ABSTRACT
The arrival of consumer-grade video had a dramatic impact on the 1980s Soviet Union: the unregulated cross-border traffic in the new medium and foreign, primarily Western, screen entertainment erupted; the state monopoly over circulation and exhibition of moving image media collapsed; and the alternative, allegedly aberrant and debased, transcultural viewing habits and tastes of the Soviet audiences surfaced. In examining these transgressive effects of home video, this article simultaneously traces the factors, ranging from socialist cultural doctrines to the conditions of shortage economies and distinctive screen translation practices, that contributed to legitimation of emerging video cultures within the Soviet project.

In August 2017, the US blockbuster Terminator 2: Judgment Day (James Cameron, 1991) was back in movie theaters for the 3D worldwide re-release. Among twenty-four foreign markets, the most lucrative one—where the remastered Terminator 2 earned about 23 percent of its global revenue—was Russia.¹ For Russian audiences, especially those outside of Moscow

and Saint Petersburg, this was the first appearance of the franchise sequel on the big screen. The original film was officially released in only a few movie theaters on December 25, 1991, on the last day of the Soviet Union’s existence. Yet it became a massive hit with the viewers across the ex-Soviet region due to its distribution on poor-quality, pirated VHS tapes that flooded local street markets, circulated through countless video parlors, and aired on official television channels without copyright permission in the 1990s.²

This local distribution history complicated the promotion of the 3D version in Russia: the emphasis on state-of-the-art special effects, the latest sound technologies, and the charm of big screens risked significantly derail ing the nostalgic sentiment that underpins the business of re-releases. With this history in mind, to ensure an affective engagement on the part of filmgoers, VolgaFilm, the Russian and Kazakhstani distributor of Terminator 2 in 3D, included the most memorable and hilarious errors emblematic of the VHS voice-over translations of Terminator 2 in their newly dubbed version and invited the cult video translator Andrei Gavrilov to revoice credits, inscriptions, and some lines of dialogue. Meanwhile, in Almaty (Kazakhstan), the premiere of Terminator 2 was preceded by the screening of the first Terminator (James Cameron, 1984) with the original soundtrack accompanied by a simultaneous single-voice Russian-language translation. Sitting in a projector booth, Leonid Volodarskii, another legendary voice of the VHS culture, did a live translation of the movie into a microphone for almost two hours. In a gesture of appreciation, after Volodarskii read the last line and the closing credits appeared, the audience burst into applause and turned toward the booth, away from the screen.

The deployment of this marketing strategy highlights the constitutive role of voice-over translation within the histories of local video cultures: a practice simultaneously associated with a monovocal, asynchronous, and inaccurate performance.³ Against all presumptions that such translation practices are inferior to professional hi-fi dubbing soundscapes, this anecdote points to the enduring legacy of the VHS era and the importance of translation in shaping the (re)production of both media economies and spectatorial pleasures in the post-Soviet context, reconfirming that cultural

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² By the mid-1990s, about 90 percent of all distributed videotapes in Russia were allegedly pirated, and approximately 80 percent of the two thousand television stations in the country broadcasted films from pirated tapes. Vladimir Gendlin, “Pomnanye piracy stanoviyatsia dilerami videokompanii” [Caught pirates are becoming the dealers of video companies], Kommersant. Den’gi, September 22, 2014; and I. S. Volkov, “Piratstvo na regional’nom televizii” [Piracy on regional television], Kinoproizvodstvo, February 1996, 77. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author’s.

³ Voice-over is a technique of audiovisual translation in which the voice(s) of the translator(s) is recorded over the source language, so that both languages can be heard simultaneously. Eliana Franco and colleagues argue that the Soviet Union was the place of origin of this translation method. Eliana Franco, Anna Matamala, and Pilar Orero, Voice-Over Translation: An Overview (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 24. For more on the use of a similar practice in other video cultures, see, for example, Matthias Krings, “Karishika with Kiswahili Flavor: A Nollywood Film Retold by a Tanzanian Video Narrator,” in Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry, ed. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 306–326.
tastes and conditions of reception are not universal within the globalized contemporary cinematic landscape.

The distribution of Terminator 2 in ex-Soviet countries raises a number of questions that this article sets out to explore. What was it about the video cultures of the (former) Soviet Union that still makes it possible to ascribe value to their habits, including imperfect translation routine, some thirty years later? How is the history of this video culture different from what we, as film and media scholars, have come to accept as a traditional narrative of the transition from film to video and other home-based media entertainment? And how can the study of this video culture change the way we think about the supposedly stable lines between formal and informal production and consumption, legality and illegality, and quality and “trash” as constitutive of the global circulation of media today?

Videotape plays an outstanding role in the (post)socialist media histories. Although the United States became a key producer of video content by the mid-1980s, American viewers invested in home video technology less enthusiastically and at a much slower pace than the rest of the world. In the late 1980s, media scholars already considered socialist states one of the primary world sites of flourishing cross-border video distribution and consumption, connecting the emerging socialist video cultures to rampant piracy disruptive of global information markets and to underground industry subversive of local state-run, centralized governance of society. More recently, some popular narratives, such as the particularly well-captured narrative in the Romania-centered documentary Chuck Norris vs. Communism (Ilinca Calugareanu, 2015), link the arrival of home video, habitually associated with the capitalist West, to the busting of the socialist state altogether. Thus, video under (post)socialism commonly denotes extreme illegality, crisis, and rupture.

In the meantime, focused on localities as diverse as Cuba, Poland, or the People’s Republic of China, a recently growing body of research has drawn attention to the ambiguous ways that video was not merely undermining but legitimately constitutive of both the 1980s marketization and socialist projects. In dialogue with this scholarship, this article examines the dialectic relationship between transgression and legitimacy that shaped and was shaped by early home video cultures in the Soviet Union up to its dissolution in 1991. By transgression, I refer to violation of legal regulations and disruption of practices they govern. In turn, legitimacy, which may either overlap or stand in conflict with the law, means adherence to broader reasonable needs and established socio-cultural values. This article gives a historical overview of how the emerging Soviet video cultures transgressed the principal norms

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of the Soviet legal institutional system, such as private trade prohibition and state censorship. Simultaneously, in locating Soviet video at the center of the transgression/legitimacy dynamic, I look into various factors—ranging from commodity and information deficit to the ideological promises of the socialist project and distinctive modes of distribution such as the use of voice-over—that allowed these cultures to become legitimate.

The illegality/legitimacy tension, as Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar emphasize, emerges “whenever a new set of potentialities arise due to novel technologies, economic opportunities, political realignments, or social transformations.”7 In the context of the Soviet video boom, this tension and its generative potentialities came into being due to all these circumstances at once. The development of Soviet video cultures was accompanied by a series of radical and conflicting market-oriented and democratic reforms, albeit declared to serve the renewal of socialism in the spirit of the 1917 October Revolution, and a geopolitical shift from antagonism to partnership with capitalist superpowers.8 Against this background, the boundaries of the Soviet legal system and the parameters of their transgression were fluctuating. Thus, the relationship between transgression and legitimacy was not a relationship of discord but of perpetual transactions, or translations, between each other.

