

NO(W)STALGIA

RETRO ON THE (POST-)SOVIET TELEVISION SCREEN

Natalya Ivanova

During that time when the post-Brezhnev period (subsequently inaccurately called the period of “stagnation”) was still fading away, Georgian and Abkhazian prose writers, poets and critics, along with their Russian, Ukrainian, Estonian, Kazakh (the list could be continued) colleagues, all in all 30 people, no more, would gather together every year on the blessed Kolkhid shore at the invitation of the Main Editorial board on Translation and Cooperation among Literatures of the Georgian Council of Ministers and the editorial board of the journal *Literary Georgia* (*Literaturnaia Gruzia*). “In this remote province by the sea” you could talk much more freely than in the imperial center: the tone and spirit were more than unofficial. The topics of the seminars were devoted to different aspects of Georgian literature. Pavlo Movchan and Vadim Skuratovsky came from Kyiv, Aksel Taum from Kazakhstan, Levon Mkrтчian from Yerevan, Ilya Dadashidze from Baku, Oleg Chukhontsev, Andrei Bitov, Alla Latynina and Alla Marchenko, Bulat Okudzhava, Vladimir Lakshin from Moscow, Algimantas Buchis, the author of several books on Lithuanian and “Soviet multinational” literature, came from Lithuania...

The last seminar took place in 1986.

I recently learned that Algis Buchis gathered up his books in his Vilnius home and committed a quarter-century of his life and work to flames. He burned everything except two slim collections of poetry and prose, which he still considered worthy to live on.

Everyone is parting with his past in different ways—if he chooses to do so—the painful reminders of which are at times inescapable. On the day after Bulat Okudzhava’s funeral, *Nedelia* published an installment of its “Portrait Gallery,” in which Boris Zhutkovsky recalls the meeting with Leonid Ilichev, the head of the Central Committee’s ideological commission. I quote the “summary notes”: E. Belyutin, “The sense of civic responsibility has weakened”; B.

Akhmadulina, “We detected the Party’s anxiety”; Y. Yevtushenko, “We are all for the Revolution.”¹ That’s how it was. That’s how people thought. And that’s how they maneuvered. Or, that’s how they defended their own understanding of the reality: “I understand that there is no ‘us’ vs. ‘them.’ That generally everybody is ‘us,’ and the more that I come into contact with people around me, the more and more I am convinced that everybody is ‘us,’ with a greater or fewer number of sins, virtues and faults” (Bulat Okudzhava’s speech, as recorded by B. Zhutkovsky).

Yevgeny Yevtushenko began his new life and new professional career as a teacher in the United States. Others from his generation and circle resiliently moved into their post-Soviet present without external shocks and remote crossings.

For example, Lenin Prize laureate Yegor Isayev busies himself with poultry farming at his dacha in Peredelkino. Another proudly brandishes his services to democracy with the aid of the particle “not”: did *not* belong, did *not* take part, did *not* sign. Somebody engages in frenzied overthrowing, while somebody else, on the contrary, arrives at the necessity for a painstaking analysis of his “past self,” what Yury Trifonov in his novel, *Time and Place*, called an “operation on oneself.”

Meanwhile, those who were born in those “remote years,” and who now actively operate in the Russian cultural scene, choose not so much—and not only—a repudiation of the near and distant Soviet past, but on the contrary, paradoxically search for their contact with it. For different reasons. And in different ways. I will now address these reasons, ways and contacts.

1. *Nedelia*, no. 22 (1997).

RETRO BECOMES ONE OF THE LEADING FORMS

"An epidemic of nostalgia," in Andrei Razbash's opinion (*Chas pik*, June 16, 1997).

