concept, drive my analysis.

Cultural diplomacy's enduring association with state-to-state activities has, as I argued in the Introduction, permitted International Relations (IR) to exercise something of a monopoly on study of it in its contemporary form, though there are several substantive accounts of its genesis and history (Gienow-Hecht and Donfried 2010; Glade 2009; Arndt 2006). Moreover, much IR research judges other nations' approaches against the US model.[10] Nonetheless, cultural diplomacy as a state policy has grown incrementally, particularly in East Asia, where it acquires its own forms. Notwithstanding the prominence attached to film as a cultural diplomacy mode, cultural studies and film studies have paid it only limited attention, with its use in Cold War contexts attracting the most interest (Falk 2009; Shaw 2002; Kozovoi 2016).[11] Whilst work exposing implicit US cultural imperialism in Hollywood film (Tomlinson 1991; Miller et al. 2005) complements a rich corpus on the counter-imperial resistance provided by Bollywood and Nollywood – Nigerian Cinema (Tyrell 1999), as well as analyses of the projection of, and resistance to, post-imperial meanings in globally distributed European cinemas (Elsaesser 2005), this research assimilates diplomacy to various paradigms of cultural hegemony or the exploitation of Bourdieusian 'symbolic capital'. Guy Austin invokes the latter when exploring cinema's relationship with cultural diplomacy via festivals and awards ceremonies and state diplomacy strategies, noting that for high-prestige film festivals, financial performance matters less to cultural diplomats than the value that accrues to the nation they represent

when a film they promote enjoys success (Austin 2016). Marcia Landy's Gramscian insights on film's role in the exercise of hegemonic power, too, are pertinent to the question of why neo-authoritarian states might support counter-hegemonic films like *Leviathan* (Landy 1994). Such approaches integrate analyses of institutional cultures and funding mechanisms with data on box-office takings and audience responses. But they eschew the close readings of individual films important to mainstream film scholars.

The lacuna is unsurprising. As I suggested in the Introduction, the reifying attitude inherent in the term cultural diplomacy (in which 'culture' is an asset to be deployed for diplomatic gain) contravenes long-established film studies principles of national (all) cultures as contingent, heterogeneous, contested, and subject to renegotiation and of cultural texts as saturated by transcultural flows which circulate according to a process independent of state agency. As I pointed out earlier, Ang et al. (2015) provide a useful corrective to treatments of cultural diplomacy in terms of 'one-way, linear processes of communication'. In this chapter, I explore the significance of their argument not, as they do, for cultural diplomacy *policy* but for the co-inscription of *meaning* by artist and audience within texts that, whether intentionally or not, enter the cultural diplomacy domain. Because Putin's regime adopts an extreme version of the reductive conception of soft power that Ang et al. rightly reject, the *Leviathan* controversy's textual manifestations offer evidence that our understanding of films emerging from peripheral contexts like that of Russia would benefit from this thinking, whilst bringing into focus the challenges that non-linear cultural diplomacy initiatives and activities pose to that regime.[12]

The contradictions generated by the clash of cultural diplomacy's instrumentalist assumptions and the non-linear, transnational flows shaping its practices make it an important area of investigation since cinematic texts form the nexus at which the contradictions converge. In this globalizing era, nations in their imaginary form continue to shape how film is deployed at all levels. Equally, international audiences persist in deriving images, positive and negative, of nations from their viewing experience, even if those images are inconsistent, fragmentary, and at odds with official meanings inscribed within film texts. There is therefore much at stake and much to gain for states capable of appreciating the complexities, contradictions, and uncertainties of the meanings that nation projection invariably generates but, as the *Leviathan* scandal demonstrates, much to be lost, too. I attempt here to identify the recursions by which such meanings emerge at the textual level, also exploring the specific complexities that emerge from the pitting of state against private actors in cinematic diplomacy.

The complexities and contradictions relating to film's benefits as a soft power tool affect democratic states convinced that responsibility for achieving these benefits is best left to film industries themselves. But the same complexities and contradictions also affect authoritarian regimes which, in striving to maximise cinema's soft power benefits, subordinate film industries to their own political purposes. Even Russia's policymakers, however, recognize that cultural diplomacy operates most effectively when their involvement is occluded. The fact that

Leviathan embodies a vision of the Russian state via a distinctive art-house aesthetic and mythologizing archetypes guarantees its international appeal, consolidating perceptions that Russia is still capable of making a significant contribution to world cinema. My analysis will illuminate this contribution – and thus the blinkered logic into which Russia's official cultural policymakers are prone to slip in failing to acknowledge it – by focusing on two films, each offering distinctive variants on the national narrative.

The case studies

I focus on three features of my selected films: (i) the universal–particular relationship (how the localizing effects of national settings and audiovisual textures articulate with implicit claims to transnational–universal meaning); (ii) structures of narration (how the ambivalence necessary to negotiate this tension affects the coherence of narrative perspectives); and (iii) modality (shifts in the different truth claims made to the multiple audiences addressed).

The films have more in common than the superficial contrast between them indicates. One appears to be a war blockbuster, the other, a multi-layered art-house whimsy. However, because of their location on either side of the boundaries of officially sanctioned artistic production, they each offers particular benefits for cultural diplomacy agendas, remaining sufficiently close to them to serve their needs, yet distant enough for their links to the state's 'nationalist pedagogy' to pass unnoticed. Also, their liminal status renders each of them sites of tension at which the 'repeating and reproductive performances' which constitute the complementary dimension of nationhood undermine the national pedagogic narrative.

The first is Shakhnazarov's *White Tiger*. Nominated for the 2013 Oscars, it tells of a tank driver, severely burned in a battle with a German battalion during World War 2, whose place within Russia's national narrative remains sacrosanct. The tank driver makes a miraculous recovery and after three days his 90-degree burns disappear. However, he can recall neither his name nor his previous life, remembering only that an elusive white German tank caused his injuries. Re-christened 'Naidenov' ('the Found One'), and possessed by surreal delusions, he devotes the remainder of the war to tracking down the White Tiger. The film then veers off into a long, puzzling scene depicting the Nazi surrender and a monologue in which, with the White Tiger still at large, Hitler claims ominously that war defines the human condition. Without jettisoning Great Patriotic War mythology, or the blockbuster genre to which the film nominally belongs, Shakhnazarov provides an offbeat enactment of its tropes and narratives, challenging both the finality of the 'Victory over Fascism' and the epic-realist aesthetic within which it is normally rendered. Nonetheless, as director of the mighty Mosfilm Studios which funded *White Tiger*, he remains part of Russia's cultural elite. A Putin loyalist, he was one of 14 cultural luminaries to sign a 2014 petition supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine. Paradoxically, his privileged status gives him greater licence to push boundaries.

A parallel ambiguity pervades Aleksei Fedorchenko's, *The Bunting Birds* (*Ovsianki* 2010) released in Britain and the US under the title *Silent Souls*. Set in the Volga region among the descendants of an ancient Finno-Ugric tribe, the Merja, and based on a 2008 novella by Denis Osokin, Fedorchenko's collaborator, the story is told in voice-over narration by Aist, a local poet's son, and a photographer at the local paper mill.[13] His hobby is to record the poems of the Merja, to which he remains attached. After buying two caged buntings, he is asked by his boss, Miron, whose wife Tania has died, to accompany him on a dreamlike car journey to perform elaborate Merja cremation rites laced with necrophiliac sexuality. The film resembles an ethnographic documentary designed to preserve a dying culture. It ends with the birds escaping their cage, distracting Miron and causing the car to crash into the river Volga, plunging viewers, too, into an abyss, as it is revealed that Aist has recounted the entire story from his watery grave, and that the rituals depicted earlier may have been a creative fantasy.

Silent Souls situates itself beyond the periphery of official patriotism (its success – it won three prizes at the 2010 Venice Film Festival – owes nothing to state endorsement but reflects the dynamics of the international festival scene). Whilst it therefore lacks an overtly cultural diplomatic function, the fact that it projects within a recognizable art-house aesthetic an appealing image of Russianness lends it value within the broader cultural diplomatic framework theorized by Ang et al.; one reason why states struggle to manage cultural diplomacy is that its effectiveness, particularly for a country with a poor reputation, is often in inverse proportion to the level of state support it commands. Unlike Shakhnazarov, Fedorchenko is an independent artist who co-owns an independent film company ('The 29 February Film Company') which, together with a second firm, 'April Mig', provided *Silent Souls*'s funding. Following the film's international success, the Ministry of Culture supported Fedorchenko's subsequent work, indicating that, even in Russia, cultural diplomacy relies on a two-way dialectic of agency and non-agency, official policymaking and grassroots creativity.

In viewing the films through the recursive nationhood prism, we see that their domestic dimensions are shaped by the intertwinement of global and local audiences, production teams and marketing/distribution strategies. Unlike *Leviathan*, whose initial distribution to a handful of Russian cinemas was intended to ensure that it conformed to the entry rules for the Oscars (though its later dissemination via illegal download led to a wider showing in Russia), these two films targeted domestic audiences from the outset (Luhn 2015). They position themselves within cultural debates about post-Soviet Russian identity: the sanctity of Great Patriotic War mythology; the role of pre-Christian ethnic groups inhabiting Russia's provincial outposts in that nation's path to modernity. The way these issues play out internationally determines the films' function in the cultural diplomacy arena. So, too, do their divergent narrative idioms. While *White Tiger* offers a troubling variant on the patriotic war film, *Silent Souls* evokes the ethnographic documentary, the road movie, and the spare aesthetic of a certain European art-house brand. Because these genres have different political and aesthetic connotations

for post-Soviet Russia's (highly heterogeneous) audiences, for international film festival elites, and for Academy Awards judges, the two films' generic affiliations are complex and significant.

Silent Souls: hoax from beyond the grave or hymn to a lost tribe?

Although *Silent Souls*'s international art-house billing jarred with official sensibilities, its pseudo-ethnographic paean to a lost Russian past indirectly aided the patriotic cause. Kremlin-loyal *Rossiiskaia gazeta* dubbed it 'an event in Russian cinema', a refreshing antidote to the negativity of recent Russian films, whilst the broadly pro-state Gazeta.ru praised its powerful evocation of rural Russia's pre-Christian roots (Kichin 2010; Goriacheva 2010). The semi-derelict provincial backdrop to the film's melancholy narrative aligns it with several films of the last decade with similar settings which re-inscribe Russia's forgotten backwaters within its national consciousness.[14] Many, including *Silent Souls* and *Leviathan*, share the same cinematographer, Mikhail Krichman, with his distinctive mode of filming such landscapes.

The concern of *Silent Souls* – an independently funded film – with delving into Russian cultural memory appealed to domestic audiences for which this issue was of growing significance. It earned a respectable (for the time) $411,988 at the box office in 2011 (meaning that about 60,000 people watched it), taking second place in earnings amongst Russian films of the years leading up to 2011. Fedorchenko also, however, sought the plaudits of the global festival circuit and of future international funders; hence the participation of Krichman.[15] His strategy corroborates Iordanova's (2015) argument that film festivals are 'transforming from primarily a display site of completed films into an important factor that often triggers the very cycle of a film's conception, financing, development, production, and circulation'. In an interview regarding his interest in securing European funding, Fedorchenko confirmed:

> Yes, I'm looking into that . . . I've got a couple of scenarios that could be offered to European producers, and the interest has been reciprocated.
>
> (Khlebnikova 2010)

Accordingly, he followed *Silent Souls* with another idiosyncratic depiction of Russia's Finno-Ugric peripheries: *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari* (*Nebesnye zheny lugovykh Mari* 2012). But *Silent Souls* also gestures towards allegorical universalism, as the many laudatory international reviews it garnered suggest. Roger Ebert crowned it 'the road movie as metaphysical memory and meditation' (Ebert 2011). Lee Marshall describes it as 'a cinematic poem to love and loss' (Marshall 2010). The title of Daniel Garrett's review is 'Love, Friendship, Death, Grief, and Absurdity' (Garrett 2013). Even Western reviewers who highlight the film's attention to Merja rituals generalize that theme. Robbie Collin suggests that

Silent Souls 'ponders the oddness and necessity of the folk rites in which we all seek solace' (Collin 2012).

In emphasizing the film's universality, Western promotional material highlights the archetypal symbol of water linking love, oblivion, death, and creativity. The English-language poster features a quote from Aist's voiceover: 'In this land there are only two gods: Love and Water'.[16] *Silent Souls*'s symbolic network connects it to layers of meaning centring on recurrent images of water. The narrative features multiple crossings of the river Oka. A particularly arresting scene in the recreation of Merja practices focuses on Aist and Miron bathing Tania's naked corpse in water in preparation for ancient rites performed on intimate parts of her body, including the sewing of threads into her pubic hair.

The film ends with the heroes submersed by the river. Drowning is in turn linked to oblivion (the Merja have been almost erased from memory, something Aist is determined to reverse), immortality (his narration confirms that 'death by water means immortality to the Merja'), and creativity (the underwater camera depicting the heroes' demise dwells upon Aist's father's typewriter, now semi-submerged in the riverbed's murky deposits). The contradiction is resolved via the mediating trope of the art of loss: the father's immortal elegiac poetry; Aist's own lugubrious narration. Recovery of the lost also evokes the immortality of love. Aist's very last words, spoken from the watery depths, assure us that all that is permanent is the eternal force of mutual love: 'only love for one another, only love', and that Eros works in tandem with Thanatos. The dressing of corpses mirrors the dressing of brides. The drowning is preceded by a night of sensual passion with two women, following a random encounter.

Silent Souls signals a parallel universalism via its global intertexts: the ever-present bunting birds, portending both the realization of pent-up desire and the threat of catastrophe, and invoking the caged love-birds of Hitchcock's *The Birds* where their function is identical; the journey to cremate Tania, structuring the narrative as a variant on the archetypal road movie; the self-reflexive device of narrator-as-photographer and the austere, washed-out tones redolent of a recognizable pan-East European art-house aesthetic (Gamble 2015).[17]

The universal grounds itself in the specific elements which realize it. The film's English-language paratexts perform this function by locating the counterpart to its symbolic universalism in the ethnographic particulars of its remote setting; the official trailer promoting its international release blends multiple images of water crossings, details of Tania's funeral rites, the burning of her pyre, and the encounter with the two women, overlaid with Aist's narrative questioning 'who are we?' and averring that 'only love unites us' – a sequence whose lack of context renders it applicable to humanity itself.[18] But the fact that the Merja are Finno-Ugric authenticates the film's Russianness by layering it with ethnic difference. As Marshall writes:

> Only scraps of their culture have survived Orthodoxy, industrialisation and the Bolsheviks, but this haunting fable imagines the customs their

> descendants might otherwise still be observing beneath modern Russia's monolithic surface.
>
> (Marshall 2010)

So, too, do the background signs of modernity offsetting the archaism; the characters are accompanied throughout by the accoutrements of modern technology: familiar mobile phone ringtones; 4x4 vehicles; desolate stores displaying multiple flickering monitors.

Significantly, however, Russia's popular press tended to reverse dominant international readings. The Hitchcock and road movie intertexts and the universal themes barely resonated with audiences more concerned about the Merja's relationship with Russianness:

> Russia's untamed wilds are elevated . . . into poetry.
>
> (Goriacheva 2010)

> The Merja are our contemporaries and even our co-tribesmen. But they are carriers of a different morality and different rituals which at a certain point [in the film] begin to seem . . . more rational and natural than the taboos and prejudices imposed by civilisation.
>
> (Kichin 2010)

In support of such interpretations, the film upsets the system of universalizing figures imposed by Western commentators. Its beginning and ending feature prolonged close-ups of the birds (referenced only in passing by these critics). Their (literally) arresting interruptions of the narrative underscore their irreducible singularity rather than their place in an abstract symbolic system. In a seemingly out-of-place series of freeze-framed close-up photographs of the ruddy faces of the female mill workers, Aist's creative activity converges with that of the film.[19] But rather than elude the urge to generate universal meaning (even if it equates to life's 'radical contingency'), the photographs elicit a different complex of universals: those of a fading Russia succumbing to new, alien ways of life.

The values are matched by alternative intertextual allusions: the sequence of poetic-sounding Merja villages, lyrically intoned by Aist in a manner recalling a similar list in Solzhenitsyn's proto-nationalist *Matryona's Home* (*Matrionin dvor* 1963); recurring birch-trees images; the motif of submersion in the Volga's maternal waters. This defiantly anti-modern, mythologized Russia explains *Rossiiskaia gazeta*'s rapturous endorsements, though the film did not elicit similarly positive responses from the wider Russian public for which it remained of niche interest.[20] Moreover, as Oushakine (2011) notes, it emits a distinct whiff of *kvas* (the confected patriotism of cliché) – which is perhaps why Fedorchenko embodies it in a non-Russian ethnicity of indeterminate origins.

Two sets of universal–particular relations thus invert one other (Merja ritual as a particular embodiment of the universal truths of mortality, creativity, and love/Aist's particular account of love, creativity, and death as an embodiment

of the universal truth of the Merja as Russia's lost essence). They oscillate without resolution, sometimes converging, sometimes bifurcating. Appropriately, in some interviews Fedorchenko documents the Merja's genetic influence on Russia's contemporary population, claiming that they represent 'the hidden origins of every Russian'.[21] Elsewhere, he emphasizes the tribe's heathen eroticism and attachment to ritual as 'quintessentially human qualities'.[22]

Silent Souls's unstable relationship with the universal reflects its multiple audiences (international and domestic), providing an illustration of recursive nationhood at work. This function is echoed on the plane of narration, whose disruption finds expression in the ghostly status of Aist, the first-person storyteller, as his narrative premise disintegrates. This self-reflexive trick assimilating *Silent Souls* to a world cinema aesthetic in which the final revelation that a narrative has been related from beyond the grave is not new[23] and reinforces the symbolic chain connecting love, death, and creativity. It also, however, contradicts the real-time *longeurs* aligning it with the ragged contingencies pervading the ethnographic mode: Miron returning inconsequentially to retrieve dropped firewood; Aist's repeated failures to light the funeral pyre. It jars with the haunting, extra-diegetic singing of the soundtrack and with the nostalgic flashbacks depicting Aist's father traversing a mist-clad lake. These details locate the narration's ultimate source in the mythologized Russia undercut by the denouement. First-person narrations in which the storyteller is also a protagonist must grapple with the logical tension arising from his/her status as both subject and object of narration. In *Silent Souls*, the tension reflects a dialogic encounter of multiple performances of the universal–particular dynamic as the film repeatedly addresses, yet distances itself from international festival judges, domestic art-house critics, and pseudo-imperialist enthusiasts.

The dynamic is linked to the film's uncertain modality. By foregrounding fractures in its implied narrative source and symbolic architecture, its ending not only induces ambivalence regarding its primary audience, but it also precipitates a retrospective suspicion that we have witnessed a mere *trompe l'oeil*. The more idiosyncratic the rituals, the greater their authenticity (the meticulous detail of the sewing of threads; the curious attribution of the term 'smoke' (*dym*) to describe the tradition by which Merja widowers share lurid details of their deceased spouse's sexual proclivities) and the stronger the sense that the narrator has misled us regarding both his status and the veracity with which he recounts Merja rituals. Significantly, Fedorchenko's debut film, *First on the Moon* (*Pervye na lune* 2005), was a mockumentary reconstructing the 'long-suppressed story' of a 1930s Soviet space mission. So convincing was its narrative that it persuaded several newspapers of its authenticity.[24]

If *Silent Souls* is an elaborate hoax, it hoodwinks both festival and domestic audiences. *The Boston Globe* characterizes it as 'a cinematic field guide to Merja traditions' (Barry 2010). A few of its Western press accolades highlighted the ethnography's fabricated nature; on praising the film's haunting recreation of Merja ritual, Peter Bradshaw adds the brief rider: 'even if Fedorchenko was not on oath with all those . . . traditions' (Bradshaw 2012). Some scholars familiar with the

cultural context paid more attention. Describing the director's aim 'to imagine a counterfactual, plausible past', Oushakine (2011) argues that:

> Fedorchenko does not just limit tradition to its deconstructive potential. [H]is emphasis on the fictitious, fabricated – and therefore changeable – nature of tradition helps move beyond the obsessive . . . fascination with forms of the past by inventing *new* points of origin.

This reading captures *Silent Souls*'s elegiac celebration of art's powers to create myths anew. However, it assumes a unified creative purpose, sidelining the performative function of the act of deception and its orientation to an indefinite plurality of audiences, including those Russian reviewers who contested its stance on Russia's imperial narrative. While the patriotic mainstream lauded Fedorchenko's revivalist exhumation of the ancient roots of ethnic Russianness, Eurasianists celebrated the project's contribution to Russia's new expansionist geopolitics (Bagdasarov 2011). Contrastingly, those on the progressive wing, along with Russia's Finno-Ugric communities, saw in *Silent Souls* a gesture of 'internal decolonisation' (Kukulin 2014). This tension, and the rejection of a coherent Russian nationhood that it indexes, places the film firmly within the scope of Nancy Condee's magisterial analysis of the occluded 'imperial trace' in post-Soviet Russian auteurist film (Condee 2009).

Silent Souls explores Russia's post-imperial identity at the intersection of multiple images of its relationship with difference (internal and external). Rather than resolving this difference, it performs it as a series of embodied perspectives, oriented to distinct audiences. The extended opening long-take in which Aist rides a bicycle carrying his bunting birds, shot first from behind, then looking back (as if from the birds' viewpoint), visually signals the commencement of this series. The perspectives simultaneously align with, and interrogate, one another. They cancel any self-equivalence or stability that viewers might be attempted to assign to the film's portrayal of a Russia newly deprived of its habitual imperial moorings and now caught between a globalized modernity inducing sentiments of profound alienation and an ethnic archaism eliciting approval of a distinctly tongue-in-cheek variety.

White Tiger: phantom narrative of the great patriotic war

Shakhnazarov's *White Tiger*, Russia's choice for the 2013 Academy Awards, was based on Il'ia Boiashov's 2007 novella 'The Tank Driver or the "White Tiger"'. Western critics recognized that, despite its nationalist affiliations, Shakhnazarov's film addressed foreign audiences, offering an unusual take on the war film genre. Its estimated gross earnings in 2012 (the year of its release) were $7.2 million (though its budget was $11 million), so its blockbuster status placed it in a different market from Fedorchenko's films.[25] However, *White Tiger* has more in common with *Silent Souls* than meets the eye. Stephen Norris, who attributes the explosion of Great Patriotic War blockbusters since 2004 to the war's status as

'the one Soviet event about which contemporary Russians could feel pride' (Norris 2012a: 14), acknowledged that *White Tiger* did not fit this paradigm, noting its 'dark ending' and linking it to Tolstoy's axiom that the very essence of war is 'unnatural' (Norris 2012b). Petkovic (2013) praises its 'deep mediation on modern existence . . . that explores man's plight in a machine age'.

The primary object of Western praise was *White Tiger*'s ability to allegorize universal questions of the meaning of war and the durability of evil[26] and also the authenticity of the battle scenes.[27] The elusive white monster and the vain struggle of one man to destroy it are modelled on Melville's *Moby Dick*, as Shakhnazarov acknowledged.[28]

Naidenov's monomaniacal obsession echoes Captain Ahab's. But the overly signposted symbolism of his miraculous 'resurrection' and his prophetic powers add a religious take of post-Soviet provenance. The universalist appeal is enhanced by the choice of Wagner's Tannhauser Overture for the soundtrack; fragments are played repeatedly, binding the battle scenes of the first half with the concluding out-of-place post-war sequences, including Hitler's chilling pronouncements about war's undying vitality, delivered to an unspecified interlocutor:

> As long as heat and cold exist . . . so too will conflict. War has no beginning and no end. War is life itself. War is the original condition.

White Tiger never fully abandons the patriotic line that secured its endorsement by Putin's cinematic establishment. Hitler's Manichean rantings pit Germany as the embodiment of Europe's darkest desires against a proud Russia, dubbed 'that dark and gloomy country in the east – that centaur, savage and foreign to Europe'.

As with *Silent Souls*, the universal–particular relationship plays out differently for domestic audiences. Like Fedorchenko, Shakhnazarov engages in a re-mythologization, this time that of World War 2's place in Russia's national imagination. As Sander Brouwer argues, it disassembles generic features of the domestic war film such as the finality of Fascism's defeat and the collectivist nature of Soviet heroism (Brouwer 2015). Off-centre features like the Wagnerian soundtrack and the lurch into metaphysics authenticate a re-imagined war myth which challenges official patriotism, investing it with traits accommodating it to post-Soviet Russia's place within global culture. As Naidenov loses his memory, *White Tiger* virtually erases official memory of the war. Brouwer interprets this as Shakhnazarov's implied critique of the 'forgetful' accounts that recur in patriotic treatments of the war:

> Only when there is no real *memory* of the past can there be such a literal obsessive *repetition* of that past in the present.
>
> (Brouwer, p. 313)

Russian reviews divided between those who, likewise, saw a refreshing attempt to transcend stereotypical war narratives[29] and those who lamented a traducing of Soviet history.[30]

But, as in *Silent Souls*, tensions arise where the universal–particular dynamic is concretized, for example in the use of actual T34 tanks, painstakingly restored for historical accuracy. The visceral battle scenes are filled with sounds of creaking tank turrets and chugging engines that drown the dialogue and claustrophobic cockpit scenes where faces obscured by the murk make the action hard to follow. The clash between such detail and the film's mystical pretensions is epitomized by the haunting Wagner soundtrack and when the elusive White Tiger appears. Preceded by ominous silence, it is finally glimpsed through mist-shrouded trees. But when viewed in close-up it is revealed as just another creaking machine whose faded camouflage barely recalls a sleek white tiger. The commanding officer assigned to destroy it tries to photograph the monster, but his camera malfunctions, and he discards it, his failure metatextually echoing Shakhnazarov's. The deployment of historical detail takes a different turn during the Act of Surrender. The pace slows dramatically as the camera captures the most banal details: a journalist tripping over, close-ups of random chairs and, most bizarrely, an interminable re-enactment of a scene from Field Marshall Keitel's memoirs in which his officers savour the texture of frozen strawberries.