In this article, I argue that the fundamental driving force behind the formation of the Soviet video order is translation, both as the process of negotiation happening across multiple political, economic, and cultural systems and as language mediation. By opening with a short story about the debut of video technologies in the Soviet Union, the article stresses the embeddedness of Soviet video in an international context from the outset, which gave rise to the transgression/legitimacy tension and the negotiations of unevenness and connectedness shaping this tension. I further trace the refractions of these negotiations by looking at the (in)formal video policies and emerging viewing experiences and tastes. The article concludes by examining voice-over translation as a practice that epitomizes the principal digressions and legitimacies at the heart of Soviet video cultures. Emblematic of broader (post)socialist video cultures, these asynchronous, inaccurate, monovocal video voice-overs belong to the recognizable circle of “aesthetic hybrids” that, as Anikó Imre points out, “have grown out of the transitional post-communist terrain in their interlinked global, regional, national, and subnational circumstances of production, distribution, and reception.”9 They represent a powerful metaphor for the (post)socialist aspiration for “inscription into the now of globality” and emphasize the continuities and endurance of socialist locality, shedding light on how early video cultures developed and

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reflected the emerging transcultural encounters amid the rise of neoliberal globalization.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{THE ADVENT OF HOME VIDEO AND THE SOVIET VCR BOOM}

“The beginning of home video can be put into rhyme: Boris was a scientist / His last name can’t be said / Filed a patent—here’s a twist / The VCR is Red,” the US technology journalist Mark Schubin humorously proclaimed in the opening of his 1991 \textit{Video Review} article.\textsuperscript{11} Celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the videocassette recorder (VCR), linked to the 1976 introduction of the VHS-based video recorder in Japan, the article, as opposed to other popular accounts, located the birthplace of video in the nascent Soviet Union of the 1920s. Recognized as a pioneer of video, the scientist with the hard-to-pronounce name was Boris Rcheuli (Rcheulov), a physicist of Georgian origin and employee of the Higher Officer Armor School in revolutionary Petrograd. While Rcheuli’s projects ranged from the development of sound system for “talking cinema” to television vacuum tubes, his main achievement was the design of the recording apparatus to transfer television signals on magnetic tape in 1922, which proved to be the first known prototype of VCR in the history of video technology.\textsuperscript{12} After receiving a patent for his invention in the United Kingdom in 1926, however, Rcheuli could not continue work on his video machine at the University of Oxford as planned. In the context of the 1927 Anglo-Soviet diplomatic break that resulted from the accusation of the USSR in espionage and support of the revolutionary Kuomintang government in China, the physicist was forced to return to the Soviet Union, where he never came back to his project.

Albeit unsuccessful, the project of the “Red” VCR points to video, both as a technology and idea, as inherent to Soviet modernity. Moreover, it highlights the enmeshment of video in the global capitalism-versus-socialism confrontation long before the Cold War that provided a main context for later video developments and the formation of analog video cultures. Video made its public debut in the Soviet Union during the so-called Kitchen Debate between US Vice President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, opening the American National Exhibition in Moscow in the summer of 1959. Central to the debate on the role of science and domesticity in the capitalism-socialism competition was the Ampex video recorder and color videotape, capturing the meeting in real time. Framed by Nixon as the American response to the 1957 Soviet \textit{Sputnik} satellite launch, the Ampex apparatus propelled video technologies for the first time as “central tools for global knowledge, diplomacy, and expansion,” as well as a new constituent of “the Cold War imaginary.”\textsuperscript{13}

In the context of the 1949 embargo on trade and technology exchange with the Eastern bloc, the Soviet electronics manufacturers and research institutes, playing a perpetual catch-up game, embarked on their own video engineering projects. And the first videomagnitofon (a Russian word for both industrial and consumer-level video recorders), KMZI-1, was introduced by the factory Lenkinap in Leningrad already on December 24, 1959, which became the official date of birth of the Soviet video according to the Leningrad engineering school. As the Soviet television centers started actively adopting the video recording machines in the 1960s, the history of Soviet video as a crucial television medium began. While this history remains a blind spot of Soviet media studies and is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth emphasizing that the 1960s and 1970s (semi-)professional Soviet video technologies, practices, and discourses around them set the stage for the controversies and experiences of the 1980s rise of consumer-grade video.

In particular, gradually replacing live broadcasts, video emerged as a revolutionary technology that proved essential for maintaining Soviet cross-border and intra-regional connectivity. Videos, from the recordings of the Sanremo Music Festival in Italy or the Olympic Games in Japan to the images of Soviet mundane life, whether unfolding at the collective farms or orbital stations, circulated through local and transnational satellite networks, reinforcing a sense of geocultural integration of domestic and global environments. And yet, seen as a “collective victory,” video simultaneously served as a reminder of collective defeat and disconnection. The local video production suffered from chronic obsolescence, breakdowns, and deficit, impossible for the giant, economically uneven, and heavy industry–oriented country to compensate via either technology imports from other states of the Eastern bloc or perpetual reverse engineering of Western video equipment.

With the advent of the first home VCRs—Betamax by Sony in 1975 and VHS by JVC in 1976, both Japanese—the Soviet Union’s lagging in advancing video technologies became particularly evident. Although Soviet engineers worked on developing consumer-grade video since 1970, technical difficulties, ranging from the lack of precision in manufacturing tape drive mechanisms to persistent incompatibility of Soviet video devices and tape formats between each other, did not allow for the large-scale serial VCR production. In the meantime, Japanese VCRs and videotapes, both blank and with pre-recorded foreign films and programs, started crossing the Soviet borders in the late 1970s.


16 Lev Balanin, “K 60-letiiu sozdaniia pervogo otechestvennogo videomagnitofona dlia televizionnogo veshchaniia” [To the 60th anniversary of the creation of the first video recorder for television broadcasting], MediaVision, no. 3 (2019): 41.

17 On the detailed analysis of the cross-border (video) technology traffic in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, see, for example, Besnik Pula, Globalization under and after Socialism: The Evolution of Transnational Capital in Central and Eastern Europe (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).
Irregular and random at first, video flows repeated the journey paths of the Soviet citizens permitted to travel abroad. More mobile elites, from diplomats to scientists and ballet dancers, were bringing video from around the world; rare tourists, usually allowed to visit only the Eastern bloc countries, spent savings on VCRs and videocassettes in “semi-liberal” Hungary and Poland; engineers and workers involved in a variety of infrastructural projects across the Third World could deliver video from Nigeria or Tanzania; and military personnel, whose principal location was Afghanistan, given the erupted Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), were coming back to the Soviet Union with video bought in South Asia.18 A technological wonder, video quickly became a crucial commodity to circulate in bulk via growing cross-border and local channels significantly dependent on transport workers serving planes, ships, and railways. For instance, in paving the way for one of the busiest informal media routes in the ex-Soviet region in the 1990s, 1980s Soviet sailors were the principal suppliers of video and audio equipment from Singapore, where the stores created “specially for the Soviets” necessarily showcased VCRs and VHS tapes.19

In the mid-1980s, bewildered Soviet critics acknowledged that the “cassette cinema strangely came to us—from the roadsides, from the edges, in the ways unfathomable and not always righteous.”20 And yet the video trade in the Soviet Union, accumulating technology streams from a variety of places across the globe, could also stem from the heart of Soviet capitals. The state-run chain of Berezka stores (Ivushka in Belarus, Chinar in Uzbekistan, etc.) allowed for another opportunity to obtain the coveted VCR and VHS tapes. Called an “enclave of capitalism,” Berezka stores were selling scarce and non-domestic luxury goods, including electronics, for foreign currency or special certificates.21 They were available only for international tourists and those Soviet citizens who officially worked abroad and could not get paid in rubles. The average person formally did not have the right to shop there since the possession of foreign currency was illegal until 1991. Nevertheless, the vast informal system of reselling of Berezka goods and certificates, exchanges, and bribes allowed ordinary citizens to get access to desirable products. The cost of a VCR at Berezka was between three and four thousand rubles, while the average Soviet monthly salary was about two hundred rubles. Unaffordable for an ordinary individual, VCRs thus acquired the status of prestige commodity from the outset, as in other socialist cultures, where VCRs proved to be a prominent symbol of “individual identity” as

20 Valerii Kichin, “Video ot bezumiia k razumu” [Video from madness to reason], Literaturnaia gazeta, April 11, 1984.
21 Anna Ivanova, Magaziny “Berezka”: paradoksy potrebleniia v pozdnem SSSR [The Berezka stores: Paradoxes of consumption in the late USSR] (Moscow: NLO, 2017), 199.
well as of the “consumer culture of the West and universal technological modernity.”

