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Between Glamorous Patriotism and Reality-TV Aesthetics: Political Communication, Popular Culture, and the Invective Turn in Trump’s United States and Putin’s Russia

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Summary: This article proceeds from the observation that Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin—two politicians frequently correlated and compared since Trump’s bid for the Presidency—have been remarkably successful in mobilizing support for their politics and in seemingly immunizing their rhetorics against vernacular critique. To work toward an understanding of this phenomenon, we propose to look at how political communication by and around the two politicians draws on forms and venues of popular culture. Both contexts, we will argue, have developed new strategies for the instrumentalization of popular culture, strategies that, while actualized differently in the two settings, revolve around an ‘invective turn’ in political communication—a radicalization of the familiar nationalist rhetoric of ‘us versus them’ that seems specifically fueled by pop-cultural forms. To explore this traffic between pop and politics, this article puts into conversation two case studies: On the one hand, of Trump’s campaign speeches which, we contend, symbolically organize around the logic of *agôn*—of the competitive game—as it has coagulated in the reality-tv genre of the gamedoc. On the other hand, we look at (state-controlled) pop music in the Russian genre of *Éстрада* which, thus our argument, advertises a distinct form of patriotism through the principle of ‘glamour.’ Glamour, in Putin’s Russia, operates simultaneously as a style and as an ideology of self-glorification. The article will outline how reality tv’s logic of *agôn* and patriotic pop music’s aesthetics of glamour each fuel a qualitatively new orientation of political discourse toward the aesthetically charged, affect-saturated denigration of others and valorization of self.

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1 Introduction

In the hot phase of the recent US Presidential campaign, much was made of possible connections between American Presidential candidate Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. As an editorial in *The New York Times* summarizes the lively debate: “One curious aspect of the 2016 presidential campaign has been Donald Trump’s startling affinity for Vladimir Putin, the increasingly authoritarian president of Russia. Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin have spoken admiringly of each other; exhibited similar strongman tendencies; and seemed to share certain views, notably a disdain for NATO” (Editorial Board, n.pg.). Rather than attending to the potential political similarities suggested there—which have been reasserting themselves after President Trump took office—, this article pursues a different set of parallels between the two politicians. Its point of departure is the remarkable resonance and support that the policies of both Putin and Trump enjoy among sizable portions of their constituencies, and the apparent immunity of their rhetorics to critical challenge. One, though certainly not the only, pillar on which this shared popular reach and immunity rest seems to concern the ways in which political communication by and around the two politicians draws on forms of popular culture. Both political contexts, we will argue, have developed novel strategies for the instrumentalization and appropriation of popular culture. They overlap in what could be described as an ‘invective turn’ in political communication—a qualitatively new orientation of political rhetoric toward the aesthetically charged, affect-saturated denigration of others and valorization of self: Since Putin’s third term in office, and especially after the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, Russia has seen a marked radicalization of political language, in which aggressiveness has become the new norm and which increasingly registers in the field of popular culture. In the United States, Trump’s campaign has attracted much attention for a contentious and derisive language that used to belong to other registers than politics, especially to those of popular culture. This pop-resonant invective turn and its emotional signatures, we suggest, significantly contribute to the legibility and persuasiveness of political communication by and around the two politicians, while simultaneously complicating established forms of popular critique.

Whereas this is a shared pattern among Trump’s and Putin’s politics—a pattern more poignantly thrown into relief by the kind of comparative engagement that this article proposes—the dynamics by which these patterns are actual-

lized in Russia and the United States are considerably different, reflecting the distinct structures of politics and culture in each setting. Next to the different historical contexts in which contemporary Russian and U.S. pop cultures are embedded, the most prominent distinction lies in the U.S. media's independence from content-related control by the state and their operation strictly on economic principles, vis-a-vis a Russian mediascape that is very much controlled by the state. Whereas conditions in the United States have thus nurtured a multivoiced—or fragmentary—quality of popular culture, in contemporary Russia, mainstream pop culture is politically more homogenous as its contents are either tolerated or actively used by political elites for ultimately propagandistic ends. Oppositional forms of culture are relegated to the mediascape's more precarious fringes, especially in the new media. This article zooms in on two case studies that take seriously these distinct conditions of the traffic between pop and politics in contemporary Russia and the United States, and that focus on fields where this traffic seems to have been particularly rampant: Donald Trump's campaign speeches—a key genre of political communication that, in Trump's practice, stoutly relies on certain forms of pop; and popular music in today's Russia—a key genre of pop that is thoroughly political. In the process, we will contour the particular aesthetics that travel between pop and politics in each setting—those of 'glamour' in the Russian and those of reality tv in the United States context—asking how these aesthetics fuel a rhetorically powerful invective turn in political communication.

2 *'Make America Great Again': Reality-TV Aesthetics and Donald Trump's Campaign Communication*

In the United States, the boundary between institutional politics and popular culture has been notoriously porous for a long time. American-Studies scholarship highlights, both, how political agents have used popular formulas and venues to communicate their goals, and how popular culture has served as a platform for critical perspectives on political agents and hegemonic discourses.¹ Campaigns for the presidency count among the political events in which this traffic between the political and the popular traditionally intensifies, and this has

¹ To name only two exemplary studies, see Michael Rogin's *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* or Jeffrey Jones's *Entertaining Politics*.

certainly held true for the 2015/2016 campaign. We want to suggest that, in the context of Donald Trump's successful campaign, a significant shift in this traffic seems to emerge: Whereas exchanges between pop and politics used to be organized around the symbolic form of narrative and, more specifically, the genre of melodrama, Trump's campaign orients itself toward what has been called the 'gamedoc'—a genre of reality tv in which the competitive game dominates as symbolic form. Among other things, this has had a grave impact on pop-cultural forms of political critique, which have been trained on the debunking of *narratives*. The symbolic logic of Trump's campaign is not just tied to a new invective style of electoral politics, it has also preempted and deflated much pop-critique, recoding critical attacks in ways that actually strengthen the candidate.