The newspaper *Izvestiya* (no. 81, 1997) prints two cheerful photographs of Muscovites (1959), taken by the American William Klein. An exhibit of Klein's work, organized by the energetic Olga Sviblova, is enjoying great success in the "Moscow-1997" exhibition in the Pushkin Museum's Private Collections. Gennady Khazanov acknowledges that "in the countries of the former Soviet Union a very large number of people come to my concerts [to relive] their youth."² Sergey Zhenovach mounts Alexander Volodin's *Five Evenings* at the Malaya Bronnaya Theater. The reviewer of this production writes about the "nostalgia for the radiant in the socialist past, which unites today's Communists with the more democratically oriented sectors of Russian society."³ Let me remind you that Volodin's play is rather dramatic; it concerns the difficulties of returning to reality encountered by a person who has been away (an Aesopian hint—the reason is clear) several years, and it's about loneliness. Today's production, however, is about something completely different: "The play, it turns out, concealed a considerable psychotherapeutic effect [...] You leave the theater with a strange, almost forgotten sense of conciliation," notes *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. But that is precisely the effect of retro, an effect of gratifying "nostalgia for the radiant." The same issue of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* prints a lengthy interview with Yevgeny Matveyev ("People's Artist of the USSR") who relishes recalling with that same "nostalgia for the radiant" the all-union premiere of the movie *A Particularly Important Task* (1981): "All kidding aside, I'm proud of that movie! It's good, it's about courage, about people's spiritual strength"; he recalls with satisfaction playing the role of Brezhnev: "...Leonid Ilich in the movie *Soldiers of Freedom* is quite the fellow—a robust, young general who loves women and drink"; he joyfully recalls his propaganda jaunts around the country: "I traveled so much on behalf of the Propaganda Bureau and gave readings!

2. G. Khazanov, "I did not have and am not having an affair with the authorities," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, June 18, 1997.

3. G. Zaslavsky, "Feelings and Reason," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 30, 1997.

Tvardovsky was in my repertoire, and Sholokhov and Gorky..."⁴ Some might take exception that the nostalgia of people's artist of the USSR Yevgeny Matveev is understandable and is merely a compensatory mechanism. Then I will add to these solid testimonies made by such solid figures the voice of a young poet:

More beautiful than early rising
And the festive fireworks in the cities,
Which do not grow dim with consciousness,
That belief in absolutes has been shaken.

And outside the window an inscription darting by,
Though it praised the creators of lawlessness,
It fit so nicely into the embankment,
Like famous titles on the spines of books.

—A. Sharapova, *Novyi mir*, no. 1 (1995)

"Nostalgia for the radiant" informs the mood and tonality of contemporary art, in particular poetry:

the yardwoman exits the entryway
the factory worked noiselessly
there under the stairway—downstairs
the ugly mug was dissolving her retard in a basin
always in a kerchief and wearing a winter hat
stoking the smoky furnace with a crowbar
the children were shouting upstairs
the smell of the morgue and the road
the strong smell of moonshine

—G. Saggir, *Novyi mir*, no. 2 (1997)

Until the worst day, until the time of the grave
in this wretched and colorless fatherland
you have borne your cross, and other worlds
you did not even dream of while you were alive.

Because you saw your fate approaching
in the forms of decay—
a posthumous native land in a black paradise—
you have been granted the dream of atonement.

—Igor Melamed, *Novyi mir*, no. 2 (1997)

And yet, despite the expressive and harsh judgments and even curses at the past (not for nothing does Saggir preface the cycle of his poems with the line: "Let Babylon flare up with fire" and Melamid call paradise "black"), nostalgia moves on the offensive. And it makes good use of government officials who pay lip service to letting art take care of itself, but who in reality thrust their own mediocre nostalgic aesthetic tastes on the entire population. The Mayor of Moscow gives the artist Shilov, a talentless epigone of the

4. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 6, 1997.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

socialist realist Laktionov, a luxurious mansion in the city center to serve as a private museum, while President Yeltsin gives his blessing not only to the exhibit but to the entire Ilya Glazunov "academy."

Television has now become the most important art form. Television has driven the fine arts off onto the shoulder, having won over millions of movie goers and hundreds of thousands of readers of the thick journals. The degree of influence and authority can be measured by the battle over ownership, the 1996 presidential campaign, the ill-fated box full of dollars... There's plenty of indicators by which to measure. And it's precisely on TV that "nostalgia for the radiant" past has become one of the genre-determining principles.