In witnessing the VCR boom facilitated by massive informal economies, the Council of Ministers announced the beginning of the urgent state-controlled “videofication” policy in October 1983, with the release of a decree titled “On the Mass Sales of the VCRs and Cassettes with Pre-recorded Video Programs.” Following this official call that declared consumer-grade video production a priority for local electronics producers, the VHS-based Soviet VCR Elektronika VM-12 first produced in Voronezh (Russian SSR) began to appear on the market in 1984, although only two hundred VCRs of this model were sold that year. Despite the still-high price of 1,200 rubles, the domestic VCRs were more affordable than foreign devices. Yet, while Soviet VCRs had multiple technical defects, they were also permanently in deficit: to acquire the cherished machine, regular consumers were joining waiting lists at the state electronics stores, with the waiting time habitually reaching more than a year, which only pushed Soviet consumers further toward participation in informal video economies.

Compensated by the black market, the poor and scarce local VCR production was linked in public debates to bureaucratism and sluggish state apparatus, which indeed became a marker of the Soviet Union by the 1980s. It was also acknowledged that, except for the socio-cultural “West” of the country, the Baltic republics, and such VCR manufacturing centers as Voronezh, “psychological barriers” affected the efficient growth of the video industry, as institutional workers merely feared the unfamiliar machine and its cultural impact. In the meantime, the deficit manifested not only in Soviet VCRs but also in officially distributed videotapes, and Soviet video viewers were immersing themselves deeper in diverse unregulated and uncensored flows of foreign screen media.

IN/FORMAL VIDEO POLICIES AND MARGINALIZATION OF DOMESTIC SCREEN ENTERTAINMENT

By 1986, there were from 350,000 to 1,000,000 VCRs and from 10,000 to 15,000 foreign films circulated on the informal video market in the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, in embarking on the official “videofication” campaign,
Goskino (the State Committee for Cinematography) released only about five hundred videotapes with predominantly domestically produced films and programs by the same year. An indicator of the rise of Soviet video culture as a domain of foreign media, the disproportionality mainly resulted from concrete material factors and the complex internal dynamics among the local (un)official cultural actors and institutions, be it through competition or collaboration.

In an attempt to establish a state-controlled video infrastructure that could compete with informal video economies, the Soviet administration initiated two principal measures, both taking place only in 1986. The first measure was the creation of an all-Union institution responsible for the centralized release and circulation of cinema and television programs on video. Founded as a small subdivision of Goskino, this institution became known as Videofilm by 1988. The second measure involved obliging the local Soviet authorities and Workers’ Unions to ensure and facilitate the launching of video rental and exhibition services for the general public. Opened at movie theaters, libraries, museums, and Houses of Culture (community clubs), the newly emerged state videotheques and video halls, or salons, in turn, must have formed their repertoire by routing orders to Videofilm.

State video policies advanced video as a medium of protection of cultural heritage, as particularly evident from the famous Goskino promotional film Vpolne veroiatnye videoprikliucheniiia (Quite believable video adventures, Vitalii Fetisov, 1985) advertising video distribution of “old films that are better than the new ones” and state videotheques as a site of “saving films of many generations.” Reflecting this vision, video programming offered by Videofilm predominantly consisted of canonical Soviet films and the 1960s and 1970s hits of local film distribution. While these cinematic productions were widely available in movie theaters and on television, an average price prescribed by Videofilm for state video renting and exhibition reached about four rubles per videotape, as opposed to one ruble for a ticket to a movie theater or underground video salons (see Figure 1). In the context where individual possession of video was still the privilege of a few, informal video salons, mushrooming across private apartments, basements, abandoned buildings, and even public transportation, provided affordable access to foreign films impossible to see at state video salons. Thus, most Videofilm releases were in low demand and could remain never requested by Soviet video viewers from videotheques, turning into “dead weight” for state distributors (see Figure 2).

prestupnosti i problem bor’by s nimi, ed. A. I. Dolgova (Moscow: INION, 1989), 22–32.
The growing competition between Soviet screen industries became a crucial factor in the failure of Videofilm to develop more diverse, contemporary, and affordable video programming. Since 1987, in the course of the liberalization of the Soviet economy, state enterprises, including film and television industries, started gradually moving from the reliance on state funding to self-financing and a profit-driven model. In this regard, video circulation of
recent films and media seemed to threaten their theatrical and television viewership and revenues, and in 1988, Gosteleradio (the State Committee for Television and Radio) signed an agreement to provide Videofilm with only fifty hours of programs annually. Thus, unable to guarantee a sufficient and steady supply of new high-quality domestic entertainment, Videofilm increasingly appeared an “unreliable and irresponsible partner” in the eyes of state distributors, particularly those outside Soviet capitals.

To compensate for the scarcity of content available for official video distribution, Videofilm launched its straight-to-video production centered on educational documentaries. They were “programs about political and state figures, outstanding military commanders, the history and present day of Moscow, and sensations and paradoxes of the twentieth century,” along with the cycle of films on Russian artistic movements and music cultures from guitar romances to bell ringing. Meanwhile, state distributors saw these low-cost, didactic, and Russia-centric Videofilm productions, sarcastically called konservy (canned food), as “morally obsolete” and hardly possible to attract many Soviet viewers.

While Soviet video audiences participated in a “fantastic network of exchanges . . . , purchases-sales, renting, and re-recording” of informally imported videos, state videotheques and video salons were increasingly becoming part of this network. Caught between the imperatives of the all-Union videofication campaign and the incapacity of Videofilm to facilitate videofication, state distributors resorted to the services of unofficial video dealers, and the divide between the “white” (state) and “black” (non-state) video distribution became blurred. Moreover, in undermining the monopolistic status of Videofilm as a sole legal video distributor, the new Soviet laws “On Individual Labor Activity” (November 1986) and especially “On Cooperatives” (May 1988) legalized, albeit in restricted forms, video entrepreneurship, which ultimately bridged the divide. Yesterday’s shadow video traders energetically formed independent collective economic enterprises or video cooperatives that, although establishing their own video production and distribution sites, commonly collaborated with state videotheques and salons and saw the existent infrastructures as a crucial outlet for video circulation.

In the course of chaotic liberalization and introduction of contradictory legal regulations, video cooperatives were periodically banned and legalized.

again. However, such cooperatives, growing from and deeply linked to informal video networks, turned into a norm of the emerging Soviet media market and principal suppliers of video entertainment that was predominantly coming from abroad.

