

Video Atlantis, or (Post-)Soviet Small-Screen Cultures at the End of the Cold War

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Abstract

Video Atlantis, or (Post-)Soviet Small-Screen Cultures at the End of the Cold War

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Arguing that video was part and parcel of the postsocialist condition marked by liberalization and disintegration of the so-called ‘Second World,’ this dissertation explores the history of analog video technologies, distribution, and consumption in the (ex-)Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s. (Post-)Soviet video, as this study emphasizes, represented a particular glocal formation that was a frontier of the Cold War economies and cultures since the 1960s, as well as their dismantling during the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. First, while I trace Soviet video engineering projects, tele-video practices, and early consumer-grade video cultures, I outline the visions, both utopian and dystopian, that informed the meanings and usage of and policies around video as a technology. In particular, I foreground how video in the Soviet context emerges as a medium facilitating socialist and internationalist connectivity and offering a window into the world. Second, with an emphasis on how video reshaped the encounters between the (post-)Soviet and global realities, the study examines cross-border networks of video circulation and the rise of local video distribution infrastructure, including exhibition spaces, media bazaars, and television programming. Finally, this research brings translation as a cultural negotiation and actual language transfer to the fore, examining the crucial sites of (post-)Soviet video—children’s media and action cinema. With translation as a tool and object of the analysis, I interrogate the shifting geocultural dynamics of screen flows and politics of attributing cultural and aesthetic worth under (post-)socialism, as refracted through these media forms, video, and the reconfigured Cold War East-West divisions.

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Introduction

In 2015, the *Message To Man* International Film Festival—a showcase for documentaries, experimental films, shorts, and animation—opened in Saint Petersburg (Russia), as it did every fall since its founding in 1989, in what was then Leningrad, amidst the turbulent liberal reformation and disintegration of the Soviet Union. That year, however, the festival’s edition was distinctive in two ways. First, the festival welcomed its guests during the domestic escalation of the crackdown on dissent and the global rise of rhetoric on “a new Cold War” that was feared “to be more damaging than the earlier one.”¹ Such were the effects of the 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine by the Russian state and the introduction of the first round of international sanctions against Russia. Second, one of the central themes of the 2015 programming surprisingly proved to be a VHS tape, a rare object of attention at the local high-prestige cultural forums like *Message To Man*. The organizers, who noted that the “VHS format died ten years ago,” offered “an opportunity to rewind everything,” inviting to attend the conference on media archaeology, including lectures on analog video, and the film screenings centered on the VHS cultures in Anglophone contexts.² Another offered event was the “Video Salon in the New Museum” exhibition dedicated to the 1980s and early 1990s (post-)Soviet VHS era and held in the New Museum, a gallery for unofficial Soviet avant-garde and contemporary Russian art.

¹ “Foreword,” in *The Return of the Cold War: Ukraine, The West and Russia*, eds. J. L. Black and Michael Johns (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), xvi.

² Vasilii Stepanov, “Peremotka,” in *25 International Film Festival Message To Man, 25.09–3.10, 2015: Catalogue* (Saint Petersburg: Profi, 2015), https://message2man.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/m2m-2015-catalogue-text-preview-spreads_comp.pdf, 242.

The exhibition's entry room displayed, beyond a few rare issues of (post-)Soviet video magazines and catalogs, a media mural depicting some of the most recognizable icons of the Soviet video screens. Among them were Bruce Lee, Freddy Krueger, Emmanuelle from the eponymous erotic drama (1974, Just Jaeckin), a great white shark from *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg), Rambo, Terminator, and Xenomorph from the *Alien* franchise (Figure I.1). Each icon was accompanied by a cloud of 'tags' that named the phenomena emblematic of the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and yet evocatively spoke to the 2015 present. For instance, the tags associated with a great white shark were "Afghanistan," "Bush legs," or "Russia for Russians," with the half-written meme slogan "Crimea is Ours" closing the list. The end-of-the-Cold-War markers—the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the export of the US chicken leg



Figure I.1. 'Video' Mural, the "Video Salon in the New Museum" Exhibition. Provided to the author by curator Polina Zaslavskaja.

quarters during the late Soviet food shortage, and the rise of Russian nationalism—have come to be tied to the Crimean Crisis, the beginning-of-the-New-Cold-War landmark, all refracted through what was to stand for one of the symbols of the Soviet VHS culture.

Each among these symbols, as the exhibition's description further clarified, epitomized "one of the post-Soviet collective traumas either discovered or acquired (but equally not processed by the society) during the transitional period: shame of poverty, defeat in the Cold War, shock therapy, repressions and the habit of violence, the collapse of the USSR, sexual taboos, etc."³

³ "Vystavka 'Videosalon v Novom Muzei'", Novyi Muzei, accessed September 7, 2023, https://www.novymuseum.ru/events-muzeum_news-exch/vystavka_videosalon_v_novom_muzei.html.

After familiarizing themselves with the media mural, the exhibition's visitors could proceed by exploring three installation spaces. The first room, "Portal of Memory," comprised a



Figure I.2. The 'Portal of Memory.' Provided to the author by curator Polina Zaslavskaja.



Figure I.3. The Reconstruction of 'Video Salon.' Provided to the author by curator Polina Zaslavskaja.

exhibition, represented a reconstruction of an interior of Soviet video parlors, venues for collective video viewing (Figure I.3). The VCR was, as the exhibition's press release stated, "an object of material and technical culture of the Western world, created for individual viewing."⁴ In pointing to the phenomenon of video salons as an anomaly resulting from the late Soviet economic and ideological restraints, the installation was to introduce the spectators to the

series of photographs of late Soviet everyday life, including pictures of weddings, working collectives, and anti-nuclear demonstrations, all digitally altered by adding a VHS effect (Figure I.2). The first mass produced Soviet consumer videocassette recorder (VCR),

Elektronika VM-12, stood on display in the middle of the room. The plasma TV on the wall showed film scholars and critics sharing their memories of the VHS era.

Next, the installation "Video Salon," the centerpiece of the

⁴ "Vystavka 'Videosalon'".

experience of video as “forced collectivity” or “the collectivity of the queue to Paradise.”⁵ To get a glimpse into this “Paradise,” the audiences could attend a series of VHS screenings. With the exception of the Israeli–West German teen erotic comedy *Sapiches* (Private Popsicle, 1983, Boaz Davidson), the repertoire entirely consisted of US B-grade films and flops, ranging from action movies like *Deadly Prey* (1987, David A. Prior) to horror *Night of the Demons* (1988, Kevin S. Tenney) and comedy *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989, Arthur Hiller). Most of these screenings were showings of old ‘original’ videotapes, each including a Russophone voice-over translation performed by one of the famous translators of the (post-)Soviet VHS era. Recorded over and overlapping with the audible foreign-language dialogues, these monovocal (usually male), asynchronous, and improvisational translations, an indispensable chord of (post-)Soviet video, served to be another curious attraction for the contemporary visitors of the exhibition.

Lastly, the installation, “Portal of Hope,” closed the exhibition and contained one showpiece: a TV set that transmitted the New Year Addresses of the state leaders to the Soviet and then Russian citizens from 1986 to 2014, along with other various video recordings. The latter, for instance, included the telepathy séances of the all-familiar star, the Ukrainian hypnotist Anatolii Kashpirovskii, ‘healing’ the (post-)Soviets remotely through television and video screens. Since the late 1980s, his voice, “a correction for the abnormal bodies and thoughts,” either calmed or frightened the dwellers of the disappearing country by enigmatically proclaiming that “Nothing is finished when it ends.”⁶

In aiming to shed light on the defining aspects of (post-)Soviet video, this museum exhibition, which has an imprint of the uneasy status of videotape in the ex-Soviet region,

⁵ “Vystavka ‘Videosalon’”.

⁶ *Probuzhdenie* (Awakening), directed by Sergei Shkunov and Vladimir Fat’ianov (1992), 19:09, 50:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5XX4FSRK1s>.

reveals as much as it obscures. An exploration of (post-)Soviet “joining in the video culture,” the exhibition, as the curators point out, was to be an exploration of “unique and in some ways wonderful, but in some ways shameful experience” that “occurred through interference.”⁷ At the center of the narrative that unfolds here is video as a marker of the outside with which the (post-)Soviet world hoped and disgracefully failed to connect. The location of that outside is explicit: the liberal West. Video, a zone of contact, is judged as a ‘good’ object opening space for reconciliation and integration or a new beginning and travel to ‘there.’ A stronger emphasis, however, is on video as a ‘bad’ object, a reminder that the contact turned out inauthentic and contaminated with noise, the beginning marked the end, and travel took a curved direction leading back to the locked ‘here.’