While the exchange between American politics and popular culture has been a steady subject of scholarly inquiry, its formal principles have mostly received only implicit attention. Elizabeth Anker's recent monograph *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and The Politics of Freedom* counts among the few studies that specifically focus on the symbolic parameters that structure political appropriations of popular formats. Anker argues that, since the middle of the 20th century, political communication in the United States has predominantly relied on the genre of melodrama. The conventions of melodrama, she suggests, uniquely enable the articulation of 'strong,' combative notions of national identity, an ability that contributed to the genre's growing influence in U.S. politics since the beginning of the Cold War and—with renewed intensity—in the aftermath of 9/11. Considering the larger geopolitical context that thus fueled the melodrama's rise to political prominence in the United States, it is not surprising that it also seems to inform much political communication in Russia, as this article's other case study suggests. Anker's argument is worth quoting at length:

What I call melodramatic political discourse casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation-state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue. [...] It suggests that the redemption of virtue obligates state power to exercise heroic retribution on the forces responsible for national injury. Melodrama depicts the United States as both the feminized, virginal victim and the aggressive, masculinized hero in the story of freedom, as the victim-hero of geopolitics. Its national injuries morally legitimate the violence, extensions, and consolidations of state power that melodrama posits as necessary both for healing the nation's wound and for reestablishing the state's sovereign freedom. (Anker 2014: 2–3)

With its emphasis on the nation's wounding by outside forces as the grounds of national self-definition and political action, the melodrama rivals with and largely replaces the genre that used to govern U.S. political communication—the

jeremiad. Anker suggest that the jeremiad, with its “claim that evil is partly caused by one’s own actions” (2015: 236),² continues to play a role in the 20th century but significantly loses in influence. She compellingly traces the melodrama’s conventions across several important pieces of political communication from the Cold War to the present, including the Truman Doctrine speech, Ronald Reagan’s first inaugural address, and George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” performance at the supposed end of the second Iraq War. With varying emphases, the melodrama and the jeremiad have also governed the rhetoric of Presidential campaigns—the stories candidates tell about the state of the nation, their visions of its future, and the role they promise to play in it, from Ronald Reagan’s “Morning Again in America” over George W. Bush’s “A Safer World and a More Hopeful America” to Barack Obama’s “Yes We Can.”

The chief symbolic form with which melodrama as well as the jeremiad operate is the narrative. What distinguishes narrative as a fundamental symbolic form is its ability to articulate causal relationships between sequences of events and to thus invest them with order and meaning. Hayden White’s concept of emplotment perhaps most poignantly describes this as narrative’s unique capacity for meaning-making: For him, to “‘emplot’ a sequence of events and thereby transform what would otherwise be only a chronicle of events into a story” (White 1987: 172–173) is the quintessential process by which experiences of time—“whether of individuals or of collectivities” (ibid.: 173)—are endowed with meaning. Especially because they entail the simulation of coherence and closure, narrative’s semantic capacities are tied to great rhetorical power. Anker’s discussion highlights the extent to which melodrama’s usefulness for political rhetoric owes to its narrative operation: Political melodramas combine affectively potent scenes of the nation’s wounding and suffering with a clear narrative telos—with a plot that turns suffering into a sign of virtue and innocence, and that glorifies the protection and redemption of this virtue.

The melodramas of nationhood that Anker identifies do not stand alone in their narrative orientation: As Lyotard’s term of ‘master narrative’ most apparently suggests, hegemonic discourse tends to operate as narrative: “culture is made up of stories, stories that power has constructed for its own perpetuation and that can be dismantled only by other stories” (2010: 282), Amy Elias summarizes the basic assumption of ideological criticism. Accordingly, critical discourse has primarily evolved strategies for the critique of (hegemonic) *narratives*.

² Sacvan Bercovitch famously described the American jeremiad in its earliest, 17th-century version as “posit[ing] a movement from promise to experience—from the ideal of community to the shortcomings of community life—and thence forward, with prophetic assurance, toward a resolution that incorporates (as it transforms) both the promise and the condemnation” (1978: 16).

This not only applies to contexts of professional critique, such as the academic one from which Elias speaks, but also to the vernacular critique in and around forms of popular culture. In its fictional as well as non-fictional formats, U.S. popular culture has trained its critical capacities on narratives: From popular fictions like the film *Wag the Dog* or the tv series *The Good Wife* that defamiliarize political processes or structures in ways that enable their critical thinking through, to satiric programs like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* that expose problems in the political theater and in its coverage by the media—pop-cultural critique has always traded in the demystification, lampooning, and contesting of narratively organized discourse.

In the last decade or so, the satiric fake-news shows of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in particular have served as important venues of vernacular political critique. When Donald Trump announced that he would run for President, Stewart performed a hyperbolic prayer of thanks in his show, implying that the “billionaire vanity candidate” (*Daily Show*) would provide him with ample material. Given the gleeful anticipation with which satirists like Stewart looked forward to Trump’s candidacy, the following dearth of satiric engagements with the actual campaign became all the more conspicuous. The satires that did circulate in the campaign’s first months tended to focus on Trump’s appearance rather than his politics. And, even more strikingly, when Trump did get satirized, it did not seem to harm him—to the contrary: his campaign smoothly integrated attacks of any kind into its own discourse. As *New-York-Times* critic James Poniewozik perceptively noted: “[Donald Trump’s] style has rendered him, weirdly, almost comedy-proof. Election parodies traditionally exaggerate candidates. But Mr. Trump exaggerates himself—he’s the frilled lizard of politics, inflating his self-presentation to appear ever larger. Satire exposes candidates’ contradictions and absurdities. But Mr. Trump blows past those, while his supporters cheer” (n.pg.).