Not only did the policies of Videofilm and market de-regulation bring local entertainment to the periphery of video consumption, but the Soviet copyright regime also created more favorable conditions for the distribution of foreign video. The notion of copyright and intellectual property hardly existed in Soviet legal and public discourses, which partially resulted from socialist policies, either actual or declared, that stressed free access to knowledge and education. Besides the 1952 Universal Copyright Convention the Soviet Union signed in 1973, no international legal protocols governing the global circulation of intellectual property were valid in the country. Meanwhile, as the 1952 Convention suggested a priority of local copyright norms, Soviet cultural and knowledge distribution was regulated via a series of domestically issued laws with the concept of authorial rights at the center. Protecting local authors and creators and only those foreign citizens who first released their works in the USSR, these laws allowed for public media circulation without preliminary permission and prescribed the payment of pre-established compensation to authors via the All-Union Copyright Agency. In the context of the Soviet centralized media economy, the general public had neither clear awareness of nor access to mechanisms designed to manage the authorial rights. Major state institutions were the only actors obliged to follow the local and highly flexible copyright restrictions.

The advent of consumer-grade video provided an opportunity for the decentralized circulation and consumption of screen media, which Soviet copyright regulations simply did not cover. As an all-state video distributor, albeit free from asking for permission on circulation, Videofilm had to adhere to the procedure of fee payment to local owners of authorial rights or sign agreements with Sovexportfilm (the All-Union Agency for Export and Import of Films) to distribute films acquired by the state abroad. Foreign films and media distributed by Soviet video entrepreneurs, in turn, represented the objects that were impossible to identify and protect in terms of local copyright law. In this regard, in contrast to domestic productions, foreign screen media could circulate freely, and piracy was rarely an object of critique in the public debate about video culture throughout the 1980s. The image of (post-)Soviet video piracy emerged retroactively in the 1990s upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the integration of the former Soviet states into the global copyright regimes.

Informal video economies, compensating for the shortages of the state video industry and merging with official cultural infrastructures, proved a

legitimate phenomenon of late Soviet life, and intellectual property infringement remained largely irrelevant in the Soviet context. Yet, given the gradual displacement of domestic productions, video culture, transgressing the established practices of control over screen consumption, constituted a locus of ideological and aesthetic concerns for the Soviet authorities. The content of distributed videotapes and emerging viewing habits of the Soviet audiences provoked the most heated polemic around video.

TRANSGRESSIVE VIDEO CONSUMPTION, SOVIET MORALS, AND TASTE

In 1988, the head of Videofilm, Oleg Uralov, commented on the agency’s repertoire policy as one that, as opposed to Western free market video industries, “does not allow for commodity to meet the demands of consumer but aims to form the consumer’s taste” and circumvents the needs of the viewers who “will, of course, want pornography.” Reflecting the official views on what Soviet video was (not) to be, this commentary puts the principal anxieties around the transgressive effects of video in the state socialist context into stark relief. Namely, these anxieties are around commercialization, individualization, and, consequently, debasement of culture, all epitomized by pornography being at the core of Soviet debates over video spectatorship since the mid-1980s.

Pivotal to the Soviet project that “radically focused on the recipient” was the idea of the reader or spectator as “the object of reshaping, ‘molding.’” A principal means of and playground for reconstructing the individual and social being in the spirit of socialism, culture was declared to educate, mobilize, and transform by elevating everyone beyond the personal pleasures and the mundane and to the collective progress and the extraordinary. Envisioned as “an anti-masscult culture for the masses,” the Soviet project centered on egalitarian reappropriation and radical accessibility of the global and local heritage of art, literature, and scientific knowledge, promising to abolish the divide between the low/mass and the high/elite as “a capitalist perversion.”

In practice, this policy indeed partially succeeded. The Soviets fully embraced culture as a fundamental right, value, and site of perpetual moral and intellectual perfection rather than entertainment. The highly advanced late Soviet system of cultural and media institutions offered access to remarkably eclectic and, given the centrality of the doctrine of socialist internationalism, cosmopolitan flows of affordable texts, images, and sounds of aesthetic and political significance. Yet, essentially didactic, this policy, operating

through top-down, centralized control and censorship that defined the routes
and nature of circulation, resulted in distinctive asymmetries of access and
cultural hierarchies. In fact, in the context of enormous public demand for
cultural products and yet closed borders and ideological restrictions, “Soviet
society was plagued by information deficit.” Here, the most valued and privi-
leged knowledge was the one in short supply, that is, most limited and censored
by the state, particularly the knowledge stemming from the capitalist West.

The advent of consumer-grade video in the Soviet Union proved a
double-edged sword, undermining the cultural governance from above but
reaffirming the effects of the Soviet project from below. With the informal
cross-border video boom and poorly developed state video industry in the
background, Soviet officials faced the unprecedented de-regulation of screen
traffic and consumption, which entailed the risk of ideological and cultural
losses, as glimpsed in the position of the head of Videofilm. “[T]he most dan-
gerous disadvantage of video,” some critics warned, was that “everyone could
compile their ‘cultural menu’ not from the offered ‘products’ but from what
they really like.” Simultaneously, it appeared that the Soviet viewers enjoyed
everything available on video, while the press’s rhetoric on “video madness”
or omnivorous and indiscriminate watching made comparisons to the AIDS
epidemic and nuclear explosion.

Indeed, a manifestation of the long-lasting socialist resistance to a high/
low split and the information scarcity, the seemingly erratic and disordered
lists of the most demanded and available videotapes in Soviet circulation may
strike anyone familiar with the original production contexts of these movies.
Such lists include films as diverse as the critically acclaimed Cet obscur objet du
désir (That Obscure Object of Desire, Luis Buñuel, 1977), the Italian sexploitation
horror Papaya dei Caraibi (Papaya, Love Goddess of the Cannibals, Joe D’Amato,
1978), or the US worldwide comedy hit Police Academy (Hugh Wilson,
1984). The (semi-)underground video salons, in turn, allowed space for the
French New Wave classic Le Mépris (Contempt, Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), the
US superhero action Batman (Tim Burton, 1989), the UK adventure comedy
and flop Royal Flash (Richard Lester, 1975), or the Disney animation Dumbo
(Ben Sharpsteen, 1941) to be screened side by side under the rubric “World
Cinema Masterpieces” (see Figure 3).

Despite the apparent randomness, it is clear that Western productions lay
at the center of Soviet video circulation and consumption. The dominance
of these films was characteristic of global video markets and not surprising,
given the leading role of Western video distribution companies in the 1980s.
Yet, as another manifestation of the repercussions of the Soviet cultural regu-
lations, the local audiences intentionally preferred Western movies, previously
scarce and therefore highly estimated and simply intriguing. According to

48 Gilburd, To See Paris, 155.
49 S. Bestuzheva, “Vzgliad v budushchchee” [A look into the future], Klub i khudozhest-
50 Kichin, “Video ot bezumilia”; and Vsevolod Vil’chek, “Esli vam ne nravitsia Shekspir,
ia pozovu militsiiu!” [If you don’t like Shakespeare, I’ll call the police!], Video
51 “Diapazon vkusa” [The range of taste], Video Ace, no. 1 (1990): 64–69.
Figure 3. The repertoire program of video salon Disc, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1989. Provided by the founder Oleg Karpov.
the 1988 survey conducted by Videofilm among viewers in eight Soviet cities, films from habitual foreign suppliers, such as India and countries of the Eastern bloc and Latin America, were still in demand; US movies enjoyed the highest popularity, followed by the productions from France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong.52

