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Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition: Genres, Technologies, Identities, edited by Alexander Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova and Rimgaila Salys. Academic Studies Press, 2021, 277 pp.

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If one were to visualise the course of Russian television's development under Putin's regime, what would it look like? Given the country's recent descent into militaristic "hybrid totalitarianism", the initial impulse might be to picture it as a straight line punctuated by a series of media clampdowns (Kolesnikov). However, as noted by Hutching and Rulyova, "post-Soviet Russian television has not followed an unbending linear trajectory from freedom to subservience" —owing, in part, to the presence and popularity of imported Western content out of line with the regime's agenda (10). More importantly, though, Russian television's transition from a broadcast to digital post-broadcast model has widened the boundaries of the previously strictly national media space, setting course for global export. This, in turn, has created demand for more diverse domestic productions—both stylistically and ideologically, including various types of serialised fiction. A careful consideration of such televisual texts may thus be necessary to gain a nuanced understanding of Russian television in the twenty-first century.

This is precisely what Alexander Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova and Rimgaila Salys offer the reader in *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition: Genres, Technologies, Identities*, in which they set out to challenge the misperception of Russia's televisual landscape as homogenous. Comprising nine essays—contributions from the field's leading scholars—the collection delves into the multiplicity of genres, narratives and characters that have figured on Russian television over the past two decades. Complete with a selection of interviews with industry professionals, *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition* offers a comprehensive overview of changes and continuities that have characterised the production and distribution of serialised fiction in Putin's Russia. The collection can be thematically split into three parts: the first focuses on series set in or inspired by the historic past; the second discusses series about present-day Russia and the third provides insight into the inner workings of Russian television industry through the first-hand accounts of those working in it.

Part One opens with Alyssa DeBlasio's exploration of high culture as a marker of quality on post-Soviet Russian television. The chapter is built around a case study of Russia-K, otherwise known as *Kul'tura* (Russian for "culture")—the only non-commercial channel on contemporary

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Russian television dedicated exclusively to the promotion of cultural values. By tracing the development of this unique thematic channel from its conception in 1997 to the present day, the chapter provides an insight into how this distinctly Soviet brand of quality television exists in (and resists) the changing media environment of modern Russia. Substantiating its claims with textual analyses of Russia-K's educational programmes, the opening chapter demonstrates how the channel constructs the nostalgic aesthetic of high culture and uses it to conceal the deliberate absence of politics from its content. DeBlasio's contribution thus provides an example of Russian television's unreflexive nostalgia for its Soviet origins, which, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, is a rarer phenomenon than one might assume.

DeBlasio's article is followed by Stephen M. Norris's discussion of *Penal Battalion* (*Shtrafbat*, 2004), Nikolai Dostal's controversial portrayal of the uncomfortable parts of Soviet Second World War history. Unlike the subject matter of the previous chapter, *Penal Battalion* serves as an example of Russian media's critical (rather than nostalgic) engagement with its Soviet past. At the same time, as Norris argues at length, Dostal's series offers a reinterpretation of history in line with the Russian Orthodox Church's agenda, which strives to "[define] belief as an essential component of Russianness" (72). Through a close engagement with the text and the sociopolitical context in which it was created, the chapter investigates the seemingly contradictory intertwinement of Orthodox beliefs and patriotism in contemporary Russian identity.

Rimgaila Salys continues the discussion of Russian serials' reworking of history with her examination of *Orlova and Aleksandrov* (Vitaly Moskalenko, 2015), a biopic about a notorious celebrity couple of the Stalin era. The series centres around the lives of Liubov' Orlova, Stalin's favourite film star, and her lifelong partner and collaborator Grigory Aleksandrov, best known for directing popular musical comedies starring Orlova in the 1930s. Despite focusing on a show deeply rooted in the context of Russia's Soviet past, Salys's analysis is conducted largely from a global perspective: her article examines how the conventions derived from the staple American TV biopics are reflected in the narrative structure of the show. The author uses this parallel to investigate how biopic's genre conventions allow for a repackaging of modern-day Russian values into a historical-fictional format. Notably, Salys also introduces the subject of gender in relation to what she terms the "sex-power-violence nexus," which becomes a recurring theme in the collection (90).

In fact, sex, power and, to a lesser extent, violence—the three pillars of the international period drama format—take the central stage in Prokhorova and Prokhorov's discussion of the Putin-era series about Catherine the Great. Like Salys, the authors adopt a global cinema approach to Russian television to demonstrate how Russia Channel's *Catherine* (Aleksandr Baranov et al., 2014–19) and Channel One's *Catherine the Great* (Igor' Zaitsev, 2015) fit into the international format of big-budget costume dramas. By de-emphasising the series' continuity with Soviet historical productions, the authors acknowledge the deep extent to which international trends and the need for global distribution have reshaped Russian television's approach to the country's history in the mid-2010s.

The first part of the collection culminates with Lilya Kaganovsky's piece titled "Between Pornography and Nostalgia: Valery Todorovsky's *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*)", in which the author dissects Todorovsky's backstage melodrama set at Moscow's Mosfil'm studio during a brief

moment of liberalisation in the early 1960s (2013). As the title suggests, Kaganovsky argues that the series, despite its pretence to authenticity, is "a very pretty simulacrum", which oscillates between the cynical (pornographic) and the naïve (nostalgic) portrayal of a heavily romanticised period of Soviet history (120). The chapter thus adds to the list of diverse and often contradictory modes in which Russian television shows engage with the past and concludes the historically oriented section of the collection.