Television has responded extraordinarily keenly to the public's state of mind and, it must be admitted, has known how to manipulate and direct the public's mood with the help of Mexican, Latin American, and simply American soap operas. Television has won over an enormous number of former readers to the absolutely unbelievable, part fairytale for the post-Soviet viewer, virtual reality. We know of instances where mothers in maternity wards have named their newborns after heroes and heroines in TV serials; the magnificence of the Russian visit by Veronica Castro, the leading actress in the serial "Maria" and "Simply Maria," an actress of little world renown, to put it bluntly, eclipsed the degree of illumination accorded to important state visits. Milkmaids in collective farms would not go out to their sobbing cows on account of an inconvenient time slot, which finally had to be rectified according to their demands; in Crimea mass disturbances were noted when the Russian television broadcasts of the American soap "Santa Barbara" were stopped; viewers in Ukraine protested the new dubbing of that same "Santa Barbara"—the characters spoke in Ukrainian instead of Russian.

In addition to "Santa Barbara," the five channels of Russian television broadcast a baker's dozen of soap operas, most of them Latin American in origin, and only one homegrown product, the serial "Strawberries," which plunges the viewer into an imaginary post-Soviet market reality: artists who achieved their fame in the Soviet era perform simple reprises from the lives of the owners and customers of a fledgling cafe. Of course, the ratings for the television serials outstrip the ratings for all other programs, and it is no coincidence that the

new private RenTV, which had declared itself at the outset to be "television with the face of an *intelligent*," broadcasts seven television serials throughout the day to win their audience share.

Apart from the soaps, the largest audience share goes to game shows and talk shows, cloned from popular Western models: "Field of Wonders," "Name That Tune," "What? Where? When?" "L-Club," "One Hundred Against One" (games); "I, Myself," "We," "Profession," "Dog Show."

It is only recently that two essentially new projects have made their appearance on TV. Both are Russian productions without clear analogues in Western TV production: "The Old Apartment" (RTR) and "Our Time: 1961-1981" (NTV). ("The Old Apartment" is broadcast monthly, "Our Era" is a weekly show.)

The programs share a similar mission—the artistic documentary investigation and recreation of the cultural, political, and historical topics from a given year ("Old Apartment" began with 1946, "Our Era" with 1961.)

The very genesis of these programs is partly owing to what might be called the crisis of the cultural and historical identity of the former Soviet society. Both projects begin their historical countdown from a time with which many of today's viewers have an immediate connection (memory and fate). The programs are conceived and realized by people who are sensitive to the shift in cultural and historical styles: the dramatist Viktor Slavkin and director Grigory Gurvich ("Old Apartment") and journalist Leonid Parfenov ("Our Era").

Both programs made their appearance when Russian post-Soviet art and literature had passed through two periods.

The first period, the period of conceptualism, was thoroughly engaged with the deconstruction of the Big Style of the Soviet period, namely, the parodic and travesty utilization and lowering of its component elements. (For example, the poetry of Dmitry Prigov, the early Timur Kibirov (before 1991) and Bakhyt Kenjeev, as well as the prose of Yegveny Popov, Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin.)

Not only the "heroes" of the Soviet era were subjected to this travesty crowning-uncrowning. Consider Prigov's *Militsianer*, Pelevin's cosmonauts and Alexei Maresev (*Omon Ra*), the Party leaders in Yegveny Popov (*The Soul of a Patriot*), the Komsomol enthusiasts in Sorokin (*Four Stout Hearts*), the military in Kibirov (*Toilets*), Kenjeev's government

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

officials (*Chernenko*), but the image itself and the style of the Soviet era are depicted as rotting, decaying and stinking (hence the surfeit of fecal and anal imagery; the prose writer Valery Popov in his novella *The Days of the Harem* dubs its adepts the “fecalists.”)