Soviet critics traditionally treated cinematic cultures of these capitalist superpowers with caution or, in the case of monopolistic Hollywood, particular antagonism, although celebrating the “antibourgeois orientation” and “humanism” of Italian neorealism or such US filmmakers as Sydney Pollack and Hal Ashby.53 With the arrival of video, however, the critical response was radically hostile, depicting video markets of developed capitalist countries as a “school of crime” in “cruelty, violence, murders, thefts, and tortures.”54 Their distribution policies, in turn, were criticized as the “undisguised aggression of colonialism” and “information imperialism.”55 Meanwhile, the Soviet viewers and their proponents among critics, in enthusiastically engaging with and emphasizing the legitimacy of their interest in these reprehended productions, displayed the attitudes of “proper” socialist subjects. Evoking the centrality of access to culture, internationalism, and education, it was common to insist that video allowed “peoples to learn about each other and become closer.”56 And, as the Soviet teenagers wrote in their letter to the press, films coming from the West on video offered what was “impossible to either see in movie theaters or learn at school or from parents,” and “these films, especially Griecheische Feigen [The Fruit Is Ripe, Sigi Rothemund, 1977], taught how to live and love beautifully.”57

New realms of cultural “education,” the softcore erotica Griecheische Feigen and Just Jaeckin’s films Emmanuelle (1974) and Histoire d’O (Story of O, 1975) constituted the “leading trio” of Soviet video consumption, flaming the polemic among local authorities about the preoccupation of video viewers with pornography.58 As pornography, a “vehicle of bourgeois ideology,” represented a crime against public health and social order, this polemic gave rise to the 1985 to 1987 legal campaign accompanied by police raids on video salons and apartment screenings and resulting in imprisonment and social ostracism of ordinary video viewers who owned materials identified as pornographic.59 In turn, hunted for by the Soviet police, so-called video pornography could encompass a variety of productions ranging from films by Luis Buñuel to teen sex comedies or, merely based on the titles, innocent Hollywood movies such as The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas (Colin Higgins, 1982), while the latter is similarly a famous example of the extremes of the “video nasties” campaign in the United Kingdom.

54 “Posobie po prestupnosti” [Crime textbook], Sovetskaia kul’tura, July 10, 1983.
As discussed elsewhere, the Soviet anti-pornography campaign seemed to represent both a defensive response of the authorities to the loss of the privilege to control cultural consumption and, given the absurdity in pinpointing pornography, a symptom of aesthetic illiteracy on the part of the investigators and viewers disoriented in the terrains of the high and the low. However, rather than simply another proof of the “bad education” of the Soviets unfamiliar with the Western aesthetic hierarchies, the unexpected pornography labeling resulted from multiple factors. Among them was the lack of clear legal definitions and regulations in the changing media context, the linking of pornography to other ideological crimes such as anti-Sovietism and propaganda of the cult of violence, and the bewildering messiness of Soviet video distribution in which the circulation of materials under false titles or cassettes with two random pre-rerecorded films was typical. Also, rapid economic and political Soviet liberalization since 1985, including the gradual removal of censorship, brought about the general institutional discord influencing the discrepancies and inconsistencies in developing the attitudes to the newly arrived imagery.

Ironically, in this context of the dizzy de-regulation, the Soviet belief in and habit of learning proved unshaken, while the increasingly loud call for “pedagogy” in erotica provoked a boom in educational publications and programs. For example, in pursuing a goal of developing erotic taste, youth magazine Smena produced a three-hour videofilm, Legal’nye i esteticheskie aspekty eroticheskogo kino (Legal and aesthetic aspects of erotic cinema, 1989), that included film excerpts with critical commentaries by art scholars, legal experts, and journalists and centered on the case of 9½ Weeks (Adrian Lyne, 1986) as an example of high erotic artistry and film deserving to be in everyone’s home video collection. One of the most forbidden cultural forms unknown to the Soviet general audiences, film erotica, became a particularly valued video commodity worthy of accessing, discussing, and studying. A by-product of Soviet cultural policies, this worthiness, however, faded with the fall of socialism and routinization of sexual imagery. In the mid-1990s, video distributors from Kyiv published one of the fullest catalogs of video erotica available on the (post-)Soviet market. As the “Erotic Cine-Calendar” opening the catalog concluded, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, accompanied by the first festival of erotic cinema, We Have Sex!, in Moscow, “Nothing significant happened in the world of film erotica.”


63 Galina Klevtsova and Andrei Kosach, 100 eroticheskikh fil’mov [100 erotic films] (Kyiv: Slovo Polissia, 1994), 13.
Incongruent with the Western aesthetic and taste divisions, Soviet video consumption also appeared to violate local official ideological and cultural norms subject to turbulent revision during the post-1985 liberal reformation. While the parameters of these violations were getting more difficult to outline in the context of socioeconomic transition, the Soviet public still tried to make sense of and legitimize the emerging viewing practices and preferences in terms of the Soviet project by framing video as a means of access, international connectivity, and learning about the world. No matter how humorous, naive, or even mockingly performed in reproducing the socialist parlance it might seem, the negotiation of Soviet video consumption—informal, West-centric, and seemingly indiscriminate—constituted a field of intricate cultural translation between the valuable and worthless, the state and society, and the foreign and local. In the meantime, this complex negotiation manifested itself directly on the video screens, refracting through the noise of voice-over language translations constitutive of Soviet video experiences and the ambivalent dynamic of transgression and legitimacy they were shaped by.

SCREEN TRANSLATION

Since the arrival of video in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, no foreign videotape could rapidly circulate and reach many small screens if not accompanied by a cheaply and quickly made translator’s voice-over. A principal vehicle of Soviet video economies and an indispensable chord of video consumption, voice-over translation was central to the emergence of the transgressive and simultaneously legitimate zone of video, allowing for meaningful engagement with video imagery and profoundly influencing the emerging viewing experiences and conventions. The effect such translation produced in the 1980s was described as follows:

Pirate videotapes, whether they contained Hollywood action movies or European visual fancies, were undoubtedly part of the cultural avant-garde. The Voice of Translator also belonged to the same twilight zone of the underground culture. Moreover, it is precisely this Voice of Translator that the underground sensibility and illegitimacy emerged through. And vice versa, the translation stripped video viewing of the enticing aura of taboo. That is why the figure of the (anonymous) Translator became integral to the new information received from the black video boxes that resembled secret caskets, chests, or safes. . . . The translation connected us with the mystery, with the transcendence.

Voice-over, thus, was both a marker of the forbidden territory and the force that sanctioned engagement with this territory seemingly formed beyond the walls of official institutions and mundane cultural practices.

In the Soviet Union, dubbing, a synchronous replacement of original voice with a soundtrack in the audience’s language, was historically the dominant way to distribute foreign films, reflecting the legacies of the early Soviet

politics of cultural accessibility for illiterate citizens.\textsuperscript{65} The translation and production of dubbed films for movie theaters and television were carefully controlled and administered by the editing and dubbing section of Goskino, and film translation was inscribed within the system of state regulation and censorship.\textsuperscript{66} In this regard, located outside this system, video translation itself constituted a domain of disobedience and marked all films as unofficial. Even those foreign movies that had been officially approved and shown in Soviet movie theaters were retranslated for distribution on video, thereby seemingly shifting away from the orbit of institutional culture.