The VCR, a modern “Western” technology that epitomizes the freedoms of individual cultural consumptions, seems to re-incarnate in the (post-)Soviet context as a wrong machine: a technological surrogate of domestically produced equipment and object of collective use at video salons. The VHS flows of foreign films and media, Western and therefore valuable, eventually appear to be delivered to the (post-)Soviet viewer as the currents of commercial blockbusters and B-grade cinematic ‘trash’ and via low-quality voice-over translations. And used locally as a means of production and transmission, video emerges as a heaven for politicians and charlatans, the difference between whom is hard to discern. Envisioned as integral to the history of the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, (post-)Soviet video here represents a symbol of postsocialist transition, interference per se, accumulating experiences of optimism and enthusiasm along with experiences of misery, displacement, and breakage. In 2015, the transition, a mix of erroneous translations, reappeared as eventually a failed opportunity to

⁷ Konstantin Shavlovskii i Polina Zaslavskaiia, interview by Iaroslav Zabaluev, “90-e—eto takaia shkatulka Pandory,” *Gazeta.ru*, October 1, 2015, https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2015/09/30/a_7787939.shtml?updated.

connect with Western liberal and democratic modernity, with the flaring Russo-Ukrainian War in the background. The history of (post-)Soviet video, meanwhile, provided an outlet for expressing an increased sense of the failure that, paradoxically, related to the incapacity to integrate into the ‘world’ and, at the same time, maintain autonomy from it within the cohesion of Soviet Atlantis.

Indicative of the extreme affective cultural power videotape possesses in contemporary Russia, the account of this history, as presented through the 2015 New Museum exhibition, simultaneously captures the most popular tropes surrounding the VHS cultures in the ex-Soviet region more broadly. ‘Imperfect’ Soviet VCRs, video salons, informal flows of predominantly Western entertainment films, and recognizable voices of Russophone video translators are a part of intimately shared video memories across the former Soviet Union, as well as of memories of the disruption of Soviet collectivity in the process of the country’s dissolution. But, as often happens, memories, particularly if associated with disquieting events, can be partial, contradictory, adaptive, and repressed. The “Video Salon in New Museum” exhibition is a bright manifestation of the fragility of memory, as it not only recovers but also points to the social obliteration of (post-)Soviet video history.

What seems to be immediately apparent about the history arising from the New Museum exhibition is scarcity. Sporadic artifacts, such as rare issues of the first and short-lived Soviet video magazine *Video Ace*, occasional digitally processed photographs, or an awkward reconstruction of what supposedly represents a ‘typical’ video salon suggest the absence rather than the presence of video and reveal the effort to repair what barely exists. Not unusual for the global analog video cultures often formed in the messy environment of the everyday and around the notoriously fleeting medium, the scarcity characteristic of (post-)Soviet video history is particularly tangible. Hardly documented, this history of the video medium that, according to

Soviet critics, became “the dominant form of cultural consumption” in the Soviet Union by 1990,⁸ is today buried in the debris of scattered newspaper publications, popular magazines, digitized videotapes circulating across peer-to-peer networks, and folkloric anecdotes and narratives that inform the New Museum exhibition.

The lack of strictly reliable written sources, images, and material objects, and as a result scholarship and substantial critical debates, does not derive only from the actual and assumed informality and do-it-yourself nature of (post-)Soviet video. Concurrent with the 1980s Soviet and 1991 vertiginous transformations, ‘objectivity’ of knowledge or mere saving of video-related artifacts proved hardly meaningful and feasible amidst the societal turmoil. Simultaneously, as seen from the New Museum exhibition, it turns out that looking back to (post-)Soviet video histories is not painless exactly for the reason that they are part and parcel of the Soviet disintegration. Evoking feelings of shattered hopes regardless of what they were about and an implosion of social and cultural fabric, (post-)Soviet video is what one shrinks away. An Atlantis in itself, it belongs more generally to the decade of the long Soviet 1980s historian Kirill Kobrin called the “black hole” or “submerged decade,” whose traces “strangely disappeared.”⁹

Without claiming to be comprehensive, my study is a modest attempt to step into the murky terrain of the history of (post-)Soviet video. I take the most obvious and seemingly familiar paths charted above by looking at the advent of the medium of analog video in the Soviet Union; video circulation and exhibition, symbolized by a video salon, albeit, as we will see, not limited to it; and the phenomenon of Russophone voice-over video translation of foreign-language films and media. The 1980s and early 1990s are at the center of my dissertation

⁸ Vladimir Borev, *Video: tekhnika—dosug—kul'tura* (Moscow: Profizdat, 1990), 28.

⁹ Kirill Kobrin, “Utonuvshee desiatiletie, ili Chto proizoshlo, kogda umer Brezhnev,” *Neprikosnovennyy zapas*, no. 6 (2012), https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy_zapas/86_nz_6_2012/article/13318/.

as a formative period of (post-)Soviet home video cultures. And yet, my research extends beyond the limitations of this timeframe, examining the development of the Soviet notion of and practices around video before the 1980s, which had strong repercussions, and tracing the continuities of the 1980s video after 1991. In this regard, my dissertation is not about (post-)Soviet video as the end-of-the-era phenomenon.

Although I recognize and analyze the mutual constitution of video and the Soviet transformations and dissolution, I argue that (post-)Soviet video as a technology, economy, culture, and aesthetics was deeply embedded in the state socialist lifeworld, reflecting its contradictions and complexities. As evident from the New Museum exhibition, the rootedness of (post-)Soviet video cultures in the legacy of socialism is exactly what can be seen as “interference” and result in their evaluation as ‘bad’ and ‘defective.’ Meanwhile, stressing the need for sympathetic and historically grounded accounts of (post-)Soviet video histories, I stress that these cultures, although marked by disorder, fierce economic struggles, inequalities, and mistranslations, were also vibrant, creative, socially supportive, and culturally productive of unanticipated experiences. In particular, seeing (post-)Soviet video as implicated in the late and post-Cold War transnational screen economies, I emphasize its generative role in rearticulating the medium of video, rerouting media flows, and reconfiguring meanings and value of moving images circulating through video. My story is about the failures that were simultaneously successful and often, rather than merely frustrating and bleak, humorous and illuminating the space of open-minded and vigorous engagement with the world.

In what remains of this introduction, I will, first, outline the 1980s and early 1990s Soviet historical context that shaped and was reshaped by the arrival of home video, with a focus on local screen industries and cultures. Second, I introduce the existent theoretical reflections on the

place of video in relation to the political and socio-economic order of the Soviet Union and the role of the medium in the 1991 Soviet collapse. At the center of these debates is an argument that foregrounds video as a technology and infrastructure alien to Soviet state socialism and indicative of and contributive to the ‘defeat’ of the Soviet Union in the Cold War. While this argument I examine and challenge throughout the dissertation relies on a particular fixed and dichotomous understanding of video, state socialism, and the Cold War, I will describe my approach to understanding these concepts, which foregrounds them as historically situated and relational, adding another notion central for my study, translation. Third, I summarize the contribution of my dissertation to the field of global video studies and the emerging area of (post-)socialist video studies, highlighting the place of my research within the broader scholarship on transitory screen cultures. Lastly, I provide an overview of the four chapters that constitute this dissertation.

From Stagnation to Restructuring and Transition

A diachronic constellation of technologies, consumer-grade analog video began its international spread in the mid-1970s, with the introduction of Betamax format by Sony in 1975 and VHS format by JVC in 1976. The home video penetration, uses, and impacts varied according to economic, social, and cultural contexts. Yet, by the late 1980s, there was no doubt among media scholars that, due to video, “viewing experience in virtually every country of the world has forever changed.”¹⁰ A 1980s phenomenon, the video boom hit the Soviet Union during what Birgit Beumers and Eugénie Zvonkine called “probably the most non-homogenous decade in

¹⁰ Christine Ogan, “The Worldwide Cultural and Economic Impact of Video,” in *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication*, ed. Mark R. Levy (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 230.

Soviet history.”¹¹ Conventionally in Soviet historiography, the 1980s is divided into two periods, with the year 1985 as a watershed: the so-called late ‘Stagnation’ and ‘Perestroika’ (restructuring) Eras, culminating in the dissolution of the USSR as a sovereign state on December 26, 1991. The population of the Soviet Union in 1989 was 285.7 million people living in fifteen republics.¹² The 1991 collapse led to the formation of fifteen independent countries that entered the stormy, albeit not identical and non-linear, path to democracy-oriented multi-party polity and free market-driven economy—the re-organization, dubbed ‘Transition,’ most of the former ‘Second World’ embarked on in the 1990s.