The direction of the artistic quests of the entire conceptualist company reveals a kinship to the archaic, an appeal to the deep layers of the collective unconscious. Consequently, in Kenjeev’s *poemas* an archaic *ritual lament* (“conclamare”) is parodically reborn, for example, *buzhen’e*, the basic element of ritual laments. “The lament’s song,” notes Olga Freidenberg, “at first in keeping with the disappearance of the totem, subsequently becomes a lamentation for the deceased and is sung to the accompaniment of protracted, plaintive music; among the Etruscans and Romans this is a song, an elegy with the Greeks. These laments, which contain the names and deeds of the deceased, are transformed into *slava* (glory) and *khvala* (praise), where a short exposition of his deeds and merits is given.” In “Militsianer,” Prigov’s character becomes the name and deity of official Soviet society. The ceremonial description of his acts, and his “glorification” turn into the uncrowning of the totem of power. One can easily locate the archaism and the buffoonery (of Greek rites, the festival of the ritual sacrifice of the sacred bull) in Pelevin, who links the general ideological and sacrificial quality of Soviet astronautics with the forced amputation of limbs, while the Soviet cosmos itself is the Moscow subway system.

Leaving behind Greco-Roman rites for those of contemporary Russia, one can say with confidence that conceptualist prose and poetry was performing *kostroma*—the festival of preparation, offering of hymns and then the burning and drowning of the Soviet scarecrow. (Incidentally, any revolution, including a cultural revolution, without fail appeals to the archaic layers of consciousness, as can be witnessed by the reverse side of the cloth of conceptualism from the opposing, Soviet side: recall the burning of Yevtushenko in effigy in the yard of the Union of Writers on Povarskaya Street.

The next stage in the development of literature after conceptualism (which includes those same authors and those same actors of contemporary Russian letters) has already been designated as the “new sincerity” and the “new sentimentalism.” Based on the nostalgic return to literature of a lost emotionality, new sentimentalism opposes (frequently within the bounds of one and the same authorial persona) conceptualism,

which to a large extent had exhausted the pathos of mocking Soviet clichés and stereotypes, a conceptualism that was ossifying, dying, gasping its last breath, losing its fury and topical vitality, its ardor dissipating. And then came the period of Bakhyt Kenjeev’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Timur Kibirov’s *Paraphrasis* and Viktor Pelevin’s *Chapaev and Pustota*—ancient theater in reverse order: first dramatic satire and then tragedy. Or rather, not tragedy but elegy: a song about that which had passed, free of any mockery and ridicule. Take, for example, Kenjeev’s incredibly sympathetic Uncle Xenofont, “in whose work predominated the motifs of aestheticism and bourgeois humanism, the uncle of the narrator who is recalling his youth: “He was wearing a coarse tunic pulled on over a shirt, holding a lyre, which for some reason he had tucked under his arm, and in his hand a plain pine wreath with a single sprig of laurel. [...] Behind Xenofont a banner stretched across the entire podium with the slogan: ‘With a lyre in our hands we will build the world.’ Below, like captions on vacation photographs, a calligraphic inscription announced: ‘The Second Congress of Soviet Esoterics, Moscow, 1936.’”⁵

This nostalgic and elegaic intonation (ranging from Kibirov’s poetry to the unavoidable announcements we have today on the subway, reminding the riders of the special cultural significance of the Moscow Metro) are diametrically opposed to the aggressive nostalgia of the political sort that are given expression in Stalinist posters and slogans or the unwillingness to part with Lenin’s body. (V. Ampilov explained on the news [NTV, July 5] that since Lenin’s body is situated lower than ground level, and Stolypin buried Lermontov in a burial vault with a window, the question of the Christian aspects of Lenin’s burial is settled once and for all.)

Cultural nostalgia, while resuscitating clichés and stereotypes, at the same time keeps them at a distance while it constructs its own subjects out of these same clichés and stereotypes.

That’s precisely how “The Old Apartment” was planned and executed. Members of the talk-show audience, primarily comprised of people who have seen something of life, so as not to say elderly, are invited onto the stage by the host. The stage is set with objects

5. *Oktiabr'*, no. 1, (1995).