At the same time, along with dubbing, voice-over translation was widely adopted in the Soviet media culture. A “key element of the foreign-film sound track throughout the Soviet Union,” simultaneous voice-overs were characteristic of film festivals, film clubs, movie theaters governed by the major state film archive Gosfilmofond (e.g., Illiuzion in Moscow), exhibitions of motion pictures at educational organizations, and private screenings for state officials.\textsuperscript{67} Voice-over was also used on television to translate foreign-language interviews, documentaries, and increasingly television series. Thus, transferred to video distribution, this translation practice was firmly embedded in the official Soviet norms and protocols of media distribution. More importantly, in pointing to the close links between official media circulation and the video sphere, most voice-overs heard across videotapes in the 1980s turned out to be the familiar voices of experienced simultaneous interpreters who worked for state circuits and, in some cases, even served the Communist apparatchiks.

Among such interpreters, for instance, is Aleksei Mikhalev. One of the most iconic voices of the VHS era and translator of about 1,500 films for informal video distribution, he was also a personal interpreter for General Secretary of the Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev and the Soviet embassies in Iran and Afghanistan in the 1970s and a regular translator at international Moscow and Tashkent film festivals.\textsuperscript{68} Mikhalev was not merely associated with the official Soviet power but was one of its voices. Yet VHS translators such as Mikhalev also played the role of Soviet tricksters who easily moved between official circles and the realm of alternative cultural production. As another famous video translator Vasilii Gorchakov recalls, they could translate \textit{Last Tango in Paris} (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) for the party officials at their dacha party and do the same for unofficial video distributors the next day, connecting these seemingly antagonistic worlds.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{65} Gilburd, \textit{To See Paris}, 179.
\textsuperscript{66} Gilburd, 180.
\textsuperscript{68} Aleksei Mikhalev, “Ia teper’ ochen’ znamenit” [I am now very famous], interview by Iurii Minzianov and Sergei Kudriavtsev, \textit{Iskusstvo kino}, no. 2 (2002): 84.
\textsuperscript{69} Vasilii Gorchakov, “Odn na odin” [Face to face], interview by Vladimir Glazunov, \textit{Nostalgia} (TV program), May 15, 2012, YouTube video, 49:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vod6gbmOuFU.
Mikhalev translated *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Miloš Forman, 1975), one of his first films on VHS, in 1979 when the videotapes with foreign films started circulating through the so-called *molochnaia pochta* (milk mail) in Moscow.\(^70\) *Molochnaia pochta* represented an informal network of video viewers who copied movies for themselves and exchanged them by using plastic milk bags.\(^71\) Ironically, the size of the Soviet milk packaging exactly coincided with the size of a standard VHS cassette, hence the name of the network. Expanding throughout the 1980s and giving rise to the first video cooperatives, this informal video infrastructure circulated films and media either delivered from abroad by tourists and transport workers or recorded by catching foreign, usually European, television signals, which was a typical model of informal video distribution across the Soviet Union.\(^72\) Videotapes were copied in small clandestine studios with dozens of VCRs always on, and the number of such studios only in Moscow reached five hundred by 1997.\(^73\) In the 1990s, while some of these studios were located in private apartments, others were discovered at local research institutes and factories, as well as in the buildings owned by the Ministry of Atomic Energy, the Ministry of Health, the Russian Agency for Management Systems, and even the Administration of the President.\(^74\)

In this shadow industry, translation always remained central to distribution and exhibition. In the early 1980s, although video networks maintained via uninterrupted and systematic voice-over labor were forming, translation was not always present as a ready-made element of video. In these cases, regular viewers could interpret during the collective screenings; such poor and improvised translations constituted humorous entertainment but pointed to the urgency of translation.\(^75\) In many ways, the success of Studio One—the most influential informal video distributor across *molochnaia pochta*, which became the official company West Video, a crucial video supplier across the post-Soviet region in the 1990s—was due to the capacity of its founder Tigran Dokhalov, an entrepreneur of Armenian origin and “the father of Moscow piracy,” to organize a highly effective system of video translation.\(^76\)

\(^{70}\) Mikhalev, “Ia teper’,” 84.


\(^{72}\) “Problema zastala vrasplokh” [Unexpected problem], *Sovetskiaia kul’tura*, June 6, 1987; and Nikolai Stepanchenko, “V setiakh mafi ili blagie namereniia” [Being in mafia networks, or the good intentions], *Video Ace*, no. 2 (1990): 12–14.

\(^{73}\) Gendlin, “Poimannye piraty,” 24; and “V bor’bu za avtorskie prava vkliuchilos’ ORT” [ORT joined the copyright fight], *Kommersant*, April 15, 1997.


\(^{75}\) Rustam Arifdzhanov, “Kak sinkhronno dublirovat’ Khemingueia, ne vykhodia iz doma” [How to simultaneously interpret Hemingway, no leaving the house], *Izvestia*, May 28, 1996.

The first VHS translators, including his brother Vartan Dokhalov, worked from Tigran’s apartment. In contrast to studio dubbing, where translators translate the dialogues for further delivery by dubbing actors, Soviet video translators performed both functions of translation and revoicing. Each film was usually translated by means of simultaneous interpreting, with only one voice used for all the characters. This voice was typically Rusophone, which allowed for broader all-country distribution, given the status of Russian as a Soviet lingua franca, and male. While sitting in front of the TV screen, the translators watched a film and recorded their voices on reel-to-reel audiotape in real time. This audio recording was subsequently superimposed over the original audio track. Another common method was to record the translation directly to videotape, rendering re-recording impossible. Unlike official film translators, VHS translators rarely had an opportunity to watch films beforehand and never used scripts. They worked in the conditions of fast production, with one translator doing as many as seven videotapes per day.

These material factors of pirate production shaped both the linguistic and vocal performance of the VHS translation. Tired translators made mistakes, had no chance to think through a translation strategy, and improvised by trying to guess the meaning of missed words. Their pace could be too fast or too slow and barely synchronized with the original audio track. The translators could speak inarticulately, make sudden pauses, or whisper. Because of the low-quality equipment and frequent copying of already worn-out videotapes, their voices were often distorted and, as a result, acquired a kind of nasal, monotonous quality. This ubiquitous nasal delivery on video engendered a rumor that the VHS translators used clothespins on their noses so that KGB and the police could not identify them. In the end, the clothespin anecdote added to a rich mythology around video that, despite its accessibility and pervasiveness since the mid-1980s, was still considered a forbidden cultural activity in the Soviet imaginary.

Broader cultural contexts, practices, and knowledge further impacted the nature of the VHS translation. One of the most pressing challenges faced by translators was the difficulty of recognizing and comprehending the unknown cultural realities reproduced both in language and on screen. Attempts to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers inevitably led to errors and unexpected reinterpretation of meaning, on the one hand, and simultaneous transformation of the Russian linguistic norms and experiences, on the other. For instance, in struggling to find proper equivalent for American slang and relatively innocent curse words, VHS translators started introducing mat (Russian obscene language) despite its significant differences from

77 L. Makaron, “Interv’iu s nevedimkoi” [Interview with the invisible person], Video Digest, no. 2 (1989): 17–19.
English at the level of connotation and taboo. The appearance of *mat* on the screen, which was otherwise culturally and politically unacceptable in local media and public spaces alike, turned out to be a shocking and, at the same time, liberating event increasingly associated with the freedom of speech. At the same time, the use of obscene language in translations gave rise to the notion that American culture was vulgar and offensive.