An integral part of these transformations from Stagnation through Perestroika and Transition, the development of (post-)Soviet video cultures accumulated and reflected the fundamental societal shifts characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s I attend to throughout this study. The existent scholarly accounts trace the arrival of video in the Soviet Union back to 1979, foregrounding video as a commodity, VCR and videotapes with pre-recorded media, brought by travelers from abroad.¹³ At that time, the long-lasting rulership of Leonid Brezhnev, a General Secretary of the Communist Party (hereafter CPSU) from 1964 to his death in 1982, was coming to a then-imperceptible end. ‘Mature socialism’ was an official catchphrase of the moment, served to capture the achievement of all-country stability and continuous secure movement towards communism under the auspices of one party and principles of a command

¹¹ Birgit Beumers and Eugénie Zvonkine, “Introduction: Re-Construction, or Perestroika. Re-Visioning, Re-Making, Re-Framing,” in *Ruptures and Continuities in Soviet/Russian Cinema: Styles, Characters and Genres Before and After the Collapse of the USSR*, eds. Birgit Beumers and Eugénie Zvonkine (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 1.

¹² Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, “Demographic Sources of the Changing Ethnic Composition of the Soviet Union,” in *Population, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building*, ed. Calvin Goldscheider (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), 156. Anderson and Silver group the Soviet republics as follows: the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), ‘Western’ republics (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine), Transcaucasia (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Kazakh SSR and Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), and Russian SSR.

¹³ Alexander Pavlov and Polina Khanova, “Cult in Everything But Name? Transnational Experiences of (Western) Cult Cinema in Late Soviet and Early Post-Soviet Russia,” *Transnational Cinemas* 8, no. 1 (2016): 53.

economy. Among the successes of ‘mature socialism’ was the unprecedented growth of mobility, living standards, and media culture, all preparing the ground for the forthcoming video boom.

Allowed to cross the borders since 1955 upon special permission, Soviet citizens, from governmental elites to honorary workers, gained the opportunity to get firsthand experience of the outside world. If the number of Soviet tourists was about two million in 1974, it reached four and a half million people in 1985.¹⁴ Significantly influenced by these travel flows, video, a new luxury product, came on the heels of “the Soviet consumer revolution” that paved the way for the formation of a Soviet consumer appreciating material well-being and domestic comfort despite the official rhetoric targeting consumerism as immoral and capitalist.¹⁵ With the rising income and high level of employment, the Soviets were moving into their individual, as opposed to communal, urban apartments, equipping them with modern furniture and home appliances. The most expensive home device, a TV set, was simultaneously the most ubiquitous, and 90 percent of rural and nearly all urban households had TV sets by the mid-1980s.¹⁶

The television boom was a signature of the Brezhnev era. Central Television’s Channel 1 and Channel 2, transmitted from Moscow and supervised by the State Committee of Television and Radio Broadcasting (hereafter Gosteleradio), were available across the Soviet Union. Developed with the intention to become a “high-status, masculine, experimental, transformative culture,” Soviet television integrated a wide range of serious (news, documentaries) and increasingly entertaining (game and music shows) genres, both of domestic and foreign origins.¹⁷ Importantly, video, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, played an important role in shaping

¹⁴ Anne E. Gorsuch, *All this is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad After Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 186.

¹⁵ Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

¹⁶ Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.

¹⁷ Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 13.

television aesthetics and economies since the 1960s and was a well-known technology and notion far before the 1980s. Available as industrial and semi-industrial domestically produced video recorders and cameras, video was employed by Central Television and at regional and amateur television studios that were curiously mushrooming in the context of centralized media.

In the meantime, the Brezhnev era was also the era of booming film industry controlled by the State Committee for Cinematography (hereafter Goskino) and “the golden age of Soviet moviegoing.”¹⁸ By the late 1970s, forty-two Soviet film studios annually produced approximately 150 features and up to 800 documentary and educational films distributed across 5,000 movie theaters and on television.¹⁹ One of the highest in the world, Soviet movie attendance was still about 19 visits per capita annually, with the Russian and Kazakh SSRs as the most cinema-devoted republics.²⁰ Domestic film production demonstrated significant aesthetic transformations, shifting towards entertainment-oriented genres. An official creative doctrine of the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, Socialist Realism, remained a central artistic program based on three principles: *partiinnost’* (party-mindedness), *narodnost’* (popular spirit), and *ideinnost’* (ideological commitment). Nevertheless, the interpretation of these principles, especially the one of ‘popular spirit,’ proved ambivalent. Envisioned as “an anti-masscult culture for the masses,” the Soviet project centered on egalitarian reappropriation and radical accessibility of the global and local cultural heritage, promising to abolish the divide between the low/mass and the high/elite as “a capitalist perversion.”²¹ In part, beyond pragmatic reasons, that is, an economic

¹⁸ Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 74.

¹⁹ Marina Kosinova, “Parametry krizisa organizatsionno-ekonomicheskoi sistemy sovetskogo kinematografa,” in *Posle ottepeli. Kinematograf 1970-kh*, ed. Andrei Shemiakin and Iuliia Mikheeva (Moscow: NII kinoiskusstva, 2009), 32.

²⁰ Marina Kosinova, “Kinofikatsiia sovetskoi kinematografii v gody ‘Zastoia’”, *Vestnik universiteta*, no. 3 (2016): 227; Peter Rollberg, *The Cinema of Soviet Kazakhstan, 1925–1991: An Uneasy Legacy* (New York: Lexington Books, 2022), 320.

²¹ Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 2, 27.

struggle for the viewer, this promise fully legitimized the rise of comedies, melodramas, detectives, and other ‘commercial’ forms on the Soviet screens by the late 1970s and it would play a decisive role in the formation of (post-)Soviet video tastes.

Soviet ‘blockbusters’ and one of the highest-grossing films in the history of local movie-going, melodrama *Moskva slezam ne verit* (Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears, 1979, Vladimir Men’shov), that won a 1980 American Academy Award For Best Foreign Film, and action film *Piraty XX veka* (Pirates of the Twentieth Century, 1979, Boris Durov) epitomized this trend. Meanwhile, foreign cinema, habitually divided into three categories—capitalist, socialist, and cinema of the developing world—and acquired through bilateral agreements by Goskino’s division Sovexportfilm, enjoyed the immense popularity by the moment the first videotapes with pre-recorded foreign movies emerged in the Soviet Union. Topped by the indestructible leader of Soviet film distribution, Mexican melodrama *Yesenia* (1971, Alfredo B. Crevenna), the list of foreign hits of the late 1970s and further, given the common practice of re-releases, included the US epic *Spartacus* (1960, Stanley Kubrick), the French 1960s *Fantômas* trilogy (André Hunebelle), and Japanese kaiju sci-fi *Kyōryū Kaichō no Densetsu* (Legend of Dinosaurs & Monster Birds, 1977, Junji Kurata).²² At the same time, films from India and, in some cases, Egypt, favored by Sovexportfilm, gathered the biggest audiences during the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the most notable examples of *Disco Dancer* (1982, Babbar Subhash) and *Al-Rida’ al-Abyad* (The White Gown, 1975, Hassan Ramzi).

Paradoxically, the arrival of video coincided with the end of the era that “may have been the best of Soviet times,” as Sheila Fitzpatrick noted, “or the most boring.”²³ Termed, albeit

²² Here and below I use the data provided by Aleksandr Fedorov in *Luchshie i khudshie fil'my sovetskogo prokata: mneniia chitatelei zhurnala 'Sovetskii ekran' (1958—1991)* (Moscow: OD Informatsiia dlia vsekh, 2022), 36, 290.

²³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 154.

controversially, ‘Stagnation,’ this period is associated with the gerontocratic government, culminating in the 1982–1985 interregnum of successors of Brezhnev, Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. Colloquially known as the ‘Epoch of the Lavish Funerals,’ the first half of the 1980s witnessed the deaths of the General Secretaries of CPSU and other party officials one after another. Deterioration of political life manifested in the exponential growth of bureaucratization and corruption. Decline in public political engagement persisted, and ideological rhetoric appeared progressively “formulaic, unrealistic, and awkward.”²⁴ The late ‘Stagnation’ signaled the end of the 1970s Cold War détente, with the beginning of the devastating Soviet-Afghan War in 1979. As a result, most NATO countries boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and, in 1983, another epithet for the Soviet Union, ‘evil empire,’ started circulating across the world after Ronald Reagan’s speech.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of engagement on the part of Soviet citizens with this world was also shifting. A vehicle of internationalist cultural and political exchange, Soviet tourism, for example, was turning into an opportunity for shopping and informal commercial enterprise for the Soviets developing dissatisfaction with the Soviet everyday in the face of the seemingly more affluent and prosperous foreign countries, including socialist Eastern European ones.²⁵ While the consumer desires and demands of Soviet citizens proliferated, the heavy industry-oriented Soviet economy entered a recession aggravated by the fall in oil prices on the international market. Commodity shortages and poor quality of the offered Soviet goods proved the frustrating reality visible through the rise of shop queues and repair services since the late 1970s. Similarly, despite the advanced late Soviet system of media industries and eclectic flows in affordable domestic

²⁴ Fedor Sinitsyn, “The Challenges to Social Control in Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, 1964–1982,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 20, no. 1 (2021): 167.