Lurches between the two modes are linked to the same universal–particular inversion observed in *Silent Souls*. Does the authenticating detail compensate for the scandalous rewriting of war myth as mystical fable or, alternatively, ground a pan-European universal truth in Great Patriotic War specifics? That hesitation achieves visual incarnation as *White Tiger* makes its disorienting detour into the metaphysical realm: the darkened person opposite Hitler as he delivers his monologue figures the uncertainty surrounding Shakhnazarov's primary addressee. This unsettling scene suggests that Hitler's shadowy interlocutor visually manifests the film's occluded narrative perspective. The camera zooms in, switching between profile shots of Hitler's face. It then adopts Hitler's viewpoint. However, the standard shot–reverse shot sequence is aborted and, confirming the ruptured narration, the film closes with a slow zoom to Hitler's mysterious companion, still obscured. Before he can be identified, the screen fades to black and the credits roll.

Shakhnazarov had previously experimented with occluded narrative perspective. In his 2009 adaptation of Chekhov's short story, 'Ward No. 6', Aleksei Vertkov, who plays Naidenov in *White Tiger*, stars as the mental patient whose lucid insights erode the madness–normality boundary. Shakhnazarov transposes Chekhov to the present, depicting inmates from the perspective of an invisible interviewer who elicits the story through one-to-one conversations, never revealing his face or purpose in visiting the institution (a psychiatric home featuring real patients).

White Tiger's problems with addressee and narration complement its exploration of modality: the abortive realization of metaphor that was the mythical tiger's long-anticipated manifestation. The failure raises doubts over whether the tank, like Fedorchenko's Merja rituals, is anything but a (Nazi-inspired) tall tale. The same ambivalence surrounds Naidenov: is he a comically deluded madman or a visionary with extraordinary foresight? The latter interpretation is stretched

to breaking point when Naidenov is found praying to a helmet-wearing metallic god who has, he claims, accorded him the capacity to talk to other tanks, but this insane belief is seemingly and mysteriously vindicated by the Tiger's disorientating tendency to conform precisely to (and thereby vindicate) Naidenov's wild intuitions about its whereabouts and the intentions he anthropomorphically attributes to it.

The tensions underlying *White Tiger*'s treatment of modality, narration, and the universal–particular dynamic reflects its own ambivalent projection of post-Soviet Russian nationhood and relationship with Soviet mythology,[31] its internalization of a feedback loop in which the anticipated interpretative strategies of one audience are incorporated into the pitch made to the other. The insertion into the Great Patriotic War myth of the metaphysical universalism accommodating the film to the sensibilities of international audiences invests that myth with refreshingly controversial particularity for post-Soviet Russian viewers. But for international audiences, the same myth accords the Manichean universalism of Hollywood Cold War movies' new philosophical depth, and new national specificity, challenging those audiences' stereotypes of the Soviet Union, and of the war film. Similarly, *Silent Souls*'s exploration of the Russia's imperial narrative draws on art-house aesthetics to reassure the festival circuit. But its exoticized Finno-Ugric Russianness, whether self-consciously post-imperial or loyally patriotic, lends ethnographic singularity to its transnational symbolism.

Conclusion: discourses of nation and the messy business of cultural diplomacy

The feedback loops confirm that, within globally networked spaces like cinema, national projections engender encounters between self-renewing, transnational processes that are mutually constitutive and that this process is performed textually. Recursive nationhood superimposes upon the axis of national responses to globally generated meanings a second axis incorporating hybrid voices within given national contexts.

The disruptive instability the phenomenon accords to official narratives of nation (Bhabha's 'nationalist pedagogy') are not unique to Russia. The complexities of the recursion strategies reflect a dual paradox characteristic of the post-1991 global communications environment: (i) the enhanced capacity for media actors to reach that environment's margins and the concomitant loss of control over, and likelihood for contaminations of, the meanings they project; (ii) the greater potential for states to project influence in a post-ideological age, yet the increased need to mask that influence, in film's case, through commitment to the world cinema aesthetic of international festivals which, as Nagib (2007) shows, wields immense sway in the struggle of non-Western film-makers to achieve global recognition.

Situated respectively just within, and just outside, the perimeters of official patriotism, *White Tiger* and *Silent Souls* highlighted nationhood's performative aspect: the repeated calling into being of Russia through the enactment of its disposition towards what it simultaneously constructs as 'self' and 'other' (stilted

Great Patriotic War narratives; Finno-Ugric traditions at Russia's periphery). Each emphasized the second meaning of performance: that of the contingent staging of, or playing up to, external images of Russia (Russia as Europe's dark and gloomy other; Russia as a site for the pre-modern authenticity of ethnic ritual). The third corollary of performativity is its dialogism; each stage in a recursive series is driven by the desire to deflect the anticipated response of others. The circular indeterminacy of the process limits efforts to deploy cinema for linear, soft power purposes.

Nation projection here is inflected with the paradoxical desire to curtail the impulse that drives it to articulate the discrete elements constituting a series as a stable narrative embodying what that nation 'is'. But as Ang et al. (2015: 377) argue:

> The attempt to impose a unifying national narrative on the intrinsically diverse range of cultural diplomacy relations may prove . . . elusive. . . . a diverse nation-state . . . will always struggle to forge an image of cultural unity.

Emerging during an era of expanding global connectivity, the feedback loops of nationhood occupy an intermediary position between the state and its intended audiences – domestic and international. They become embroiled in dialogic processes that acquire their own self-perpetuating logic. This logic, a by-product of mediatization, provides the key to resolving the contradictions reflected in my opening questions concerning the enduring struggle pitting national imaginaries against the very transnational codes via which they are articulated. As one example of the struggle, we witnessed the retrospective attribution of cultural diplomatic meaning. It was the international success of Fedorchenko's niche film which prompted Russia's Ministry of Culture to fund his subsequent exploration of Finno-Ugric ethnicities. Conversely, *Leviathan* lost much of the minimal cultural diplomatic value accorded to it by Russia's Oscar nomination committee following its unrelentingly anti-Putin reception.

Transitive models of cultural diplomacy are undermined by the divergent images of nationhood inscribed (and read) into them for (and by) domestic and international audiences, a phenomenon which has grown under conditions of deep mediatization.[32] Nonetheless, the debates our films sparked about the post-imperial moment in contemporary Russianness, and the place of war mythology in Russia's historical trajectory, confirm that divergence can also revitalize national narratives. As Saunders (2016) argues, the tensions between national self-image and external perceptions of the nation produce a complex interplay integral to contemporary global affairs. Reversals in the relationship between the films' dual claims to universalizing and concretizing meaning emerged as the fulcrum of this interplay. The tensions that it generates prompt shifts in their modality and disruptions to their narrative unity. The mutual conditioning of universal and concrete, the oscillations between modalities and the unresolved occlusions of narrative viewpoint provide a framework within which to analyze the confusion surrounding the ordering of symbolic meanings in Zviagantsev's *Leviathan*. Is it a biblical

synecdoche of a monstrous Russian state or a local Russian metaphor for a Hobbesian colossus equally capable of instantiation in an American context?[33]

Like *Silent Souls*, *Leviathan* highlights a further dimension to the logic of reciprocity. The prominence that they each accord to their provincial settings (the Central Volga region and Northern Russia respectively) foregrounds that logic's frequent reliance on a local–transcultural–national axis. As Parts (2016: 202) argues, the insertion of the provincial into the national–transnational dynamic is reflected in the 'recurring perception of Russia's position as provincial . . . in relation to the West' which ensures the provinces are 'the symbolic locale where major Russian cultural myths are negotiated'. Recursive nationhood is never reducible to a two-way mirroring of national image within national image, as we saw when, in switching between, national, local, and global postures, the films drew on a hybrid of transnationally circulating aesthetic idioms.

Silent Souls and *The White Tiger* textualize the disruptive function of various forms of mediation at the production, distribution, and reception levels. The intervention of the institutional cultures of funding agencies, directors, production and distribution teams, and bureaucratic apparatuses guarantee that states cannot now simply 'commission' films and predetermine their settled meanings. The Russian Ministry of Culture's inconsistency demonstrates that contemporary states are, in fact, no univocal, Leivathan-like monoliths. They must negotiate a mesh of relationships operating within and across national borders, and audiences – domestic and international. As the point at which these relationships converge, films offer a means of tracing their interaction. Through the work of textual recursion, they further transform the meanings encoded in them by state agencies.

Cultural diplomacy is a messy business. Ang et al. conclude by proposing it as 'a testing ground for possibilities for the politics of recognition between . . . and beyond nations', calling for a rethinking of the national interest 'not as a top-down target . . . but as a generative mechanism for *overcoming* . . . exclusionary notions of the nation, in favour of more relational and open understandings'. They argue that 'by focusing on the cultural *relations* being built, cultural diplomacy can go beyond the national interest in an iterative way' (Ang et al. 2015: 378–379). My analysis of the intercultural exchanges moulding the audiovisual narrative forms of two Russian films corroborates their thesis. It further suggests that the state's heavy-handed interventions in Russian cultural diplomacy practices set in relief the instrumentalism dominating the phenomenon more broadly, notwithstanding the fact that, as *Leviathan* illustrates, the advantages of alternative, decentred approaches to intercultural understanding are habitually shunned in neo-authoritarian contexts.

Crucially, however, Ang et al.'s concern was with cultural diplomacy *practices* and with widening their scope beyond the state as a means of expanding their benefits *to* it. By contrast, I have highlighted how the transnational modalities through which nationhood is encoded in cinematic *texts* escape the intentions (and often the attentions) of the actors, *regardless* of their relationship to the state. I have further demonstrated how, via renewable chains based on these modalities, state actors may attempt to re-appropriate the meanings they generate.

The theme of re-appropriation informs a useful coda to the *Leviathan* affair which framed my analysis of the two earlier films and which served as a reference point throughout. In 2017, Zviagintsev's next film, *Loveless* (*Neliubov*), was released. It steered clear of direct criticism of the Russian state but, unsurprisingly, was shunned by Russia's Ministry of Culture and criticized by members of the Putin establishment for its grim portrayal of alienation in Russian society (*Loveless* was funded by private Russian sources with support from various foreign companies). This did not blind Russia's 2018 Oscars Committee to its aesthetic merits or the international acclaim it had already received nor prevent members from selecting the film as the nation's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the ninetieth Academy Awards; it was eventually shortlisted but did not win a prize. Although the stand-off between Russia and the West had acquired new momentum since 2014 in the light of revelations about Russian interference in Western democratic processes, and despite the ever-greater control Putin was asserting over the Russian state apparatus, one rung of that apparatus (an arts committee) had in this case prevailed over another, higher rung (a government ministry). Thus, even in Putin's Russia, state re-appropriations of inconvenient cultural meanings are complex, multi-agent affairs which do not happen hierarchically or according to a clear linear time sequence. The fact that, notwithstanding the damaging *Leviathan* scandal, *Loveless* was called upon to represent the Russian nation at the same major international event as its predecessor also points to the growing function of Zviagintsev himself as a powerful intercultural mediator; at the time of writing, Zviagintsev is working on his first film in 'the universal language' of English, to be shot in the US (a gesture which throws yet more retrospective doubt on simplistic, anti-Putin readings of Leviathan).[34] This function provides the focus of the next chapter.

Notes

1 Vsevolod Chaplin, an Orthodox Church official, fulminated: 'It is obviously made for . . . Western élites'. Quoted in Lipman 2015.
2 The Bolshoi Theatre's ballet, *Nureyev*, was pulled for these reasons in July 2017. For an account of the Church's role in the prohibitions, see Johnson 2015.
3 The second stage involves a shortlist of national submissions drawn up by the Academy and the third a nomination of around five finalists from which the winner is chosen.
4 Study of film as cultural diplomacy is underdeveloped, but see Bangert et al. 2013.
5 For transnational cinema as a medium, see Durovicova and Newman 2009; Palacio and Türschmann 2013.
6 Habord (2002) draws on Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* in her analysis of film cultures. See also De Valk 2014.
7 Anton Dolin comments, 'Though the film is extremely critical of the modern Russian state, this did not impede its promotion, because it works in favour of Russia's image as a leading country in the realm of cinema and culture,' quoted in Ennis 2017.
8 To complete the taxonomy of related concepts, 'Smart power' reflects Nye's later recognition that soft power and hard power work in consort (Nye 2009). 'Nation branding' refers to the narrower application of corporate marketing techniques to enhance the external images of countries (Kerr and Wiseman 2013: 354).

9 The question of the limits and definition of diplomacy are discussed by, among others, Paul Sharp and Jamie Metzl, who recognize that definitions of diplomacy are shifting and who attempt to account for 'alternative diplomacies', such as 'sub-state diplomacy' and 'citizen diplomacy' (Sharp 2004; Metzl 2001). These authors explore how different non-state actors become diplomats and when their behaviour can be described as 'diplomacy'. They do not, however, address the issue of the complex and contested meanings generated by the outputs of cultural diplomats – the subject of this chapter.
10 Exceptions include Cross and Melissen (2013) and Hall and Smith (2013).
11 See, however, Clarke 2016; Paschadilis 2009.
12 In a demonstration of the confusion that the *Leviathan* aftermath sewed in official Russian cultural circles, the following year (2016) saw continuing disorder, as Andrei Koncholovskii, now based in the US, and highly critical of Putin, insisted that his lyrical whimsy depicting the life of a postman in the remote Russian North, *White Nights of the Postman Triapitsyn* (*Belye nochi pochtal'ona Triapitsyna* 2014), be withdrawn from consideration for the Russian Oscar nomination, despite its Ministry of Culture funding. Instead, the nomination went to his estranged brother, Mikhalkov, whose indulgent exercise in post-imperial melancholy, a distortive adaptation of Ivan Bunin's early twentieth-century short story, 'Sunstroke' (*Solnechnyi udar*), was provocatively filmed in Russia's newly re-acquired imperial outpost – Crimea.
13 To further complicate matters, Aist is Osokin's own penname.
14 Other exemplars include the Oscar nominated, *The Italian*, Svetlana Proskurina's *The Truce* (*Peremirie* 2010), and Andrei Konchalovskii's *The Postman's White Nights*.
15 Krichman's global reputation was secured with Zviagintsev's first film, *The Return* (*Vozvrashchenie* 2003), winner of a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.
16 See www.moviepostershop.com/silent-souls-movie-poster-2010; accessed 14/9/2016.
17 Gamble's article features Krichman as one of ten selected cinematographers.
18 See www.google.co.uk/#q=silent+souls+trailer+youtube; accessed 15/9/2016.
19 This use of photographic stills reflects the influence of Fedorchenko's cinematographer, Krichman, who used the same device in Zviagintsev's *The Return* (*Vozvraschenie* 2003). See Cavendish 2013.
20 Even Western-based academics foregrounded Merja traditions and Russian national identity. Mikhailova (2013) focuses on what she sees as the film's failed attempt to create an alternative to imperial Russian identity. Oushakine (2011) highlights the 'paradigmatic shift – from laments about lost traditions to creative exercises of their invention'. 'Strukov (2016b: 205) claims that *Silent Souls* 'reflects an aspiration to affirm the position of the Meria in Russia's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society'.
21 In an interview with *Russkii Reporter* (RR), he avers that 'The Merja are the secret, hidden side of every Russian person' (quoted in Gusiantinskii 2010).
22 'What happens in the film – the heathen eroticism and the thirst for simple but mystical rituals – that resides at the heart of every one of us' (Timasheva 2010).
23 For example, M. Knight Shamalyan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and Amanabar's *The Others* (Los Otros 2001).
24 However, given that the domestic film industry was still in the doldrums in 2005, its appeal to wider audiences was limited. For evidence of the hoax's success in the Russian press, see Anonymous 2005, 2006.
25 See IMDB, 'Box Office Business for *Belyi Tigr*', www.imdb.com/title/tt2318405/business, 2012; accessed 31/10/2017.
26 Mobarak (2012) claims that a 'good versus evil tussle fought on a plane much higher than our own' makes the film 'more than its authentic depiction of the Second Great War's carnage'. Kaufman (2012) describes it as 'a meditation on the senselessness of war and the violence that spawns in its fog'.
27 For Matthews (2012), 'the superb manipulation of the tanks' is 'so believable and gritty you can almost smell the mud and taste the desolation'.

28 In an interview he explained:

> The Nazi 'ghost tank' reminded me of Melville's Moby Dick . . . the supernatural element helps make the story more universal. The White Tiger does not merely stand for the German military threat in the 1940s. After all, Nazi ideology is alive and well: neo-Nazi movements abound, Nietzsche's philosophy is still deemed 'respectable'. (Kozlowska 2012)

29 *Iskusstvo kino* praises the film's mystical but controversial, unresolved ending in which the White Tiger disappears, unvanquished, into the murk, claiming that 'the tank's disappearance evokes an ironic assumption that everything which preceded this, including the Great Victory, was a hallucination' (Matizen 2012).

30 A left-leaning nationalist journal castigates Shakhnazarov for equating Nazism and Communism, criticizing him for creating in Naidenov a deranged, idiosyncratic war hero lacking collectivist values (Anonymous 2013). An *Odnako* review averred that Shakhazarov had overstated his critique of official war mythology (Marakhovskii 2012).

31 This theme was addressed more directly by Shakhnazarov addressed in his earlier *The Vanished Empire* (*Ischeznuvshaia imperiia* 2008).

32 As Couldry and Hepp (2017: 182) put it, 'a demonstration of deep mediatization is the existence in parallel of . . . conflicting imaginations of collectivity and the unresolved political values and political projects that results'.

33 On the range of possible readings of *Leviathan*, see Condee 2016.

See Ritman 2021, where the attraction to Zviagintsev of English's universalizing function is explicitly evidenced.

34 See Ritman 2021, where the attraction to Zviagintsev of English's universalizing function is explicitly evidenced.

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5 Double agents

Russia's intercultural mediators and the articulation of the global

The intercultural mediator as double agent

The ambiguities within implied audiences explored in *Silent Ones* and *White Tiger* are but one indication of the wider problems attached to the cultural diplomat's linear notion of projecting nationhood in a world thoroughly traversed by global media flows in which distinctions between domestic and international production and consumption modes are unsustainable. Metonymic glimpses of this media-saturated realm can be discerned in the identical flickering television sets and incongruous mobile phones that occasionally disrupt Fedorchenko's archaic vision of Merja tradition. The conditionality that defines the mythic narratives of Russia in both *Silent Ones* and *White Tiger* betrays both directors' implicit awareness that any vision of nationhood – no matter how pristine – must be articulated in the context of the increasingly deep mediatization of long-established arenas of sociality-like nations.

Paradoxically, the more the sense of a mediatized global modernity prevails, the more completely some choose to retreat into an un-reflexive pristine archaism that could not, however, exist without it. This paradox underlies the distorted medieval ideology of Islamic State terrorism (Monagle and Darcens 2014). Russia's own nationalist fringes are not free from the phenomenon, but what I will explore in the current chapter are three cultural projects in which Russian engagements with mediatized global modernity are handled in a more reflexive, albeit contradictory, manner. Though sharply different in sensibility, they share two things: (a) they each feature cosmopolitan figures who operate within both Russian and Western cultural contexts; and (b) in their responses to Russia's place within global modernity they all establish implicit links between mediatization and the commodification of nationhood.

The first project flows directly from the preceding chapter. If the Russian Ministry of Culture's 40% funding for *Leviathan* misfired, its substantial support the following year for Andrei Konchalovsky's *The Postman's White Nights* (*Belye nochi pochtal'ona Triapitsyna* 2015) was equally ill-starred. Having won the Silver Lion Prize at the 2015 Venice Film Festival, the film was a strong contender for Russia's nomination to that year's round of the Academy Awards, until Konchalovsky withdrew it from consideration in protest at what he described as

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'the pernicious influence of commercial American cinema on the formation of the taste and preferences of our audience' (Beard 2014).

On the one hand, the film's fate represents yet another illustration of the perils of cultural diplomacy, particularly for authoritarian states. On the other hand, any decision to dragoon Konchalovsky into representing Russian interests on the international stage entailed a particular risk not only because of his opposition to the Academy Awards but also because he had spent a decade working in Western Europe and the US and, until *White Nights*, had set his best-known films in English-speaking contexts. Konchalovsky's uncertain status – *The Independent* called him 'a man of two worlds', noting that his hostility to Hollywood was no greater than his deep disdain for what he had called 'mob rule' in Russia – accords him the curious role of a 'go-between' alienated from both of the cultural contexts he attempts to mediate (MacNab 2011). During a period of heightening tension between Russia and the West, Konchalovsky serves as a kind of double agent; indeed, his distinct lack of loyalty to either the globalized film industry or the Russian state reveals the classic pose of the Cold War double agent. (Unlike RT, of whom we briefly and proleptically used the term 'double agent' in Chapter 2, Konchalovsky's allegiances are genuinely and persistently ambivalent; other than in instances when its presenters go rogue on air, RT's loyalties remain firm.) The focus of this chapter is on the role of intercultural mediators like Konchalovsky, seemingly capable of operating within, and translating between, Russian settings and those perceived as belonging to a vast transnational space. Such settings are often, though not invariably, understood as Westernized environments in which national affiliations are subordinated to cosmopolitan values associated with global capitalism. We understand the intercultural mediator function here not in its conflict resolution context but in its basic understanding as 'the facilitation of exchanges between people of different socio-cultural backgrounds' and as the act of 'bridging' . . . in order to 'foster integration' (Radulescu and Mitrut 2012).

The second such project was initiated by Mikhail Idov, a Russian Jewish émigré (real name, Zil'berman) born and brought up in Latvia, who spent time as a journalist in New York, but now works in the film business in Los Angeles, producing his own films, having worked briefly for Art Pictures. He was a staff writer for *New Yorker* magazine, has edited the Russian version of *GQ*, and has authored several novels, including a well-received first novel based on his own difficult experiences as a coffee house owner in New York (*Ground Up*). More recently, he was the creator of, and lead scriptwriter for, the controversial but highly popular televisual serial, *Londongrad*, shown throughout Russia by the independent STS television channel in 2015. Later still, he co-created a serial for broadcast on state Russian television channel, Rossiia in 2017. Called *The Optimists* (*Optimisty*), it used a 'Madmen' retro-aesthetic to tell the story of a unit of diplomats-cum-intelligence officers working in the Thaw era to help the Soviet Foreign Ministry gain the upper hand in the USSR's rivalry with Western powers.

Set in London amidst the Russian émigré community, the earlier serial, *Londongrad*, depicts in part-comic, part-thriller style, the adventures of the staff of an agency established to deal with problems encountered by Russian-speakers in

London. But it also tackles the contradictions and identity conflicts that Russian émigrés must negotiate when operating in the at once alien, yet familiar, urban spaces and consumerist lifestyles that prevail in global cities like London. Idov's capacity to test and subtly challenge the political constraints in television broadcasting under Putin soon led to his removal from the project. What is surprising is that the serial was given the go-ahead at all, especially since it was broadcast at the height of the New Cold War tensions between Britain and Russia, following the latter's illegal intervention in Ukraine. Idov tells the fascinating story of his involvement in the project in an article published in the *New Yorker*, where his own form of double agency emerges vividly (Idov 2016).

Mikhail Idov is, appropriately, a regular contributor to the third focus of our analysis – the provocatively named 'Snob' project funded by Mikhail Prokhorov, a billionaire businessman who has run large Russian corporations operating in the global market, stood against Putin in presidential elections, and bought two famous American basketball teams and two private hospitals in Israel. Prokhorov also set up the Cultural Initiatives Foundation designed to promote Russian culture within a world context. The 'Snob' project is indirectly linked to the Foundation's goals in that it, too, aspires to reconcile Russian self-identification modes with the increasingly globalized culture in which financial elites across the world operate. Consisting of an online social networking community and an expensive membership club, a glossy magazine covered by the subscription, and a free-access website, 'Snob' was launched in Russia in 2008, then in the US and the UK in 2010. It targets wealthy Russians whose affinities with the global elite do not conflict with their commitment to their culture of origin. Its mission statement makes reference to a new class of 'Global Russians' who, in the words of the Editor, Masha Gessen, 'live in different countries, speak in different languages, but think in Russian', who as 'cosmopolitan travellers . . . consider themselves "people of the world" ' (Gessen No Date). The website and magazine feature serious articles on politics, controversial social issues not covered in the Russian press, literature and the arts, and regular contributions from Russian and international authors including Idov, Salman Rushdie, Vladimir Sorokin, Gary Shteyngart, Zadie Smith, and Boris Akunin. In contradistinction to the much-derided 'New Russians', 'Global Russians' combine wealth with good taste and high cultural values.

In 'Snob', then, double agency serves as both mode and objective; the very basis of the identity strategy of Global Russians is their ability to reconcile Russianness and global-ness, high culture and neoliberal consumerism, to be at ease within and between both cultures. Let us begin, however, by returning to the project that, on the face of it, at least, represents the counterpoint to Snob.