Recalling his experience, VHS translator Andrei Gavrilov admits that, despite his best efforts, he failed to translate a film about lesbian love due to the lack of suitable words in the Russian language. He sarcastically explains, “We did not have and still do not have the language of love. And in translation, instead of having a conversation between two lovers, especially if this is a conversation between two lovers in bed, we get, God forgive me, Goblin or a gynecology textbook.” Lack of cultural knowledge often resulted in voluntary and involuntary errors made by VHS translators who omitted words or misinterpreted texts. These translational failures and errors were ubiquitous, exposing the “detours” characteristic of translation as such and pointing to the fact that, as Tessa Dwyer notes, in global media flows, “error screens’ are central, not peripheral, to screen culture.” Engagement with moving images through linguistic inaccuracy and the surplus meaning of errors was one of the defining features of Soviet video consumption.

The specificities of official simultaneous translation also had an impact on the oral performance of VHS translation. For instance, the tradition of monotonous voice-over delivery indifferent toward the emotional intensity of original dialogue scenes dates back to 1945 and reproduces some basic principles of simultaneous interpreting established at the Nuremberg Trials. These principles, originally developed in the setting of courtrooms and formal international gatherings, insisted on differentiating between translation and acting and considered emotional detachment as a necessary requirement, eventually carrying over to VHS translation practices.

This imperfect translation, mixed with the original languages in a dissonant soundscape, was not merely a compromise the video viewers were willing to tolerate; it proved to be a source of aesthetic pleasure and an intimate part of the audiences’ experience. In Western academic and some

80 Mishel’ Berdi, “Kinoperevod: malo chto ot Boga, mnogo chego ot Goblina” [Film translation: There is little from God, much from Goblin], Mosty 8, no. 4 (2005): 60–61.


Eastern European popular discourses, the “Soviet voice-over” is characterized as a “farical and surrealist” phenomenon or disparagingly described as an invasion of “idiotic voices.” But in the (post-)Soviet media cultures, the video voice-over is referred to as an authorial or *auteur* translation, which places the translators who acquired the status of “virtuosos” at the forefront of the spectatorial experience and endows translated pirate videotapes with qualities of creativity and originality.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the same film or program could be translated a few times by different translators and distributed in multiple translational versions. At the early stages, the practice of re-translation was primarily a commercial necessity resulting from the fact that videotapes quickly wore out because of frequent copying, and distributors needed to replenish the market with updated products. However, evoking some early film distribution practices, such as Japanese *benshi*, whose film interpreting and lecturing performances proved “a stand-alone commodity,” the voices of Soviet translators, associated with unique styles, quickly became one of the essential factors shaping the expectations and preferences of the video audiences in choosing a videotape to acquire. By the late 1980s, as video viewers remember, “The last names of translators—Volodarskii, Mikhalev, Gorchakov, and Gavrilov—became something like a brand and were indicated on video cassettes next to the films’ titles.”

In the meantime, the undisputed star among the Soviet and post-Soviet video translators was Mikhalev. “Mozart,” “the King,” “number one in the art of synchronous translation,” he was and is still considered the most prominent and beloved VHS translator admired by both critics and mass audiences. Mikhail’s voice had high aesthetic and commercial value, and videotapes with his translations, despite their wide availability, “were always sold separately from other video productions at special price,” which became particularly true after the translator’s untimely death in 1994.

In generic terms, Mikhail’s voice is firmly associated with musicals, animation, and comedy. A musicals fan, Muslim Magomaev, the legendary Azerbaidjani opera and pop singer and one of the essential Soviet stars, gathered a video collection of about two hundred musical movies and invited Mikhalev to be a translator for all these films.

86 Berdi, “*Kinoperevod*,” 53.
90 Kutlovskaia, “Korol’.”
91 Aleksei Mikhalev, “Ikh ne znali v litso, 1992” [They were not known by sight], interview by Aleksandr Frumin, *Megamiks* (TV program), October 11, 2012, YouTube video, 5:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx7WjafDZAo; and Kutlovskaia, “Korol’.”
across video networks, solidified the indestructible link between the translator’s voice and the genre of musical Mikhalev continued to actively translate until his death. In the mid-1990s, in implicitly pointing to Mikhalev’s voice as the residue of a past that did not exist anymore, Magomaev noted, “We have lost the habit of such voices Mikhalev had. It was a highly cultured [intelligent-nyi] voice. He had a wonderful diction and wonderful knowledge of Russian language.”

Beyond the musical genre, the “optimistic” voice of Mikhalev, “the best friend of every child of the 1990s,” was seen as an essential accompaniment of children’s media; Disney animation is remembered by Russophone video viewers primarily in Mikhalev’s translations. A dialogue-driven comedy traditionally difficult for translation became a domain in which Mikhalev’s erudition and mastery in improvisation and word play were also in high demand. The capacity of the translator to “handle the most linguistically difficult films and often ‘save’ obviously failed ones” has recurrently been claimed to be Mikhalev’s distinguished talent.

Among the films the translator allegedly “saved” is, for example, the British pastiche horror *Theatre of Blood* (Douglas Hickox, 1973), centered on the killings of theatrical critics by a vindictive actor who borrows murder scenarios from William Shakespeare’s plays. In the memories of video viewers, this “mediocre film caused a genuine amazement” as Mikhalev turned this “plain” movie into a poetic performance by improvising and reciting whole excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet, Othello*, and other Shakespearean tragedies. Thus, *Theatre of Blood*, the campy classic of British trash cinema from the cult studio Amicus that specialized in satirical horrors about “the random and fundamentally meaningless terrors of modern everyday life,” was aesthetically elevated via translation to the level of imitating the practices of high art. As the film indulged in punishing the critics and ridiculed the dictate of value-generating cultural institutions and the mass–elite divide, translation intervened as the corrective on the “badness” and mundaneness of the film, simultaneously giving meaning to and legitimizing “junk” for the (ex-)Soviet audiences not simply as the mainstream but valuable experience beyond the cult interpretative framework.

The view of Mikhalev as a translator who “dignified stupid dialogues . . . not in the sense of leveling piquancy and asperity but by giving a semblance of artistry to even the most banal and talentless scenes” quickly gave rise to his reputation as a translator who did not translate “crap” and “was squeamish about bad films.” The media, accompanied by Mikhalev’s voice, thus,
were eventually destined to enter the orbit of high-quality video consumption or, at least, “healthy” entertainment that combined the pleasure of light genres with aesthetic worth.

In attesting to the principal role of translation in shaping Soviet video economies and experiences, this case sheds further light on the mechanisms of manufacturing legitimacy in the context of Soviet video cultures. Born out of the shadow conditions of informal video economies, voice-over translation—shoddy and erroneous—was transgressive and distortive of the original and facilitated access to the foreign media flows deemed ideologically dangerous and destructive of the socialist cultural environment. The Soviet critics lamented that the local audiences, indulging in these flows, were voracious and corrupted by the “temptation to watch cheap action film instead of opening a book by Gogol for the first time or learning something about Raskolnikov and Anna Karenina.” The scholars of late- and post-Soviet culture, in turn, acknowledged “the wholesale social displacement of the cult of high culture” accompanying Soviet fascination with foreign commercial entertainment and progressing liberalization. In the meantime, the rise of the figure of the translator as an auteur and the popular demand for performers such as Mikhalev, invoking theatrical and literary traditions, stressed the endurance of socialist values of cultural consumption. The translation here constituted a principal playground of their reproduction, reaffirming the legitimacy of emerging media cultures and experiences.