²⁵ Gorsuch, *All This is Your World*, 188–9.

and foreign books, music, and images, the sense of boredom and scarcity spread among both cultural producers and ordinary citizens.

The late ‘Stagnation’ cinema culture habitually evoke associations not only with the ‘blockbusters’ but also with the flow of the so-called Soviet ‘gray films.’ Seen to be visually ascetic, monotonous, and uninteresting, these films, taking over theatrical and television screens, were a manifestation of mandatory thematic planning and tightened censorship that contributed to a conveyor-like production and loss of enthusiasm by film workers. “Mediocre and lazy,” ‘gray’ films partially made Soviet viewers gradually leave movie theaters: in 1984, only twelve out of 148 released Soviet movies paid off.²⁶ By the mid-1980s, cinema, formerly one of the most profitable sectors of Soviet economy, became fully dependent on the state subsidies.²⁷ Movie theaters, in turn, survived, albeit not many of them during the darkest times up to the late 1990s, not least due to Bollywood imports (ex-)Soviet moviegoers continued to enjoy.²⁸ Soviet television, closely connected to the film industry, was in better standing with the audiences due to the arrival of new popular genres ranging from police procedurals to melodrama-based mini-series and, as such, serial productions.²⁹ The flight of film workers to television that, as Catriona Kelly concludes, provided them with more opportunities “to combine creative ambition and spectator appeal,” eventually led to the triumph of the small screen, and now “cinema was beginning to look the poor relation of TV, rather than vice versa.”³⁰ Nevertheless, in the context of genre proliferation and experimentation, both extended to the area of television show

²⁶ Liubov’ Arkus, ed., *Kino i kontekst: Vol. IV, 1986–1988* (Saint Petersburg: Seans, 2002), 81, 83.

²⁷ Vida Johnson and Elena Stishova, “Perestroika and Post-Soviet Cinema, 1985–2000s,” in *The Russian Cinema Reader: Volume Two, The Thaw to the Present*, ed. Rimgaila Salys (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 191.

²⁸ See more on the phenomenon of Soviet popularity of films from India in Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-Going after Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

²⁹ See extensive discussion of these television genres in Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

³⁰ Catriona Kelly, *Soviet Art House: Lenfilm Studio Under Brezhnev* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 128, 119.

productions and children's media, "hierarchical, didactic Soviet cultural values" persisted, bringing to the fore the dilemma of boredom among the TV audiences and perpetual attempts among television producers to resolve it.³¹ This problem became even more urgent for TV, with the rise of video circulation of foreign media and in video salons, first informal and illegal but then fully legalized and encouraged by the Soviet state embarking on the policy of 'videofication' of the country in 1985.

Directly related to the shifts in late 'Stagnation' media cultures, one of the most notable features of the period, simultaneously an effect of commodity and information deficit, was the flourishing of a 'secondary' or 'shadow' economy. While private enterprise was illegal under state socialism, a booming system of informal selling-buying and barter compensated for the failures of the Soviet planning model to match the citizens' material and cultural aspirations. By the early 1980s, "It was precisely in this area of the unofficial," as Adele Marie Barker notes, "that most of Soviet life flourished."³² Ubiquitous informal networks of distribution, providing access to goods as diverse as food, clothes, electronics, or, importantly, video, constituted an integral social sphere during late socialism. Meanwhile, as it is frequently emphasized, "where the state system ended and society or the black market began was often unclear."³³

Closely linked to shadow media economies and practices, including informal systems for the production, copying, and circulation of texts (*samizdat*) and audiotapes (*magnitizdat*), diverse underground cultures blossomed. Collectors, music and book lovers, artists, amateur filmmakers, hobbyists, and then videophiles formed networks of exchange that allowed for alternative ways

³¹ Evans, *Between Truth and Time*, 239–40.

³² Adele Marie Barker, "The Culture Factory: Theorizing the Popular in the Old and New Russia," in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 22.

³³ Natalya Chernyshova, "Consumers as Citizens: Revisiting the Question of Public Disengagement in the Brezhnev Era," in *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange*, eds. Dina Fainberg and Artemy M. Kalinovsky (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 10.

of collective and individual living and cultural participation. As most of them were members of the Komsomol (the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) and other official organizations, they used the established capillary system of Soviet institutions, especially Houses of Cultures (community clubs), and connections as a basis for informal circulation, exchanges, and socialization, forming a crucial part of (post-)Soviet video histories as I will discuss in Chapter 2.

The boundary between the official and unofficial areas of economy, politics, and culture became particularly blurry with the beginning of the Perestroika Era in 1985. Upon an initiative of Mikhail Gorbachev, the new and last General Secretary of CPSU, the Soviet state began a series of radical and conflicting democratic and market-oriented reforms, albeit declared to serve the renewal of stagnating socialism in the spirit of the 1917 October Revolution.³⁴ The reformation process unfolded under the slogan of *glasnost* ' (openness). It represented a policy that served to reanimate the political environment by encouraging transparent public discussion about the pressing problems of Soviet socio-economic development and culture. Not envisioned as the abolishment of censorial control, *glasnost* ' resulted in a proliferation of unregulated debates, distribution of previously banned books and films, and *de facto* dismantling of censorship, including screen censorship, by 1987.³⁵ *Glasnost* ' brought to the Soviet screens the sensationalist television programming and cinematic productions that tackled previously tabooed themes from sex work to drug addiction and the AIDS epidemic in the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, as I will demonstrate, this policy made a paradoxical impact on video cultures

³⁴ See more on the articulation of the continuity between the October Revolution and 1980s reforms in Mikhail Gorbachev, *October and Perestroika: The Revolution Continues* (Moscow: Novosti Press, 1987).

³⁵ Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 55.

by facilitating moral panic and criminalization of video at first, followed by nearly indiscriminate embracing of condemned content by the late 1980s.

Another trajectory of Perestroika involved the re-organization of the Soviet economy, its gradual decentralization, the transition of Soviet industries to the profit-oriented system of self-financing, and the legalization, although limited, of private enterprise. In media industry, these transformations, accompanied by fierce power struggles and competition, led to the decline of cultural monopoly of the state directory bodies, such as Gosteleradio and Goskino, including the new Goskino division, Videofilm, established in 1985 and aimed to facilitate the official video production and distribution. The rise of independent media enterprises (TV channels, film studios, distribution companies, creative associations, etc.), periodically banned and legalized in the course of stormy Perestroika, opened up new avenues for the production and dissemination of films and TV media. One of the most noticeable developments, in turn, was the growth of international co-productions with Western countries and input of foreign capital into the Soviet media, resulting from the emergent Soviet foreign policy *new political thinking* aimed at ending the Cold War confrontation and exhaustive competition. A media symbol of this re-orientation proved to be a series of the US-Soviet Tele-Bridges, interactive videoconferences, held annually since 1985 (the first tele-bridge took place in 1982) and broadcasted live on Central Television in the Soviet Union and on TV channels in the US.³⁶

The Perestroika democratization and decentralization brought to the surface hidden tensions and acute feelings of resentment accumulated among Soviet republics and peoples for decades and exacerbated by the Brezhnev policies of unification and Russification of political cadre, media, and education, which is simultaneously often manifested through video histories,

³⁶ Being crucial media events in the late Soviet history and for Soviet viewers, they have received little attention on part of both the US audiences and scholars. See more in Mickiewicz, *Split Signals*, 43–8.

particularly the dominance of Russophone language translations. While sporadic ethnic conflicts were not new, they were escalating out of control since the first 1986 incidents: a clash between the indigenous Yakut and the Russian students in Yakutsk (Siberia) and a Kazakh revolt in Almaty against the planned appointment of Russian as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. The beginning of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1988, Fergana massacre between the Uzbeks and the Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan in 1989, and many other devastating ethnic clashes broke out across the country. Since 1988, the process known as ‘parade of sovereignties,’ declarations of sovereignty and then cession from the Soviet Union, began, led by the Baltics and joined by other republics, with the Russian SSR as one of the first among them. The Cold War seemed to end upon the mere fact that one of its key rivals ceased to exist. The year 1991 brought a chain of political crises, coups, obscure referendums, and broken agreements between the de facto separate states. The so-called post-Soviet Transition started, along with the formation of independent albeit still highly interconnected media markets, as particularly evident from intra-regional informal video distribution through outdoor bazaars, interconnections between formal video companies, and video broadcast cultures, which I will discuss in the forthcoming chapters.