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

of a certain era and the invited participants become the characters (the principle of a living, working museum) of a certain story which they tell with the help of the prompting audience. The collective time machine begins its work. The audience remembers, joins in singing songs, argues (sometimes among themselves) while enumerating specifics about the events, they recite poetry, get confused, bring out statistics and garble facts. The audience is simultaneously a chorus, the collective participant and collective interpreter, creator of the myth, part of the myth and the one who lays bare the myth; it is the living past and simultaneously the judge of that past. From the picture of an individual human fate one is supposed to divine the fate of the country—and vice versa. The lively, spontaneous reminiscing out loud of a bygone time by completely different people, united only as “neighbors in time,” to use Yury Trifonov’s expression; for example, a housewife and a teacher; Irina Bugrimova, the tiger tamer; composer Vladlen Davydov and the author of the national anthem, Sergei Mikhalkov; the writers Daniil Danin and Alexander Borshchagovsky. Their reminiscences, which touch upon the most diverse topics of a given year, ranging from the murder of Mikhoels or the campaign against “cosmopolitans” to how a *kerosinka* or primus stove worked in the communal kitchen, alternate with a documentary chronicle, but the characters in this “daily newsreel” unexpectedly turn up in the audience. (For example, a whole class of girls from a school on the Arbat who met with Sergei Mikhalkov in 1951, sits with him in the audience and then on the stage now, in 1997). History is actualized in the present—and vice versa—right before the eyes of the viewer-participant (since the studio audience, to some degree, is on equal footing with the television viewers who also actively switch on their own personal, social and political memory).

The change in the nature, spirit and tenor of the interpretation of Soviet history (recent history) can be observed in statements made by members of the literary profession, particularly those remarks made on the occasion of anniversaries of figures in Soviet literature. It has been only a few years since the appearance of Viktor Yerofeyev’s “A Wake for Soviet Literature,”⁶ which created such a furor. And now Yevgeny Popov, Yerofeyev’s *Metropole* comrade-in-arms, a representative of the same generational and ideological

group as Erofeyev, writes: “Looking back I think that it was really *their* doing—Mikhalkov, Katayev, Chakovsky, the literary functionaries, each of whom one may remember [...] with some ambivalence”; “When in Rome, do as the Romans do...” And Popov concludes with the sentiment: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.”⁷

Thus the denial (sometimes fierce), indignation, the abrogation of a connection, and the renunciation of the legacy are exchanged for a completely different sort of view on the historical (including the artistic), actualized and regenerated past. Extremely telling in this regard are the projects conceived and executed with the utilization of interiors from the Soviet High Style: for example, the artists Valery and Natalya Cherkashin designed a performance in five acts of “acculturating” the totalitarian Empire style of the Moscow Metro: Act I (Prologue)—the privatization of the vestibule in the station Revolution Square by random and non-random passengers/members of the audience; Act II—a Communist *subbotnik* (cleaning and maintaining the figures of the revolutionaries); Act III—“The Love of the People for the Art of the People” (an Italian photo model in an embrace with a bronze proletarian); Act IV—a wedding (the wedding dress is made from materials of the 1930s, i.e., newspapers printed with bronze paint). These artists have plans for a performance for the 850th anniversary of Moscow—the contemplation of the socialist realist Atlantis through the water of the municipal swimming pool (for those people who can keep their eyes open while swimming).

On the highly rated program “L-Club” three participants (as a rule, representing different age groups) must guess the price of vodka or champagne in a given year. The one who guesses correctly wins a special prize. This is also an instance of nostalgia gratification. The very genre of “Old Apartment” can be equated with a wake at which the deceased is remembered with some ambivalence: people, upheavals and ordeals notwithstanding, were born, fell in love, went to school and worked—a year in one way or another yielded certain outcomes. These wakes are optimistic—and polemicize with the negative, “gloom and doom,” exposé tendencies in literature of the perestroika and glasnost periods. Without question “Old Apartment” also yields a collective,

6. *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 1990.