Double agency sublimated: Konchalovsky's *White Nights*

In choosing to focus on life in Russia's rural peripheries, Konchalovsky was returning in *White Nights* to a theme that had preoccupied him at the beginning of his career. His second feature film, *Asya's Happiness* (*Asino schast'e* 1966) depicted peasant life on a collective farm, with its hardships, disappointments,

and unfulfilled aspirations, in a harshly realist, non-propagandistic way which set him at odds with the Soviet authorities. The film was shelved for two decades, and released only in the glasnost period. In *The Postman's White Nights*, Konchalovsky revisits the theme in a post-Soviet context. Another important thread linking the two films is that they each feature a cast of almost exclusively non-professional actors – villagers who themselves lived out the existences of the characters they were portraying. In the case of *White Nights*, the actors, including the postman at the centre of the film, are playing their 'real life' selves.[1]

The use of non-professional actors in *White Nights* must be considered within a very different sociopolitical context to that of its Soviet-era precursor. The gesture is linked to the film's radical strategy of eradicating all traces of the modern, mediatized world that had intervened in the period separating it from *Asya's Happiness*. Significant here is the fact that *White Nights* features as its hero a remnant of the pre-online age. The most dramatic moment in what is essentially an *anti-narrative* plot comes when the motor for the boat that Triapitsyn uses to collect mail from the depot is stolen and Triapitsyn must resort to a trip to a nearby city to search for a new one to allow him to continue distributing letters (as well as provisions and pensions) to the residents of his remote village. What is striking about the daily delivery round around which the anti-narrative is structured is the languorous, jagged pace of the process, as Triapitsyn stops to talk to and often help the villagers (one, an inveterate, barely coherent, drunkard). Nothing could contrast more with the fast-paced, predictable world of instant communication that lies beyond the village's boundaries. According to Konchalovsky, there was no script as such for the film.[2] The crew merely followed the postman on his daily round, filmed his interactions, and constructed a minimal story. The anti-plot element is part of a larger anti-film gesture: *White Nights* strives to free itself from all association with the artifice of the feature film. It is more than an ethnography, however, and a narrative of sorts emerges around Triapitsyn's unrequited feelings for a former classmate, now a single mother, whose son he takes under his wing. In one of the film's most touching sequences, Triapitsyn and the boy take a boat trip down the river in search of the mythical figure of the Kikimora, a spiritual creature of pre-Christian Slavic beliefs. The boy is genuinely frightened yet comforted by Triapitsyn's reassurances.

The theft of Triapitsyn's boat motor leads to a crisis in a life hitherto structured around a repetitive routine signified by the recurring point-of-view shots of the postman's flip-flop shoes, as he stares down into them from his bed on awaking each morning to begin a daily round populated by frustrated, dysfunctional lives, alcoholism (from which Triapitsyn himself had suffered, as we discover when he drinks his first vodka in two years during his visit to the city), and poverty. He packs his possessions following a hasty decision to move to the city but returns, disenchanted, re-committing himself to helping the village community through the daily grind of its uphill struggle for survival.

Yet, the outside world is not absent from the film. Its presence is marked by the inconsequential, superficial chatter playing in the background of the villagers' houses on ubiquitous television and radio sets (unlike in *Ovsianki*, there is not a single computer screen, mobile phone, or tablet in sight). This signals the chasm between the vague, impersonal urban 'centre' from which the chatter is broadcast and the tangible realities of repetitious daily life in this remote Archangelsk region;[3] Channel 1's makeover show *Fashion Verdict* (*Modnyi prigovor*) makes an incongruous accompaniment to Triapitsyn's start-of-day routines and he barely pays attention to it. But it also signals a nostalgic recollection of a Soviet period when peoples' lives everywhere were lived out against the background of the cheerful, uplifting sounds emanating from the radio on the wall. Significantly, the familiar opening chords of the Russian (and, before that, Soviet) national anthem resonate several times during the film, summoning up a time before the advent of the modern, mediatized world that *White Night* effectively erases. The ambivalent Soviet nostalgia theme recurs when Triapitsyn stands with his school friend – the current object of his affections – amidst the ruins of the old school building, recalling episodes from that period, accompanied by the now extra-diegetic sound of the Soviet anthem. It also reasserts itself at the end of the film, in a striking scene in which Triapitsyn and a neighbour are sitting before a stunningly beautiful landscape, when a space rocket (constructed in the nearby city) launches against the skyline. But this is no hankering after former Soviet glories. The camera then cuts to one of the sparse, dilapidated village households, contrasting the vast resources spent on the Soviet, now Russian, space programme and the impoverishment of Russia's rural outposts. Indeed, as Majsova (2016) perceptively argues, several recent post-Soviet films have located narratives constructed around the Soviet space programme in provincial settings in order to reconfigure the centre–periphery relationship as one between space and planet earth, with the provincial settings now acquiring a universalizing role as representative of life on earth (or in Russia) as a whole.

At this point, then, it is continuity rather than rupture with the Soviet era (and with Konchalovsky's own earlier work) that *White Nights* foregrounds. Nonetheless, the closing shots represent a rare moment of uplift, as Triapitsyn reaffirms his attachment to his village community, and the screen fills with the beautiful lakeside landscape. The film is effectively structured around a series of contrasts between the grim dilapidation and sense of abandonment characterizing the everyday lives of the villagers and long shots framed to convey the sublime beauty of the surroundings. Running as a leitmotif are recurring images of Triapitsyn driving his boat across the lake, shot from afar in long takes accompanied by the faint extra-diegetic sound of the single note of an Orthodox church choir, sustained at length, and merging hypnotically with the murmur of the boat motor. At these moments Konchalovsky attempts to transcend his anti-aesthetic and articulate a higher truth, one that certain domestic audiences, encouraged by Konchalovsky's own comments, were all too ready to align with the higher truth of an 'essential' Russia, capable of withstanding whatever hostile actions it is subject to from

outside. In the address he gave at the film's premiere, Konchalovsky left no doubt about his attitude to the sanctions imposed on Russia following its illegal actions in Ukraine:

> The Russian North is a special world. Here people are taciturn and inured to harsh conditions. But these people demonstrate the qualities which make our country absolutely undefeatable. And if gas, the electricity and everything is shut off in Russia, nothing will happen – Russia will survive. We do not fear any sanctions while we have people as resilient as this.
>
> (Konchalovsky 2014)

The anti-aesthetic posture and stances adopted within *White Nights* are closely bound up with its critique of the modern, mediatized world more generally. The slow, inconsequential interactions and utterly unstructured rhythms of life illustrated by Triapitsyn's daily delivery round, characterized by long conversations with each villager, stand in sharp contrast to the ever-increasing velocity and ever more rationalized and networked complexities of the globalized workplace.

Even though *White Nights* received its first and only domestic showing on state television's Channel 1, it is no fawning paean to the Russian state. Apart from the grim, primitive lives it depicts, and its implied critique of a distant centre of power more inclined to spend resources on patriotic indulgences, the film was in deliberate breach of the law against the use of curse words in Russian cinema, introduced as part of the Putin regime's increasingly extreme advocacy of traditional family values. The Channel 1 showing is memorable for the volume of bleeped-out swear words which recur throughout. Konchalovsky claimed that they occurred naturally as the film crew followed the villagers going about their daily business. But his decision not to compromise on their inclusion accorded with his refusal to adhere to the official agenda. Indeed, he signalled his intention to not release the film to Russian cinema audiences, whom he saw as 'too influenced by Hollywood' (quoted in Kozlov 2014).

White Nights is characterized by deep ideological ambiguities. It evinces both nostalgic desire for the lost Soviet past and contempt for its legacy; patriotic admiration of the resilient character of Russia's remote rural dwellers and the sublime beauty of their surroundings, yet also a horror for the degeneration of their lives; a critique of global modernity (including that embracing the film industry) to which it is, however, itself entirely vulnerable, as the framing of its (anti-)narrative acknowledges. For the opening credits appear against the background of a set of clichéd, tasteless depictions of the beauty of the Arkhangel'sk region. As the camera pans outwards, it becomes clear that the images are imprinted on a cheap tablecloth, which also features a stylized black cat. The credits for the actors, meanwhile, each appear with six digits stylized as the postal codes used on Russian (and Soviet) envelopes. For all its sublime beauty, *White Nights* is replete with static long-takes of the stunning Arkhangel'sk landscape, now contextualized as images of images packaged for reproducibility and mass consumption.[4] This framing device confirms that the mediatization of the modern world cannot

ultimately be transcended, that it is bound up with the commodified packaging of images for consumption which facilitates their media circulation, and that Konchalovsky's own film is traversed by these very processes.

Here we should invoke a Hollywood precursor to *White Nights*, of which Konchalovsky was undoubtedly aware: the 1997 post-apocalyptic film, *The Postman*, starring Kevin Kostner, in which the survivor of an unspecified global disaster discovers an old US postal service mail carrier and sets about delivering letters he finds to their intended recipients, gradually restoring the American nation in the process. Konchalovsky acknowledges that he gained the idea for his film from an article he read on the internet and it seems certain that he is referring to an article called 'The Postman' by Marina Akhmedova, published on the *Russian Reporter* website, in which she discusses the 1997 film and its relationship with American nationhood (Akhmedova 2012). *White Nights* is Konchalovsky's authentic Russian riposte to the action-packed glamour of its Hollywood antecedent.

Despite its gesturing towards gritty, unmediated authenticity *White Nights* is tangled up with the Hollywood ambiences with which Konchalovsky was so familiar. Nor can it liberate itself from the commodity status that defines the global film industry and guarantees the ease of circulation of those meanings. As if in reluctant acknowledgement of this reality, Konchalovsky overlays *White Nights* with a surreal element, sporadically introducing a mysterious black cat into Triapitsyn's daily routine; whether a figment of his dreams or an actual beast, the black cat is the one depicted in the cheap, mass reproducible tablecloth with which the film starts.

White Nights explores the complex relationship between notions of rural Russian authenticity, its Soviet antecedent, the official state patriotism of the Putin regime, and the commodified distortions of the global film industry. The relationship plays out in an undecided series of overlays which destabilize any emergent unity of viewpoint or implied audience. As in Shakhnazarov's adaptation of 'Ward no. 6' discussed in Chapter 4, the disruption is textually reflected in the appearance within the film's frame of an invisible, unspecified interlocutor; *White Nights* opens with the voice of an invisible Triapitsyn commenting on a set of old photographs of past times. It is never made clear whom he is addressing; nor does the frame device recur. Konchalovsky's double agency enables him at once to articulate an expression of authentic Russianness that appeals to a range of patriotisms and to undermine that expression through a recursive strategy leaving Russian nationhood in the balance.

Londongrad: a home from home

A radically different form of double agency is at work in STS television channel's 2015 serial, *Londongrad*. It achieved phenomenal success on Russian television, becoming the most popular programme in its schedule slot and helping STS leap to the head of the viewing figure table for all Russian channels in September 2015 (Amirdzhanian et al. 2015). Shown in a series of 28 50-minute episodes, it focuses on the adventures of a group of London-based Russians who have established an

agency to assist Russian-speakers who encounter problems (legal, commercial, socio-economic, etc). The main characters are Misha, who established the agency after dropping out of Oxford University; Alisa, who joined him as one of his first clients when seeking to evade an oligarch father insisting, against her will, that she register for an architecture degree in a prestigious London college; Stepan from Ryazan, the agency's chauffeur, whose taxi is an old Soviet Lada that has seen better days; and Boris Brikman, a successful, but self-important, Jewish–Russian lawyer. As these characterizations imply, the serial has a strong comic element, but it is also a detective thriller and a romantic melodrama.

The serial's creator and lead writer, Mikhail Idov, is himself a Russian émigré living in and working in Los Angeles, so the decision of STS to commission his serial and film much of it in London was bold, the more so because it was broadcast when relations between the Russian and British states were at a historically low ebb, following Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine. It was partly for this reason that the show attracted such attention in the UK, as well as in Russia, and partly because of the growing negative publicity surrounding the activities of London's super-rich Russian population (Walker 2015; Parfitt 2015). In an interview with ITV, Idov suggested that the rationale for the serial included an aspiration that it 'would improve relations with the West by showing Britain in a positive light to his countrymen' (ITV 2015).

In its setting, narratives, representational strategies, and performative orientation to its audience (of which Idov's gesture of intercultural reconciliation is but one dimension), the series encapsulates the workings of recursive nationhood. In particular, by articulating Russia's relationship to otherness via a persistent, three-way interplay of domestic, diasporic, and global perspectives, each of which conditions, interrogates, aligns with, and distances itself from the other, it adds a layer of complexity to a series of such layers, one capable potentially of infinite expansion. Much of what is required to understand *Londongrad* is condensed into the serial's opening credit sequence, which, accompanied by a thumping, thriller-like soundtrack, depicts in a rapid montage sequence stereotypical images of London's iconic sites: Tower Bridge, the Gherkin and London Eye, double-decker red buses, black taxis, and London Underground signs, combined with stylized animations of James Bond-like heroes bearing black revolvers. The sequence concludes with the superimposition on the London landscape of a classic London Underground sign carrying in Cyrillic script the name, Londongrad.

The image visually captures the dramatic–comic premise around which the subsequent action revolves – that of a group of Russians who, whilst thoroughly acclimatized to the London landscape, nonetheless superimpose upon it distinctively Russian sensibilities and lifestyles. This is confirmed in the show's subtitle: '*Znai nashikh*!' (which translates roughly as 'This is what we Russians are!) and in what became the advertising tagline for the serial, claimed to be one in which the Russian heroes 'knock the whole of London off its perch' (*ves' London na ushi postavit'*). However, the pseudo-patriotic bravado of the subtitle and tagline, like the opening montage sequence, is highly stylized. Their shared modality is

one of a self-conscious mediation of London, and of the Russian impact upon it, through the prism of what the worldly young Russian audience at which the serial is targeted will recognize as the standard foreign stereotype of the city as an embodiment of quintessential Englishness.

The idealized London conveyed in the serial's opening sequence is that of the older generation of Soviet-raised Russians who created such imaginary landscapes as objects of aspiration. This phenomenon finds expression in the character of the lawyer, Brikman, who, we learn, emigrated to Britain in the 1980s, and, bemoaning the disappearance of the old English aristocracy of his Soviet imagination, recreated through his home and office decor the antiquated surroundings of the nineteenth-century English gentleman as depicted in Igor Maslennikov's legendary Sherlock Holmes adaptations for Soviet television.

It is also reflected in several of the comic plot lines, including one featuring a company bidding to be providers of their upmarket brand of English tea to the royal family and securing the help of the Londongrad agency in their endeavours via Alisa's new, equally upmarket, English boyfriend (Episode 4). Post-Soviet viewers of the serial are treated not to an unmediated representation of London, but to a representation of a representation of London: one filtered through the prism of a consciously stereotypical and idealized image belonging squarely within Soviet consciousness. *Londongrad* is as much a visualization of post-Sovietness as it is of Englishness.

Stylization pervades *Londongrad*. It is most overtly evident in the regular interruption of the thriller storylines by set pieces delivered directly to camera by Misha, who provides fast-paced, ironic accounts of the specific, idiosyncratic feature of British/English culture featured at that point. The tea-plot is punctuated by Misha's to-camera homily about the role of tea-drinking rituals in British society. A storyline about corruption at Oxford University (Episode 7) is interrupted by a breathless account of the mystique of Oxbridge and its place in Britain's class-ridden system of social values. Each episode includes at least two such interruptions which foreground Misha's dual status as lead character in the action and a mediatory, tour guide figure, who serves up a conveniently packaged introduction to English culture and society, at the same time challenging viewers' suspension of disbelief and drawing attention to the fact that they are viewing a version of London sanitized by the Russian émigré community perspective on it.

The interruption device calls attention to the émigré dimension itself. What is on offer in *Londongrad* are 'Londonised Russians', and, conversely, a 'Russified London'. The relationship between the two is played out in a complex game of recognition and misrecognition, de-familarization and re-familiarization, sameness and difference. This is apparent from scenes in the opening series shot in Heathrow Airport where, from Misha's viewpoint, a steady stream of arriving plane passengers is observed, all of whom are dressed in fashionable casual clothes. It is only when two of them are faintly heard speaking Russian that Misha is able to identify his client, a young boy carrying a violin (his rich father, worried about his son's lack of commitment, had wanted Londongrad to take him under its wing).

Such visual devices encourage viewers to hesitate between assimilating émigré Russians to a class of uniformly globalized, cosmopolitan, English-speaking nomads, or recognizing in them the tell-tale indicators of rooted Russianness. The oscillatory effect is encapsulated in the spectrum that runs from Misha (fluent English-speaking, dressed for each episode in a nationally indeterminate grey hoodie and jeans, and operating with such confidence that he is often able to pass himself off as British, through Brikman (who self-presents as a grotesque parody of the English gentleman, thereby revealing his quintessential Russianness), to Stepan, who speaks no English, dresses according to the stereotypical image of the uncouth Russian provincial, and drives an old Lada.

Office interiors are similarly homogenized, including that of the Londongrad agency, with its high-rise views across London, and its combination of futuristic, corporate desks, casual chairs, and flickering computer monitors. The highly self-conscious choice of visual décor – a reproduction of the iconic Petrov-Vodkin painting of a boy on a horse; a framed black-and-white portrait of Princess Diana – serves, however, to ground the office within the culture and perceived mind set of the 'global Russian', a phrase coined by the founders of the controversial Russian *Snob* magazine.[5] The painting points to an intellectual sophistication and pride in the Russian artistic heritage with which global Russians would identify. So, the portrayal of the émigré Russians is likewise tongue in cheek, semi-conventionalized and mediated, their image filtered through a picture of the contemporary Russian immigrant in London whose imaginary status is repeatedly foregrounded.

The Russian-speaking types who populate *Londongrad* recall the archetypes through which the Western press views the Russian presence in London. The plots of a selection of individual episodes revolve around a violent, jealousy-related dispute at the heart of the Bolshoi Ballet company (Episode 27); a dissident Russian scientist being pursued by the FSB (Episode 8); the secretive transportation from Moscow to London of an illegal substance concealed in a metal tube (Episode 9); the opulent Russian wife of a rich English businessman seeking to demonstrate her husband's infidelity (Episode 2); the failing Oxford student whose desperate father is prepared to use bribery to ensure his son's success (Episode 7); corruption at the heart of Russian preparations for the World Cup in 2018 (Episode 28); a successful Russian writer seeking a deal for film adaptation rights to his novels (Episode 3); a sinister criminal type in sunglasses blackmailing Misha for regular payments of money (Episodes 10–13). Even Sasha (a late-joining member of Londongrad, and a computer geek capable of fantastical feats of online hacking at implausible speeds) corresponds to the Russian menace of Western popular imagination.

In order to solve the problems confronting the gallery of post-Soviet archetypes, the Londongrad agents resort to acts of dissembling – playing up to or acting out roles enabling them to blend with the milieus into whose midst they penetrate in order to gain the information they need. Alisa dresses in tight, provocative clothing to conform to the image of an escort girl to enable her to visit a seedy nightclub run by a tyrannical Russian businesswoman. Misha temporarily

reassumes the demeanour of a brilliant young Russian Oxford maths student to help a client see his own less-than-committed son through his exams.

Most episodes involve Alisa and Misha dissembling as English or adopting the mask of a familiar, post-Soviet Russian archetype. The denouements to the plot lines often undercut these archetypes; the scientist pursued by the FSB turns out to be suffering from memory loss, confusing the FSB with the KGB; the sinister tube transported from Moscow to London contains a rare medical treatment rather than a destructive poison; the exam cheating scandal at Oxford leads to a chain of corruption involving an English don; even Stepan's image as the hapless provincial Russian taxi-driver is complicated when it emerges that he has come to London to find his estranged daughter.

Such revelations reinforce the sense that, just as London is depicted self-consciously through the eyes of Russian notions of England (in the final episode, Misha associates Alisa's name, and the entire serial, with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*), so are the heroes and heroines filtered through Western imaginations of Russian diaspora 'types'. The fact that many of these types coincide with their domestic internalizations – that they are globally articulated – enriches a three-way filtering prism in which transculturally generated images of Englishness, Russianness, and Russian émigré-ness are re-projected through one another in a circular hall-of-mirrors effect.

At its half-way point (Episodes 15–16), *Londongrad*, however, takes the play of recursive prisms in a new direction. A storyline stretched over two episodes is filmed on location in St Petersburg, where Misha must return to rescue his autistic brother from the clutches of a criminal gang connected to the world of online gaming and which is keeping him hostage. The serial's entire visual idiom shifts dramatically for the duration of these episodes, shedding its stylized conventionality, ironic tone, and three-way semiotic interplay. The semi-idealized fantasies of fast-moving London settings are replaced by grey, dismal landscapes of snow-swept Petersburg streets, formidable Soviet-era tower blocks, poorly stocked food shops, curt shop assistants, and the dark, dilapidated interiors of unkempt apartment entrances.

For several key points in the drama, Misha is absent from the screen, the action depicted from his first-person viewpoint with a shaky, hand-held camera. The contrast with surrounding episodes momentarily establishes this as the authentic, unmediated background, the suppressed 'real' of a post-Soviet Russia in which the 'Soviet' element is to the fore and for which the vivid, fast-paced London (and Moscow) featured elsewhere in the serial supplies the 'imaginary' counterpart. It then dawns on viewers that this St Petersburg is no more than an intentionally hyperbolized mediation of the drearily sinister Leningrad of popular memory (Western and post-Soviet), adding another twist to the spiral. It reminds us that the serial is at root a complex visual rendition of Russian nationhood filtered through a transcultural imaginary, not an idealized representation of Russians afloat in a sea of quaint Englishness.

The central storyline spanning all 28 episodes is that of the implicit sexual tension between Misha and Alisa. Misha is unimpressed by what Alisa claims

she has to offer the agency and agrees to her insistent demands to work for it on a trial basis initially. He is less impressed still when, in Episode 3, she tries to persuade him to take on the case of a young Russian girl in love with an Irish boy, whose Traveller community have identified a gypsy bride for him. The girl has no money to pay the Londongrad fee and when Alisa nonetheless pleads with Misha to offer the agency's help, he retorts angrily that it is not a charity. In common with most of the episodes, parallel stories, corresponding to parallel cases, are followed. As the stubborn Alisa preoccupies herself with the Irish Travellers, Misha busies himself with the far more lucrative case of helping an eminent Russian writer sell the film rights to his latest crime thriller novel. The tension between the two persists throughout most of the serial, with Alisa complaining of Misha's hard-nosed commercialism and he of her soft-headed and impractical charitability.

Episode 3 is the serial's ideological fulcrum. The eminent writer appeals to British film companies because he claims connections to Russia's criminal class and a prison spell. He is seen as offering British audiences an authentic slice of the post-Soviet underworld. The fact that these attributes are spurious emerges when the writer, hearing of Alisa's case, decides to help her by ingratiating himself with the Irish Travellers and misrepresenting himself as a hardened Russian gypsy. The ruse is soon exposed. The Travellers take him captive, causing him disastrously to miss the signing of his film rights contract. Undeterred, he takes selfies with members of the Traveller encampment, convinced that its grim, authentic realities offer rich material for his public image and his next novel.

Both the British film company and the Russian writer engage in a form of commodification: packaging the object of their attentions into a saleable image of what it represents, ensuring that British viewers of the yet-to-be-made film are treated to an image of criminal Russia that appeals to their sensibilities, and readers of the writer's next novel are able to align their notions of Irish Traveller authenticity with that of Russian popular imagination.[6]

Whilst Misha complies with the mutual commodification process, Alisa resists it. In this contrast lies the conflict at the heart of the serial. Misha's stylized, cameo presentations of London, and the serial's own mediation of conventionalized images of Englishness and Russianness in both domestic and diasporic variants, are commodified packages, filtered through one another. England (London) is viewed through the prism of pre-packaged notions in the mind of Russians diaspora members, who in turn oscillate between semi-ironized conformity to Western images of the Russian abroad commodified in many a post-1991 Western crime thriller, and alignment with national self-images popular in Russia, itself portrayed in multiple modes: that of the fast-paced, high-rise global city of international thriller movies, and that of the grey, forbidding Soviet city, dilapidated and snow-bound.

Misha's extra-diegetic tour guide interruptions link the interplay via which both Russia and London are represented in the serial and the logic of commodification that it interrogates. Alisa's line of resistance counterposes commodification to the values of charity and a sentimental attachment to the overriding precedence of

family ties. Here, the plot lines overarching the discrete narratives of individual episodes become significant. Sentimental melodrama is a staple of the Russian serial format whose hybrid generic influences are acutely evident in *Londongrad*. Alisa's own reconciliation with her father, Misha's commitment to his autistic brother, even Brikman's reunion with the wife who abandons him to pursue her dreams of a career on the stage, all help establish the central tension running through the serial. This is the contradiction generated by post-Soviet Russia's hesitant accommodation with globalized neoliberal commodification and its associated subjectivities.[7]

Related to the commodification theme is that of the cosmopolitan lifestyles and status of the global Russian, of which Misha and Alisa in particular, are exemplars. Viewers witness a vast gallery of characters, often depicted initially within London's crowded hustle-bustle of streets, shops, and offices. Most episodes feature an early moment of recognition when the tell-tale sound of the Russian language identifies a subset of the crowd as compatriots. When, as is several cases, much of the subsequent dialogue is conducted in fluent English (albeit heavily dubbed), cognitive dissonance threatens, as audiences must self-identify with compatriots who look, sound, and behave like globalized cosmopolitans in a distinctly non-native environment. The younger characters (Misha, Alisa, Sasha) remain attached to their tell-tale global technical aids (the ubiquitous iPhones, forever vibrating to draw their attention from the action). Misha openly expresses a sense of distance from other Russians and never abandons his standard grey hoodie, pale sweatshirt, jeans, and trainers. Like his colleagues, he jets with exaggerated ease between London and Moscow (the authenticating tedium of airport checks, and of the flights themselves, are always edited out).