Unfolding differently across the post-Soviet states and most of former Second World, Transition had predominantly devastating effect on local screen industries, particularly theatrical film distribution. The Soviet film industry collapsed, and most movie theaters were closed and turned into casinos, night clubs, or shopping malls, whereas video salons and growing video street markets were compensating for and replacing the decaying theatrical film distribution, contributing to “killing a movie theater” in the opinion of cultural authorities.³⁷ If video was

³⁷ Viacheslav Shmarov, “Snimaem fil’m srazu na video,” *Ogonek*, August 1997, 29.

construed as “the bastard child of cinema and television” in the West,³⁸ it turned out to be at the center of media consumption and the major channel for screen production and distribution in the post-Soviet context in the 1990s. Video simultaneously appeared as a principal medium for local and global circulation of the spectacle of the demise of socialism. Broadcasted across the world’s television channels and distributed among viewers on VHS, the video footage of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, in Romania, speeches of dissidents from the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, the 1991 August Coup in Moscow, and lately the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia proved constitutive of postsocialist visual archive unimaginable without a videotape.

Theorizing Video Under and After State Socialism: Conceptual Framework

“This is the ultimate victory of the VCR,” Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in his well-known 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, pointing to the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergent post-Cold War prospect of “the creation of a universal consumer culture based on liberal economic principles.”³⁹ This hyperbolic proposition provides a theoretical starting point for interrogating the history of Soviet video in my dissertation. Suggesting a correlational, if not causal, relationship between the rise of the VCR and the demise of the Soviet system, Fukuyama’s argument is built on the assumption that socio-cultural formations brought about by video and state socialism are conflicting phenomena. Meanwhile, this assumption, which I examine, expand, and challenge throughout my dissertation, stems from a particular understanding of what the notions of video and state socialism stand for.

³⁸ Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 11.

³⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 108.

A consumer-grade analog video, for Fukuyama, refers to the advanced technology constitutive of the post-industrial information revolution, along with other innovations, such as computer networks. This technology reflects and facilitates (1) a mode of circulation that is open, competitive, and decentralized and (2) a mode of connection that is homogenizing and productive of commonalities across diverse societies. State socialism, in turn, is a socio-economic regime that is industrial and lagging or obstructing the information revolution. State socialist circulation is closed, planned, and centralized, and state socialist connection is a linkage through control and top-down imposition that hinder the production of genuine commonalities. In this regard, the very idea of Soviet video seems to be an oxymoron, as the effectiveness of video economies and cultures undermines the effectiveness of state socialism and vice versa.

Among the rare thinkers who addressed the relationship between video and state socialism, Fukuyama is not alone in highlighting the structural discrepancy between the arrangements and experiences produced by the two. In a similar vein, for Manuel Castells, video, put on a par with other electronic telecommunications technologies, signals the information revolution and, as a result, the rise of a new socio-economic organization, or “network society.” In this organization, any electronic media system, including video infrastructures, is simultaneously a network and an essential instrument for other network(s). The network represents an “ahistorical space of flows”—dynamic, decentralized, and multi-directional—and “a set of interconnected nodes” as material and virtual sites of contact, organization, and coordination of the flows.⁴⁰ The architecture of networks varies, and nodes are organized hierarchically. Yet, this hierarchy is flexible and mobile. Network “is able to embrace and integrate all forms of expression,” that is, cultural identities, which gives it legitimacy, but “the

⁴⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 459, 501.

price to pay for inclusion in the system is to adapt to its logic,” meaning to accept homogenization of action and deterioration of culturally coded rituals and habits.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Castells uses the Soviet Union to account for the societal formation that failed to adopt and integrate into the network as an increasingly global model for regulating information flows and economies. According to Castells, the main feature of the Soviet system was its “industrial statism,” which, to put it simply, refers to a combination of a quantitative resource-based economy, as opposed to a qualitative knowledge-based economy, and centralized and inflexible economic accumulation aimed to maximize power and control rather than profit.⁴² In the global context, the Soviet Union seemed to be a closed “autarky” that, given the international confrontation, “generated a siege mentality,” which, beyond industrialism and statism, equally led to the failure of the Soviet system to join the information/network age and, therefore, survive.⁴³ Moreover, contrary to the emerging network socio-technological models, the Soviet system forcibly rearticulated cultural identities by morphing them into a new entity of ‘Soviet people.’ With the fall of Soviet socialism, in turn, the legacy of “abduction of identity,” as Castells emphasizes, is the main obstacle for ex-Soviet societies, embarking on the process of post-socialist self-identification, to become ‘proper’ network societies, that is, to reconcile with the homogenizing power of the network lives. “Nowhere,” he concludes, “is the ongoing struggle between global economic flows and cultural identity more important than in the wasteland created by the collapse of Soviet statism”⁴⁴—the conclusion that brackets Fukuyama’s well-worn triumphalism.

⁴¹ Castells, *The Rise*, 405.

⁴² Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 8.

⁴³ Castells, *End*, 18.

⁴⁴ Castells, *End*, 68.

One can find consonant arguments about electronic media, such as video, and the Soviet system in the works of Zygmunt Bauman and Régis Debray. A phenomenon of postmodernity, or “liquid modernity,” video, as a time-shift technology and system of dispersed and privatized image circulation, belongs to and mirrors the world that, for Bauman, is “light,” “fluid,” “diffuse” or “capillary,” and “network-like.”⁴⁵ State socialism, meanwhile, “modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture,” evokes everything opposite: it is the world that is “heavy,” “better still” and “solid,” “condensed,” and “systemic.”⁴⁶ Similarly, in Debray’s view, video technology and state socialism constitute two distinct media “sociotopes” and cultural ecosystems.⁴⁷ For him, the emerging postmodern “videosphere” is an image-centric relativist order of “thought-networks,” where the boundaries that separate the inside and the outside are blurry, and a celebrity, or the individual, is a locus of authority and identification. Collapsed under the pressure of the “videosphere,” state socialism, in turn, is the world of modern “graphosphere”: a word-centric dogmatic order of linear system, where space is divided into segments and collectivities, and a hero, or the citizen, is the orienting model of being. Videosphere, thus, always becomes what follows after state socialism, annihilating the foundational spatial and temporal vectors, forms of collectivity, and cultural values the latter establishes.

In response to these theoretical accounts of the ontological conflict between the socio-economic modalities and cultural ideologies generated by video, on the one hand, and state socialism, on the other, this dissertation shifts focus to the complex overlap and intersections

⁴⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 25. See also, Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 31–3.

⁴⁶ Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, 167; Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 25.

⁴⁷ See comparative table in Régis Debray, “Socialism: A Life-Cycle,” *New Left Review*, no. 46 (July/August 2007): 26.

between them. As such, it circumvents the premise of approaching video as the postmortem of the socialist world. By situating the video-state-socialism nexus within a historical context of Soviet politics, economies, and cultures, this study problematizes, reassesses, and diversifies the prescriptive definitions of video and state socialism as well as our ideas about the modes of living and cultures these two phenomena suggest. This intention, in turn, resonates with broader scholarly debates that foreground non-essentialist and historically and culturally situated approaches to understanding *video* and *state socialism* and influence my use of these notions.

Deeply embedded in and tied to the histories of diverse media, not reduced to film, television, or sound recording, video emerged as a stand-alone medium in the 1950s. Since then, however, as Dieter Daniels and Jan Thoben point out, “the development of video as a medium has been characterized by a constant divergence.”⁴⁸ The divergence symptomatic of video manifests in a multitude of machines, formats, and encoding systems employed to record, copy, playback, and broadcast moving images along with sounds. In attending to video as an assemblage of media technologies, my research, in turn, simultaneously draws on a historically, socially, and culturally informed view of media. In this regard, I follow Lisa Gitelman’s comprehensive conceptualization that foregrounds all media as “unique and complicated historical subjects” and “socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.”⁴⁹ The divergence characteristic of video, thus, derives from the plurality of both video as technology and the historically contingent social and cultural

⁴⁸ Dieter Daniels and Jan Thoben, “Preface,” in *Video Theories: A Transdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Dieter Daniels and Jan Thoben (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), xvi.

⁴⁹ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 7.

conventions, rituals, and conditions surrounding the usage and experience of video media. Moreover, “The medium of video,” as Michael Z. Newman adds, “exists not only as objects and practices, but also as a shifting constellation of ideas in popular imagination, including ideas about value, authenticity, and legitimacy”—the ideas which he broadly refers to as “cultural status.”⁵⁰ With all this in mind, by *video*, I mean a technocultural process (rather than essence) that has neither certain origin nor end and represents a cumulative result of interactions between material artifacts, behaviors, and codes in particular places at particular times. This is to say that the meanings of video I will refer to throughout the dissertation will evoke media technologies, practices of use, and ideas, or “cultural status,” associated with video in the Soviet Union specifically. Also, I place emphasis on the 1980s and early 1990s, albeit not exclusively, as a period of the most active public negotiations of video cultures, which relates to the advent of VHS tape and is resonant with most global media contexts.