7. “The Rebus of Genius and Villainy as Solved by Valentin Katayev,” *Obshchaia gazeta*, January 20, 1997.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

psychotherapeutic effect, like a group therapy session. By talking about their traumas (the doctors' plot, the fight against cosmopolitans, the resolution on Akhmatova and Zoshchenko, etc.). society, here represented by the program's studio audience and the viewers at home, theoretically should overcome these traumas.

However, in fact collective insight is assigned a secondary position. The entertainment both diminishes and obliterates the tragic aspects, which results in the banalization of history rather than a true understanding of it. History is chopped up into noodles and cooked, like a soup made from a long list of ingredients, where time spent in the camps is stirred in with comic froth.

The general tendency toward cultural-ideological compensation and psychotherapeutic therapy for historical trauma also informs the program "Russian Project," which is comprised of short subjects on clearly delineated themes, brought out at the end as "slogans": for example, "This is my city" or "I love you." These three- and five-minute films are shot with the assistance of well-known Soviet artists: Nonna Mordyukova, Oleg Yefremov, Zinovy Gerdt, each one of whom embodies a host of nostalgic memories for the viewer. Each subject has its own internal dramatic tension with its own obligatory positive conclusion. For example, while Moscow was experiencing glaring disparity between the rich, riding around in the most expensive makes of automobiles, and the poor who had only the option of a transport system that worked ever more poorly, the trolleybus driver (Oleg Yefremov) with a smile carts along on a nonexistent route a girl on roller skates who has hooked onto the "blue trolleybus" with her umbrella handle; an elderly Russian woman with a sledge-hammer (Nonna Mordyukova) after some language that borders on the obscene breaks out into a free and easy, life-affirming folk song; a combine operator on a collective (?) farm brings his little girl a bunny rabbit that he has touchingly saved; an astronaut (Nikita Mikhalkov) soars in a space suit over the territory of the Russian Federation, rapturously declaiming the names of the Russian cities (simultaneously an affirmation of his joy at beholding state unity). These fabrications, deftly and nonchalantly stitched together (like all propaganda), employ orphaned psychological stereotypes patterned on Soviet models and acted by Soviet artists (to make it more convincing). These "positive heroes" as represented by the Russian Soviet woman industrial worker, the front-line soldier, the collective farm worker and elderly

driver are the hope and foundational support for the new Russia.

The ideology and aesthetics of nostalgia was tested by the documentary film-maker Alexei Gabrilovich in the films "The Circus of Our Childhood" (1982), "Soccer of Our Childhood" (1984), "The Movies of Our Childhood" (1985), a series that easily weathered the transition to the post-Soviet "The Courtyards of Our Childhood" (1991) and the twelve-part TV serial, "The Broadway of Our Youth" (1996), in which the generation of the 1960s reminisces about the way of life and fashions of the 60s (the *stilyagi*). The forever lost paradise of childhood and youth in the Soviet period was revived as a form of relative non-conformism; in the post-Soviet period it took the form of opposition to Soviet style; and now it is viewed as nostalgia for a lost stylistics of existence. The Soviet style!

The cycles of broadcasts about popular artists of the past (Gleb Skorokhodov's "In Search of What We Lost," Leonid Filatov's "To Be Remembered," Vitaly Vulf's "Silver Balloon"—all based on concrete artistic and human fates) are also realized in the genre of the funeral wake, despite the fact that Skorokhodov and Filatov are telling their stories about the dead, while Vulf's subjects are still among the living though their creative lives are long past. Skorokhodov's subjects were Tamara Makarova, Lyubov Orlova, Petr Aleinikov, Sergei Martinson; Vulf: Oleg Yefremov, Tatyana Lavrova, Galina Volchek; Filatov: Inna Gulaya, Gennady Shpalikov, Yury Belov, Valentin Zubkov, Vladimir Ivashov, Izolda Izvitskaya, Nikolai Rybnikov, Yury Bogatyrev, Sergei Stolyarov. The result is paradoxical. On the one hand, an indispensable element in these films is the idea that the subject's talent was not allowed to be fully realized given the specifics of the Soviet situation, while on the other hand, since all of these personalities' successes were in Soviet movies, the Soviet cinema appears to have been a powerful and productive system (especially when compared to the present day, when the stars of yesterday generally are not in demand; e.g., Alexei Batalov has not been in a picture for more than 14 years). The audience's nostalgic needs thus stimulated are then further encouraged by the aggressive programming of Soviet blockbusters in the TV schedule. During the course of only one week (July 9-15) the following films were shown: *Ivan Vasilevich Changes His Profession*, *Three Comrades* (with