We want to suggest that one of the reasons why pop-cultural forms of political critique have had such problems in targeting Trump’s politics rests in the mostly non-narrative nature of his campaign: Its chief touchstone is not the genre of melodrama but the reality-tv genre of the ‘gamedoc.’ In symbolic terms, the gamedoc more centrally draws on the form of the competitive game than on that of narrative.³ Roger Caillois influentially theorized the competitive game as

³ Media scholar Bernadette Flynn pioneered the observation that some forms of reality tv are inspired by the logic of gaming. In an influential analysis, she discusses “the reality television program *Big Brother* [...] and the computer simulation game *The Sims* [...] as examples of convergence across interactive gameplay and documentary” (Flynn 2005: 130). Extending on Flynn’s work, Jonathan Dovey maps Caillois’s typology of play onto *Big Brother*, including the

‘agôn’—a type of play that “seem[s] to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that the adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions” (14). In *agôn*, the license of play to define realms demarcated from real life is used to create a controlled space for rule-bound competition, which, at least in Caillois’s ideal formulation, is free from consequences in reality. If the basic horizon of narrative is to endow the passage of time with order and meaning, *agôn*’s horizon is a contest between two or more actants, a contest that operates by ultimately binary principles: The goal is to determine winners and losers, to diagnose strength and weakness.

The genre of the gamedoc is considerably shaped by this symbolic logic. From *Survivor* to *The Biggest Loser*, these shows revolve around the rule-bound competition between contestants. Each show constructs its own ludic world with a distinct set of rules that govern the contest. Typically, they combine a long-term objective with smaller challenges and tasks, where contestants can win rewards and/or earn protection against the rounds of elimination that shows of this genre almost invariably feature. In *Survivor*, for example, the long-term competition, whose ‘rounds’ demarcate the show’s seasons, is to find out which contestant is best adapted for survival in a wilderness setting; smaller challenges that characteristically structure episodes include, for instance, competitions who can carry the largest amount of water, who can eat the most repulsive food, who is quickest to make a fire, etc.⁴ Each show also has its own rules for how eliminations work: often, they are determined by the viewers, who are asked to call in, but sometimes, there are also referee- or jury-figures that play a role. These eliminations are not only functionally necessary to designate a winner by season’s end, they fuel the main promise of pleasure that the gamedoc makes to its viewers: spectacles of emotionally charged rivalry among contestants and the humiliation of those identified as losers. While there are, of course, narrative elements in such shows, they do not dominate the programs as they do in dramas or comedies; they are reduced and integrated into an overall design that is structured by the logic of *agôn*.⁵

category of *agôn* which he primarily sees in “the day to day action of the house [, structured by] competition in which housemates compete against one another or against *Big Brother* to win food supplies and treats etc.” (Dovey 2008: 252).

⁴ Fans of the show have created a comprehensive wiki that catalogues all the challenges: <http://survivor.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Challenges> . (Last Access: 8 August 2016).

⁵ Our suggestion that narrative is of subordinate symbolic importance in the gamedoc takes issue with, e.g., Patrick Keating’s argument about the narrative nature of the genre. Using Meir Sternberg’s conception of narrativity “as the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time” (qtd. in Dovey 56), he contends that the example of his choice, *Project Runway*, operates on the basis of a narrative “suspense dynamic”: “we spend the bulk of

This also applies to the show in which Donald Trump's public persona took shape: *The Apprentice*, which he hosted from 2004 to 2015. *The Apprentice* is a business competition in which contestants complete management-related tasks. The winner is rewarded with a lucrative one-year contract with The Trump Organization. The show's rules are designed to fuel rivalry and conflict among contestants: They are assigned into teams which are not only set up to compete against each other; members of the less successful teams are also interviewed which team member is responsible for the poor performance, encouraging scenes of blaming and shaming that the show salaciously depicts. The chief dispenser of humiliation, however, is Trump himself, who heads the jury that decides on eliminations. These eliminations take place in a boardroom setting where the jury's discussions with the contestants—arranged with appropriately dramatic or sentimental music—revolve around the 'strength' or 'weakness' of individual team members. Each episode culminates in an elimination, enacted by Trump with a sentence that became both the show's and his personal trademark: "You're fired."

In many ways, *The Apprentice* epitomizes the corruption of play that Caillois so fervently laments: The real-world consequences of how contestants perform in a game circulated by national television, let alone the reward of an actual contract of employment, perfectly illustrate the widespread "contamination [of play] by ordinary life" (43) that, for Caillois, perverts the very idea of play. While the appropriation of (competitive) gaming by the world of business, that *The Apprentice* (ever so thinly) fictionalizes, has long been acknowledged, Donald Trump has introduced its symbolic logic, to an unprecedented extent, into the realm of U.S. politics. Of course, the logic of *agôn* has never been fully absent from political communication, especially in contexts like a Presidential campaign. Several commentators have noted the structural parallels between Presidential primaries and reality game-shows—candidates disparaging each other while the camera holds on, people voting on their performances, and a process of elimination at whose end one person is left as winner.⁶ But Trump's campaign more thoroughly relies on the gamedoc's symbolic logic of *agôn* than any previous Presidential

the season wondering about an event (the ultimate victory of one contestant)" (59). We would, in fact, argue that this particular suspense is more compellingly understood as the pleasure of gameplay rather than that of narrative. As Keating's actual discussion, as well as that of Mäkelä, suggest, narratives chiefly figure as embedded discourse in the gamedoc, when candidates relate, in conversations with each other or in the confessionals that many shows of the genre feature, their efforts or experiences in the competition.