Placing video in the Soviet Union, I foreground *state socialism* as a distinct geopolitical and historical condition behind the development of video. State socialism, to use David Lane’s definition, is “a peculiar type of social formation” that is “distinguished by a state-owned, more or less centrally administered economy controlled by a dominant communist party which seeks, on the basis of Marxism-Leninist ideology and through the agency of the state, to mobilize the population to make a classless society.”⁵¹ This seemingly straightforward definition captures the fundamental paradox that underlined state socialist lifeworld and played out in the history of Soviet video. This paradox can be interpreted as the uneasy conjunction of different imperatives for the organization of movement (or circulation of resources, power, ideas, etc.) or different

⁵⁰ Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.

⁵¹ David Lane, *The Capitalist Transformation of State Socialism: The Making and Breaking of State Socialist Society, and What Followed* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 6–7.

temporal dimensions. Vertical, hierarchical, and deep vector of social regulation, with the vanguard state apparatus on the top, and the demand for horizontal, unordered, and expansive vector of social organization run side by side. Furthermore, the vertical hierarchy, the current state of things, regardless of how rigid it may appear, is envisioned as transitory. The horizontal formation, the future possibility and ideal, in turn, is what is permanent and fixed.

One of the most fundamental analyses of the socio-cultural manifestations of this contradiction belongs to Alexei Yurchak, who describes the central conflict of state socialism as follows:

“[under state socialism] paradox appeared through the announced objective of achieving the full liberation of the society and individual (building of communism, creation of the New Man) by means of subsuming that society and individual under full party control. The Soviet citizen was called upon to submit completely to party leadership, to cultivate a collectivist ethic, and repress individualism, while at the same time becoming an enlightened and independent-minded individual who pursues knowledge and is inquisitive and creative.”⁵²

This means-objective paradox, in turn, as Yurchak shows, opened up space for the emergence of a variety of unexpected ways of living and forms of cultural production and participation that were neither resistant nor adaptive to the party-state but mutually propelling or independent from each other. Tracing the expressions of this paradox in various spheres, from Soviet politics to literature and art, as a paradox of time, other scholars, such as Katerina Clark or Susan Buck-Morss, emphasize the heightened tension between uncertainty and predictability or between the present and the future linked to and shaped by the past, the 1917 October Revolution, as integral to Soviet state socialism. Called by Clark “modal schizophrenia,” the Soviet “what is”/“what ought to be” conflux created imaginaries of the present as a “profane time” and the “proclivity for making sudden, unmotivated transitions from realistic discourses to the mythic [the epic past

⁵² Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11.

of October] or utopian [the future promise of communism].”⁵³ Under socialism, as Buck-Morss writes, “For the future utopia, the present is sacrificed,” and the present with the ubiquitous power of the state, if not irrelevant and inanimate, is a temporary stop on the path to the after of socialism.⁵⁴

These ambiguities that shaped socialist lives are crucial for the history of the Soviet 1980s and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union—the organizing chronotope for my study of video. These lives were far from being locked by the immutable and immovable authoritative regime. What might seem like an agony of the Soviet system and the radical break was the mobilization of the always present but not fully articulated dissonances, potentialities, and hyper-normalized modes of living that surfaced. The post-1985 *glasnost*’ policies, facilitating the open discussion of the Soviet failures, the gradual Perestroika decentralization, and then the collapse resonated with the instinctual belief that the existent order of things is always a transition. The eruption of various voices and debates, networks of exchange, and images and texts into the public sphere, in turn, reflected the always present social and cultural routines and structures established and forged during the ‘waiting period’ in the course of making the New Self. The anticipated ‘what ought to be’ or ‘after’ appeared to arrive, and while the image of the future haunting the Soviet world was formed during the October Revolution, it is particularly illustrative that the Soviet officials attempted to legitimize the post-1985 reforms of the Perestroika Era as the return to the 1917 ideals on the basis of Leninism. In foregrounding the dignity of the individual, democratization, and cooperation as loyalty to the October duty betrayed, for instance, through Soviet repressions or bureaucratization, Mikhail Gorbachev

⁵³ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 37–39.

⁵⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 29.

defined Perestroika as “the full theoretical and practical reestablishment of Lenin’s conception of socialism, in which indisputable priority belong to the working man with his ideals and interests, to humanitarian values in the economy, in social and political relations, and in culture.”⁵⁵

No matter how declarative this evocation of October was, the 1980s and early 1990s, while accumulating a myriad of historical layers of the Soviet past at once, indeed strikingly echoed the 1920s the most. Located at the center of this temporal twist, video cultures which I will explore often parallel the lexicon, sensibilities, and practices emerged during and after the Revolution. My story will begin with the 1920s and ‘Red VCR,’ while I show that the idea and technology of video marked the beginnings of the Soviet Union. The echoes of the 1920s will be heard in the utopian hopes linked to video medium and the call for ‘videofication,’ which correlates with the famous Soviet modernization projects, such as ‘cinefication,’ or ‘radiofication,’ and underscores the deeply rooted centrality of media technologies for state socialist development. Emerged during the 1920s, norms, such as film lecturing or on-the-spot foreign film interpreting, reincarnated in the ubiquitous voice-over video translations. And the cultural vocabulary emblematic of the 1920s, including the seemingly forgotten notion *boevik*, somewhat similar to the concept of ‘blockbuster,’ reappeared and was reinterpreted during the video boom as one of the most pervasive everyday words.

Reflective of a similar sense of rupture that marked the 1920s, Soviet cultures of the 1980s and early 1990s, including video, revived the legacies even of those pasts that seemed remote, maintaining continuities with the broader political and everyday logic of life under state socialism. For this reason, while I focus on the 1980s Soviet video, I often move back throughout the dissertation. At the same time, I will sometimes move forward, foregrounding the video

⁵⁵ Gorbachev, *October and Perestroika*, 46.

phenomena that emerged and developed in the 1980s and continued after 1991. In this regard, whereas the 1980s and 1990s state socialism transformations and fall, commonly referred to as *postsocialism*, are at the core of this dissertation, I join the scholars who consider the postsocialist condition as a complex interplay between socialist legacies and liberal economic and political shifts rather than the vanishing of socialist paradigm.

Nevertheless, given that the ‘after’ of state socialism, regardless of how deeply this ‘after’ was integrated into the Soviet project, turned out to be radically different from the dream of communism, the societal change and disruption were tangible and had immediate imprint on (post-)Soviet video cultures. In their analysis, Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora note that postsocialism has brought “the re-igniting of the multiplicity of socialisms and socialist legacies acting in the world,” while the genuine ‘after’ or “the ‘post’ in postsocialism marks the end of the Cold War episteme.”⁵⁶ The Cold War politics, its dismantling, and residues were integral to the history of (post-)Soviet construction of video as a medium and (post-)Soviet video economies and cultures. Deeply embedded in an international context and the (post-)Cold War order, (post-)Soviet video was a site of the negotiations of unevenness and connectedness, which found reflection in all spheres ranging from manufacturing and transfer of video technologies to video circulation and emerging video aesthetics, as I will aim to demonstrate in this dissertation.

The Cold War, a particular geopolitical condition, is usually seen as a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, ‘West’ and ‘East,’ or capitalism and state socialism and oscillation between discursive frameworks of progressiveness and backwardness. Moreover, as media historians increasingly emphasize, the Cold War represented “a media phenomenon in its own right—a cultural political struggle about the hearts and minds of ordinary

⁵⁶ Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, “Postsocialist Politics and the Ends of Revolution,” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 24, no. 2 (2018): 144.

people—and, as for the government leaders, it was meant to undermine each other’s ability to control the domestic public sphere.”⁵⁷ Although rarely addressed in the (post-)Cold War studies, video played a crucial role as one of the frontiers of this struggle. The existent accounts, however, as evident from the theories outlined at the beginning of this section, tend to foreground video exclusively as the end-of-the-Cold-War medium that epitomized the victory of one superpower over another.

My study, in turn, questioning the prevailing view of the Cold War as a dichotomous rivalry seeks to provide a more nuanced picture. Beyond encapsulating the binary antagonism between geospatial alliances and socio-economic formations, the Cold War and its media cultures, including video, also marked mutual dependence and complex exchanges and had repercussions across the globe, which is resonant with such newly emergent re-assessments of the Iron Curtain relations as a porous or “semipermeable membrane”⁵⁸ or “nylon curtain.”⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War, not merely a moment of triumph or defeat, followed by economic and cultural homogenization, was an evolving and fluctuating process of rearrangements of the preceding geographical zones and routes of interaction. These geocultural rearrangements and emerging late and post-Cold War transnational imaginaries at the conjunction of cultures constitute the primary site of change I trace through the case of (post-)Soviet video, with the focus on cross-border circulation of technologies, knowledge about video, and media.

⁵⁷ Henrik G. Bastiansen, Martin Klimke, and Rolf Werenskjöld, “Introduction: Mapping the Role of the Media in the Late Cold War,” in *Media and the Cold War in the 1980s: Between Star Wars and Glasnost*, eds. Henrik G. Bastiansen, Martin Klimke, and Rolf Werenskjöld (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4.