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

Mikhail Zharov and Veronika Polonskaya), *Cruel Romance, Thirst, Young Russia, Alone and Unarmed, Love and Doves, By the Blue Sea* (a film by Boris Barnet with Nikolai Kryuchkov in the lead role), *Volga-Volga, Vasily Buslaev, Alexander Nevsky, Three Poplars on Plyushchikha, Kinfolk, I Wander about Moscow, Snowball Berry Red, Paternal Home* (blurb: "a young lady's views on life change fundamentally after spending time on a collective farm, filmed in 1959"), *Autumn Marathon, Wedding in Malinovka, Alitet Goes Away to the Mountains, Rowanberry Nights* (blurb: "1984 melodrama about inhabitants of a village who abandon it for a more decent place under the sun, and about the machine operator Tatyana who does not at all wish to do this"). The viewer practically does not need to part with the Soviet period of his life, thanks to the button on the television time machine that allows him to immerse himself—as he chooses—in any decade of the Soviet regime, as reinterpreted by that same regime. Consequently, on one and the same day, for example, July 12th, Russia's Independence Day, the viewer can satisfy himself that in the Khrushchev period (*I Walk around Moscow*) and in the Brezhnev period (*Three Poplars on Plyushchika*) a student, a taxi driver and a woman collective farm worker all lived much more romantically, happily and morally upright than today. (The television viewer on the same day can encounter present-day Russia only in the film *Russian Brothers*, the blurb of which reads: "...in our era brother goes against his brother, who is stupefied with slogans about freedom and equality...")⁸

During the "late" perestroika period the TV program "Kinopravda" first made its appearance, showing Soviet films from the 1930s and 40s (e.g., *A Great Citizen*). The films were supplied with the inevitable background remarks by a journalist who explained the ideological, propaganda tasks of the film. Then after the broadcast of the film followed a half-hour discussion with historians, sociologists, philosophers and the viewers themselves—by telephone. Whereas now Pyrev's *Kuban Cossacks*, Barnet's *Bountiful Summer* and Lukov's *A Great Life* are shown without any commentary at all—and with invariable and ever growing success.

A response to the altered psychology of the television audience can be seen in the New Year

program "Old Songs about the Main Thing," as produced by the new generation of aesthetes of tele-postmodernism (K. Ernst and L. Parfenov). Pop stars in primitively driven kitsch subjects perform well-known songs from Soviet blockbusters. But the performers, the creators' declarations notwithstanding, clearly fall short of the original performances. The new vulgarity (a blend of mockery and "in your face") cannot vanquish the sincerity and fervor of the old and unfading pictures in the viewers' eyes. It only confirms once more that the "period of democratic transition" cannot offer anything comparable to what was created according to the canon of socialist realism.

All of the TV stations—without exception—broadcast New Year programs from December 30th through the evening of January 4th: "The same faces over and over again, the same songs were to be heard, and for the hundredth time, if not the thousandth, they showed the same films. [...] Longing for the motherland (the USSR) and longing for the past... paradoxically merged in the forfeited unity of the Soviet people. It is not accidental that emotional memory proved to be more powerful than rational arguments. And the competition for viewers in this instance required complete and unconditional capitulation on the part of the reformers."⁹ The effect proved to be the opposite to that which the authors of "Old Songs about the Main Thing" chose for their roguish (at least in conception) broadcast.