The false trail that Alisa lays is indicative of the comic acts of dissembling, which define the behaviour of global Russians operating in *Londongrad'*s cosmopolitan spaces. The serial appropriates features of the picaresque novel, characterized by comic tales of roguery, deception, and adventurism linked loosely by the first-person perspective of the hero, who must deceive up to, but not beyond, the borders of legality to survive in a world of corruption and treachery. *Londongrad* positions the acts of dissembling that drive its narratives on the boundary between (i) deceit in order to assimilate to the cosmopolitan spaces that it depicts; and (ii) dissembling aimed at appropriating those spaces for the reassertion of native behaviour models celebrating the tongue-in-cheek 'z*nai nashikh*' tagline and Alisa's charitable counterpoint to Misha's hard-nosed business sense. The dominance of English gradually recedes. In the episode concerning jealous rivalries at the heart of the Bolshoi Ballet, the dialogue is entirely in Russian, and London is a mere silent backdrop to an intrigue which could have unfolded in any global city. The episode concludes with the entire *Londongrad* cast picking up the mournful refrains of the traditional folk song 'Not for me' ('*Ne dlia menia*') in a sentimentalized expression of nostalgic longing for the culture they have abandoned. Across its 28 episodes, the serial works through a contradictory, incomplete response to the questions of what it means to be a global Russian and how to negotiate the cosmopolitan spaces and lifestyles of a disorienting world in

which the neoliberal logic of commodification holds sway over traditional values of community.

As Martin-Barbero's (1992) work on the *telenovela* as a media form suggests, one of the genre's unique features is that the very length of its narrative arc enables it to mutate as it unfolds, to recalibrate its themes, look, characterizations, and discourses in light of audience responses and other pressures, and to change the outcomes of its multiple plot lines. Martin-Barbero also claims that the *telenovela*'s characteristic melodramatic mode enables it to explore controversial social and ideological tensions, whilst ultimately resolving them and restoring the status quo. Both insights are relevant to *Londongrad*'s treatment of Russian nationhood and Idov's unceremonious sacking from the project.[8]

The central melodramatic line in the classic *telenovela* invariably revolves around the developing romance between the hero and the heroine. *Londongrad* represents a hybrid genre combining elements of the series (each episode following a discrete plot line, involving a central cast of characters but resolved with the confines of that episode) and the *telenovela* (in which the same cast act out a single narrative over the course of multiple episodes). It follows the melodramatic format in broad outline, with the 28 episodes providing a series of obstacles, delays, and setbacks in the heroine's quest to gain her lover's affections. In the Latin American *telenovela*, the obstacles take the form of influential rogues and villains intent on thwarting the ambitions of or seducing the heroine, typically a poor provincial girl in the employ of a rich, handsome young man (her love interest). *Londongrad*'s Alisa is hardly poor, nor is she explicitly seeking love, but her role in the agency begins as that of Misha's junior partner, in a bid to escape the grasping clutches of a powerful, possessive father.

The main obstacle hindering any romance between Alisa and Misha is the seeming chasm in their philosophical visions for the agency. However, the chasm shrinks when Alisa is made aware that Misha has secretly been transferring agency profits to the Russian gang holding Misha's autistic, but brilliant, brother captive in St Petersburg, in order to buy back his brother's debt. This, it turns out, was the primary motivation for the establishment of the agency, re-aligning Misha's apparent consumerist greed with the traditional virtues of charity and family loyalty. In a role reversal spanning the final episodes, Misha drops the business of the agency to assist Alisa retrieve one of her kidneys, apparently excised from her body whilst she was deliberately drugged as part of an international criminal vendetta against her father in Moscow. It later turns out that the kidney had not been removed but hidden from X-ray vision by a new technique of medical deception, but the episode finally brings Misha and Alisa together in a passionate embrace.

In a second reconciliation, Alisa is reunited with her oligarch father who, it is revealed, has, rather than perpetrating corruption, and despite the photo of Putin we are now shown hanging prominently in his office, been the victim of a high-level French conspiracy in relation to Russia's 2018 World Cup preparations (appropriately, his daughter's agency rescues him from disaster). At the same time, Sasha finally acknowledges her feelings for Vadim, and Brikman's wayward wife returns to him. Unambiguously traditional values, tinged with the tones of official patriotism, displace the disruptive effects of the performative interplay

of domestic, diaspora, and non-Russian perspectives, each itself inflected with transcultural meanings and distancing, ironic modalities. Bhabha's pedagogical nationalism prevails, which is unsurprising given Idov's loss of prominence and the growing constraints on filming in London.

Interestingly, the premise, the semiotic function, and the narrative trajectory of the later project, *Optimisty*, that Idov helped create for state television channel, Rossiia, were all similar to those of *Londongrad*. It began as a bold and stylish portrayal of a unit of young Soviet diplomats of the Khrushchev era whose linguistic training, cosmopolitan outlooks and intercultural nous enabled them, like Idov himself, to mediate the Soviet Union's relationship with its Western rivals to the benefit of the former. The star of the first series and head of the unit was a Latvian woman who had lived in the US but, owing to her communist sympathies, emigrated to the Soviet Union (she thus follows Misha in figuring Idov's own cultural intermediary role). Like *Londongrad*, the first series of *Optimisty* managed, by dint of its critique of Khrushchev's still oppressive and subservient bureaucratic apparatus, to make numerous daring (if deliberately ambivalent) comments on conditions in Putin's Russia. Set in the context of the Cuban missile crisis, however, the second series degenerated into something resembling a much more traditionally patriotic spy drama, albeit one featuring dizzying acts of double agency on both sides. Here, the resolution of the missile crisis is attributed unambiguously to the triumph of Soviet espionage over the blundering of its US equivalent.

Both serials play out the contradictions at the heart of post-Soviet Russian nation-building in an increasingly networked world in which commodification and cosmopolitan universalism collude yet conflict with one another and of a Russian media landscape in which, despite the Kremlin's best efforts, it struggles fully to suppress competing voices. The audiovisual enactment of these dynamics, and specifically, the role accorded to visions of an imaginary London in the earlier serial, lend them a semiotic complexity that remains obscured in other contexts. It is fitting, then, that the final scenes of Episode 28 of *Londongrad* are shot not in London, but at one of Moscow's most iconic visual settings: the park, backdrop of which is the gigantic main building of Moscow State University. It is here that Alisa finds Misha waiting for her after their final escapade (he remembers how she had told him it was her favourite spot in Moscow), and they declare their mutual affection.

The sight is soaked in the history of Russia's Soviet past, now seemingly displaced by the liberated, globe-trotting lifestyles of its youth (the amorous Londongrad pair), but it conveys also the permanence and sheer spatial immensity pervading the mythology of post-Soviet Russian nationhood. This is all too appropriate now that the disruptive tide of recursions has been (temporarily) stilled.

Double agency and global Russians: the cosmopolitan as patriot

Londongrad's urbane hero, Misha, provides a fictional illustration of the target audience of Snob, our final case study. This is unsurprising, given Mikhail Idov's

close association with what, as established earlier, is a multimedia, multi-modal project rather than a discrete artistic text. At the core of Snob is the idea of an elite social network of well-to-do, outward-looking Russians prepared to pay a steep membership charge for the privilege of access to social events, exhibition launches, and film premieres, and to like-minded, similarly wealthy and cultured compatriots. Moreover, the subscription fee entitles members to free copies of the glossy, well-produced magazine, *Snob*, the content of which combines serious, independent-minded political news and discussion pieces on issues – domestic and international – with cultural analysis and opinion provided by a select group of (mostly, but not exclusively) Russian writers, artists, musicians, and theatre directors, high-end fashion news and lifestyle features. The latter cover some controversial issues commonly discussed in the West, but rarely acknowledged in the Russian press (mental illness, for example). Much of the content of the magazine is now freely available on the Snob website (in the earlier model access to the website required a subscription also, but this was abandoned in the interests of expanding the clientele).

Several related tensions underlying the Snob project led us to intercultural mediation's role in the construction of Russian nationhood. It is first worth noting that Snob presents itself as a unique 'international Russian-language media project', a statement with which a 'media kit' available from its website opens.[9] The idea of a kit betrays the fact that Snob does not have a ready-made audience to appeal to, but must work to co-create, that audience according to its own ideological precepts and assumptions. Its logic is tautologous. It lists as its key objective 'To gather the greatest possible number of representatives of the target audience and unite them in a dynamic, well-informed community', clarifying that this target audience consists of 'so-called "Global Russians," that is, successful Russian-speaking professionals living anywhere in the world, working in any field'. From the outset, Snob acknowledges that the community which accords it its identity does not exist as such. Rather than being assumed, or widely established, the attributes of the so-called Global Russians (the qualifier, 'so-called' highlighting the contested nature of the term) must be meticulously laid out in the context of a document which makes no effort to hide its status as a manifesto. Those attributes are at once so broad as to be meaningless, and yet at a level of precision so exaggeratedly arbitrary and prescriptive as to reveal a comically dialogic self-awareness:

A portrait of the TA [= Target Audience]

Age: 25–45

Background: consider Russian to be their native language; either reside in Russia or are from Russia but live elsewhere without necessarily considering themselves immigrants – people with, culturally speaking, a dual cultural background.

Residence: urban or suburban areas

Education: college and above

Occupation: successful professionals; mid- or high-level managers, independent entrepreneurs, including highly successful creative professionals
Income: from $60,000 per household
Travel: travel three to four times a year, usually internationally, for business and pleasure
Internet networking habits: regular followers of current events on the web and in other media outlets, magazines, TV, specialized professional publications, etc.; frequent users of social networks, blogs, comment boards, etc.

A second, more apparent, contradiction lies in the notion of an elite with access to a password-protected, subscription-only area of the website – a closed, relatively intimate community in which there is full mutual transparency (the network does not allow anonymous comments). For this barely accords with the ideology of 'open-ness to the world', and with the liberal, cosmopolitan values promoted by the editorial team. A second, more recent iteration of the 'Portrait of the Reader' section of the media kit listed the following qualities:

- Russian speaker of a megapolis between the ages of 30 and 50
- Financially well-to-do
- Attributes great significance to quality of life but aspires towards responsible consumption
- Feels the demand to make the world a better place but does not want to aggressively impose his/her world view
- Follows some serious pursuit or other (music, sport, travel, art)
- Is tolerant to differently grounded points of view
- Often crosses the world's borders

Ironically, the more recent version describes the project still more misleadingly as a 'single media space' (*edinoe mediaprostranstvo*). The contradiction found empirical expression in a change of financial strategy that the Snob editorial teams recognized it needed to realize its goals: making the rest of the website available free of charge.

Third, and still more obviously, is the contradiction inherent in the very term 'Global Russian', which conjoins the cosmopolitan values of the 'world citizen' with an enduring commitment to Russianness, and thus to national specificity, however loosely defined. That definition ultimately extends to anyone who, regardless of the language they speak, 'thinks in Russian'. But the prominent availability of English-language versions of all of Snob's platforms, the presence of several English speakers in the team of contributors (including Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie) and the explicit, proudly acknowledged modelling of the magazine on *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* within the Media Kit, point to an ambiguity: are 'Global Russians' assimilated to the world of Global English, or, conversely, is the whole of the globalizing English world being brought into the orbit of the values of Global Russians and made to 'think in Russian'? As Tine

Roesen points out in the only scholarly publication dedicated to Snob (Roesen 2011: 89), many of the participants provide their names in Roman rather than Cyrillic script form and 'thanks to a recent Anglo-phone extension, a "highlights in English" page with the address wishicouldreadsnob.com, non-Russian speakers may also get a glimpse of the project'. The eclectic mix of news (domestic-Russian and international) and opinion does little to resolve the contradiction.

The ambiguity leads to the final tension at the heart of the Snob project in what is effectively a single paradigm of equivalent and related contradictions. The 'Russian' component of the Global Russian is strongly associated with the world of literature and high culture – the traditional preserve of what loyal Soviet citizens proudly characterized as the 'most well-read nation in the world'. Culture is first on the list of selected topics covered by the project, and the selected examples of preferred genres include fiction, creative photo projects, and comics. The magazine version of the media kit boasts that '*Snob* Magazine is the only glossy, intellectual format of its kind with a serious literary component'.[10] 'Project Participants' feature luminaries of the Russian art and culture scene: art collectors, the gallery owner, Marat Guelman, art historians, actresses, and conductors. These participants have been specially selected as 'opinion shapers' by the editorial team and contribute and have access to all aspects of the project. However, ordinary individuals may only gain access to the full privileges on payment of a fee. High culture is not cheap.

High culture, in fact, serves as a bridge joining the open, liberal, cosmopolitan values espoused by Snob and the worship of the expensive commodities of the realm of high-end global capitalism. This is best encapsulated in the presentation of the glossy magazine which comes with the subscription to those who can afford it. The Media Kit describes it as 'designed to be a beautiful object – perhaps, a collector's item'. It goes on to boast that 'The quality of the magazine is unparalleled in Russia in terms of the quality of our paper, printing, design, and typography', and that 'High-Quality bonus materials are included with every issue and make every issue unique and memorable'. If culture can be transformed into a saleable commodity, then through the attribution to it of aesthetic qualities of beauty and sophistication, a commodity product which covers, amongst other things, food, alcohol, sex, business, health and wellness, and sports can conversely become an object of high culture.

With Snob's prominent emphasis on paid access to cultural privilege, its entire identity project becomes infused with the logic of commodification and the idea of a purchasable access to a global community of taste.[11] It effectively becomes a project in which self-commodification becomes the means by which its values circulate. The project's logo is of significance here. Consisting of the Cyrillic letters of the word 'snob', but with the initial 'C' represented in inverted form, the logo is a direct transliteration of its English derivative whose representation in Russian is intended magically to divest it of the negative connotations of irrational, class-driven condescension towards those of modest means and low cultural taste. The inverted 'C' marks the point of transformation through which the snob as Global Russian acquires genuine good taste, free-of-class prejudice, and becomes instead

the outward-looking, unprejudiced, liberal cosmopolitan whose commodity exchange value is inseparable from his/her orientation towards an infinitely open world. The full stop placed at the end of the word, **Эноб.**, designates the term as a sentence rather than a noun – an active proposition and not a static concept. The proposition is, then, a form of meritocracy: *anyone* prepared to engage actively in the Snob project has it within them to become a Global Russian.

The inverted 'C' of the title also serves as the index of recursion: the point at which the familiar tension between cultural taste, economic class, and a commitment to cosmopolitan open-ness is re-enacted as a relationship of integrated wholeness. In parallel, upon the traditional opposition between the patriotism of Russian identity and the nation-free devotion to world citizenship is superimposed dialogically a new, unified concept of Global Russianness, in which the boundaries of the latter term are widened, decentred, obscured, and elided with the former. Cosmopolitanism in turn acquires specific, national attributes. In becoming a state of mind, a unique stance towards others, the Global Russian is transformed into an agent for the reconciliation of nation and globe, an ideal representation of the rooted world citizen.

Calhoun (2008: 444) argues that a hybrid, 'both/and' structure is at the heart of many cosmopolitan projects, which attempt to 'signal both the identity (and therefore unity) of all human beings and appreciation for and ability to feel at home among the actual differences between people and peoples'. Snob, however, rejects hybridity in favour of an elision of national difference and a global identity in which each term strives implicitly to subsume the other. Calhoun is also alert to the 'fashion for universalism' which 'misleads us about the inequalities built into ostensibly universalist projects' (427–428). The latter admonition applies in full to Snob, of course, although the universalism that it espouses is from the outset, an avowedly exclusionary universalism, access to which is specified, quite literally, 'down to the penny'. It is, in a second paradox not only exclusionary in class terms but also hubristic in its national dimension. Rather than, as Linklater (2007: 36) contends of the notion, embracing cosmopolitanism to 'suffuse' particular identities 'with a sense of moral accountability to other human beings', it, conversely, appropriates cosmopolitanism and suffuses it with a sense of the superiority of a particular ethnonational identity.

Snob manages its contradictions, ambiguities, inversions, and elisions via its own elusive status as a global project of co-construction the precise spatio-temporal location of which is difficult to determine. It migrates from internet-based social network to club membership, to open-access website, to exclusive, high-end magazine, and back. In this sense, it is very much a product of the process of mediatization in which 'a social world characterised by interdependencies whose practicality depends on an infrastructure of multiple connected media' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 216). Its posture as an organic, globalized co-construction sanctions the changes in strategy enacted by its owners: its move to a primarily open-access website; its expansion from Moscow to New York and London, and from Russian to English. It is the point, in fact, at which the double agency of cosmopolitan hybridity (both 'global' and 'Russian') dissolves itself

into an irresolvable conundrum: that of the Global Russian, for whom to be truly global requires a collective articulation of true Russianness.

Conclusions

These three very different case studies have highlighted the implications of Russia's intimate intertwinement with globalization in the deeply mediatized process which began, like the new Russia itself, with the advent of the internet in 1991. This has meant among other things that versions of Russianness, or Russian national identity, have been self-consciously saturated throughout by an awareness of that process. Notions of projecting Russia onto the 'global stage' in this context become highly problematic. It is perhaps for this reason that each example featured media-privileged intercultural mediators who served to translate the language of globalism into that of Russian distinctiveness and back.

In Konchalovsky's case, on the one hand, his very familiarity with Hollywood and the global film industry gave him licence to articulate a grim, pseudo-pristine, pre-mediatized Russia via an anti-aesthetic liberated from the artifice of acting and the burden of dramatic plot, yet capable of being breached by moments of sublime beauty aligned with the transcendent sound of the heavens. Yet that same familiarity forced him to acknowledge in the framing of the film the full extent of its capitulation to artifice and its connections to the logic of commodification and circulation.

In *Londongrad*, Mikhail Idov's intermediary packaging of national selfhood involved filtering it through a three-way interactive prism of domestic, diasporic, and English imaginings of the Global Russian, in which those imaginings are self-consciously acted out, or acted up to, in order that distance be established from them. The acting up forms part of the serial's contradictory response to how to negotiate the cosmopolitan spaces embraced by London's Global Russians. It recognizes the sway that neoliberal commodification holds over traditional values of community yet proves incapable of recreating the intimacy of community as a plausible counter-vision. Idov's failure means that his double agency is unstainable. The fact that he is erased from the serial as a version of traditional community corrupted by the official values of the state is reasserted.

Snob is at once the most radical of the three projects examined and the one that succumbs most to its own contradictions. Using the full extent of the new media environment available to it, the project assigns the function of intercultural mediation, or double agency, to the very audience it aspires to reach. The co-construction of a pseudo-intimate worldwide network of members whose Russianness is at one with their cosmopolitan global-ness is, as the tongue-in-cheek tone of the 'Media Kit' acknowledges, an impossibility. Its failure exposes the deep insinuation of the principles of commodification into the process by which its values are circulated and the implausibility of the notion of an identity that synergizes national affiliation with cosmopolitan citizenship.

The three projects are unified by their awareness of the fact that any efforts to re-articulate the relationship between Russianness and worldliness are contaminated

by that relationship's pre-existing, deep immersion in its own globally mediated forms. They also share a common recognition that the principles they adopt in those efforts are therefore condemned to be re-enacted over and over without resolution, from which process, however, they paradoxically gain new impulse.

Notes

1 The only two professional actors employed in the film are Irina Ermolova who plays the postman's former classmate and Timur Bondarenko who plays her son.
2 Konchalovsky claims that he submitted a perfunctory script simply to please his funders but then promptly abandoned it when it came to shooting the film (Andrews 2014).
3 The film was shot in a number of different village locations close to the Kenozero lake in the Arkhangel'sk region.
4 This feature of the film is discussed in Sattarova 2015.
5 According to Timon Afinskii, the magazine's UK director, [T]his group of members is united not by political views or by any other views but by their globalness, creativeness and openness to the whole world. According to some statistics, there are 300,000 Russian speakers in London. They might be from Russia, the Ukraine or Kazhakstan. We believe that 10 per cent of this audience are the audience of Snob. Quoted in Billings 2009
6 For the image of the gypsy in Russian popular imagination as reflected in television serials, see Hutchings and Tolz 2015: 121–148.
7 An excellent analysis of post-Soviet Russian visual culture's complex adaptation to the logic of neoliberal commodification is to be found in Khalikova and Fish 2016.
8 For an account of the sacking, see Anonymous (2015).
9 Significantly, the format and the content of the Media Kit seem constantly to be under review. In its current version, the site lists two media kits, one for the site as a whole and one for the magazine. They are available at https://snob.ru/marketing/snob_site_mediakit.pdf and https://snob.ru/marketing/snob_magazine_mediakit.pdf respectively. There is a further version at https://snob.ru/i/indoc/files/snob_mediaKit.pdf.
10 https://snob.ru/marketing/snob_magazine_med iakit.pdf.
11 For the notion of 'high class' magazines as 'communities of taste', see Holmes and Bentley 2015.

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6 Pussy Riot goes West

Re-staging the new Gulag for a global audience

Introduction: the whole world is a stage

Like our analysis in Chapter 4 of Russian cinema's often tacit cultural diplomacy function, Chapter 5 showed that non-state actors can be more effective intercultural mediators than their state-endorsed equivalents. What happens, however, when the Russia being mediated is the nightmare vision of the state's most committed internal foes? Opponents of Putin's Russia can be no more contemptuous of their persecutors than the Pussy Riot collective, two of whose members spent 20 months in prison following their conviction for 'offending the feelings of religious believers' through their 'Punk Prayer' performance.

Whilst there is unquestionably a distinction to be made between nation and state, in the case of Putin's Russia, as elsewhere, the two have become difficult to disentangle (the intertwinement of Orthodoxy – a perennial marker of Russian nationhood – with Putin's state apparatus, being but one example). In defacing a site holy to Orthodox believers and therefore offending their feelings, Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer simultaneously sullies the nation with which Orthodox belief is so bound up; the state was bound, therefore, to react to this 'outrage'.[1]

There is, however, a complication with the now familiar Western media account portraying Pussy Riot as practitioners of what Roudakova (2017: 19–21) calls *parrhesia*, a pure form of 'speaking truth to power' uncontaminated by fear or circumlocution. There is a tension between Pussy Riot's context-specific practice of political protest and its adherence to a performative aesthetic which requires that practice to be mediated to a mass audience. Punk Prayer would have failed dismally if the performers had not been rudely ejected from the cathedral, and if they had not arranged to have the event filmed and uploaded on YouTube, with the cacophonous musical soundtrack artfully edited in at a later stage.

Another instance of the mediatized essence of Pussy Riot's acts of protest was, as we saw in Chapter 2, the infamous Cossack horsewhipping incident at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Pussy Riot is a feminist offshoot of the Voina collective whose previous stunts had included the uploading to YouTube of a video documenting an orgy in a science museum organized to mock President Medvedev's drive to improve Russia's birth rate and a ritual hanging in a Moscow supermarket

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of three mannequins depicting a Jew, a homosexual, and a *Gastarbeiter*. Here, too, the performance appeared to require both cooperation from the very 'actors' against whom it was targeted (the scandalized shop managers; the museum) and, in the case of the ritual hanging, a certain ambiguity as to its meaning, allowing Putin (with characteristically cynical insincerity) to adopt the role of the affronted liberal outraged at the idea of an act that openly provokes violence against vulnerable minority communities. (Significantly, like the provocative film-maker, Andrei Zviagintsev, Voina had received funding from Russia's Ministry of Culture.) There is a role reversal at work here – Putin rails against Voina's aggressive, 'anti-minority' sentiments – the outcome of which proves curiously convenient to both parties and hints again at a paradoxical convergence of interests that is characteristic of the mediatized public sphere.[2]

The multivalent performances of Pussy Riot and Voina are a function of their reliance on mediation, often via YouTube.[3] As Borenstein (2021: 62) notes, this means that their Actionist art is often permeated by 'unresolved contradictions'; he points out that 'as performance art, the Punk Prayer is a copy without an original . . . a documentation of, if not a non-event, then an aborted one', but that, in the trial, state prosecutors treated the video as literal, unadulterated 'evidence document[ing] a crime' (Ibid.). Here, too, then, a curious and counter-intuitive form of collusion between accuser and accused is at work. Indeed, when three members of Pussy Riot were tried, the court case became a global *cause célèbre* and a media battleground of value to both sides, with the proceedings broadcast live from the courthouse in a step which signalled that the Russian state, too, saw this as an opportunity to promote its agenda on the global stage. During the trial, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Mariia Alekhina read programmatic statements of protest targeting conditions in Putin's Russia. Along with images of the trademark colourful balaclavas, Tolokonnikova's blue '*No Pasaran*' t-shirt acquired global iconicity. The statements, littered with references to post-structuralist philosophy, were broadcast across the world, as the trial became the focal point of a highly publicized clash of narratives in which the Kremlin's traditional values agenda confronted a Western press indignant with rage at the excessive treatment meted out to the band and the absurdity of the charges against them. As Wiedlack and Neufeld (2014) argue, the polarization effect distorted Pussy Riot's own more complex attitude to Orthodoxy.