⁶ Joan Gerry, e.g., commented on these parallels already in the 2011/2012 campaign. Innumerable articles note how the Trump campaign resembles reality tv; see, e.g., Newton-Small and Reilly.

campaign, to an extent that narrative elements have become significantly reduced in his campaign communication in ways many observers register as an absence of semantic substance and coherence.⁷

Instead of an effective narrative of the nation's present state and envisioned future, his campaign revolves around scenarios of competition, focusing its affective appeal on scenes of winning and losing rather than on compelling narrativity. Early on in his announcement speech,⁸ Trump presents the baseline of his campaign, which he would revisit and reiterate throughout this and other speeches: *"Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let's say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time"* ("Announcement" n.pg.). Affectively marked scenes of the nation's defeat are juxtaposed to the promise of future victories, to be realized by a President Trump. The scenes of defeat are invested with emotion, on the one hand, through a language of life and death—winning is figured as killing, losing as getting killed. In a study of Trump's public utterances commissioned by *The New York Times*,⁹ researchers found that a language of violence pervades Trump's rhetoric, "which is infused with words like kill, destroy and fight" (Healy & Haberman n.pg.), a pattern closely tied, we would argue, to his rhetoric's symbolic logic of agôn.

On the other hand, the announcement speech affectively charges scenes of losing by associating them with humiliation: *"When do we beat Mexico at the border? They're laughing at us, at our stupidity"* (n.pg.). Similarly, to give an example from a later speech, Trump relates how President Obama traveled to Denmark for the selection of the next city to host the Olympics: *"after this unprecedented effort, it was announced that the United States came in fourth — fourth place? [...] We were laughed at all over the world, as we have been many, many times. The list of humiliations go on and on and on"* ("Foreign Policy" n.pg.). This connection between defeat and humiliation immediately evokes the game-doc where, as suggested above, it serves as a genre marker. Significantly, the

7 Editorials that accuse Trump's remarks of incoherence and lack of political substance abound; Joe Klein's *Trump: The Incoherent Demagogue* and Jessica Schulberg's *Donald Trump's First Major Foreign Policy Speech Is Completely Devoid of Substance* are just two random examples.

8 In this article, we focus on Trump's—presumably scripted—speeches, especially his announcement speech, rather than his unscripted remarks or tweets, because the former can be expected to offer the most controlled and most extensively developed communicative content. We hypothesize that a closer look at his other venues of communication would corroborate our findings.

9 The study was conducted in early December 2015. Its corpus consisted of "every public utterance by Mr. Trump [...] from rallies, speeches, interviews and news conferences" (n.pg.) in the course of one sample week.

correlation also works the other way around: In Trump's campaign, the ability to hand out invective and humiliate others plays a prominent role as a sign of strength. As in the gamedoc, this humiliation is only rarely unfolded in a narrative manner; it is more typically effected through the spectacle of hurtful language that is used to personally denigrate people.¹⁰ Neither does humiliation serve a function in a narrative: it is an end in itself, a signal of superiority in an agonistic projection of the world.

Trump's invective name-calling is thus tied to agôn's orientation toward diagnosing strength and weakness in a field of competitors. More than anything else, his campaign needs figures that can be cast as opponents to enable the kind of invective performance that provides the key script for Trump's self-fashioning as strong leader. Whether the nations, institutions, or individuals cast as opponents consciously enter into the competition makes no difference for this script—their actions as well as inactions are simply supercoded by the script's agonistic logic. In its spirit, strength and weakness are significant motifs in Trump's rhetoric: America has become weak, he continuously argues, while other nations have become stronger: "*Our enemies are getting stronger and stronger by the way, and we as a country are getting weaker*" ("Announcement" n.pg.). Casting himself simultaneously as contestant and referee, he identifies the people who are supposedly responsible for this and presents himself as the better, 'stronger' leader who would bring back the nation's lost strength: "*How stupid are our leaders? How stupid are these politicians to allow this to happen? How stupid are they? [...] We have losers. We have losers. We have people that don't have it*" ("Announcement" n.g.). Pointing to personalized culprits for the allegedly abysmal state of the nation not only reduces the complexity of political processes, it also allows him to advertise, in a similarly personalized manner, his own superior fitness for the office of President, the advantage he would bring to the competition among nations that comprises his conception of geopolitics.

"[I]f I get elected president I will bring [America] back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again" ("Announcement" n.pg.). This, along with gloomy sketches of the nation's alleged state of crisis, is the residual micro-narrative in Trump's campaign. Competition serves as the symbolic horizon of his political communication—discursive elements tied to the symbolic form of narrative, such as an investment in the unfolding of causal relations, in rendering plausible sequences of actions and events, are radically

10 The findings of the above mentioned *The New York Times* study corroborate this: Its sample showed that "Mr. Trump tends to attack a person rather than an idea or a situation, like calling political opponents 'stupid' (at least 30 times), 'horrible' (14 times), 'weak' (13 times) and other names" (Healy & Haberman 2015: n.pg.).

reduced. This has made his political rhetoric a slippery target for forms of pop-cultural critique, whose established strategies do not work here: There is no narrative simulation of coherence and order that could be disrupted; no narrative ascription of value that could be challenged; no (or only very little) narratively generated semantic substance that could be satirized through exaggeration, grotesque distortion, or humorous rant. In addition, these very techniques of satiric critique have been co-opted by Trump himself, who uses them—purged of satire’s irony—to ‘seriously’ articulate his own superiority and disparage his opponents.¹¹ Northrop Frye, in his influential *Anatomy of Criticism*, highlighted the thin line between satire and invective: “Sheer invective or name-calling [...] is satire in which there is relatively little irony” (1957: 223), it is “[a]ttack without humor” (ibid.: 224). Reality tv, including the genre of the gamedoc with its logic of *agôn*, has helped popularize such non-ironic use of satire’s offensive tactics—a popularity from which Trump’s campaign has distinctly benefited. With his campaign and now presidency, U.S. popular culture has been facing the challenge to evolve new strategies to demystify Trump’s new style of political communication.