In this situation of growing cultural nostalgia, Leonid Parfenov, one of the most stylish journalists (and now a producer) of post-Soviet television, has attempted to introduce historical consciousness into the framework of notable events of the year in his project "Our Era: 1961-1991." (I call your attention to the highly telling epithet "our": the absolute prerequisite here is that history cannot be repudiated because of this or that ideological reason, nor can it be negated, truncated or distorted.) So what exactly is this "our" era? Playing at impartiality, Parfenov has spurned the nostalgic sets of "Old Apartment," offering instead a postmodernist divided screen and eschewing corroborative "objects" and "viewers'" reminiscences. The studio audience participants are replaced by four experts, who in a peculiarly detached manner comment on a series of events of supposedly equal importance

8. All blurbs are taken from the weekly supplement to the newspaper, *Komsomolskaia pravda*.

9. K. Razgolov, "Forward into the Past," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1997), p. 34.

THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

which Parfenov introduces in a deliberate monotone. The Brodsky affair, the construction of the Aswan Dam, the opening of a new store and the popularity of jersey cloth are all given equal weight. If the genre of "Old Apartment" can be likened to a collective wake, then "Our Era" is without a doubt a dissecting room (the geometry, color, the show's atmosphere, its illumination, the music—everything is done in the cold tones not simply of a surgeon in the operating room but rather a medical examiner conducting an autopsy), where the beaming screen is the scalpel that cuts through the dead tissue, while the host and experts hold up the glass containers with the samples they have taken and report on the results of the histological analysis. Time has frozen after death, it is completely torn away from the viewer. Contact not only of the casual visitor idly whiling away time in a museum (and Parfenov wears precisely such a mask, particularly when he goes on his incredibly expensive barefoot strolls on the Cuban seaside for the sake of a one-minute story—in the authentic setting—about the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, but also the host's contact with time is one void of emotion, like an exhumer with a corpse. True, while enjoying his role, the exhumer occasionally intrudes directly into the documentary frames of the film (with the help of computer graphics), appearing as a background figure in state visits, obligingly proffering a rifle for the hunt or a towel to Khrushchev after washing. This playful intrusion in fact carries an unanticipated significance for the host, as it demonstrates his compensatory jealousy, an unequivocally servile dependence, and his desire to be near ("to stand alongside") the main figures of a given era.

One must admit that Soviet art, including both cinema and television, has proven—at least for now—to be aesthetically steadfast if not invincible. Despite the declared ideological victory, and despite the newly found freedom and the total abolition of censorship, including aesthetic censorship, post-Soviet culture continues to demonstrate a lingering dependence on the language and style, as well as the characters and performers of a bygone era. The "new" genre repertoire of post-Soviet TV is clearly dependent on the old Soviet one. The attempt to break new aesthetic ground after shedding the old constraints did not succeed. And I believe that is precisely why the television professionals assembled at the annual TEFI awards ceremony for best television broadcasts were so delighted when the award for "Goodnight, Children"

was announced. Filya, Khryusha and Stepashka had survived with honor the ideological shocks and tribulations and won out over the Americanized contender, "Sesame Street."

The state of affairs on television today can be likened to a reverse perspective: the objects in space (here, in time) are not optically reduced, but instead are magnified in accordance with their remoteness. The true proportions are violated, while the historical past loses its definition, becomes blurred, and is covered with an alluring veil, a delicate mist, all enveloped by an attractive scent. (The bad smelling, so as not to say stinking, rottenness comes together in a single smell, a "bouquet," together with the scent of vanished youth, love and health.) The further away it is, the larger it becomes... And Sergei Solovyov already waxes nostalgic about the wonderfulness of the Soviet cinema. Amidst the ruins of today's film industry that is all too understandable. Will we perhaps again discover for ourselves that which Viktor Erofeev so playfully saw fit to annul? The wake, it turns out, was premature.

Natalya Ivanova is Deputy Editor of the thick journal "Znamya" (Moscow) and President of the Academy of Russian Letters.