Throughout the prison sentence and beyond, Pussy Riot became a cultural phenomenon of worldwide significance. This did nothing to stem the group's passionate commitment to protesting injustice. Now, however, the meanings of its performances were filtered through a second layer of mediation: not just that of the future notoriety awaiting those acts but also that of the pre-performance brand identity of the actors. With the celebrity personae came an equally hastily improvised celebrity lifestyle. In both its subsequent projects and in the personal demeanours of its members, Pussy Riot remained acutely aware of the web of contradictions it had entered. Tolokonnikova and Alekhina issued impassioned statements rejecting the branding of Pussy Riot. As their post-Punk Prayer careers unfolded, they began to use their celebrity to assail the very consumerist ills to

which that celebrity could be traced. In a joint statement issued by Tolokonnikova and Alekhina, the claim was made that Pussy Riot members:

> act against any personality cult, against hierarchies implied by appearance, age and other visible social attributes. We cover our heads, because we oppose the very idea of using female faces as a trademark for promoting any sort of goods or services.
>
> (Quoted in Wiedlack 2015: 413)

At the same time, they made clear their determination to pursue their campaign to expose the oppressive cruelty of Putin's authoritarian, imperializing state.

Tolokonnikova's and Alekhina's post-Punk Prayer lives became those of the international jet-set. They toured the world, performing, giving media interviews, leading local political protests, meeting with their poststructuralist philosopher heroes, and participating in endless panel discussions. Their political performance art became the subject of multiple learned academic analyses (including, of course, the present one!). Their travels were, however, regularly interrupted with sojourns in Russia, where they continued to flout the sensibilities of their nemeses, empowered by their new-found fame, but repeatedly arrested, assaulted by pro-Kremlin nationalist thugs, and detained in prison.

The careers of these two young women bifurcated, as Tolokonnikova returned to the radical feminist strategies of Pussy Riot and began to apply them in corporeal statements of anti-corporate, anti-misogynistic, defiance in the US (Gajanan 2017). The accession of self-confessed 'pussy-grabber' and Putin-sympathizer, Donald Trump, to the presidency was a gift to Tolokonnikova. She recorded the aptly titled Pussy Riot song, 'Straight Outta Vagina' in direct response to what she saw as the growing and troubling convergence of nationalist authoritarianism and patriarchal violence. The lyrics, performed in a characteristically discordant screech, revealed an awareness of the contradictions that the global branding and artistic performance of the visceral pain of political victimhood entail:

> Does your vagina have a brand?
> Let your vagina start a band
> If your vagina lands in prison
> Then the world is gonna listen
>
> My vagina is tough and dangerous
> Shaking up the major labels
> Vagina gonna take the stage
> Cause vagina's got a lot to say.[4]

Alekhina maintained her focus on the repressive, transnational influence of Putin's state authoritarianism and on its imperialistic patriotic ideology. Her collaboration with the Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) targeted repression against Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian artists, all of whom had suffered under the shadow of the

divisive Ukraine conflict of 2014. In 2017, Alekhina started a romantic relationship with Dmitrii Eneo, an activist in the far-right, pro-Orthodox 'God's Will' group, one of the very organizations that led the outcry against Pussy Riot during the Punk Prayer scandal. This seemingly represented an attempt to introject the shock aesthetics of political performance art into life itself. It could equally be interpreted as a move to counter the easy branding of Alekhina's activist profile. During an interview with *The Daily Beast*, her responses combine provocation and indignation. Of Enteo she says,

> He's kind of a homophobe . . . Actually, he's not a homophobe, he's OK with LGBT people . . . I don't understand this need to mark and define everything.
> (Quoted in Crocker 2017)

Alekhina's work with the BFT centred on the role she played as herself in the play, 'Burning Doors', which was also dedicated to the prison experiences of Ukrainian film director, Oleg Sentsov and Russian performance artist, Piotr Pavlenskii. There is a clear logic in Alekhina's progression from the bold, illicit punk concerts of her Pussy Riot phase to her interest in political theatre. First, the kind of activist art practised by Pussy Riot requires the surrounding context of the repressive state apparatus for it to acquire its intended meaning and impact; it would be difficult to replicate that context on the cosmopolitan, open-minded streets of London, New York, or Berlin. But if the retreat from the real-life stage of Russia's repressive urban spaces to the dramatic stages of refined Western theatre buildings represents a compromise in meaning, by the same token it also constitutes a semiotic gain. It implicitly acknowledges that the open streets and squares on which Pussy Riot's impromptu Russian performances took place were, metaphorically speaking, precisely a 'stage' requiring a mass media audience. By now taking to the real-life theatre stage, Alekhina's fictional performances, based on actual events, become more authentic and immediate (here, the witnesses are live audiences rather than absent viewers). Paradoxically, the fictional portrayal of genuine suffering on a stage before an audience adds a new layer of authenticating meaning to Pussy Riot's earlier, raw explorations of the relationship between performance, politics, and life.

As 'Burning Doors' was concluding its British tour, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova announced a collaboration with London-based theatre group, Les Enfants Terribles, whose provocative title, 'Inside Pussy Riot', seemed to refer back to 'Straight Outta Vagina'. It, too, was based on the brutal realities of Russia's prison system, offering audiences a 'fully immersive experience'.[5] The play was not performed in a theatre but within the space of the Saatchi Art Gallery, which was simultaneously featuring the 'Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism' exhibition as part of a project considering the hundredth anniversary of the 1917 October revolution in the context of Putin's Russia.[6] The Saatchi Gallery became the site at which Pussy Riot's actionist art (political acts in dangerous urban spaces inflected with their own future mediation to anonymous viewers, then re-imagined as artistic performances on authentic stages before live audiences) converges with conflicting

projections of contemporary Russian nationhood. A year later (2018), Alekhina extended Pussy Riot's theatrical turn by performing a multimedia, trans-genre adaptation of her autobiographical account of her post-Punk Prayer imprisonment, *Riot Days* (Alekhina 2017). Here, as in 'Inside Pussy Riot', official and oppositional representations of Russia are included in a continuous sequence of subsequent, dialogic representations, each parasitic on, yet transcendent of, its predecessor. This convergence involves the imbrication of the projection of the Putin state with that of its nemesis.

My analysis focuses on Tolokonnikova's and Alekhina's three theatrical endeavours, opening out onto a broader reflection on the book's umbrella theme: that of the mutuality of mediatization and Russian nation projection in the shadow of the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The chapter concludes with a fourth Pussy Riot performance: the pitch invasion that interrupted the 2018 World Cup Final and carried out by Tolokonnikova's ex-husband, Petr Verzilov, with two female collaborators.[7] Here, the stage is that of a stadium and the performance that of two football teams and the state that facilitated the occasion. The pitch invasion represents an intrusion of ugly reality onto the shimmering stage. But on another level, by 'entering the game', the protestors join the performance itself. For one brief instant, the Luzhniki stadium becomes an arena in which competing projections of Russia to an international audience are subsumed into another set of rival representations: one of a welcoming, competent Russia the acme of which has been soiled by the inconsiderate interruption of a rag bag of self-indulgent protestors; the other that of a Russia whose real, repressive nature has been brought to the fore from behind the false mask of magnanimity presented to foreign observers.

Pussy Riot, regularly lauded for its daring outbursts of political defiance, has throughout demonstrated an acute awareness of two forms of semiotic dependency: (i) that of the protest acts on their subsequent mass mediation and, on the prior celebrity status of the performers; (ii) that of its parasitic reliance on words, images, and actions generated by its state antagonists. This awareness has often led to an exploration of the relationship between the universal meanings that emerge from the two forms of dependency and the visceral singularity of their acts of protest and subsequent incarcerations. The explorations take the form either of strategies to intensify the embodied particularity of the performances or of the adoption of a *stiob* aesthetic in which the layers of mediated meaning enter a complex interplay rendering any moment of sincerity elusive.

Incendiary acts and burning doors

In autumn 2016, Nadezhda Tolokonikova immersed herself in US electoral politics. Donald Trump's infamous 'pussy-grabbing' boast provided the ideal backdrop for this still-committed feminist to transpose her pussy riot to patriarchal America. At the same time, Mariia Alekhina was also expanding her horizons westwards to Russia's zone of immediate post-Soviet imperial influence: a war-torn Ukraine; and a repressive, authoritarian Belarus. Alekhina entered a temporary partnership with an established transnational group whose reputation for

resistance to repression had already earned it a global reputation and the sponsorship of Vaclav Havel and Tom Stoppard: the BFT.

Styled with provocative irony as 'the executive arm of the Ministry of Counterculture', the BFT was established in 2005 in Minsk by playwright, Nikolai Khalezin and his wife, theatre producer, Natalia Koliada.[8] It has been deprived of any right to premises in Belarus and performs in private apartments under conditions of extreme repression (its cast and production team have been repeatedly beaten by the secret services). However, it has a parallel existence as a revered theatre in exile with offices in London and the endorsement of the European artistic press and political establishment. It forms a nodal point for the new, post-Cold War conflict between the East and the West, one whose transnational mobility makes it difficult to assimilate to classic Cold War structures.

The BFT repertoire is not limited to the politics of post-Soviet protest, and it has produced plays by Shakespeare, Pinter, Sarah Kane, and Edward Bond. Its original aim was to 'break through stereotypes of the Belarusian population that are imposed by the ideological system of Belarusian dictatorial regime',[9] but the brutal censorship of its creative freedom has linked it inextricably to political opposition. In recent years, it has turned to productions based on the experiences of repressed artists in Belarus and elsewhere. The BFT–Pussy Riot partnership followed from this trend and in 2016, the BFT took on international tour a new play based on the documented prison experiences of Alekhina, Pavlenskii, and Sentsov, incarcerated in Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014. The play was called 'Burning Doors'.

'Burning Doors' was strongly influenced by the Russian New Drama (*Novaia drama*) movement conceived in reaction against the glossy productions and star actors to hit Russian stages after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A particularly significant offshoot of New Drama was 'documentary theatre' which had its base in the underground theatre, Teatr.doc, founded in Moscow by the directors, Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov. Teatr.doc presented itself as a theatre that rejected artifice – one in which people do not play roles. It prioritized documentary or verbatim drama, drawing on the authentic language of official documents or of natural speech derived from interviews. Like all New Drama, Teatr.doc renewed prioritization of the playwright's work – and specifically his or her text – over the role of the theatre director. Initially, its focus was the grit of the unglamorous lives of people at the sharp end of Russian society. Clearly, however, New Drama's spare aesthetic lent itself to portrayals of the suffering endured by political prisoners.[10] Transcripts of the interrogations of Sentsov and Pavlenskii, along with the prison diaries of Mariia Alekhina, formed ideal material for BFT in its New Drama phase.

During the Soviet period, theatrical trends, movements and personnel travelled freely across Russian-speaking space. This continued after 1991, and New Drama influenced theatre in Belarus and Ukraine, where Russian was still widely spoken, including the work of the BFT. Following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, however, collaborations between the respective artistic communities became strained; one expression of this was the rise of linguistic nationalism (reflected in a growing

preference for Ukrainian and Belarusian over Russian, the imperial language). The focus in 'Burning Doors' on the fate of Sentsov – a victim of Russian imperial aggression against Ukraine – offered one way of addressing the contradictions entailed in reliance on Russian as a lingua franca – not only the most practical medium of cross-national communication but also the first language of much of the Ukrainian and Belarusian artistic community. As Curtis (2020: 180) puts it:

> The Russian language, and shared political as well as theatrical values, have allowed playwrights and theatre directors in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to maintain a dialogue – where this still seems feasible – in which they address issues of common interest, and to continue to explore the possibilities of drama within a shared framework of creative endeavour.

Performances of 'Burning Doors' were accompanied by English-language surtitles of the Russian script. This, too, moderated any contradiction arising from the reliance on a language associated with the empire. On one level, 'Burning Doors', like the BFT enterprise itself, attempts to forge from the ruins of morally bankrupt Soviet internationalism a new, localized cosmopolitanism facilitated by Russian and English and matched by eclectic philosophical and literary underpinnings.[11] In addition to quotes from Pavlenskii, Sentsov, and Alekhina, the 'Burning Doors' script includes scenes inspired by Solzhenitsyn (whose name is synonymous with the hardship endured by Gulag prisoners), Dostoevsky (an earlier global icon of the essence of a spiritual freedom forged through imprisonment), and Michel Foucault, the great French theorist of state-imposed discipline. Thus, the association of the Russian language with state-induced confinement renders it an appropriate medium for a cosmopolitan expression of the value of spiritual struggle against oppression.

Episodic in its structure, 'Burning Doors' eschews narrative continuity. Its title refers to an audacious piece of performance art carried out by Pavlenskii – the setting fire to the entrance doors to the FSB Headquarters in Moscow – for which he was imprisoned. He later sewed his lips shut to protest the sentence received by Alekhina and Tolokonnikova for 'Punk Prayer', an act of solidarity for which 'Burning Doors' is an expression of gratitude. The production consists of a sequence of visceral, harrowing scenes in which the inhumane treatment meted out by jailors, interrogators and state officials towards imprisoned artists is re-enacted in a mannered form which is no less visually and emotionally compelling for that. It involves endless repetition designed to induce maximum discomfort and alienation in audiences. These scenes are interspersed with jailor–prisoner and FSB agent-to-FSB agent dialogues whose absurdity (particularly those based on Pavlenskii's encounters with his interrogators) lends them a Beckett-like black humour. In one, two FSB officers face one another on toilets, with their trousers down, discussing how the girls of Pussy Riot should be punished for their 'Punk Prayer' in the light of their global fame. There are also interludes consisting of dramatized readings from Dostoevsky and physically exhausting vignettes in which the words of Solzhenitsyn and Foucault appear in surtitles above the action.

All of this occurs on a stark, highly conventionalized set designed to convey the harshness of the interrogation room and the prison cell.

Inspired by experiences across post-Soviet space, 'Burning Doors' explores the responsibilities of contemporary artists in authoritarian societies more generally. The first half of this two-hour show is based around Alekhina's 22-month jail stretch when she endured physical and psychological torture. She narrates in Russian (English surtitles running across the back of the stage) as she and other female inmates endure simulated drowning (Alekhina's head is ducked repeatedly under water until she is gasping for breath), isolation, forced nudity, ritual abuse, and humiliation.

One of the eight cast members then strips naked, telling the story of a man who had been sentenced to death for a political crime but was given a last-minute reprieve. The man was distraught at the thought of having to live, having made his peace with death. The ironic story is an excerpt from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, as the scope of the production expands to embrace universal questions of the relationship between cruelty and suffering, life, and death. Another scene is based around an excerpt from *Brothers Karamazov* in which Ivan Karamazov describes a barbaric, but true, story of a peasant woman forced to watch her own child torn to pieces by hunting dogs. Dostoevsky serves as a medium through which the Russian language and culture shed their imperialist associations, acquiring universal value.

Half an hour of 'Burning Doors' is given over to a visceral theatre of heightened violence. Two of the actors throw each other aggressively around the room, ripping off their clothes. Two actresses take turns to slap one another's faces until they are burning red. One hangs from the neck by a rope, seemingly at strangulation point. Four of them run vigorously away from a prison door and towards the edge of the stage, attached to a bungee cord which viciously snaps back just as they are about to plunge into an audience momentarily and uncomfortably complicit in the desire that they be 'reined in'.

The awkward sense of complicity acquires a self-reflexive quality half-way through the performance when it is announced that Alekhina must leave to attend an 'important meeting', but that she will conduct a brief 'press conference' in English. As Alekhina improvises responses to live audience questions, most of which predictably highlight her heroic status as an opponent of Putin's police state, she merges with her own global icon. The important meeting is a fiction, however, and, whilst Alekhina disappears for the remainder of the production, she reappears with the cast to take plaudits at the end. Paradoxically, a real question-and-answer session is revealed as an artifice, rendering the artistic re-enactments of prisoner suffering yet more authentic. At the same time, Alekhina highlights the related paradox of the mediatized, and commodified, nature of political protest.

The play ends with the cast re-enacting Pavlenskii's setting alight of the wooden doors that have provided the symbolic backdrop to the action and a prop signifying the actual doors to their prison cells. As the doors burn, the cast leaves the stage and the audience watches the flames slowly spread, its gaze fixed uncomfortably on the stage for several minutes, as it delays its final applause. Eventually,

a lone audience member breaks the silence, precipitating a realization that it is for the audience to determine when to draw the production to a close. This is followed by spontaneous applause and the return of the cast to take their bow. One of a series of metafictional gestures, this extra-textually imposed ending marks an aesthetic ambiguity with ethical implications – over the extent to which the audience authors the fate of the cast; whether the cast are primarily actors or oppressed human beings; and whether incarceration is inevitable, or susceptible to defeat at the hands of free individuals. This gesture closes a circle initiated before the play started as audience members are given mock prison IDs in brusque tones by the ticket collector, opening the question of their status: victims of their own un-freedom, passive, mediatizing observers of the un-freedom of others or ethical co-authors of a universal act of liberation.

Universalism is itself a form of oppression and the harbinger of un-freedom, in that it equalizes human differences, reducing individuals to the status of digitally circulating ciphers in a mediatized world. It is bound up with globalized commerce and commodification. 'Burning Doors' transforms the Gulag into a universal symbol capable of monetizing its victims' sufferings and turning them into celebrities of the global stage. This is yet another illustration of the insubstantial contingency of the Russian nation as projected onto that stage: Russia as a cosmopolitan arena of violence rather than the false *patria* of the violent Putin regime. When projected beyond its boundaries onto new soil, Russia dissolves and takes opposite form. It is a symbol of nationhood as trans-localization.

Precisely because of its associations with oppression and commodification, universalism is part of the system to be resisted; the otherwise curious presence of Foucault within the pantheon of heroes celebrated by 'Burning Doors' is testament to that axiom. It is thus possible to resolve the mismatch between the play's soaring abstractions, together with the global celebrity of its central icon (Alekhina), and the shocking physicality of the suffering it re-enacts. The latter compensates for the former. But because that bodily experience is performed, and because the audience cannot relive the experience vicariously, the compensation fails. The endless *ad nauseam* repetition of the same acts of violence – the play's most discomforting aspect – becomes the aesthetic expression of that failure.

The compensatory gesture has a linguistic dimension. Russian is construed as the language of oppressive, imperialistic universalism, but in the local context of a play performed in non-Russian theatres with the assistance of surtitles (and Alekhina's halting but serviceable English), Russian is also the boundary that marks the embodied concreteness of the play's shocking portrayal of the new, post-Soviet Gulag. Russia's projection on the Western stage can once again be characterized as an act of (trans)localization. Russian now sheds its imperial connotations and becomes the shared medium via which the Gulag appears as a cosmopolitan arena of suffering.[12] It is, as Bhabha (2018: 136) puts it, the basis for a cosmopolitanism 'which ensures that the groundedness of the locality and singularity of suffering is not lost in a transcendent universality'.

Straight into . . . Saatchi

The tensions underpinning Tolokonnikova's efforts to bring the suffering of the Gulag to the genteel surroundings of London's Saatchi Gallery are encased in recursive structures similar to those underpinning 'Burning Doors'. The 'immersive experience' which Tolokonnikova and her British collaborators, 'Enfants Terribles', offer audiences of 'Inside Pussy Riot' is one that 'makes you question what price you're prepared to pay to stand up for what you believe in'. In precise terms, that price is 'between £21.50 and £37.00' – the eye-watering cost of a ticket for a show of 'around 1 hour in duration'.[13] The Saatchi Gallery venue owes its existence to the largesse of one of the UK's most controversial capitalists. It is situated in opulent grounds at the heart of the obscenely rich Kensington region of London. If 'We are all Pussy Riot', this achievement comes at a steep price: that of compromise with London's corporate elite. Tolokonnikova's own consciously self-subverting answer to her question, 'Does your vagina have a brand?' is, then, 'Yes, and like all top brands, it naturally doesn't come cheap'.[14]

'Inside Pussy Riot' is conceived as one component of a larger project to mark the centenary of the Russian Revolution(s) of 1917 – an event whose mythology is that of a proletarian uprising against the likes of the Saatchi brothers. The Pussy Riot performance is the culmination of an exhibition of contemporary art activism motivated by a desire to bring down the current Russian regime and agitate for artistic freedom. It included works by Pavel Pavlenskii, Oleg Kulik, and the Siberian Blue Nose group. The Russia that appears on the Saatchi Gallery's stage-within-a-stage is performed through a series of layered projections: of Putin's Russia onto tsarist Russia; of tsarist Russia onto the opulent world of the Saatchis, and of Pussy Riot onto the Bolsheviks, and feminist (and other) protestors against Western capitalist injustices.

'Inside Pussy Riot''s continuity with the *Art Riot* exhibition is self-negating. The viewer passes through a tasteful gallery in which s/he gazes at artfully hung paintings and installations from outside, into a dimly lit, oppressive space seemingly allowing him/her to experience the grim realities of incarceration from within. The questionable authenticity of the immersion experience is acknowledged via the metaphorical act of sexual penetration evoked in the performance's title: far from sharing the experience of Tolokonnikova and her fellow prisoners, the bearers of 'Inside Pussy Riot' tickets 'screw them over', complicit in the systemic injustices which the performance attacks.

The hour-long performances take place in conveyor-belt fashion; ticket holders queue patiently at the entrance to the inner space, observing the previous 'shift' emerge from a dark corridor and barred from crossing the threshold into the labyrinth until a loud prison claxon sounds. The production thus signals its awareness of its compromised status as part of the very commodification of suffering and protest it targets.

On entering the dungeon, audience members don brightly coloured balaclavas. They are instructed firmly by a female prison guard in a grey uniform to fill out a

form with a pencil, selecting the political cause that most appeals (gender equality; the environment; free speech, etc). Her tones become increasingly stern as we are reminded that all pencils, without exception, must be returned. The atmosphere deteriorates further as two (female) participants are made to play a game of 'scissors-paper-rock' (in the production I attended with my family, my own daughter was, disconcertingly, one of those selected!), the loser of which is then ordered to undress (fortunately, she won, determined thenceforth to have nothing more to do with her father's dubious indulgences). We watch uncomfortably the humiliation of a fellow audience member as she first resists and then complies, removing clothing down to her underwear. It later transpires that this is an actor, called upon to re-enact the full body searches to which female prisoners are subjected on beginning Russian prison sentences. There is a layering of complicities: our complicity in the humiliation of a fellow human being; the complicity of non-protesting prisoners in systemic violence against their political counterparts; the production's complicity in deceiving its audiences as part of an artistic mediation of an immersion experience that has been sold at an inflated price, and as a fictitious simulation.

Before entering a grotesque mock-up of the courtroom in which Tolokonnikova received her prison sentence, we see our chosen slogans displayed on placards; these serve as the pretext for our own 'arrest', and we are led off to be sentenced. The judge is represented as a large nodding puppet (a representation of her subservience to the authoritarian Russian state). Behind her, in a stained-glass collage, we see images of Donald Trump and Theresa May (US president and UK prime minister at the time of production). These images gesture to the universalized protest against the state as a violent, misogynistic entity for which Tolokonnikova's Russian prison experience is a mere cipher. The contradictory effort both to immerse visitors in an alien and deeply corporeal experience otherwise unavailable to them and to sanitize that experience by abstracting it via familiar state 'oppressors' like May and Trump is characteristic of a performance which seeks to expose, and thereby transcend, its own compromises. As Andrzej Lukowski of *Time Out* aptly put it, it indulges in a 'heavily ironic deconstruction of its own premise' (Lukowski 2018).

We carry out our 'sentences' in a dank room in which we are shunted around in groups from one impossible, meaningless task to another (threading needles which turn out to be pins, for example). The bright colours of the balaclavas, the elegantly attired, all-female guards, and the mint and pink pastel shades of the décor of the remaining rooms reinforce the self-ironizing mediation of a grim experience, 'camp' in both senses of the word, and which denies the very immersion it offers. This meta-theatrical self-irony surfaces within the production itself when one of the guards barks aggressively at audience members as they are awaiting trial: 'As this is a piece of immersive theatre, it doesn't work unless you follow the rules!'. Yet, filtering through loudspeakers positioned around the walls are harrowing accounts of real prisoners. In the *stiob* tradition, it is difficult to judge whether the production is sending up its own po-faced gravity or shocking visitors into recognizing its authenticity through a contrastive technique juxtaposing

the soft, liberal indulgences of the Saatchi Gallery with the harsh sufferings of Putin's Gulag.

In the finale, we are herded into pitch black cubicles representing solitary confinement. We don headphones through which we suddenly hear the real voice of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova addressing us in a pre-recorded, rousing call to political arms. Again, we must negotiate the irony that her voice is a disembodied mediation emanating from the same, impersonal source from which we are accustomed to receiving orders from the oppressive Orwellian state. On release, we are asked to shout in unison the political slogan dearest to us. Inevitably, the response is both cacophonous and awkwardly self-conscious. Following this somewhat bathetic anticlimax, we filter out of the theatre space, glimpsing the next group of prisoners meekly awaiting their costly immersion experience.

The performance is saturated with a sense of knowing complicity in the sanitized commodification of protest.[15] It is also inscribed into the momentous anti-authoritarian politics of the 1917 revolution – the foundation myth of the state responsible for the Gulag and also of the twentieth-century progressive movement to which the countercultural opposition from which Pussy Riot derives its inspiration owes allegiance. Where is Russia in all of this? It is lost in hall of mirror-like projections: of Lenin's Bolshevism onto Stalin's, and of these two onto Trump's America. Contesting the heroic narrative of revolution whilst at the same time inserting itself into it, 'Inside Pussy Riot' causes the Russia it represents to splinter into fragments in the Saatchi Gallery's plush surroundings. Rather than transnationally projecting an integral Russian nationhood, it translocalizes a nationhood whose meaning is contingent on the context in which the layered series of projections constituting it unfolds.