3 ‘Forward, Russia’: The Aesthetics of Glamour in the Politics and Pop Music of the Putin Era

In contrast to its Western equivalent which established itself as a relevant sphere of criticism and reflection on political practice, Russian popular culture has traditionally been defined by its relative distance or closeness to the political center, especially during totalitarian periods.¹² In the 1990s, a rapidly commercia-

¹¹ Some commentators see a different connection between the success of political entertainment and phenomena like Trump’s candidacy—a normalization of irony—whose relationship to the connection we are discussing would require further investigation: Literary scholar Lisa Colletta argues that the popularity of programs like *The Daily Show* has transformed U.S. political culture: “in a more subtle form [irony] has come to be the defining aesthetic of politics itself. Politicians perform their roles with a smirk and wink aimed at a television audience” (Colletta 2009: 858); and journalist Neal Gabler suggests that “Trump could only make a mockery of our politics because the media already had” (2016: n.pg.).

¹² The overall aim of Socialist mass culture was to overcome previous distinctions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. It is somewhat paradoxical that this in turn led to the establishment of a hierarchical cultural canon (cf. Trepper 2002). State paternalism from the Tsarist era was replaced by the normative Soviet concept of *kulturnost’*. Cultural practices which were popular in the Western sense often acted as an escapist counter- or sub-culture.

lizing popular culture partially took on a critical and reflexive function, yet without fully casting off Soviet patterns—chiefly because the emergence of a new public sphere and corresponding cultural practices had not been accompanied by the modernization of its basic institutions. Under Vladimir Putin’s leadership, however, the old mechanisms of state control have been revived in the new guise of ‘glamour’ culture. We will argue that glamour, as the dominant aesthetic mode of Putin’s system, revitalizes and expands on topoi of Soviet identity in ways that prevent a critical exchange between pop culture and politics. The proliferation of glamour in all spheres of public life is further fueled by the resurgence of Orthodox Christianity, with its ostentatious architecture and liturgy, which additionally evokes and forges a link to the nation’s Tsarist imperial past (see also Schmid 2015: 208). As a nationalist rhetoric thus increasingly permeates the public sphere, critical engagements with the interplay between culture, media, and power are relegated to the cultural margins.¹³

A key aspect in which present-day political rhetorics and Soviet ideological newspeak (russ. *novoyaz*) overlap is their reliance on an invective mode (cf. Weiß 1986 and other works by this author). Symbolically, Soviet propaganda organized around the antagonistic depiction of a ‘decaying’ West vis-a-vis Communism’s ‘bright future.’ Its construction of Soviet superiority relied on utopian imagery of a new society to be built, in the process often incorporating nostalgic visions of a bygone golden era. Along similar lines, its figuration of the ‘Soviet Man’ as *homo patiens*, a man of suffering, was immediately tied to the promise of a better future (cf. Bogdanov 2012). Accordingly, the genre of praise dominated official discourse, which included the sphere of culture. Evocations of a joyful future—mediated in elaborately designed “spaces of jubilation” (Ryklin 2002)—compensated for the hardships of Soviet everyday life.

Music had been an area of popular culture favored by Soviet propaganda, and under Putin, it again emerges as a potent field for the circulation of ideological views, effective in mobilizing positive emotions and fostering a sense of communal cohesion and identity. Similar to earlier Soviet songs ‘for the masses,’

13 Satirical formats such as fake news shows are one instance of pop cultural criticism. In Russia, they remain relatively unknown, with the exception of Internet users (see *Xobosti* <https://www.youtube.com/user/hobosti>). The homogeneous—and make-believe—political humor in state-television (studied by Tarangaeva 2013) is highly distinct from the satire and the viral memes in the new media that do constitute an alternative discourse. See also Lunde 2016. Music also serves as a means for expressing criticism; however, this is true for rock music and scacore, and not for the *Éстрада*-genre this article focuses on. The newest song of the band *Neschastnyi sluĥaiĭ Patriot* (2016) may serve as an example for criticism in music. Also, satirizing ‘glamour’ aesthetics and Russian celebrity culture became the trademark of the band *Leningrad*—see the songs *Patriotka* (2014), *VIP* (2015), *Ėksponat* (2016).

contemporary patriotic songs draw much of their potency from allusions to the nation's victory in World War II and its connotations of Soviet imperial power and military strength. Today, such stagings of imperial dominance are a central building block for the construction of Russian collective identity. They characteristically combine old motives of Soviet propaganda with new imagery reminiscent of imperial Tsarist power that is tied to the Orthodox Church. This fusion reverses much of Soviet propaganda's argumentative logic: In order to clearly distinguish Russia from Europe—which is regularly vilified as (pedophile and homosexual) 'Gay-rope' in public discourse—Putin selects positive events and 'traditional' values of the past to construct Russian identity as masculine, patriarchal, and virile.¹⁴ On the one hand, such adaptation of traditional ideological tools fosters a sense of historical continuity; on the other hand, it is updated through the distinctly modern design of concerts and video clips reminiscent of Hollywood aesthetics and culture.¹⁵

Thus pop songs infused by (conservative) patriotic sentiment play a central role in tv concerts, radio charts, and casting shows across today's Russia. The songs—chiefly mediated to the viewer in ritualized and elaborately staged television productions—are also performed at public events like village and city fairs, in schools and karaoke bars as well as in private, amongst friends and family, or when people are alone. An integral part of the Russian show business, patriotic pop music is supported by the government while also professionally marketed for optimum consumption. It is governed by the demands of glamour in the same way as other areas of public life, especially politics and culture, in the Putin era. Fueled by the media and resonant in public opinion, glamour's ideology of success and entertainment that emphasizes the ostentatious staging of self, showmanship, and flamboyance responds to the erosion of values in the early post-Soviet period (Menzel 2013: 6). Like no other aesthetic mode, glamour conveys the distinct patriotism, the jingoism (russ. *ura-patriotizm*) of contemporary Russia.

In the following, we want to contour how such a popular aesthetic and ideology of glamour have been instrumentalized for political ends in patriotic pop music. This genre, we suggest, is geared toward mobilizing feelings of belonging to a political community. Against this backdrop, we are interested in the propagandistic valencies of tv pop music, its audiovisual imagery whose emphasis on

¹⁴ For a discussion on linguistic violence in contemporary public discourse in Russia, see Ryazanova-Clarke 2016 and the forthcoming special issue of *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* "The Culture and Politics of Verbal Prohibition in Putin's Russia." (no. 72–2 and 73–1).