⁵⁸ Michael David-Fox, “The Iron Curtain as Semipermeable Membrane: Origins and Demise of the Stalinist Superiority Complex,” in *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s-1960s*, eds. Patryk Babiracki et al. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 14–39.

⁵⁹ Gy Péteri, “Nylon Curtain: Transnational and Trans-Systemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe,” *Slavonica* 10, no. 2 (2004): 113–24.

In this regard, I propose *translation* as a suitable entry point for examining the vectors, dynamics, and shifting values that characterize the (post-)Soviet video encounters arising from the shifting global and local mediascapes in the context of the (ending) Cold War.

Metaphorically speaking, ‘translation,’ as a process of transfer and negotiation happening across diverse socio-cultural systems and protocols, lies at the heart of (post-)Soviet video history, just like in most other global video histories. Industrial reverse engineering of foreign video equipment or do-it-yourself decoding of videotapes arriving in television standards incompatible with the Soviet ones were practices of technological ‘translations.’ Transmedia ‘translations’ flicker through the debates about the role of video in relation to other media, such as television, film, or a book. Crisscrossed by currents of video, Soviet transportation systems, film theatrical and television networks, or everyday places as diverse as libraries and bars served as sites of infrastructural ‘translations’ in which the meanings of both video and these material spaces re-molded in mutual co-constitution.

Meanwhile, my study foregrounds translation as an actual rather than metaphorical mediation between two languages, central for interrogating global film media flows. Manifested in a myriad of language transfers and formal and informal practices (dubbing, (fan)subbing, simultaneous interpreting, parody, etc.), screen translation from the outset, to use Nataša Ďurovičová’s claim, emerged as “a gearbox of power through which cinematic flows were regulated, and legitimized.”⁶⁰ Providing a perspective from which to trace the routes, regulation that both create and remove barriers, and legitimacy of media flows, translation also sheds light on the transformative process of meaning-making and production of affect and cultural value.

⁶⁰ Nataša Ďurovičová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic Translatio,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Nataša Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 94.

Meanwhile, as Tessa Dwyer amply demonstrates, “It is in moments of dysfunction and irregularity,” or error central, rather than peripheral, to global media circulation, that affect and “screen translation’s politics of value are brought most effectively into play.”⁶¹ Emphasizing this generative and illuminating role of *translation error*, or disparity between the ‘original’ and product of translation, I will focus on the emerging cultural and aesthetic ‘detours’ emblematic of (post-)Soviet video that reveal the (dis)continuities of late and post-Cold War condition. The centrality I give to ‘erroneousness’ of connection, in turn, speaks more broadly to the argument that “breakage and failures reflected a vibrant, dialogic process of experimentation and improvisation,” rather than denial of connection, characteristic of the Cold War media culture.⁶²

As outlined above, (post-)Soviet video was commonly associated with the prevailing practice of voice-over translation. Called “half dubbing” or “non-synchronized dubbing,” or, if monovocal, “Soviet voice-over,” given the view of this practice as originated in the Soviet Union, voice-over represents a technique in which the spoken translation is recorded over the original language, such that both language tracks can be heard.⁶³ Often performed by a single translator on the fly in the context of vigorous (post-)Soviet video distribution, asynchronous, noisy, and inaccurate Soviet video voice-overs, “a symbol of the capitalist transition’s contradiction,”⁶⁴ can be perceived as an epitome of translation error. A “farcical and surreal”⁶⁵ phenomenon, “a form of cultural barbarism,”⁶⁶ or “translational pornography”⁶⁷ have been the

⁶¹ Tessa Dwyer, *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 3.

⁶² Alice Lovejoy and Mari Pajala, “Introduction,” in *Remapping Cold War Media: Institutions, Infrastructures, Translations*, eds. Alice Lovejoy and Mari Pajala (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 5.

⁶³ Eliana Franco, et al. *Voice-Over Translation: An Overview* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010), 24.

⁶⁴ Vladislav Chistruga and Jacob Svaneeng, “The Curious Tale of the Soviet Voice-Over,” *Jacobin*, July 18, 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/07/soviet-voice-over-cold-war-technology>.

⁶⁵ Michel Chion, *Words on Screen*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 145.

⁶⁶ Chistruga and Svaneeng, “The Curious Tale.”

⁶⁷ Michele Berdy, et al., “Kinoperevod: Malo, chto ot Boga, mnogo chego ot Goblina,” *Mosty* 8, no. 4 (2005): 58.

ways to describe postsocialist voice-overs. Emblematic of broader (post)socialist video cultures, these 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.”⁶⁸ Reflective of (post-)socialist aspirations for “inscription into the now of globality,”⁶⁹ these translations simultaneously emphasize the continuities and endurance of socialist locality. Moreover, emerged amidst what Imre characterizes as “the disruption of a sense of intimate sociality caused by the collapse of a centralized system of governance and the influx of globalization,”⁷⁰ a figure and voice of a video translator, as I will demonstrate, became the anchor to reassemble and maintain the collectivity and negotiate the emerging transcultural encounters amidst the rise of neoliberal globalization.

Locating (Soviet) Video History: Literature Review

A historical research, *Video Atlantis* focuses on video—a technology, economy, and culture—which media historiography is notoriously reluctant to grapple with. Explanations for the difficulty of adopting video, particularly consumer-grade formats, as a historical object are manifold and, albeit overlapping, not identical across geocultural contexts. On the ends of the broad spectrum, there are the two most familiar interconnected explanations, both deeply embedded in the Anglophone critical traditions. They simultaneously set the parameters for two dominant video historiography paradigms that, to various degrees, have shaped debates on global video cultures since the late 1980s. Standing in dialogue with the scholarship informed by these

⁶⁸ Anikó Imre, *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 8.

⁶⁹ Anita Starosta, “Perverse Tongues, Postsocialist Translations,” *boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (2014): 227.

⁷⁰ Anikó Imre, *TV Socialism* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2016), 162.

paradigms which I tentatively categorize as ‘*media change*’ and ‘*media (de)regulation*’ models, my research simultaneously aims to revisit their foundational tenets.

The ‘*media change*’ model embarks on the issue that video is a medium that permanently appears either on the decline, easily obscured in other media systems, disposable, and interchangeable, or on the rise, as if arriving unexpectedly and indicating newness and leap forward. As a result, there is a tendency to oscillate between capturing the fleeting material qualities of “an endangered format...before we forget what it was like”⁷¹ to use Lucas Hilderbrand’s words about videotape or outlining how “revolution looked like” in Caetlin Benson-Allott’s analysis of the radical video-triggered shifts in film production and spectatorship since the 1970s till the spread of the internet.⁷² Another path has been to question radical change, be it obsolescence or newness, as a defining aspect of video, highlighting the long-lasting connections between video and other media. In the late 1980s, Roy Armes was among the early scholars who provided a historical account of video as deeply rooted in the evolution of reproduction industries, with emphasis on sound reproduction, which was a counterpoint against the image-centric understanding of video.⁷³ More recently, in his critique of “revolutionary talk,” Michael Newman, pointing out in Carolyn Marvin’s or Lisa Gitelman’s spirit that “often what seems boldly new is actually just something old slightly modified and made over,” emphasized the need to consider video history through the lens of broader media landscape from broadcast television to digital networks.⁷⁴ Foregrounding evolutionary rather than revolutionary framework, such approaches are very much in line with that adopted by contemporary transitory

⁷¹ Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.

⁷² Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 1.

⁷³ Roy Armes, *On Video* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁷⁴ Newman, *Video Revolutions*, xi.

media studies that foreground media change “as an accretive, gradual process, always a mix of tradition and innovation, in which emerging and established systems interact, shift, and collude with one another.”⁷⁵

Closely related to the debates on media change, the ‘*media (de)regulation*’ model shifts the focus to another issue that perplexes situating video historically, namely that video often appears as a site of the radical tension between regulation or control, on the one hand, and meaning-making, institutional, and geocultural deregulation, on the other. In the field of consumer-grade video, as a reflection on this tension, “the canonical history of the VCR,” to use Joshua Greenberg words, has emerged, foregrounding “*Universal v. Sony* (the “Betamax Case”), VHS and the death of Betamax, and pornography.”⁷⁶ This “canonical history” encapsulates the recognizable trajectory characteristic of most home video histories that focus on the robust industry-led and strong market-based contexts: the moment of deregulation and informality, be it copyright infringement, a disorder of technological formats, or the rise of alternative forms of production and distribution, is followed by embracement, adaptation, and legitimization. Frederick Wasser famously traces this dynamic by looking at how Hollywood shifted from resistance to new technology to transformation into a video content empire; Andrew C. McKevitt addresses the ascent of Japan as a principal global supplier of video equipment, which stabilized the chaos brought by technological diversity; and Paul McDonald confirms the formation of new global screen economy with a hegemony of the “axis of Japanese hardware and Hollywood

⁷⁵ David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, eds. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), x.