**AFTER 1991**

In the aftermath of the 1991 Soviet Union dissolution, Valerii Kichin, film critic and committed advocate of video in the 1980s, compared the “chic” and “library-like” video stores he witnessed in Canada to a typical post-Soviet video shop. He unfavorably depicted the latter as “a dirty kiosk with the illegibly printed lists under the glass. Poor copies of randomly selected boeviki [action films] and films that, in the opinion of the holder of the ‘business,’ may be in demand. Such a kiosk exudes the spirit of an oriental bazaar, and it is hard to imagine that some art can find shelter in its dusty nooks.” More than an orientalist metaphor, the bazaar, an open-air marketplace for traders to sell diverse goods, became a primary form of postsocialist economies, serving as a means of commodity saturation, facilitating competition and accumulation of capital from below during the transition to the free market.

Video economies were not an exception, as outdoor video bazaars, “schools of folk capitalism,” and small video kiosks, habitually dependent on such street markets, were replacing video salons and videotheques to become a mundane aspect of the post-Soviet every day. Simultaneously, while the Soviet film industry collapsed and most movie theaters were closed

98 Kichin, “Video ot bezumiia.”


and turned into casinos, nightclubs, or shopping malls, video bazaars were replacing theatrical film distribution, contributing to “killing a movie theater” in the opinion of cultural authorities.\footnote{Viacheslav Shmarov, “Snimaem fil’my srazu na video” [Shooting films on video], \textit{Ogonek}, August 1997, 29.} If video was construed as “the bastard child of cinema and television” in the West, it turned out to be at the center of media consumption and the major channel for screen distribution in the post-Soviet context.\footnote{Caetlin Benson-Allott, \textit{Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 11.} Epitomized by the Gorbushka market in Moscow, the “largest illegal trading floor of pirated materials in Europe” and one of the principal video suppliers across the post-Soviet region in the 1990s, the economy of the informal video market in Russia, with 95 percent to 97 percent pirated content, evolved into a 70 billion ruble business (about US$560 million) already by 1992.\footnote{James Graham, ed., \textit{Cyber Fraud: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures} (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2010), 102.} The revenue of the Russian film industry, in turn, constituted 12 billion rubles (about US$96 million) in the same year.\footnote{“Prestupnost’ i kul’tura” [Crime and culture], \textit{Observer}, no. 2 (1993), https://i-sng .ru/observer/observer/N02_93/2_12.HTM.}

A site of the awe-inspiring overabundance, video bazaars such as Gorbushka were perceived by the viewers as “a window into the civilization.”\footnote{Ivan Kopytsev, “Proshchai, Gorbushka!” [Goodbye, Gorbushka!], \textit{Zolotoe kol’tso}, December 28, 2000.} And their vendors were seen as “the missionaries bringing the light of the world cultures into the dark masses.”\footnote{“Filosofiia Gorbushki” [The Gorbushka philosophy], \textit{Izvestiia}, June 25, 2003.} Compensating for the actual and imagined information scarcity, video markets also served to compensate for the overwhelming feeling of backwardness and sense of the cultural gap between the ex-Soviets and the rest of the world. Growing from the Soviet video networks, video bazaars, similarly dependent on foreign media, inherited their emblematic practice: voice-over translation. The post-Soviet voiceovers were consistent with their antecedents from the 1980s. Many Soviet translators stayed active during the entire VHS era, and their voices did not disappear after the advent of DVD in the late 1990s.

Upon the formation of official video markets, integration of the ex-Soviet states into the global media economies and legal regimes, and growing influence of foreign distributors, video bazaars were increasingly turning into a reason for national shame and a sign of cultural provincialism. In the light of the official call for the closure of video bazaars in the early 2000s, they could even be depicted as a national security threat. The continuing existence of Gorbushka, as Moscow’s officials alarmed, would force “the world community to react in the same way as in Yugoslavia,” which produced an eerie effect on the public particularly exposed to such rhetoric after witnessing the 1999 NATO bombing of the former socialist ally.\footnote{Boris Klin, “‘Gorbushka’ budet, no ne tam i ne ‘Gorbushka’” [“Gorbushka” will be but not there and not “Gorbushka”], \textit{Kommersant}, March 21, 2001.}

The urban media markets were gradually disappearing throughout the 2000s, which was accompanied by the parallel emergence of new powerful bazaars spreading across everyone’s homes. With the advent of high-speed
unlimited internet access in the region in the mid-2000s, video traders and
the new generation of their followers were migrating online. Occupying
the torrent websites (with the future RuTracker as a major pirate hub of the
post-Soviet internet at the forefront), streaming platforms, and social media,
the informal video distributors digitized the VHS cassettes and DVDs and cir-
culated newly arrived media with the same or similar voice-over translations
that have shaped both formal and informal digital screen cultures of the
ex-Soviet region to date. Contemporary informal voice-overs are performed
by amateurs in a variety of ex-Soviet languages, frequently multivocal, of
better quality, and more and more difficult to distinguish from voice-overs
officially and professionally produced for legal streaming platforms and
television, which highlights the aesthetic continuity between the formal and
informal sectors.

Imperfect monovocal voice-overs, in turn, remain at the heart of the digi-
tal screen circulation in the former Soviet region. Cheap and quick, they can
usually be found in the vast sector of distribution of minority and non-West-
ern media that are in demand among the former Soviet audiences but not
present in official circulation. Here, amateurs, often teenagers and women,
translate queer media, religious sermons, and particularly visible global
soap operas from as diverse places as Mexico and Turkey or India and South
Korea. Not merely a vehicle of access, these translations evoke the sensibil-
ities and habits of the VHS era, while the audiences form attachments to cer-
tain voices and form online fan communities around media with translators
as crucial mediating agents at the center. As more evidence of the indestruc-
tible legacy of the VHS culture, the viewers continue watching digitized films
translated by the VHS translators, creating online fan groups around their
voices. Moreover, some VHS translators still have a presence in contemporary
media culture, providing their on-demand voice-overs for newly arrived mov-
ies circulating across the largest and most respectable pirate communities,
such as RuTracker mentioned above.

The common explanation for the persistent relevance of the VHS voice-
overs for the former Soviet audiences is nostalgic affection. Yet, given
the popularity of these voice-overs among younger viewers from across the
region and contemporary demand for similar translations, it is safe to argue
that their role cannot be reduced to nostalgia. Importantly, a figure of the
video translator emerged at the moment of “the disruption of a sense of inti-
mate sociality caused by the collapse of a centralized system of governance
and the influx of globalization.” This figure and voice-over translations
more broadly—ubiquitous, performed by the same people, and recognizable
by mass audiences—allowed the intimacy of social connections and shared
experiences to reassemble, which similarly manifests in contemporary online

109 See Iuliia Glushneva, “Translation (Dis)junctions, or Postsocialist Connectivity:
Network Language Transfer and Cyberdubbing on the Runet,” APRJA 9, no. 1 (2020):
94–107; and Iuliia Glushneva, “Sentimental Education across the Borders: Hindi
Soap Opera and Translation Cultures on the Russophone Web,” Feminist Media
110 Darina Polikarpova, “Odinokii golos perevodchika” [Translator’s lonely voice],
media consumption. Reflecting the complex dynamic that characterized the adoption, reappropriation, and legitimization of video in the local Soviet context, these translations simultaneously make us question the centrality of the image assumed to govern screen circulation and spectatorship and draw attention to the broader forms of social and cultural being emerging from and forging global media contexts.

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