¹⁵ Recently Ulrich Schmid (2015) described versatile utilizations of contemporary culture's multi-media products, not only for entertainment, but also for the interpretation of social reality.

the positive complicates forms of criticism. Actually, the exaggerated stylization and theatrics in tv patriotic pop strongly remind of camp, which raises the question whether contemporary Russian celebrations of patriotic splendor resonate with camp's strategies of subversive reinterpretation. Considering the utter absence of irony in the song's messages, the answer must be negative.¹⁶ Rather, Russian elites have thoroughly appropriated the globalized strategies of the entertainment industry to sell their own world-views and to install ritual affirmations of loyalty to the state.

The Russian fascination with the flashy spectacle of glamour (orig. Scottish gaelic = *magic*, *Enchantment*; Oxford dict.) has only emerged during the post-Communist decades. In ways overlapping with Western conceptualizations of the term¹⁷, glamour in Russian discourse came to be associated with, first, consumer culture; second, particular cultural practices like fashion, life style, or the show business; third, a media industry whose glossy magazines, books, and tv shows circulate hedonistic imagery; but also, fourth, a sphere of politics that fashions itself as part of this world of glamour and that reinterprets glamour as a national idea (Zvereva 2008: 128–129; cf. also Menzel 2013). Glamour's focus on outward appearance, on the conspicuous display of material possessions signifying money and power has been distinctly popularized by Putin's arrival on the public scene (cf. Gosילו 2013 and Cosילו & Strukov 2010). At a time when Russia began to leave the economic and political difficulties of the 1990s behind, glamour worked as a mode to articulate the new sense of stability and growing prosperity. Its ideology of material success and entertainment had the added benefit of preventing ordinary citizens from interfering with politics (Rudova 2008: 2).

¹⁶ Dmitrii Golyenko-Volfson proposes a similar thesis regarding the contemporary Russian art scene: "In the early 2000s, glamour no longer represented the playful provocation of kitsch or camp, it has rather turned into a hyper-successful global strategy" (Golyenko-Volfson 2005; here and in the following, all translations from Russian to English are by the author, M.S.). Following John Seabrook, Golyenko-Volfson typifies this strategy as 'no brow.' Anna Koneva (2012: 16), by contrast, refers to a variety of Russian (detective) novels that do engage with glamour in an ironic manner. In her view, glamorous reality TV shows like *Polnyi fensh* and *Blondinka v shokolade* also entail the potentials of camp. Tarangaeva (2013) is correct in pointing out that glamour, as an ideology, had an impact on tv humor in that it glossed over critical or controversial issues. It should be borne in mind that a nationalist, government-controlled culture is usually devoid of joke and playfulness. Any ironical representations in the spirit of camp are therefore wholly unintended. In how far the identities offered by patriotic pop music are indeed accepted and adapted by individual viewers can be doubted, but this question remains outside the scope of this study.

¹⁷ The history and system of glamour is discussed in detail in the works of Gundle and Castelli. See Gundle & Castelli 2006 and Gundle 2008.

Glamour did not lose its hegemonic position for the national discourse during the recent weakening of Russia's economy. Rather, its focus shifted from successful agents in the realm of the economy to the agents of political success. The militaristic media coverage of Russia's annexation of the Crimea perfectly illustrates this. There, the official broadcasting agencies were notably little engaged in the transmission of hard information; they rather dramatized the Crimean crisis in ways geared toward establishing an emotional framework that would allow the audience to become engaged in the most recent national project. Above all else, the aim was to foster the population's identification with their country.

Glamour primarily communicates optimism and euphoria. One of its central strategies lies in reducing the expression of content to its affective and performative potentials. Glamour culture follows the synecdochic, totalizing logic of *pars pro toto*—a magazine or a star represents the whole (of glamour) and is in turn represented by it. This mode of representation strongly accentuates form at the expense of deeper meanings of content, reducing or inhibiting the possibility of reflexive judgment. Glamorous high-end magazines rule out polemical critique in ways not unsimilar to those of contemporary Russian politics (cf. Dubin 2010b: 276).

Extending this comparison between traditional glamour culture and political communication a little further, it becomes clear that both revolve around the advocacy of normative values, whose reception is governed by ritualized practices. As Boris Dubin noted, one does not read a glamour magazine, one merely flicks through it, 'gliding' across its surface. This 'gliding' is tied to a particular symbolic, ceremonial practice, one of performance, staging, show (ibid.). This is precisely what makes glamour such a potent means of self-dramatization, in commercial popular culture as well as politics.

Russian state broadcasting agencies themselves act like a large publicity institution for the legitimization and self-dramatization of the government. The patriotic *Ėstrada*¹⁸ illustrates this interplay of politics and popular culture in today's Russia with particular poignancy. An important venue of Russian pop music, these are festive concerts that take place in the Kremlin and are televised on national holidays by key broadcasters (*Pervuy Kanal, Rossiya 1*). In recourse to Soviet strategies, they stylize Russia's grand past as an imperial power by drawing on the symbolic potency of the country's victory in World War II (cf. Scharlaj 2014). This

18 The term *Ėstrada* refers to a genre of traditional popular songs that was politically accepted in the Soviet Union. It was wide-spread during the 1950s. The ambivalence of the genre is discussed in Grabowsky 2012. *Ėstrada* became popular again as part of the nostalgic and nationalist revival of the Russian and Soviet past. Among others, Oleg Gazmanov, Denis Maydanov, Aleksandr Rozenbaum, and Marshal are well known patriotic performers of *Ėstrada* and have been repeatedly honored by the Kremlin.

victory figures as one symbolically charged national myth that pop music harnesses for the continuous production of texts and images that speak to the audience's sense of community. The evocation of such positive historical events on the Kremlin's stage are usually accompanied by equally positive references to Russia's contemporary actions on the world stage, within the international community.