Escape to the fringe

Mariia Alekhina chose a different venue for Pussy Riot's next UK outing: Edinburgh's Fringe Festival. Her performance, which included a saxophonist, a bare-chested drummer, and a BFT actor, combined electronica music, theatre, documentary film, and recital. Called 'Pussy Riot: Riot Days' – the title of Alekhina's autobiography in which she provides a stylized, but vivid account of her arrest, trial, and imprisonment for the Punk Prayer incident – it ran for a week in August 2018. The performance, like the book, is presented as part personal account and part political manifesto, complete with rousing slogans and practical advice on how to rebel and survive arrest and imprisonment. The book is presented in staccato segments, some of which consist of personal reflections and others of which are anonymous assertions of principle. The narrative is interspersed with numbered 'rules' of political protest in bold type. Its subtle negotiation of the boundary between highly personalized autobiographical narrative and impersonal call to arms garnered critical acclaim from the quality press (Hewitt 2017; Pinkham 2017). Alekhina's decision to adapt the book for the stage added a new aesthetic challenge: audiences must navigate an autobiography-cum-manifesto adapted for performance as theatre-cum-electronica-cum-recital.

Alekhina's visit to Edinburgh acquired new significance when it emerged that she had been banned from leaving Russia and would be unable to perform. Undeterred, she drove to the Latvian border and left Russia without detection, arriving in Edinburgh just in time for her first performance (Roth 2018). This meant that the mantra of fearless revolt now occupied a dual location both within and beyond the aesthetic frame containing it; Alekhina literally performed her own manifesto principles in the act of eluding the oppressive state that threatened to silence her artistic endeavours. This meta-textual dimension was incorporated into the performance's paratextual apparatus, with Alekhina's Russian compatriot narrating her adventure to audiences prior to the cast's arrival on stage.

The performance itself centred on a recital of Alekhina's book, much of it delivered by the author herself in Russian with English surtitles, the rest by the BFT actor. This was accompanied by the projection onto two screens of documentary clips and photographs depicting scenes from the Punk Prayer story and Alekhina's subsequent arrest, trial, and imprisonment. These were punctuated by agitprop exhortations – again from the book – flashing in bold letters. *The Guardian*'s Kate Hutchinson characterizes the synthesis as: 'somewhere between a gripping piece of Putin-skewering musical theatre, an urgent jazz-punk book recital and a film screening that unfurls like a nerve-shredding thriller' (Hutchinson 2018).

The show ends with Alekhina's account of how, on her release, a prison official tells her that she is now free. Alekhina's response (not included in the book version) came in the form of a simple question to him, which she now addresses to the audience: 'А вы?' ('And what about you?'). This turns the tables on the audience, now thrust into the position of the oppressor himself. The lights dim quite suddenly, and the audience is jolted out of its adulatory complacency.

But Alekhina herself is in danger of succumbing to a *mauvaise foi* of her own: that of the self-heroicizing indulgence of the punk revolutionary as global celebrity. Not even a revolutionary ardour forged in the grim conditions of Putin's Gulag can escape mediatization's commodifying pull. *Riot Days* is generically bold and there is no denying the bravery of Alekhina's escape to the Fringe. But one of its purposes is to generate publicity for, and sales of, her book. After each performance Alekhina remained to sign copies available for purchase, alongside other pricey Pussy Riot paraphernalia, by those willing to endure the long queues of prospective clients.

Alekhina's response to the contradiction is reflected in her manner of recital: her rapid, monotone, Russian delivery, combined with her expressionless face and intense, unflinching stare. The effect is unnerving, especially in the close intimacy of the small Fringe venue, with audience members in touching distance of Alekhina who stands erect at the front of the stage, maintaining an icy discipline and completely refusing any eye contact. She thus establishes distance from the adulatory aesthetic, weakening the link to celebrification and commodification which her own I-centred account instils. She reasserts the power of the collective, anonymized ideology espoused by Pussy Riot and symbolized in their identical balaclavas (Bruce 2015). However, in a reassertion of the tension, the show begins

with Alekhina entering the stage with balaclava on, only to rip it off dramatically as she gratifies the audience's urge to see her now iconic face in the flesh.

As to the anti-Putin ideal projected in this mediatized protest environment, it is at risk of assimilation to the radical Russia of the global leftist imaginary. Alekhina acknowledges the paradox but also the fact that efforts to step outside the mediatization process and adopt a purified meta-level position are doomed to become new sediments in the layered projections that constitute it.

Red-carding Putin on Russia's global stage

What would this anti-Putin ideal look like and how should it be represented? What if it were to insinuate itself into the core of the Putin project itself? To answer these questions, we must turn to our final Pussy Riot performance – the only one that sheds the accoutrements of the theatre. It is no less a stage performance for that, however.

On 15 July, Russia hosted the final of the 2018 football World Cup at the Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow. It was contested by France and Croatia and the French team won a highly entertaining match 4–2 against a spirited, if less talented, Croatian side. The game was the culmination to what had been deemed a successful competition, both in terms of the football played and the soft power benefits that accrued to the host nation. Russia demonstrated to the world that, far from subjecting foreign fans to the violent excesses of out-of-control far-right thugs, it could run a well-ordered competition in which fans were welcomed with open arms and treated with generosity. World Cup 2018 was thus beneficial to Russia in countering negative media images of it as a repressive authoritarian power bloated by hostility to the West.

The soft power operation fronted by RT (which had secured the temporary services of football icons Jose Mourinho and Peter Schmeichel – the latter given his own show) was as impressive as that of the competition itself.[16] The final offered Russia an opportunity to present its new, positive image to the estimated 3.2 billion television viewers worldwide who watched the game live.[17] Among the 100,000 crowd in attendance at the stadium was Vladimir Putin, who witnessed in person the international projection of a patriotic but outward-looking global Russia.

One small incident marred the spectacle. Early in the second half, with Croatia trailing 1–2, but beginning to assert themselves, there was a pitch invasion by a man and a woman dressed in identical black trousers, white shirts, and black ties. They ran towards the players and the woman exchanged a high five with France's young black star, Kylian Mbappé. The Croatian players approached the invaders with aggression and one of them, Dejan Lovren, grappled angrily with the male intruder. The referee paused the game to allow the stewards to remove the invaders from the pitch. They were later jailed for 15 days.

Observers of the incident, including the author of this book (not to mention Putin), initially shared the sentiments of the TV commentators who expressed

irritation that the sole breach of an otherwise flawless security operation should occur in the middle of the culminating match. All changed (for me, at least) when it transpired that the intruders were none other than Petr Verzilov, founder of the art action group, Voina, and former husband of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and another female member of Pussy Riot. Immediately following the incident, and in a tactic uncomfortably reminiscent of terrorist practices following bomb outrages, Pussy Riot issued a social media acknowledgement of responsibility, releasing a statement on their Facebook page calling for the freeing of political prisoners.[18]

In an accompanying YouTube video, Pussy Riot members read the statement in turns, emphasizing the collective nature of the action, and suggesting that the invaders' black and white uniforms correspond to the action's curious title: 'The Policeman Enters the Game'.[19] Close-ups of intruders show that they were carrying handcuffs, signalling that they intended to 'arrest' either players or match officials. However, the statement emphasizes that the policeman in the title is an 'earthly policeman' whom they contrast with the Heavenly Policeman – a semi-comic, semi-idealized figure who recurs throughout the work of the late Soviet poet and performance artist, Dmitrii Prigov:

> The Heavenly Policeman . . . is in conversation with God himself, whereas the earthly policeman fabricates criminal cases. While the Heavenly Policeman tenderly watches over the fans of the World Championship, the earthly policeman prepares to break up meetings. The Heavenly Policeman . . . celebrates the victories of the Russian international team. The earthly policeman is indifferent to the hunger strike of Oleg Sentsov. The Heavenly Policeman stands tall as an example of statehood, whereas the earthly policeman causes everyone pain. The Heavenly Policeman protects the dream of the infant; the earthly policeman persecutes prisoners . . . The Heavenly Policeman is the organiser of the wonderful carnival of the World Championship, whereas the earthly policeman fears celebration. The Heavenly Policeman carefully follows the rules of the game, whilst the earthly policeman enters the game without observing the rules. The World Championship reminded us of the possibility of a Heavenly Policeman in the wonderful Russia of the future but every day the earthly policeman enters the game and destroys our world . . . We demand:
>
> 1) The liberation of all political prisoners
> 2) Not to be imprisoned for [social media] 'likes'
> 3) The cessation of illegal arrests
> 4) The permission of political competition in our country
> 5) Not to fabricate criminal cases and not to hold people in prison for no reason
> 6) That the earthly policeman be turned into the Heavenly Policeman.[20]

If this is the text that furnishes the interpretative key to the pitch invasion, certain questions arise: who exactly was Pussy Riot representing (it was they who illegally 'entered the game' in policeman's uniform)?; how did they penetrate the tight

security cordon?; how did they expect worldwide television viewers to appreciate the arcane meaning of their action?; are they really endorsing Putin's World Cup as a wonderful carnival and a glimpse of what a different Russia looks like?

The answers lie in the inter-layering of conflicting meanings that characterizes articulations of nationhood in a deeply mediatized environment. First, it is in keeping with previous Pussy Riot actions that the spectator is forced momentarily to occupy the position of Putin himself, irritated by the rude interruption of an absorbing match. And like previous performances, the sense of provocation is only erased when seen in conjunction with its social media paratext. Delivered in Russian and referencing a relatively obscure poet, the video statement relied on a viral effect; those who were 'in the know' disseminated the acknowledgement of responsibility via Twitter and Facebook, knowing that this would then be splashed across news headlines. This is precisely what happened, and Pussy Riot was inscribed into the narrative of brave protest against a repressive Kremlin which had, up to this point, succeeded in countering it. That spectators now read this narrative through their own prior irritation at the spoiling of an international spectacle which is also a pro-Russian national event, reinforces its effects.

Pussy Riot's apparently parrhesic speaking of truth to power again turns out to be contaminated by its own future mediation. The confusion over the symbolic identity of the protestors can be seen is in this context. Their dual status as both earthly policemen illegally 'entering the game' and as Heavenly Policemen, unlawfully detained by the earthly powers of Putin's stewards reflects the impossibility of an uncontaminated representation of Prigov's divine law enforcer. Likewise, the odd image of the World Cup Final as a wonderful carnival and the portrayal of a future Russia without Putin incorporates a recognition that nationhood is always already inscribed with its own prior manifestations, positive and negative. The endorsement of Putin's World Cup as a wonderful carnival thus constitutes classic, *stiob*-like over-identification.[21]

The notion that the future Russia can be glimpsed only through an image of the patriotic World Cup myth propagated by Putin is consistent with the recursion effect, as is that of a Heavenly Policeman compromised by his status as a figure of order, albeit a divine order that nurtures rather than threatens. In Prigov's poetry his role is comically ambiguous. He reappears repeatedly, often without the epithet 'Heavenly' but with capitalized name, in heroicizing flights of surreal fantasy or in tongue-in-cheek paeans. In one poetic tale, he tells a terrorist: 'You are a terrorist, whose soul is that of a disharmonious anarchist, whereas I am the rule of law in this world' (Prigov 1997). When threatened with death by the terrorist, the Policeman responds: 'You cannot kill me; you can strike my flesh, penetrate my uniform and my skin, but my image is more powerful than your passion'. Elsewhere, Prigov declaims:

> There is no more joyful example . . . than that of one Policeman gazing at another with passion as if to say 'Everything, brother, is honest and in keeping with socialist law'.
>
> (Ibid.)[22]

These verses subvert the image of the *militsioner* derided in Russian popular culture as the most obtuse servant of the oppressive Soviet state. The ambiguity of Prigov's apparent celebration of the shining moral ideal embodied in the figure of the Policeman betrays the classic trait of over-identification associated with the *stiob* aesthetic. No wonder, then, that Pussy Riot's mysterious ability to penetrate a hitherto consistently effective security cordon generated the same online rumours of collusion between protestors and authorities that accompanied their prior performances.[23] Empirically, the authenticity of these photographs is questionable. Symbolically, the very uncertainty captures the ambiguity entailed in the metaphorical red-carding of the arch rule-enforcer, Putin.

The reversals of the *stiob* figure of Prigov's Heavenly Policeman are a *mise en abyme* of the contradictions of the pitch invasion. The protestors 'entry into the game' enables them to project their alternative Russia to global audiences within Putin's own projection of his official, patriotic nation. The two spectacles converge as Pussy Riot display themselves to the world via Putin and to Putin via the world. Their police uniforms depict law enforcement, even as they have the law enforced against them (momentarily goading audiences to side with the authorities striving to begin the 'Heavenly Game' anew, laying bare our collusion in the process).

The shattering of the false image of Putin's World Cup positions the interruption as the intrusion of authenticity into a deceptive artifice, even as the idealized Heavenly Policeman gives way to the thuggery of Putin's law enforcers. Or is the Heavenly Game interrupted by earthly policemen, themselves now arrested by a Heavenly Policeman who is really an earthly policeman in disguise? One of the purposes of the intrusion is to protest illegal detention, yet it is Pussy Riot, handcuffs to the ready, who attempt to perform an arrest, before they are themselves removed unceremoniously. In this nexus of reversals and contradictions, the Policeman's 'entry into the game' reveals itself as the *stiob* expression of an unattainable ideal that resembles its antithesis. If Prigov was the original *stiob* practitioner, this adaptation of his artistic text is now performed on a global stage in front of a mass audience, acquiring new layers of meaning.[24] As to the Heavenly Game itself (or perhaps we should adopt the 'Beautiful Game' moniker frequently applied to soccer in the UK?), a high-scoring thriller seemed like an entirely appropriate result.

Conclusion: a well-earned curtain call

There are several linked points to be made in conclusion, together with an important cautionary note.

First, each performance reinforces the principle underlying all Pussy Riot's actions: that they are saturated not only with their always already mediated status (their reliance on prior, often opposing, mediations of the Russia they represent) but with a future-oriented 'about-to-be-mediated' corollary. A further consequence of the deeply mediatized environment in which Pussy Riot immerses itself is the mutual contingency of pro-Putin patriotism and the alternative 'other

Russia' projected by Pussy Riot. This reveals itself in the World Cup escapade, but it is present, too, in Tolokonnikova's tongue-in-cheek exhortation to protest spoken with iron authority to 'prisoners' (audiences) in their solitary confinement cells. This gives rise to the *stiob* aesthetic that each performance embraces – as the only means of containing and countering the celebrification and commodification effects to which Tolokonnikova and Alekhina are increasingly subject – an effect dictated by their unavoidable 'circulation within a capitalist ecosystem' (Borenstein 2021: 83). The endorsement of *stiob* as a strategy for negotiating the contradictions accompanying inhabitation of a mediatized, commodified world illustrates the continuing resonance within Pussy Riot's work of the symbols and practices of Russia's Soviet past, as does the invocation of the Gulag in 'Burning Doors' and 'Inside Pussy Riot'.

All four performances suggest that rather than the transnational projection of a single Russia which disintegrates into contradiction even as it is projected, they enact the translocalization of a Russia whose tensions are both played out and compensated for differently at each individual site of performance. The Russia of London's Saatchi Gallery depends largely on the surroundings in which it is projected, as does the Russia screened in Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium. At the same time, the struggle with which each performance engages is that of the resistance that its universalizing impulse (the 'We are All Pussy Riot' mantra) meets from a countervailing audience impulse to attribute the performance to a specific representation of Putin's Russia. This is associated with the problem of Russia's residual imperial reputation. Universalizing the experiences of political prisoners in Belarus or Ukraine via the image of the Gulag and a transnational collaboration for which Russian is the lingua franca risks political compromise.[25] The BFT's emphasis on visceral bodily pain is one answer to this dilemma, confirming Borenstein's (2021: 95) observation that their 'willingness to put their bodies in situations that look precarious and unpleasant' is one example of continuity between the pre- and post-prison performances of Alekhina and Tolokonnikova.[26]

Another answer is to be found in the performances' status as theatre. This facilitates the deployment of the stage as a frame imposing an aesthetic modality on the compromised purity of the realities being represented. The compromise is thus moderated through its open acknowledgement. In each case, however, the spaces of and beyond the stage are subject to varying degrees of mutual breach and confusion; in 'Burning Doors', the audience has the momentary 'reality' of the authentic Alekhina thrust upon it, as she interrupts the action and converts the space of the stage into that of a pop-up press-conference. In 'Inside Pussy Riot', the stage is carved out of the space of London's Saatchi Gallery and made to serve as the simulacrum of a prison wherein boundaries between guards and prisoners blur. In 'Riot Days', Alekhina's escape from Russia is inscribed into the aesthetic performance of her autobiographical account of incarceration, her impassive stare into the distance and monotone delivery conflicting with the enclosed, intimate space of the Fringe venue. In 'The Policeman Enters the Game', the adaptation of a recurring theme from Prigov's poetry is performed as a bold intrusion onto a 'real' stage: that of the Luzhniki Stadium.

The aestheticization of Pussy Riot's projections of Russia – the conversion of the space of performance into that of a theatrical stage – enables the group to draw the audience into the web of contradiction in which it is immersed, and also to establish aesthetic distance from that web, and thereby to elude it. The curtain call becomes all important, for this is the point at which Pussy Riot as aesthetic performers reassume their role as political guerrillas. Moreover, like all effective guerrillas, these fighters are, as Borenstein (2021: 109–110) argues, 'improvisers who work with the material at hand', noting that 'in recent years, that material has included fame'.

Indeed, to end on a cautionary note, we should not allow the performers' knowing embrace of the mediations immersing them undermine their genuine courage. Rather less well reported than the four performances considered in this chapter is the constant behind-the-scenes battle to advance the rights of prisoners not just in Russia, but throughout the world (Halper 2014). For this, no number of curtain calls is sufficient recognition.

Notes

1 For analysis of these issues, see Hutchings and Tolz (2015), 194–221.
2 This reading is developed further in Hutchings and Tolz (2015), 214–215.
3 Using Actor–network theory, Salovaara (2016), analyzes Pussy Riot's actions in terms of media assemblages in which the multiple platforms and channels via which those actions are mediated are central to their purpose and meaning.
4 See https://genius.com/Pussy-riot-straight-outta-vagina-lyrics.
5 For details, see https://lesenfantsterribles.co.uk/shows/inside-pussy-riot/.
6 See www.saatchigallery.com/art/art-riot.php.
7 For details of the pitch invasion, including an embedded YouTube video of the event, see Austin 2018.
8 For more details of the BFT, see its official website at: www.belarusfreetheatre.com/.
9 Ibid.
10 For a substantive account of the aesthetics, history, and politics of New Drama, see Beumers and Lipovetsky 2009.
11 For a brief discussion of the play, see Curtis 2020: 141–142.
12 For further discussion of the notion that the monolingual (single-languaged) does not equate to the univocal (single-voiced), but can, under certain conditions, be capacious and inclusive, see Denman 2017. See also Avishai's (2018) provocative idea that the linguistic sensibility shared by Hebrew speakers in Tel Aviv could play a role in creating a truly inclusive Israeli state:

> The latter Hebrew is self-ironising, playfully anglicised – erotic, brassy, metaphorical, mischievous. This is the Hebrew every with-it Israeli knows and every democratic Israeli unknowingly counts on. . . . The Hebrew of Tel Aviv is spacious enough for Arabs to absorb its nuances and yet remain Arabs, at least in the hybridised way minorities everywhere adapt to a majority's language and the culture it subtends.

13 See https://lesenfantsterribles.co.uk/shows/inside-pussy-riot/.
14 Borenstein (2021: 82) reminds his readers of Tolokonnikova's most egregious breach of her anti-corporate principles, a notorious fashion shoot in which, exploiting her glamorous looks, she modelled clothes for the all-too-aptly named company,

'TrendsBrands' – an action which she rather lamely justified on the grounds that this company had sent her free clothes during her prison sentence.

15 Some reviews of the production acknowledged its self-ironizing aspect (Lukowski 2018). Many did not and attacked it for its failure to live up to its claims of an 'immersion experience', its 'compromised' politics, and the bathetic sense of disappointment it elicited from its audiences (Parkinson 2017; Winter 2017).

16 RT created a domain dedicated to World Cup 2018 within its main website. Here it uploaded articles celebrating Russia's successful hosting of the competition, celebrating the international harmony and goodwill towards Russia among fans and audiences (www.rt.com/tags/world-cup-2018/). On its main news pages it ran stories targeting Western hostility towards the host nation.

17 For details, see the official FIFA report at: www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/2014-fifa-world-cuptm-reached-3-2-billion-viewers-one-billion-watched-2745519.

18 See www.facebook.com/wearepussyriot/posts/2119354861654438.

19 The YouTube video is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJ0lQ3zIXwA.

20 Translations from the original Russian text as posted on Pussy Riot's Facebook page are mine.

21 Borenstein (2021: 101) also identifies *stiob* as a strategy aimed at enabling Pussy Riot performers to minimize the potency of the various compromises with capitalism entailed by their willingness to exploit their now instantly recognizable global 'brand'.

22 Translations from Prigov's original Russian text are mine.

23 An article posted on the website of the newspaper, *Vzgliad*, hinted that one of the stewards who allowed the protestors onto the pitch was 'already known to the authorities as an organiser of previous unofficial protests'. See http://newsrbc.ru/news/391273-obschestvo-akciya-pussi-rayot-pokazala-naskolko-izmenilas-rossiya.html. A forum commentator on another online press website (*Gi-Wom*) speculated that

> At the very least the FSB didn't try to stop them. They don't know these guys well and probably thought: 'They're running on to impress the western public. Let them. People will then think: look how liberal we are! We're letting them run on the pitch, yet everyone says we put people in prison and so on'. See https://gi-wom.ru/pussi-rajot-futbol-video-svezhij-material-na-17-07-2018-g/.

24 Prigov's role as one of the earliest practitioners of *stiob* in the Soviet period is analyzed in Yurchak 2006: 267–268.

25 Borenstein (2021: 96) identifies another instance of the problematic nature of Pussy Riot's occasional embrace of universalist gestures when he concludes that their 'I can't breathe' video intended to associate the Russian state violence that they suffered with that endured by the black victim of US police brutality, Eric Garner, amounts to the dubious act of equating the irreducible specificity of the oppression highlighted by the 'Black Lives Matter' moment to the politically compromised counter-slogan, 'All Lives Matter'.

26 Several academic articles on Pussy Riot have emphasized the importance of embodiment and bodily experience in their performances. See Rourke and Wiget 2016; Bernstein 2013; Pinkham 2014.

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In place of a conclusion

It *is* nationhood!

Projecting Russia in a nutshell

How, then, might we draw this book to a conclusion (in the dual sense of its physical end and the articulation of its overarching meanings)? To initiate this process, we might begin at the very beginning – with the title. In the Introduction, I explained how my approach attempts to strike a careful balance between structure and agency. The balance is reflected in the first words on the book's front cover: 'mediatization' designates an impersonal structural process of indeterminate provenance, whilst 'projection' as I have applied it necessarily involves verifiable human agency. The book has explored the complex relationship between these two concepts in the specific context of Russian nationhood. It is, however, worth highlighting the presence in the title of the preposition 'in'. It is not just that Russian nationhood must be projected *to*, for (and thus in) a mediatized world (though that is certainly the case). For the very act of projection is inflected by the same structural process: it is in part projection within and *by* a mediatized world. This duality generates the five main pillars of my argument.

First, the mediatized (and still mediatizing) status of the world in which Russia is projected entails also an unprecedented level of horizontal networking in which the state is not only but one player but itself divides into multiple subcomponents. As we saw with Putin's Little Green Men, the Russian international broadcaster RT, but also stridently anti-Putin activists like Pussy Riot, this means that images of Russia are projected globally via disparate assemblages of actors characterized by maximum ideological and cultural heterogeneity; thus Kremlin subordinates intersect and in a certain sense collude with Ukrainian as well as 'patriotic' online bloggers; RT staff collaborate with unruly digital news satirists, Occupy activists and Cossack disciplinarians; Pussy Riot protestors appear to conspire in unholy semiotic (if not actual) allegiance with Russian state law enforcement officials and also wealthy London capitalists. The conflicting projections of Russianness that circulate across the globally networked communications environment – domestic, international, official, popular, oppositional, Western – are thoroughly reciprocal, mutually constituted and characterized by multiple feedback loops, and by a recurrent 'calling into being' of a Russia, whose discursive stability is always provisional and contested. In such conditions, an important role is played

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by intercultural mediators (Mikhail Idov, Andrei Konchalovsky, the Snob project) capable of operating with ease across not just geopolitical borders pitting an increasingly regressive Russian state against the liberal-democratic order but also those separating seemingly incompatible semiotic realms (cosmopolitan and ethnonationalist; Soviet and neoliberal).

Second, a corollary of the fracturing of the act of projecting is a splintering of the object of projection into a series of layered meanings whose apparent polarity disguises relationships of mutuality, symbiosis, imbrication, and mirroring. Thus, Pussy Riot and Putin become inextricably entwined via the poetic image of a mythical law enforcer whilst Russians' disparagement of their subjacent neighbour Ukraine echoes Europe's denigrations of its uncouth relative, Russia. We must cease thinking in terms of discrete visions of Russia (those of state patriots; revanchist-nationalists, anti-Putin oppositionists, and foreign proponents of a liberal democratic order to which Russia under Putin is a rude affront). Throughout, I have traced the sometimes deliberately manipulated exchanges of values that characterize the relationships between such visions, and which link, for example, Lenin's scandalous overturning of the established order in 1917, both with RT's provocative challenge to the Western mainstream media establishment and with Pussy Riot's brazen revolt against the traditional Orthodox principles espoused by Putin's Kremlin, or which conjoin nostalgic Eurasianist dreams of a distinctively Slavic pre-modern authenticity, international film festival imaginations of the universal purity of ancient ritual, and the subversive humour of the intellectual prankster who receives pleasure (and profit) in playing the two off against one another.