Part Two begins with Tatiana Mikhailova's exploration of female sexuality and power dynamics in *The Affairs* (*Izmeny*, Vadim Perelman, 2015), a TNT channel series about a married woman's sexual relations with four different men. The author begins by noting just how unorthodox the show's premise might seem in the context of contemporary Russia by discussing the socio-political conditions in which it was made—namely, the aftermath of the 2014 approval of a government programme aimed at preserving conservative family values. Throughout the chapter, however, by referencing numerous sociological works on Russian women's infidelity and relationship to their own sexuality, Mikhailova convincingly demonstrates that the family dynamics and practices depicted in the show are symptomatic of contemporary Russian society. The author thus asserts that the series presents a grim yet truthful picture of family life in post-Soviet Russia, where love and fulfilment are rarely found within marriage.

The undertones of hopelessness continue to reverberate through the next chapter, where the collection's editors conduct a comparative analysis of *The Method* (*Metod*, 2015) and *Sleepers* (*Spiashchie*, 2017)—Channel One's high-budget neo-noir series directed by Iury Bykov. Here, however, the lack of hope is not merely a theme depicted on-screen. It also manifests as the abrupt loss of the director's capacity to distinguish law from justice, which the authors trace through a close examination of the two shows. They argue that while both series are examples of Russian "quality television" that make masterful use of the global neo-noir visual language, only Bykov's earlier work with its moral ambiguities reads as a true example of the genre. *Sleepers*, as the chapter demonstrates, only uses the neo-noir aesthetic to deliver poorly concealed pro-establishment propaganda.

The following chapter, however, works to remind the reader not to indulge in pessimistic generalisations about the state of Russian television industry based on a single example. Vlad Strukov's article concerns itself with the representation of structures that exist in the grey area between the normative and the deviant in the context of neoliberal Russia. At the heart of this discussion is a reading of *Ol'ga* (Aleksei Nuzhnyi et al., 2016–18), a TNT sitcom about a single mother of two and her relationship with her children, father, and younger sister, all of whom share a small flat in Moscow's suburbs. Instead of labelling this family "non-traditional"—a term the author deems both too vague and too limiting—he approaches the subject from a queer perspective, allowing for a nuanced understanding of this unorthodox living situation. Strukov argues that the series portrays a family that eludes binary categorisation, thereby "querying and queering the regime" (209).

Still, there is only so much of the status quo that can be challenged from within the framework of legacy TV. The future of subversive Russian television likely lies beyond television in its traditional sense, as Saara Ratilainen argues in the collection's concluding chapter. Instead of focusing on conventional network productions like the other contributors, Ratilainen offers a

fascinating deep dive into the lesser-known phenomenon of amateur web series, tracing their origins and evolution on the Russian-speaking Internet. Using the example of *Bitches* (*Stervochki*, Ilya Vereshchagin, 2011–15), a zero-budget teen-made criminal drama about two female gangsters, the author observes how the web series format enables the overturning of certain social and genre tropes, such as female characters' lack of agency, while simultaneously embracing and emulating another. Overall, the chapter stands out from the rest of the collection not only as an invitation to expand the narrow scholarly definition of television, but as a hopeful reminder of the possibility of change through the never-ending dialogue between old and new media.

The collection then proceeds to its final part consisting of five brief interviews with well-established Russian television producers and creatives. All conversations follow a similar structure, whereby the interviewees are first asked about their career paths followed by an invitation to comment on some contemporary issue of the industry, be it the role of women in the production process or the diminishing impact of Russian television across the Commonwealth of Independent States. This section feels somewhat disconnected from the rest of the book, owing not to the stylistic difference but rather a failure to establish clear links with the preceding chapters. Although most of the interviewees have to some extent contributed to the production of the series discussed earlier in the collection, this is not made plain. Short summaries of each interviewee's filmography at the start of each conversation would have been a beneficial addition to this section, improving the overall cohesiveness of the collection. As they are, while perhaps not too relevant for a general reader, the interviews can be an illuminating source for anyone interested in the behind-the-scenes of the Russian television industry.

Today, when a large portion of popular discourse around Russian media catastrophically lacks nuance, the need for a thorough examination of contemporary Russian television is more pressing than ever. As such, *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition* is an invaluable resource which organically combines textual analyses with political and cultural observations, revealing as much about the country's diverse televisual landscape as it does about the sociocultural processes which shape it. The collection's well-rounded selection of topics, which cover both the small screen's turbulent relationship with Russian history and the medium's ongoing adaptation to the new post-broadcast reality, paints a picture of an industry in which tradition coexists with progress, and subservience—with resistance. Of course, one must keep in mind the drastic changes which have occurred in Russia since the publication of the collection in 2021: despite the recency of their essays, the contributors could in no way have anticipated the psychotic descent of post-February 2022 Russian media after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That said, *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition* remains a pertinent contribution to the discourse surrounding the evolution of Russian television in the twenty-first century, making it essential reading for scholars and enthusiasts alike.

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