The concerts' strictly ordered dramaturgy revolves around the presence in the audience and/or welcoming note of the head of state. The performers are usually 'loyal artists' whose musical career had begun in the Soviet Union. Their songs—either reinterpreted Soviet classics or new compositions—are dominated by the motives of a nation figured as 'mother Russia,' love of one's country, defense against external aggression, and the imagery of a happy, familial collective which is pitched against the world outside Russian borders. The concerts articulate a dichotomous world-view ('us' and 'them,' 'our' and 'foreign') and a hierarchical understanding of the nation (emphasis on state support and inflationary use of state symbols). Just as the officially enforced consensus they serve, these two principles are embedded in a distinct military *habitus*. The performances of solo artists are often accompanied by choirs or marching columns in the back part of the stage. In addition, the thunder of cannons, rifle fire, bomb detonations and other elements invoking a theater of war frequently dominate the sound backdrop of the performances. Although the might of weaponry and military technology is often set into proportion by images of destruction, the overall audiovisual experience is one of patriotic devotion and sacrifice. Thus, these concerts can be understood as sort of 'Imperio-pop.'

Significantly, the Kremlin's concerts combine this official rhetoric of heroism with typical elements of popular music and the modern show business. They are marked by a dramatical quality, a fragmentation at the level of content, popular accessibility, and the promotion of old values through innovative modes of representation (cf. Zvereva 2006). On the one hand, these shows are opulent musicals; on the other, they are secular re-enactments of the pompous Orthodox liturgy, fostering a sense of a communal 'us' through the collective body of sound (russ. *Sobornost'*) that characterizes this liturgic practice.

A recent favorite in the Kremlin's festive concerts is Oleg Gazmanov's song *Vpered, Rossiya* ('Forward, Russia', 2015). In contrast to many other patriotic songs, 'Forward, Russia' has also been released as a video clip.¹⁹ By way of its narrative structure and visual language, this clip condenses the most important elements of the current political discourse and translates them into the pop cultural realm. This video clip will be discussed in more detail below as it is exemplary of the repetitive

19 State support in the production of the video is acknowledged in its closing credits.

patterns of production and staging of state-controlled *Ėstrada* on the Kremlin's stage.

The song's tone and narrative pattern is encapsulated in its chorus: "*Россия, Россия—в этом слове огонь и сила / в этом слове победы пламя / поднимаем России знамя*" ("Russia, Russia—a word of fire and might / a word of victory's flame, so we will raise the flag of Russia.") The song's depiction of Russian power is dominated by references to the country's past which itself is reduced to a succession of victories, combativeness, and achievements: "*Так было в России с далеких времен / чем выше давление, тем крепче бетон [...] / В горниле победы сегодня как встарь / опять закаляется Родины сталь*" ("In Russia it was always like this / The higher the pressure, the stronger our concrete [...] / Yesterday and today we temper the steel of our fatherland in the furnace of victory.") The image in the first line of the nation's 'steel' being hardened sets the tone of what is to follow. It also forges a connection to a glorious, imperial Soviet past as it directly evokes N. A. Ostrovsky's 'How the Steel Was Tempered' (*Как закалялась сталь*, 1932–1934)—one of the best known novels of Socialist Realism and adapted to the screen several times. Historical continuity is similarly created by the melody of 'Glory to You'—part of the opera 'Ivan Susanin: A Life for the Tsar' (*Иван Сусанин: Жизнь за царя*, 1836)²⁰—which frames the clip as its prologue and epilogue. This melody invokes Orthodox Christianity, which had played no role in Soviet political discourse, as a national value. Successes from the past are related to the country's present with straightforward images of national pride—for example of the Olympic games in Moscow 1980 and Sochi 2014, of the Soviet and Russian space programs, of historical heroes of the Soviet Union, Red Army soldiers, and today's sports icons. The song's symbolic center is occupied by Vladimir Putin who, right in the middle of the song, is celebrated as the ultimate, larger-than-life and praised celebrity-hero.

The narrative subject of the song—similar to Soviet songs of the masses and numerous current pop songs—is the peaceful nature of the Russian state and its people. The nation's attentiveness and readiness to defend itself are merely contoured by evocation of a shadowy enemy threatening Russia's traditions and collective values. In the song, this shapeless Other is defeated time and again: "*А если врагов налетит варанье, / их снова Отечество встретит мое*" ("And should again a hoard of enemies fall upon Russia, / My father's country will bid them a true welcome.") Reflecting the genre's affinity for military discourse, the

²⁰ The song was commissioned by the Tsar and refers to the chaotic period when foreign (Swedish and Polish) forces intervened in Russian affairs before being pushed back in 1613. It is symptomatic that this event plays a prominent role in the current political rhetoric.

weapons industry is stylized as the chief metaphor of the country's power, figuring prominently in the clip's visuals (Ill. 1).



Illustration 1: Video Clip *Oleg Gazmanov – Vpered, Rossiya!* (0:00, 01:47)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAvtSANTlao>, 25 May 2015. Last Access: 9 September 2016.

In contrast to earlier Soviet examples, these widely familiar narratives and myths are staged through elaborate, high-end modes of production that can compete on a global entertainment market. Their dramatical logic is based on a melodramatic, dichotomous separation of the world into good, figured as Russia's virtuous innocence, and evil, figured as an external world of infamous threat. The video's spectacular battle scenes emulate the visual style of action movies while historical achievements are represented in the visual tradition of Soviet propaganda movies. In their eclecticism, both strategies of representation amplify the show character of the video. Toward the end of the song, this eclectic sequencing of styles and perspectives, together with the imagery of military community-building that accompanies it, culminates in a moment of emotionally-charged pathos. The last chorus articulates the triumph of patriotism as the individual transcends into the collective body during a final, ecstatic celebration of the Russian community (Ill. 2).