Third and critically, however, the looping patterns described by the projection process exhibit dialectical rather than circular properties. They should under no circumstances be confused with the fluid, 'anything goes' principles of postmodern relativism in its popularized (and undoubtedly distorted) variant. Recursive nationhood as I have striven to portray it invariably involves sharp contestation and polemic, the exercising of political and/or economic power and the assertion of supremacy, albeit never final (the Polite People monuments hastily erected in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation; the re-selection of the recalcitrant Zviagintsev as Russia's Oscar nominee; the sacking of Mikhail Idov and the restoration of a state patriotic sensibility to his portrayal of Russia's diasporic community in London; even the insertion of a full stop punctuation mark at the end of the artfully ambiguous logo **Эноб.**). To return to the exposition of the central concept in this book I provided in the Introduction, the very point of recursion is, by turning the process back on itself, to impart movement and progression to it, to exercise a degree of control over it, ensuring that the circle becomes a spiral, and furnishing an escape route from mere repetition or mirroring. Looping, in other words, becomes loophole. It is this aspect of the projections of Russian nationhood explored in Chapters 1–6 which so often expressed itself through radically different varieties of *stiob* (from the absurdly overstated rhetoric of the '*Ia russkii okkupant*' video, through the ludic distancing effect embodied in Snob's ludic oscillation between the elitist/nativist and universalist/inclusive meanings of its

own name, to the self-conscious contradictions in Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's disembodied instruction to her audiences to rise up against the impersonal Orwellian state).

The loophole effect also took the cinematic form of the adoption of narrative modalities facilitating the subtle insinuation of fragility and doubt into such seemingly unyielding mainstays of official mythology as the finality of victory in the Great Patriotic War (Shakhnazarov's curiously unhinged *White Tiger*). In this case, as well as that of Fedorchenko's equally offbeat gem, *Silent Souls*, the oscillation of modalities relies on the need (the same might be said of Putin's infamous press conferences and Pussy Riot's theatrical projections of the harsh realities of the post-Soviet 'gulag' on the genteel British stage) to appeal simultaneously to multiple viewers, domestic and international, each of whom seeks to balance different (often opposing) sets of local/specific and universal/global meanings. The incremental blurring and intermixing of home and foreign audience sensibilities is, of course, a direct consequence of mediatization – a phenomenon extending well beyond Russia.

Fourth, if all the processes described in this book are therefore observable elsewhere, there is, nonetheless, a certain cultural specificity to the manner of their enactment in the Russian context. This derives from an acute sensitivity to mediatization born of the concurrence of its most recent, digital phase with that of the history of post-Soviet nationhood itself. Thus, an awareness of the limitations imposed upon them by the networked terrain in which they operate accords to some Russian actors, state and non-state, an ability to work with the grain of the limitations and develop creative strategies for navigating this terrain; the deployment of *stiob* entails the indeterminacies of the digital communications environment being openly embraced rather than resisted and circumvented. At key moments, this practice combines with Russia's long-standing ambivalence towards a mythologized 'West', and even with the residues of Soviet hostility to Western capitalism, in the form of a self-consciously hesitant critique of mediatized modernity, especially its commodified element. Illustrations included the marketized Russianness exploited knowingly by members of Idov's Londongrad agency and Konchalovsky's tacit acknowledgement that his austere celebration of the pristine purity of Russia's pre-modern, pre-mediatized rural peripheries is itself contaminated by the reified commodities of the global film industry. Into this category we can even place Simonyan's insolently defiant marketing of sweatshirts emblazoned with the tongue-in-cheek slogan 'Do You Work for the GRU?' to rebut the widespread ridiculing of her excruciating interview with the Salisbury poisoning suspects.

Fifth, to move from the descriptive to the normative, from the semiotic to the pragmatic, and from the cultural studies terrain to that of International Relations (IR), the analysis I have provided points to the need for new, more subtle, and agile ways of tackling Russia's disruptive presence on the global communications stage. It indicates that knee-jerk 'information war' responses which assume a unified, hierarchical state apparatus projecting a stable, singular Russia harnessing global media affordances to its sinister ends and in an undilutedly

and consistently antagonistic posture are based on flawed evidence. Also, they fail to recognize the force of Bauman's earlier-referenced account of the erosion, and reconfiguration, of the nation state relationship as determined by the 'liquid modernity' phase of globalization. He argues:

> Under the new conditions little can be gained by the nation from its close links with the state. The state may not expect much from the mobilizing potential of the nation which it needs less and less as . . . the wealth of the country is measured by the country's attractiveness to coolly mercenary forces of global capital.
>
> (Bauman 2000: 185)

Bauman may overstate the disjunction here, and its applicability to authoritarian states with strong ethnonationalist foundations is open to question; clearly, Putin's regime continues to see significant mileage in tying itself to a specific version of Russian nationhood and the same might even be said of less repressive countries keen to benefit from the new wind that globalization has breathed into ethnonationalism. Indeed, what has been happening under Putin corresponds to Brubaker's (1996: 103–104) influential account of the 'nationalizing state' model characterizing developments in post-communist Eastern Europe, where states are 'owned' by a specific ethno-cultural nation and constructed to advance its interests. However, Bauman's analysis receives implicit support from Mihelj (2011: 165) who notes that:

> Cultural and political markers of national identification are being recoded to suit the language of market exchange and consumerist lifestyles, attuned to the exigencies of commercial media and transnational corporations.

It is imperative in this context to distinguish *states*, which are acquiring every greater bureaucratic complexity and heterogeneity, from *regimes* and *governments* for which the very malleability of nations in their 'liquid' phase proves a useful tool in managing this complexity. Bauman's contention that nations and states are now each being drawn into new allegiances which introduce significant tension into their relationship to one another thus cannot be ignored. Indeed, it is corroborated by much of the analysis in this book.

Responses to Putin's international hooliganism which ignore Bauman's insights address questions about who is projecting what to whom in a way which fails to recognize not only that the projecting subject of Russian nationhood is divided at the very point of articulation but also that the Russia being projected is uncertain and ridden with tensions, as are its intended audiences. The evidence presented in Chapters 1–6 indicates that these gestures are also likely to prove highly counterproductive. This is the case not least because they overlook the complex layers of meaning of which *they themselves* become part subsequently to their articulation and beforehand, when, as Putin's Polite People so brazenly showed, they are pre-emptively mocked and rebuffed by the very target at which they are directed.

Such examples indicate an intuitive awareness on the part of the Putin regime of how to work within the constraints imposed by the 'deep mediatization' era from which it, along with its legendary 'grey cardinal', Vladislav Surkov, emerged. Surkov's ability to manipulate the new realities are undoubtedly exaggerated in Edvard Limonov's characteristically flamboyant claim that he 'turned Russia into a wonderful postmodernist theatre, where he experiments with old and new political models' (quoted in Pomerantsev 2011), but they contain a grain of truth. Much more than a mere grain of truth, too, is contained in Eliot Borenstein's perceptive reading of the influential ideology of 'state sovereignty' that Surkov developed on Putin's behalf. As Borenstein explains (2019: 113), invoking Agamben's (1994) distinction between 'bare', biological life and the civic life of the citizen, Surkov's theory took the anomalous form of a kind of 'bare' or 'performative' sovereignty – an ideology devoid of political meaning and one whose 'entire purpose is sovereignty itself'. Instead of a state ideology, as in the USSR, Borenstein quips, 'there is an ideology of statehood' (113). In juxtaposing this theory with Surkov's understanding of nationalism, Borenstein continues:

> Nationalists are easily co-opted into bare sovereignty . . . Nationalism means to save the Russian people, the Russian nation. Bare sovereignty sees both the source and object of salvation as the Russian state.
>
> (Borenstein 2019: 114)

To switch theoretical paradigms, what Borenstein is describing is in effect a conflation of the realm of the imaginary (whose emphasis on the narcissistic intertwinement of selfhood and otherness drives nationalism) with the realm of the symbolic (the linguistically bound, collectively negotiated, ideological meanings associated with mature statehood). This strategy, it could be said, constitutes a distinctive Russian response to the inexorable pressures on nation state collocations exerted by liquid modernity and, indeed, mediatization, wherein the civic discourses of state-sponsored and 'public service' mass broadcasters (PSBs) are, via the penetration of global media practices into every crevasse of life, increasingly diluted and contaminated by, or even subsumed into, identity discourses oriented towards one of the two poles of nationalist exclusionism or cosmopolitan universalism.

At the same time, Russia's nation state conflation strategy cannot simply divert, let alone cancel, the effects of mediatization. Informed by Ang et al.'s (2015) revisionist theory of cultural diplomacy, several of our case studies pointed to opportunities for the practice of new forms of soft power in which, as those effects grow in influence, responsibility not just for the projection of nationhood, but for the articulation of its meanings, is increasingly ceded to sub-state and non-state actors. It is at this level that Bauman's account of how the loosening bonds between nation and state foster new patterns of national community building where, thanks in part to the delegation of aesthetic 'quality assurance' mechanisms to global institutions like film festivals, dependence on state patronage is reduced, and where the role of intercultural mediators assumes ever greater importance. This situation shifts

the onus onto the act of interpretation. It mandates that ever greater care be paid to the complex layering of nationhood upon nationhood within texts which refuse to yield to straightforward readings. Here, even in contexts in which one might expect classic state-to-state soft power postures, such as the Academy Awards, the 'Russia' oriented to international viewers inverts, distorts, or even cancels that intended for their domestic counterparts. But here, too, the hermeneutic strategies of audiences themselves are often inscribed within a text's communicative structures and narrative gestures and become part of its infinite play of meanings. In this scenario, assessing the specificity of Russia's encounter with recursion in its contemporary form becomes a case of weighing up the benefits that accrue to an authoritarian state unusually sensitive to the 'rules of engagement' against the particular pressures to which precisely authoritarian states are subjected owing to the democratization of the global media sphere and the power of participatory audiences.[1]

Breaking the nutshell (or, from beyond the exclusion zone)

If the conditions of the globally mediatized world into which post-Soviet Russia was born have increased the intensity with which nationhood is normally performed, they have also, in the case of the new Russia, accelerated the layering of performance upon performance and the need for each new performance layer to bracket, respond to, and assert ownership over, prior layers. As I argued in the Introduction, however, utterances which belong to the sphere of nationhood are made from outside as well as from within. The 'alien words' (or discourses) over which new utterances targeted at the nationhood object must assert ownership include those of its sworn enemies. Chapter 6 reflected this principle in considering Pussy Riot's provocative performances in non-Russian arenas, as well as on a Russian stage – that of the World Cup Final – oriented specifically at non-Russian observers. But to follow the logic of my account to its conclusion – and to that of this book – I would need to consider versions of Russian nationhood projected by *non-Russian* protagonists, shattering the nutshell into which I have tried in the previous section to compress the book's meanings; my failure explains why that section could serve to open, but not to close, my conclusion.

Resolving that contradiction would appear to require an entirely new monograph for which the reader of the current one is unlikely, at this point, to display much appetite. In June 2019, however, news came of potential help to its beleaguered author: a new serial to be filmed for Russian state-aligned channel, NTV. Following the international acclaim received by the miniseries, *Chernobyl*, made by American media production company HBO, the NTV drama was to provide a retelling of the 1986 nuclear disaster from a patriotic, Russian point of view (Roth 2019). A computer mouse-click and, perhaps an online subscription away, it seemed, was a portrayal of Russian nationhood directly intended to rebut that of an 'ill-informed, Russophobic' Western rival. Rather than celebrating the efforts of a brave few to expose the truth about the attempted Soviet state cover-up of the disaster, and of the design flaws of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor type, the NTV

version would feature a KGB mission to thwart a CIA plot to infiltrate Chernobyl just before the explosion. It would highlight the roles of the 'real Soviet heroes' who managed to 'liquidate' the crisis (Aref'ev 2018).

Apart from neatly condensing the layering of competing internal and external accounts of Russian nationhood, the screen battle over 'the truth about Chernobyl' was redolent with symbolism tailor-made for *Projecting Russia*. As the extended on-screen historical footnotes closing the HBO series made clear, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union's last president, is on record as conceding that the end of the Soviet Union can be traced directly to the Chernobyl accident (Gorbachev 2006). So, too, can the origins of the very post-Soviet Russia under the spotlight over the earlier six chapters. Moreover, the accident took place on Ukrainian soil and was a major contributory factor in the wave of anti-Russian nationalist resentment which led to the birth of the new Ukrainian state. Nor was it accidental that the Ukraine, whose territory Putin annexed in 2014, played a supportive role in the making of the HBO miniseries.[2] Russia's incursion into Ukraine has served as a key reference point of this book. HBO's *Chernobyl* was, however, shot largely in Lithuania whose offer to the film-makers of the site of a real decommissioned nuclear reactor meshed with the drama's aesthetics of hyper-authenticity and whose sense of vulnerability the crisis of 2014 and its aftermath did little to quell (Viluckas 2018). If Chernobyl the disaster signalled the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union, then *Chernobyl* the miniseries was immersed in the politics (and economics) of the New Cold War. Little wonder, then, that, despite their flimsy grounding in reality (Gessen 2018), fears of KGB surveillance among the scientists attempting to get at the truth behind Chernobyl feature prominently in the miniseries, or that KGB agents were to be transformed from villains into heroes in the NTV response.

Unfortunately, the NTV drama, made for the channel by Amalgama Studios and filmed in 2018, has yet to materialize. A trailer for it did appear on social media in July 2019, but because it had been issued without approval from Amalgama, and in a curious convergence of the politics of communist apologia with the economics of post-communist neoliberalism, it was rapidly removed from the internet, leaving behind a residue of intrigue and speculation commensurate with the lingering contamination effects of the nuclear reactor disaster itself (BBC Monitoring 2018). Perhaps, on the other hand, a project promising crude polemics of the sort sampled in the trailer was unlikely to offer much in the way of new insight in the first place.

Although not free of polemics itself, the HBO miniseries is another matter and not only owing to its undeniable aesthetic quality, sophistication, and cultural impact. In what is one of the book's key productive tensions, precisely because *Chernobyl* falls outside its parameters (its 'exclusion zone') – the subject and the object of projection appear to be American and Soviet respectively, not *Russian* – the miniseries in fact belongs just within those parameters. The tension is ultimately that of recursive nationhood itself. The boundaries separating internal from external projections of any given nation are fast eroding. This trend is gaining widespread recognition and the paradoxical principle of a 'transnational

nationalism' (Kastoryano 2006) is well established now. This same paradox traverses *Chernobyl*; to describe it as American is no less an oversimplification (HBO is a global corporation relying on stars, and audience subscriptions, of diverse national provenance) than to say that it is exclusively about the Soviet Union (its New Cold War production context indicates otherwise). The superimposition of spatial axis (from nation to globe) upon temporal axis (from Soviet past to post-Soviet present) has been an undercurrent flowing throughout *Projecting Russia*. It is not illogical, then, to conclude it by revisiting its subject from a perspective that exceeds its apparent spatio-temporal scope – that of a non-Russian miniseries about a pre-1991 incident.

An unlikely cult

The initial inspiration for *Chernobyl* was the moving book of testimonies of the 1986 tragedy published in 1997 by Nobel-prize winning Belorussian author, Aleksievich (1997). A key storyline in the drama, that of the wife of one of the firefighters sent to extinguish the fire caused by the explosion at Chernobyl, is based on the first part of Aleksievich's book, as is a later incident involving an old woman forced to abandon her livestock by soldiers enforcing evacuation on the inhabitants of Pripiat, the town closest to the reactor. The rest of the narrative relies for its sources on other witness accounts, official chronicles, accident reports, and similar historical documents (Schwarz 2019). The scriptwriter and series creator, Craig Mazin, had previously worked on comedy feature films such as the *Hangover* sequels, and *The Identity Thief*, so the Soviet nuclear disaster of 1986 was a new and risky venture for him. It was, perhaps, more so for HBO whose long, distinctive reputation for groundbreaking, top-quality American television drama including the now legendary *The Sopranos*, *The Wire,* and *Six Feet Under* had been eroded by a string of less successful ventures including the richly layered *Carnavale*, regarded by critics and audiences as too esoteric, and by the fact that its global rivals were fast catching up to it with their own high-end television drama products (Leverette et al. 2008: 6); the celebrated series *Madmen* was originally offered to HBO, which inexplicably turned it down and ceded it to its rival, AMC (Acuna 2014).

Nonetheless, signs that HBO had regained its market position, if not its reputation for high-quality innovation, were apparent with the unprecedented global success of the viral fantasy, *Game of Thrones*, which ran from 2011 to 2019. HBO's determination to continue to be associated with risk-taking authenticity was confirmed by its *Chernobyl* project. To bolster this unlikely candidate for popular acclaim, it hired several distinguished actors. Jared Harris (who had starred in *Madmen*) played the hero, brave Soviet scientist, Vasilii Legasov. Stellan Skarsgård, whose film roles date back to von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, took the part of the Soviet minister asked by Gorbachev to work with Legasov to resolve the Chernobyl crisis (a duty he eventually fulfils with true commitment and honesty). British star, Emily Watson, also of *Breaking the Waves* fame, portrayed the efforts of the fictional scientist, Ulana Khomiuk, to discover how the nuclear

accident happened. Most significantly, Swedish director, Johan Renck, who had worked on AMC's hit series, *Breaking Bad*, considered a new milestone in the stylish, but ultra-gritty mode of television drama that HBO had made its own, was chosen to direct *Chernobyl*, an offer he accepted because it met his key personal criterion: that of providing a challenge of unusual difficulty (Utichi 2019).

From the screening of the first episode, online debates raged among scientists, historians, and former Soviet citizens over the accuracy and veracity of the miniseries; Mazin took several artistic liberties with the truth, partly in order to enhance the narrative and partly to reinforce a political message which oversimplified the complex dynamics of the perestroika period in Soviet history (Gessen 2018; History vs Hollywood 2019; Alvar 2019).[3] The controversies, however, were a direct result of the unprecedented global interest that *Chernobyl* generated. It rapidly acquired cult status thanks in equal part to a highly adroit HBO publicity and sales strategy, the feverish attention from social media channels, and a genuinely gripping plot line whose ingeniously handled tension between viewers' proleptical knowledge of the 'what' (we all know in advance that the nuclear reactor exploded) and their burning curiosity as to the 'how' and the 'why' (for which unprecedented insight into the mysterious workings of the now defunct Soviet state was required) resembled that of classical tragedy. The series won multiple awards and spurred a renewal of attention to the 1986 disaster, its aftermath and the dangers posed by nuclear power. Moreover, it launched a lucrative new tourist market based on tours of the site of the decommissioned and now safely encased nuclear reactor and of the still restricted-access territory surrounding it (Hunder 2019). Finally, it single-handedly restored HBO's reputation as the world's undisputed television drama pioneer.

Rather than an in-depth analysis of *Chernobyl*'s five 50-minute episodes, I want to use three individually discordant, yet interrelated, features of its striking narrative to draw together the main threads running through this book. They are (i) a mismatch between *Chernobyl*'s hyperreal visual aesthetic and the soaring, yet reductive ethics of universal truth that it embraces; (ii) a related tension pitting the documentary fidelity of the action portrayed, against the linguistic choice of a script delivered entirely in a globalized English (including Mancunian, Irish, Cockney, and Scandinavian variants), free of any attempted Russian or Ukrainian accents – a compromise made, according to Mazin, in the interests of emotional authenticity (Freeth 2019); and (iii) four brief moments in the action which, by contrast, involve the use of un-subtitled Russian. These features are linked to HBO's efforts to re-establish its position within the global television industry and its mission to transcend national boundaries whilst harnessing them to its own interests. They therefore echo aspects of the projection of Russian nationhood treated in Chapters 1–6.

Experiencing/exposing the foreign

The points of non-translation are fleeting and seemingly peripheral. One occurs in Episode 2 during the scenes depicting the belated evacuation of Pripiat and

consists of the evacuation instructions to inhabitants called through the loudhailers of police vans circulating the main residential areas. Even viewers with no knowledge of Russian would have little trouble in guessing the main thrust of the instructions, treating the lack of subtitles as a means of reinforcing their authenticating function as historically accurate local colour to be experienced directly rather than via linguistic mediation. It is replete with the multiple examples throughout the miniseries of street and shop signs, documents, and other realia written in Cyrillic script and a means of merging the Lithuanian space of the present time of filming with the Soviet time of the events filmed.

The loudhailer scene, however, is preceded by a more puzzling instance of non-translation. Episode 2 begins with the crystal clear, extra-diegetic sound of a voice reciting in Russian a poem by the celebrated Soviet war poet, Konstantin Simonov.[4] It is heard, first against a blacked-out screen, then as a camera pans slowly across a cracked mosaic depiction of a typical Soviet hero and then an aerial shot of a carpark. The first-person lyric voice speaks of preference for quiet, unsung country alleys as the object of true love for the Russian homeland. As the reading reaches a close, the scene switches to the inside of a laboratory with scientists at work. The poem turns to the innumerable deaths of Russian soldiers and the poet reaffirms his patriotic commitment to his country, despite its bitter fate. It is only now that viewers identify the voice as the intra-diegetic sound emanating from a radio, as one of the scientists dismissively turns it off. It is at this point, too, that the tiny minority of viewers with knowledge of Russian perceive the ironies and hypocrisies of an official Soviet patriotism which bemoans the loss of its brave warriors, whilst endorsing the strategy of obfuscation and denial responsible for the unnecessary suffering endured by its Chernobyl heroes.

The third intrusion of un-translated Russian into the English script occurs during Episode 4, during a shocking sequence depicting Soviet soldiers shooting stray animals in the Pripiat region, though historically, this occurred only on farmland and in countryside areas, not on the streets of the town as shown in the HBO drama (Gessen 2018). As they take a break from their morbid task, the disembodied, extra-diegetic words of the famous folk song, '*Chernyi voron*' (The Black Raven), sound, sung by a rasping unaccompanied male voice, again, without subtitles. The song's mournful tones would provide only the vaguest of hints at its meaning to non-Russian speakers. Russophone viewers, by contrast, would instantly recognize the symbolic aptness of a song about a soldier lying wounded on the battlefield and awaiting his inevitable fate, and a situation in which the lives of employees of the Soviet emergency services were sacrificed on the altar of state secrecy, made to suffer the agonies of a slow, painful, and unpreventable radiation-induced death. Here, there is no intra-diegetic recuperation of the unpalatable extra-diegetic truth.

The last example is less an instance of non-translation, than one of reverse subtitling presented as original script. It amounts to a curious laying bare of devices which momentarily causes the collapse of the whole edifice, or rather, artifice, of authentic Russian speech re-imagined as global English. It happens in Episode 5 when Legasov is presenting his dramatic explanation of how the Chernobyl

nuclear reactor came to explode against the expectations of the scientific workers overseeing it at the trial of those held responsible. Legasov resorts to the use of flash cards with the Russian names of the various substances he is describing written in Cyrillic, slowly setting out the fateful sequence of reactions leading to the meltdown of the reactor core. In fact, the real-life Legasov was absent from the trial, so this careful reconstruction of 'the truth' is, itself, founded on a fiction (Gessen 2018; Nicholson 2019). As he delivers his presentation, moreover, the fictional Legasov recites the unfamiliar yet baneful-sounding scientific names in English, as the camera focuses on each Cyrillic flash card in turn. The flash cards thus double as false 'subtitles' for putative Russophone audiences needing help with Jared Harris's English, and deeply compromised markers of the hyper-authenticity that characterizes Chernobyl's visual aesthetic. It is at this juncture that Anglophone viewers are most acutely aware of the fact that Harris is not speaking the true, original language of Legasov, and that they are watching a fictional dramatization licensed to deviate from the historical facts.

The laying bare of devices is all the more disconcerting in light of the narrative's rapid movement towards its climax in this final episode, as the inviolable values of truthfulness, transparency, and the rejection of state-induced obfuscations come to the fore. The series ends with a documentary-like enumeration of the eventual destinies of the central characters, including details of Legasov's suicide, Shcherbina's death from cancer, and Gorbachev's admission that the Chernobyl disaster marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. The rolling credits also acknowledge Khomiuk's status as a fictional composite.

The belated revelation that, in Khomiuk, the historical real character Legasov has been interacting with a spectral creation of the imagination is also a laying bare of devices; *Chernobyl* takes the moral high route to a greater truth by unveiling its own deceptions. There is, however, a problem with its performative transparency. For the involvement of the whole community of scientists represented by Khomiuk in uncovering the truth about Chernobyl would simply not have been possible without the conditions of glasnost that arrived only in 1985. Symbolically, Gorbachev's first speech announcing the new policy was made two months before the nuclear disaster (Tolz 1993). It had not taken root by the time of the explosion and met with considerable resistance (none of which the series acknowledges). But it was gaining strength by the time of the trial in 1987, when it had become clear that attitudes to state censorship were changing (Ibid.). Indeed, Gorbachev's eventual willingness to expose the damaging consequences of the fatal secrecy surrounding the Chernobyl disaster became a useful weapon in his struggle against the diehard conservatives in the Politburo. Thus, HBO's honest and truthful exposure of its own artifice hides a rather dishonest suppression of a truth that proves too messily inconvenient for the clean lines of its overarching morality tale.