Illustration 2: Video Clip *Oleg Gazmanov – Vpered, Rossiya!* (03:11)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAvtSANTlao>, 25 May 2015. Last Access: 9 September 2016.

The genre of patriotic pop music fuses a nostalgia for the Soviet era—the political and emotional content of the songs—with glamorous aesthetics and form. Against this backdrop, Oleg Gazmanov's video and song can be considered an advertisement clip. Similar to a PR-video, the lyrics of *Vpered, Rossiya* zoom in *only* on the scenes and theaters of Russia's successes. The jingoism—and tacit articulation of power—expressed here is marketed by the sales strategy of glamour. Advertisement always conveys the values that govern the culture that produces it. At the same time, advertisements imply that these values can be acquired by the consumption of a commodity. Like ads, Gazmanov's televised song conveys a short and simple yet emphatic message, aiming to turn the presentation into a show, to capture the audience's attention and to seduce them to the consumption of the marketed commodity (Dubin 2010a). The actual content underpinning the presentation must remain fragmented in order for this to succeed. Such mechanisms of fragmentation and ceremonial show fundamentally order Russian political culture (cf. Dubin 2006).

Symbolic politics always revolve around the imagination of a collective identity as well as the engineering, circulation, and celebration of figures of power. In the—for Dubin simulated—construction of social and political reality, symbols that manage to integrate all citizens into the collective of state and nation have become increasingly important. In today's Russia, a focus on past and current victories stands exemplary for such symbolic practices that emphasize the shared, the unanimous, the overwhelming majority.

The contemporary ritualization of Russian politics incorporates both an imagery of distinction—of the boundary separating 'us' from the foreign and enemy 'them'—and a symbolism of the inevitable, of a lack of alternatives that organizes around the President (Dubin 2006: 23–24). While the symbols employed may be archaic, the head of state is staged as a glamorous hero with an overpowering media presence. Also pop music features Putin as a national hero. Here, as in other popular media, his dominant masculinity interpellates the populace as a group of starstruck fans (cf. Menzel 2013: 8). The concept of identity that state-controlled entertainment offers its audience entails little more than an appeal to patriotism and the straightforward promotion of the government line about national superiority.

This glitter of show elbows out an actual exchange about political ideas. It involves, above all, a positive re-evaluation and aestheticization of military symbols, that are continuously related to the rituals around the country's quintessential victory in 1945. The commodification of the nation's self-image implies the promise that all strata of society can be included into the national myth. In order to generate such an integrative appeal, Soviet, Tsarist and contemporary events are amalgamated, regardless of the conflicting world-views and values which in-

formed each epoch. The key goal of such staging of imperial power is to mobilize a sense of communal belonging and to integrate the viewers into a community of “distanced observers” (Dubin 2006: 26). Ultimately, the pathos-ridden showcasing of jingoism appears to reflect the government’s aim of instilling hope at a time when the majority of the population is experiencing severe economic difficulties.

Similar to glamour, the inclusive symbolism of Russian political communication has no bearings on social and political reality. As Dubin notes: “The symbolic belonging to a virtual ‘us’ does not lead to an actual participation in everyday interaction, to no real relationship” (Dubin 2006: 27). The role of senders and recipients in tv-communication is thus only ceremonial. Pop music operates in a similar manner to instill pride in the military force of the empire. The rituals of national prowess solidify a sense of superiority toward other nations and simultaneously call for a mobilization of the audience. At the same time, any form of criticism of the ‘sacral status’ of Russia as a super power is relegated beyond the pale.

4 Conclusion

While building on distinctly local traditions for the political appropriation of popular culture, communicative practices by and around Putin and Trump have each developed new strategies that are notably successful in mobilizing political support and in immunizing their policies against vernacular critique. Both sets of strategies, while distinct in each setting, revolve around an invective turn in political communication—a radicalization of the familiar nationalist rhetoric of ‘us versus them’ that is specifically enabled by pop-cultural forms and venues.

In Trump’s case, we argued, the novelty rests in his campaign’s orientation away from narrative meaning-making to the symbolic form of *agôn*, as it has coagulated in the reality-tv genre of the gamedoc. This re-orientation entails an atrophying of narratively generated meaning; in its stead, the campaign iterates scenarios of winning and losing, of diagnosing strength and weakness, and, above all, of displaying the candidate’s competitive strength, especially by showcasing his ability to insult and humiliate others. Thus, his campaign marked a difficult target for established forms of vernacular critique, on the one hand, because critique has been trained on the debunking of narratively organized discourse; on the other hand, because his campaign co-opted the very strategies of satiric pop-critique, which—evacuated of their oppositional irony—fuel Trump’s language of denigration.

In Putin’s Russia, music is a key arena of popular culture that has been appropriated by the political elites. Revolving around the idealization of the

national self in opposition to an extra-national world depicted as inherently threatening, the strategies of patriotic popular music combine seemingly disparate signifying practices: narratives and imagery tied to Soviet as well as Tsarist history, evocations of Orthodox faith and institutions, and a visual language that emulates both high-end Hollywood productions and professional advertising. We argued that these strategies cohere around the notion of ‘glamour,’ which simultaneously operates as a style—of the emphatically enticing, the excessive and spectacular—and as an ideology of self-glorification. While, in the 1990s, this glorification was initially applied to the economically successful individual self and expressed in consumer practices, under Putin, it also targets the national self through glamorous stagings of historical dominance and military prowess. As a representational practice, glamour invests in the appeal of the stylish surface, mobilizing it to communicate feelings of patriotic pride, to mark nationalist aggressiveness as beautiful and a norm universally aspired to, and to discourage any rational engagement with the ideas of nationhood that it transports. This discouragement, along with glamour’s co-optation of the potentially oppositional aesthetics of camp, strengthen patriotic popular music against popular critique.

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