In *Chernobyl* the word 'glasnost' – the term which defined the Gorbachev era – occurs not once during its entire course. Instead, with the exception of Shcherbina (whose individual humanity shines through the layers of collective governmental cynicism he has hitherto worn), the top echelons of Gorbachev's government are portrayed as unreconstructed totalitarians. Glasnost was admittedly later in

reaching Ukraine than other parts of the Soviet Union (Plokkhy 2018), yet even Gorbachev's unprecedented televised address to the nation delivered reluctantly and ten days too late (Schmemann 1986), but spelling out the seriousness of what had happened is excluded from HBO's version of the disaster. This picture is convenient both for the miniseries' metanarrative of noble truth-seekers prevailing against a state doomed by its own lies, and for a present political context in which now proudly independent post-Soviet democracies like Ukraine and Lithuania are once again threatened by an oppressive, disinformation-spreading Kremlin regime.

I will shortly revisit the ironies surrounding HBO's compromise with transparency. For the moment, I will remark only that the translation/non-translation dynamic points to a deeper conflict about the translation of truth from one space-time to another and from one set of political motivations for moulding events to a particular version of the truth (those of the Soviet Politburo) to another (those of the post-Soviet Ukrainian and Lithuanian states, of Russia, and of HBO).

Of the moments of non-translation, the first is easiest to account for. As the evacuation of Pripiat gets underway, the gist of the Russian instructions issuing from the police vans circulating the town is eminently predictable, even if their precise meanings are not. Not only is translation (i.e. subtitling) of the instructions not required, but also their non-translation is one with the hyperreal aesthetic requiring the meticulous reconstruction of the look of the period. If look can occasionally extend to sound – all the better. There is, in fact, an earlier instance of the extended sound of Russian speech in Episode 1, when the first, realistically crackly emergency phone call from the reactor is made to the local fire station. Here, however, accurate on-screen subtitles are provided. Their presence points proleptically to a second function of the non-translation of the evacuation instructions. The speech is on both occasions ritualistic (the lexicon of emergency calls made from a Soviet nuclear power station or of Soviet evacuation instructions is largely formalized) and mediated by the technical tool of communication (a telephone line; a police loudhailer). It is the language of the Soviet state and by rendering it in the original Russian, the director succeeds in 'foreignising' it for Anglophone audiences, just as the mellifluous, Anglophone tones of the characters playing the state's opponents – Jared Harris and Emily Watson – serve a soothing, 'domesticating' function.

The foreignizing/domesticating distinction (Venuti 1998) captures the fundamental choice faced by all literary translators: between fidelity to the original author (and to the need to remind audiences that they are reading a text belonging to another culture) and ease of comprehension (with a desire to help readers empathize with characters' experiences). The distinction applies not just to the translation (i.e. the 'making same') of linguistic difference but to differences on the level of visual appearance and cultural behaviour. In *Chernobyl*, the interplay of sameness and difference in the translation of Soviet Pripiat' to the living-room environments of HBO's global audiences acquires moral and political dimensions. Pripiat must be rendered sufficiently familiar and same-like enough for audiences to internalize the dilemmas, fears, tragic losses, and passions of its heroes,

victims, and villains (hence Mazin's reliance on Aleksievich's deeply humanist tributes to the fates of ordinary individuals caught up in the tragedy). At the same time, key elements of late 1980s Pripiat must be made to seem alien and baleful – particularly those associated with the deceptions and threats of the decaying Soviet state apparatus. This dichotomous division of a fluid Soviet reality characterized by complexity and uncertainty is itself fraught with ethical compromise.

The foreignizing approach to rendering an alien reality accumulates a third, still more disconcerting function. The aesthetic of hyper-fidelity to period detail for which *Chernobyl* was rightly praised, despite some inevitable lapses and anachronisms (Gessen 2018; Conca 2019), was also one of the primary reasons for the acclaim received by *Madmen*, which was replete with stylishly dressed, photogenic actors and surroundings that played on nostalgic desire and 'sought to capitalize on 1960s retro chic' – now long associated with cultural renewal and sexual liberation (Anon 2012). *Chernobyl*, likewise, seized the nostalgic imaginations of its viewers with what seemed a rather less promising topic for a cult TV series – the uncovering by a physically unremarkable group of scientists of the story behind a temporally distant accident in a drab, oppressive, country that no longer exists. This was evident from the sudden spike in disaster tourism to Pripiat and to the still radioactive site of the reactor explosion. Numbers visiting the site were predicted to double in 2019 (Deerwester 2019). Lithuania also saw a sharp rise in tourism to the filming locations in Vilnius and at Ignalina, the nuclear power plant used as a double for Chernobyl (Viluckas 2018). A New Zealander, thrilled by the series, commented 'Really interesting to see how Soviet life was in the 80s' (D'alessandro 2019). A British visitor added 'It feels like you are stepping back into one of the scenes actually. It's very, very authentic' (Dapkus 2019). Significantly, here the actual site rather than its TV depiction is described as authentic, suggesting that the television representations amount to a form of postmodernist simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994), creating a longed-for yet intangible image of an original reality to which the historical site obediently corresponds, whilst remaining an incomplete version of it.

The reversal indicated that, as with *Madmen*, we are dealing with a form of fetishized desire in which, through commodification, an object marked as alien and different is appropriated for the desiring self. What is appropriated is not the object itself but rather its idealized image, desire for which must forever be displaced onto something else. As Dant (1996: 11) argues, the fetish is 'the site of a merging or confusion of subject and object'. Levin (1984: 42) clarifies, 'it is never clear . . . whether it is really an object or whether it is part of the self. A fetish . . . can be thought of as existing in a free space between the subject and the object'. The appeal radiating from the fetish object is precisely 'intoxicating' in that, once satisfied through assimilation, it must retain an element of its toxic difference to ensure that desire for it to be renewed. Appropriately, tourist visitors to the once-forbidden site are issued with small yellow Geiger counters to test the levels of radiation their bodies are absorbing as they wander the 'authentic' corridors and streets of their HBO-induced imaginary desires.

The strange fascination exercised by the site of the forbidden and the horrific is a reminder that one of the brand qualities attributed to HBO's innovative approach to television is its agility in working across multiple generic forms. *Chernobyl* is part fictional re-enactment, part court procedural, part disaster movie, and part detective thriller. But it also embraces elements of the horror genre, in the most terrifying manifestations of which the source of the horror remains elusive, or even invisible to the point that viewers are left unsure whether it is real. *Blair Witch Project*, *The Exorcist*, *Ring*, *It*, and *The Others* are celebrated instances. In all these examples, fear of the invisible source of a threat is combined with a desire to see and 'know' it. The mortal yet intangible threat of radiation is no less fear-inducing. Nor are the effects of radiation as it penetrates bodies and destroys them from within. *Chernobyl* is punctuated throughout by graphic images of bodies exhibiting the repulsive ravages of radiation sickness – images redolent of the Body Horror subgenre.

A celebrated Body Horror film precursor of the Cold War period was *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Don Siegel 1956) in which the takeover of bodies by an alien force turning them into emotionless automatons was widely interpreted as an allegory of the Soviet communist threat and the 1950s McCarthyite hysteria (Loock 2012). That threat has been superseded by a new, invisible Russian threat: that of cyberwarfare and disinformation. This abstract, invisible danger is periodically referenced in the HBO series in the anachronistic form of the cover-up initiated by Soviet Communist Party officials; in Episode 2, an elderly Communist Party functionary berates attendees of an emergency meeting, telling them that the best interests of Soviet citizens are served by shielding them from the horrors of the danger that faces them – a fictional intervention with no basis in history (History vs Hollywood 2019). The obverse of the universal truth pursued without fear or compromise by Chernobyl's brave hero-scientists, it is eventually articulated in Episode 5 by the extra-diegetic authorial voice represented in the on-screen intertitles accounting for the eventual fates of all the characters and by Legasov's last recorded words on the audio tape he left as his legacy:

> The truth doesn't care about our needs or wants. It doesn't care about our governments, our ideologies, our religions. It will lie in wait, for all time. And this, at last, is the gift of Chernobyl. Where I once would fear the cost of truth, now I only ask: What is the cost of lies?[5]

The mutual accommodation of the ideal abstraction (of universal truth) and the fetishized reality of an alien time and place (that of Soviet Pripiat') – of sameness and difference – recurs with a new twist in the second instance of non-translation. This begins as the invisible, disembodied voice reading a Simonov poem against the background of classical violin music and announcing the beginning of Episode 2. It is debatable whether many Russophone viewers would identify the text at the outset. For non-Russophone audiences lacking both linguistic and cultural knowledge, the coincidence of the soothing male voice and the black screen which

precedes the action that it appears to be announcing seems to point unerringly towards the extra-diegetic voice of a reliable author, spelling out the metanarrative meaning of what is about to be witnessed. It is only when the voice is suddenly extinguished at the flick of a radio switch that it is recognized as belonging to the alien world of official Soviet discourse.

For the Russophone minority, the poem's opening tribute to the 'quiet patriotism' of Russia's country backwaters and its subsequent mourning for the innumerable graves of Russian soldiers provides a poignant, if temporary, parallel with the sacrifice of the countless victims of the nuclear reactor tragedy. It is only when the poem closes with the reassertion of a more conventional Soviet military patriotism, the revelation that the author was Simonov, a leading light in the official Soviet literary canon, that the poem's status as a deeply ironic counterpoint to the 'true' patriotism of those who gave their lives in the struggle to contain the Chernobyl disaster is revealed. In the evacuation announcement, untranslated Russian speech connotes the alienating power of the Soviet state, ameliorated only by the Soviet visual backdrop which here has a fetishizing, domesticating effect. With the Simonov poem, the sounds of the Russian language appear initially to express an eternal truth about the brave Russian people, until they are assimilated into the visual surroundings with their alienating, Soviet ambience.

The oscillating movement between domestic and alien, narrative and metanarrative is complicated by the different access to that oscillation accorded to Russian speakers and non-Russian speakers. This contrast is attributable to a self-reflexive play captured within HBO's famous 'It's not television. It's HBO!' branding strategy. It revolves around the claim that HBO makes dramas of such sophistication that it is redefining what we understand as television. Unlike rival corporations, it defies the medium's associations with formulaic, low-brow entertainment, even if that means sacrificing viewing figures. As a brand quality, however, the 'It's not television!' mantra hides a certain formulaic recipe of its own, one blending: (a) gripping plot lines; (b) a willingness to push the boundaries of taste and narrative convention; (c) a commitment to gritty authenticity (the brutal violence of *The Sopranos*, the macabre detail of *Six Feet Under* or the unforgiving scientific precision of *Chernobyl*); (d) the combination of incompatible narrative forms (the mafia serial with the domestic drama; the documentary re-enactment and the horror film; the darkly humorous sitcom as metaphysical thriller); and (e) a knowing, auto-referentiality appealing to literate audiences (new layers of meaning deriving from *The Sopranos*' dialogue with the *Godfather* trilogy; the multiple mythological references peppering *Carnavale*; the semiotic riches available to *Chernobyl* viewers with knowledge of Simonov's poetry).

The non-translation of the Simonov poem is domesticated in two mutually complementary steps: first via the auto-referential element in HBO's 'not television' formula, and second through assimilation into the fetishized paraphernalia of the Soviet state. The same synthesis is absent from the third instance of non-translation. The words of '*Chernyi voron*' are, like those of the Simonov poem, lost on all but the few Russian speakers for whom they are (a) familiar from childhood, and (b) resonant with new meaning as parallels emerge between the fate of

the brave soldier left to die on a battlefield and the threat of death hanging like a pall over the courageous emergency workers. But here there is no assimilation into the Soviet surroundings. By contrast, the song stands in *sharp juxtaposition* to a subsequent scene in which one of the soldiers carrying out the slaughter of animals reads from a Soviet propaganda poster visible in Cyrillic on a street they are passing through 'We are building happiness for all mankind' (the title chosen for the entire episode), and his comrade comments ironically, 'Me, I'm happy everyday'. Sameness and difference, translation and non-translation are here prone to fission rather than fusion.

Our final example is the point in Episode 5 at which, in the finale of the court procedural scene, Legasov deploys the jargon-rich, 'truthful', language of nuclear physics to explain the Chernobyl disaster. In cold, compelling logic, he unravels the mystery behind the core meltdown: the fatal flaw undermining the safety of all RBKM reactors. This is the critical point marking the beginning of the denouement, including Legasov's eventual suicide, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the final reckoning with the truth expressed in the extended intertitles completing the historical record at the end of Episode 5. It is also the moment of the ultimate laying bare of devices: when, through the self-conscious device of a set of flash cards written in Russian script but spoken, one by one, in native English, HBO finally concedes the truth about the status of its retelling of the Chernobyl story: that of a dramatized (and not entirely true) re-enactment for a primarily Anglophone audience. This disclosure of truth as untruth simultaneously motivates Legasov's fictionalized courtroom exposé of the truth about Chernobyl (the reactor), for *Chernobyl* (the miniseries) is an English-language drama, not a documentary featuring subtitled, Russian-language footage.

HBO's representation of Legasov's trial testimony attempts to resolve the play of sameness and difference, translation and non-translation, fission and fusion. Jared Harris's reassuring English diction renders familiar and same-like the alienating difference of the Soviet-era and its Cyrillic flash cards, along with that of the jarringly unfamiliar scientific terminology. Yet, because Harris's aural delivery is precisely synchronized with Legasov's visual presentation of each flash card in turn, the very act of domestication – and Harris's rendition of Legasov's actor-like performance – is foregrounded, and with it, the original foreignness to be translated or domesticated. The contradiction, however, is itself subsumed into the sameness of HBO's 'this is not television' formula: its ability to insert moments of playful, self-reflexive honesty into the elaborate fictional artifices constituted by its second brand feature: its willingness to render the grim, un-television-like authenticity of the realities it dramatizes.

Chernobyl's dialectic of translation and non-translation – its fetishizing of an otherness appropriated for the self – returns us to HBO's market position. Whilst it has lost its unique reputation for innovation, HBO has remained a corporate giant in the media industry. Like other such giants, it has achieved this thanks to new technology's global reach and capacity to facilitate worldwide marketing exposure. Its output is as inflected by mediatization as the other cultural phenomena explored in this book. As demonstrated by the colossal popularity of *Game*

of Thrones, and as we discovered in the case of Russian cinema aspiring to transnational reach, with the need to compete globally against rivals like AMC and Disney, comes the imperative to appeal across national and cultural boundaries. *Game of Thrones* relied for this effect on the universal resonance of mythical fantasy, spiced with eroticism and exhilarating battle scenes. *Chernobyl* required a different approach. Its authentic grit and visual knowingness were therefore bolstered by other strategies, including the threading through of the theme of the eternal battle between truth and disinformation: from the initial local response to the explosion (when officials warn of dangers arising from the spread of disinformation about the real threat posed by the radiation) to the metanarrative pronouncements of the inevitable triumph of truth in the closing intertitles. This theme connecting Gorbachev's Soviet Union to Putin's Russia – a link accommodated within the political concerns of latter-day Ukraine and Lithuania – also resonated with growing alarm over fake news in HBO's nation of origin: the US of Donald Trump.

The truth theme integrates *Chernobyl* into a New Cold War environment in which proud new states are battling with the residual imperial ambitions of a former oppressor (the Chernobyl disaster is a post-Soviet Ukrainian foundation narrative, as is the Holodomor tragedy, briefly referenced in Episode 3 by an old woman, as Soviet soldiers enforcing the evacuation compel her to abandon her farm animals, the source of her livelihood).[6] But at the same time, it lifts the miniseries from the localized geopolitics of post-communism and inserts it into a universal myth about the eventual triumph of truth over deceit and disinformation, a myth which corroborates the post-imperial nation-building narratives.

The double move is not exclusive to *Chernobyl*. The year it was first shown, 2019, also saw the release of the feature film, *Mr Jones*, directed by Polish director, Agnieszka Holland, and a joint venture between Poland, Ukraine, and the BBC investigative journalist, John Sweeney, whose novel, *Useful Idiots*, provided the film's inspiration.[7] Set in the 1930s, it retells the true story of a Welsh journalist who travels to the Soviet Union to interview Stalin but is told of the cover-up of a disaster unfolding in Ukraine, where he travels illegally to discover the appalling effects of a politically induced famine, the Holodomor. He is arrested but released on condition that he returns to the UK to support the deceitful Stalinist narrative about Ukraine, in exchange for the lives of five other British prisoners held in the Soviet Union. Jones ignores the conditions, but his efforts to tell his story are derailed by the *Washington Post*'s Moscow correspondent, Walter Duranty, the 'useful idiot' of Sweeney's novel on whom the Soviets hold compromising information, and who whitewashes the horrors of the Holodomor. Eventually, Jones's truth prevails. The advertising blurb for Sweeney's novel, which could serve equally as that for the film and, date aside, for *Chernobyl*, reads:

> As Vladimir Putin rewrites the Nazi-Soviet pact and with the horrors of Chernobyl and the Cold War so recent, this thriller of fake news in 1932 is real storytelling of enormous significance.
>
> (www.fantasticfiction.com/s/john-sweeney/useful-idiot.htm)

Like *Chernobyl*, Holland at once inserts *Mr Jones* into the post-Soviet Ukrainian (and Polish) nation-building strategies and lifts it from that context, accommodating its story with the universal narrative of truth's triumph over disinformation. *Mr Jones* also employs a version of *Chernobyl*'s grim aesthetics of authenticity. The scenes of suffering in Ukraine are genuinely shocking. Like much of *Chernobyl*, they are shot in washed-out, semi-monochrome, but replacing the truth-connoting hand-held camera technique deployed periodically in *Chernobyl* (and in other recent HBO series, such as *Succession* 2018) with the extreme close-up and shallow depth of field which likewise carries with it associations of a pre-digital photographic authenticity.

Chernobyl's meticulously constructed aesthetic of visual authenticity contributes to a commodifying fetishization of the Cold War Soviet surroundings in which the nuclear drama unfolded, transforming the site of the tragedy into marketable post-Cold War products: Chernobyl, Pripiat, and their Lithuanian body doubles as global tourist destinations. The universal narrative trajectory of the triumph of truth dovetails with the rebranding of (a) acute danger zone as cool tourist haunt, (b) post-imperial backwater as vibrant new nation, and (c) HBO as undisputed world leader in ground-breaking TV drama.

HBO's continuing battle for commercial supremacy is also attributable to the looming battle over the streaming market in which Netflix and Amazon lead the way but into which Time Warner (which owns HBO) and Disney are intent on intervening. Time Warner's legendary rivalry with Disney appears to motivate an otherwise puzzlingly out-of-place shot that occurs in the middle of Episode 5. As the 1987 trial of the Chernobyl plant managers commences, and Shcherbyna, now clearly ravaged by cancer, takes a break from the proceedings, the camera pans the court building, pausing to linger on a forlorn and dilapidated figurine of Mickey Mouse, the familiar Disney Corporation logo. As Shcherbyna sits on a bench with Legasov who, in an otherwise painfully tragic conversation, reassures his dying colleague that he has lived a good life, the corner of Mickey Mouse's large ear obtrudes comically and incongruously into the corner of the shot. Such figurines were not unusual in late Soviet Russia. They became increasingly common in the perestroika period as the Soviet Union's surge towards market economics, and its accompanying embrace of global capitalist culture, gathered pace. The courthouse Mickey Mouse is as much an authentic part of glasnost-era reality as the monotonously similar high-rise apartment blocks, ubiquitous cigarette smoke, and faded Cyrillic shop signs which form the core of the fetishized *byt* pervading *Chernobyl*. Moreover, it provides one of HBO's trademark nods to its cultured audience – a reminder that what they are watching is 'not television', but raw, unmediated reality portrayed, however, with self-conscious knowledge of the wider representational context. As screenwriter Craig Mazin told the Royal Television Society: 'Because of the scale of it, we didn't want the Disney version. The story is big enough without needing in any way to be sensationalised' (Frost 2019).

Ott (2008: 98) refers to HBO's consistent deployment of 'insider jokes . . . self-referential gestures and knowing winks' aimed at its educated, literate audiences.

In the same context, Santo (2008: 28) refers to the 'complex critique of capitalism' undertaken in classic HBO series like *The Sopranos*, pointing out that such products 'epitomise the very act of repetitive consumption that television series demand of their viewers'. By signalling awareness of their own complicity in such consumption practices, HBO's texts over-determine the meaning of the conscious paradox represented by their embrace of the 'It's not television' conundrum. In a similar vein, Kelso (2008: 53) contends that HBO 'disseminates polysemic messages that both affirm and undermine dominant capitalist ideology'. Thus, the lingering focus on the faded Mickey Mouse figurine simultaneously commodifies an alien reality, affirms the triumph of capitalist ideology as epitomized by Disney Corporation, undermines that ideology by ridiculing its fading symbols, and winks to its own knowing audience.

Chernobyl's moments of non-translation foreground difference and foreignness as a function of the similar and the domestic by contributing to a representational strategy that converts the alien and the foreign into commodified objects for appropriation and domestication. These moments also represent knowing gestures of differentiation in which extensive sequences of non-subtitled Russian point audiences towards HBO's 'non-televisual' brand image and towards their own identity as cultural sophisticates capable of recognizing (and so domesticating) such gestures. Finally, the trans-lingual form of the non-subtitled Russian inscribes viewers into a cosmopolitan community which, whilst it lacks a common language, shares a single, familiar set of enlightenment values: transparency, rationality, and the universality of objective truth.

Chernobyl's non-translated sequences serve HBO's efforts to reinforce its global 'not television' brand which transcends nations and attracts cosmopolitan audiences sharing universal values. Precisely for this reason, they are also available for appropriation by post-Soviet nation-builders operating in a newly mediatized environment. The portrayal of the moment at which truth-seeking scientists initiated the collapse of the truth-suppressing Soviet Union hones a powerful post-Soviet Ukrainian foundation narrative into a sharply contemporary tool capable of irradiating the crumbling Soviet skeleton beneath latter-day Russia's deceptively intimidating surface and also of lending the site of that turning point a morbid, ionizing *kudos*. The multivalent Chernobyl narrative offers rich pickings for progressive post-Cold War American nation-builders, of both the older, established pro-democracy, pro-capitalist variety, and the newer environmentalist, anti-nuclear, and increasingly anti-populist, anti-Trump kind, and, by extension, for Russian patriots, again of both oppositional and, by negation, official versions.

The universalizing and market commodification strategies inflecting the HBO aesthetic appear to counterbalance the various post-Soviet, post-Cold War discourses of nationhood competing to appropriate it. Yet, HBO's strategies and the nation-building discourses they transcend coexist as a complex series of recursions facilitated by the mediatized environment from which they emerged. To adapt the HBO mantra, the arena in which *Chernobyl* unfolds may not be television, but it *is* nationhood – and a nationhood which television, along with

all its digital accoutrements, facilitated. The sediments – temporal and spatial – attributable to contemporary media practices mean that it is often difficult to locate nationhood's articulating subject, now a transnational composite whose ambiguity the gerundive form of the first word of this book's main title – '*Projecting* (Russia)' – was designed to capture. In order to properly understand this phenomenon, we must distance ourselves from the linear New Cold War narratives within which *Chernobyl* is, nonetheless, clearly entangled – an entanglement confirming, however, that such narratives cannot, in turn, be dismissed as inconsequential or anachronistic.

We have seen throughout that Russian cultural and media practices – state-aligned and oppositional – exhibit an intuitive sense of the circular, repetitive motion characterizing nationhood in its mediatized dimension. Also, we have observed an acute awareness on the part of Russian state and non-state actors of what this means for, and how it can be adapted to, linear projection with a defined nominal subject – how the vulnerability of the meaning of Russia as a *nation* to constant reconfiguration can be turned to the advantage of Russia, the *state*. The real-world consequences of our journey across the densely thicketed terrain covered by this process – one contaminated with the (albeit homeopathic) toxicity of often irresolvable contradiction – are significant. It was a journey, therefore, which needed to be undertaken. It is also one whose endpoint remains, by definition, perpetually deferred.

Notes

1 For an analysis of how this balance of forces played out in the context of Russian state media's response to the 2018 Salisbury Poisonings crisis and what it means in terms of the enhanced agency of state journalists, see Tolz et al. (2020).

2 For example, a Ukrainian cultural consultant read over the script to each episode (Hristov 2020).

3 The internet is awash with articles debunking various historical and scientific inaccuracies in *Chernobyl*. One of the most authoritative academic accounts of the true facts surrounding the disaster is Plokkhy (2018).

4 The poem, 'Dorogi Smolenshchiny', was written during the Second World War. For the original Russian, see https://rustih.ru/konstantin-simonov-ty-pomnish-alesha-dorogi-smolenshhiny/. Ironically, in the script for the episode released by HBO on the website for the series, the poem has been translated into English. See https://johnaugust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chernobyl_Episode-2Please-Remain-Calm.pdf

5 See https://johnaugust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chernobyl_Episode-5Vichnaya-Pamyat.pdf

6 The incident is heavily adapted from one of the biographical accounts in Alexievich's book of Chernobyl memoirs. The Ukrainian famine was indeed artificially induced, but it was part of a wider catastrophe affecting vast areas of rural Russia and Kazakhstan also subjected to Stalin's disastrous collectivization policies.

7 The term 'useful idiot' which became current at the height of the Cold War is now used generically to describe people, usually intellectuals and artists, naively used for propaganda purposes by the regimes they unwittingly endorse. It was originally attributed to Lenin in relation to communist 'fellow-travellers', but this attribution has never been documented (Safire 1987).

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