⁷⁶ Joshua Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 2.

software” at the center.⁷⁷ Aiming to provide an alternative to these historiographies, scholars, including Greenberg and Daniel Herbert in the US, as well as Johnny Walker in the UK, emphasize the role of ‘intermediaries,’ or video entrepreneurs and video stores, that emerged as seemingly disruptive or marginal forces but eventually, beyond corporations, formed regulatory staples of video market.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, such phenomena as bootlegging or the adult video industry, as analyzed by Hilderbrand or Peter Alilunas, similarly arise as sabotaging at first and fully legitimized later, in part, because either they did not threaten the stability of the market or contributed to its development.⁷⁹

The *media change* and *media (de)regulation models*, far from being culturally neutral paradigms, have significantly informed thinking about home video cultures existing beyond the Euro-American context. From the outset of the Anglophone research on global video, dating back to the publishing of the late 1980s collections and monographs, all simultaneously addressing video in the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union as a particular case, two principal frameworks for conceiving change and (de)regulation emerged.⁸⁰ They are lag or breakdown, not strictly congruent with evolutionary historiography, and piracy or ‘black market’ as a priori sites of deregulation. These are the categories indicative of the fact that Euro-American experiences of technosocial organization constitute a universalizing reference point to interrogate global video

⁷⁷ Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Andrew C. McKevitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 105.

⁷⁸ Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*; Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014); Johnny Walker, *Rewind, Replay: Britain and the Video Boom, 1978–92* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁷⁹ Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*; Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

⁸⁰ See these early accounts in Douglas A. Boyd, Joseph D. Straubhaar, and John A. Lent, *Videocassette Recorders in the Third World* (New York and London: Longman, 1989); Manuel Alvarado, ed., *Video World-Wide: An International Study* (London: Libbey, 1988); Mark R. Levy, ed. *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989); Gladys D. Ganley and Oswald H. Ganley, *Global Political Fallout: The First Decade of the VCR, 1976–1985* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

histories and present. Given the actual and overestimated dominance of the US entertainment in video distribution, regardless of the leading role of “culturally odorless”⁸¹ Japanese technologies, it has been argued till now that “the US video habits have defined both the international video market and the look of ‘film’ internationally.”⁸² As a result, the US-centric histories of video change and (de)regulation are written as local, while most studies of video cultures, especially non-Western, turn out inevitably transnational and are burdened with explicit or implicit comparison to the hypernormalized Euro-Atlantic legal, economic, and cultural rhythms and regimes.

Remarkably rare scholarly accounts of the (post-)Soviet video histories reflect these tendencies, also revealing the imperative to grapple with a pressure of double deregulation in relation to both global and local law and ideologies. The early academic fragmentary and scattered reflections on Soviet video appeared before 1991, being the ‘new media’ narratives on a technosocial innovation rather than a historically situated critique. Except for Evgeny Kornilov, who pointed to the existence of Soviet video before VHS, other scholars, such as Douglas Boyd, Ellen Mickiewicz, Anna Lawton, and Gladys and Oswald Ganley, foregrounded the lagging and deregulatory beginnings of Soviet video culture characterized by the failures of domestic centralized video production, piracy, shadow operations, and resistance to the state.⁸³ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, articles addressing (post-)Soviet video started emerging in the 2010s, all stressing informality to some degree, with the main focus on economic and legal

⁸¹ See on the ‘odorless’ Japanese video technologies in Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 24–9.

⁸² Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes*, 14.

⁸³ Evgeny Kornilov, “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” in *Video World-Wide: An International Study*, ed. Manuel Alvarado (London: Libbey, 1988), 197–210; Douglas Boyd, “The Videocassette Recorder in the USSR and Soviet-Bloc Countries,” in *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication*, ed. Mark R. Levy (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 252–70; Mickiewicz, *Split Signals*, 11–13; Lawton, *Kinoglasnost*, 99–105; Ganley and Ganley, *Global Political Fallout*.

analysis of Russian media piracy as one of the most rampant in the world.⁸⁴ Sergei Zhuk analyzed disco clubs and video salon ‘mafia’ distribution of Western media in Soviet Ukraine.⁸⁵ Alexander Pavlov and Polina Khanova focused on video tastes in (post-)Soviet Russia, stressing aesthetic ‘disorientation’ of the (ex-)Soviet audiences, that is, the unfamiliarity with the Western genre hierarchies.⁸⁶ Finally, a limited number of publications were dedicated to underground video art in Central Asia and Russia.⁸⁷

Slowly emerging (post-)socialist video studies has been preoccupied with video art for a long time, with Marina Gržinić to be one of the most vocal theoreticians. Presented as a terrain of state subversion, the (former) Eastern bloc video art and amateur production, according to her, are “what suffered a delay of a whole decade,” especially in the most “repressive” countries, including the Soviet Union, that “executed an almost bloodthirsty control of art and cultural production.”⁸⁸ Reflections on popular (post-)socialist video cultures started with the assumption that these cultures were inherently pirate and “undermined the ideological integrity of the Eastern regimes”⁸⁹ or, as in the case of Romania, facilitated “resistance to the political status

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Olga Sezneva and Joe Karaganis, “Russia,” in *Media Piracy in Emerging Economies*, ed. Joe Karaganis (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2011), 149–217; Olga Sezneva, “The Pirates of Nevskii Prospekt: Intellectual Property, Piracy and Institutional Diffusion in Russia,” *Poetics*, no. 40 (2012): 150–66; Olga Sezneva, “Re-thinking Copyright Through the Copy in Russia,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 6, no. 4 (2013): 472–87; Ilya Kiriya and Elena Sherstoboeva, “Russian Media Piracy in the Context of Censoring Practices,” *International Journal of Communication*, no. 9 (2015): 839–51.

⁸⁵ Sergei Zhuk, “‘The Disco Mafia’ and ‘Komsomol Capitalism’ in Soviet Ukraine during Late Socialism,” in *Material Culture in Russia and the USSR: Things, Values, Identities*, ed. Graham H. Roberts (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 173–95.

⁸⁶ Pavlov and Khanova, “Cult in Everything”; Aleksandr Pavlov, “‘Videodrom’: formirovanie videokultury v Sovetskoi Rossii v 1980–1990-e gody,” in *SSSR: Zhizn’ posle smerti*, ed. Irina Glushchenko et al. (Moscow: VSHE, 2012), 137–59.

⁸⁷ Yuliya Sorokina, “From Evolution To Growth: Central Asian Video Art, 1995–2015,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 10, no. 3 (216): 238–60; Antonio Geusa, *History of Russian Video Art* (Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2007).

⁸⁸ Marina Gržinić, “Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context,” *Transitland: Video Art From Central and Eastern Europe, 1989–2009*, ed. Edit András (Budapest: Ludwig Museum–Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011), 25.

⁸⁹ Tristan Mattelart, “Pre-1989 East-West Video–Entertainment Without Borders,” *Réseaux. The French Journal of Communication* 2, no. 2 (1994), 276.

quo.”⁹⁰ In the meantime, articulating different forms of lag, disruption, and informality, a new body of scholarship tries to think beyond video piracy and state resistance frameworks. In her analysis of amateur video periodicals in Czechoslovakia, Alice Lovejoy analyzes the (dis)connections between official television aesthetics and emerging video production in the late 1980s.⁹¹ Also focused on Czechoslovakia, Lucie Česálková’s study addresses the transformation of local consumer culture and advertising industry with the advent of video.⁹² Or, particularly insightful for my research, interventions by Patryk Wasiak on Poland and Anna Cristina Pertierra on Cuba propose an unexpected argument about the disinterest of socialist states in regulating or restricting informal video distribution and consumption.⁹³

Contributing to this still unformed area of (post-)socialist video histories, I simultaneously would like to distinguish my approach. First, my research introduces the frameworks of lag/breakdown and piracy only when they prove relevance for local (post-)Soviet institutions and historical agents and in the ways they reflect local uses. Seminal works on video cultures by Barbara Klinger, Brian Larkin, Ravi Sundaram, and Ramon Lobato have been a crucial contribution to the attempt to destabilize these frameworks by reconfiguring their generalized Euro-American meanings, which influences my work.⁹⁴ However, while these scholars focus on failures and piratical practices as normative cultural experiences and highlight

⁹⁰ Tessa Dwyer and Ioana Uricaru, “Slashings and Subtitles: Romanian Media Piracy, Censorship, and Translation,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 63 (2009): 47.

⁹¹ Alice Lovejoy, “‘Video Knows No Borders’: Samizdat Television and the Unofficial Public Sphere in ‘Normalized’ Czechoslovakia,” in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, ed. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2013), 206–17.

⁹² Lucie Česálková, “Time Bomb from the West: Video, the Advertising Industry, and Consumer Culture in Late-Socialist Czechoslovakia,” *Journal of Film and Video* 74, no. 3 (2022): 34–47.

⁹³ Anna Cristina Pertierra, “Private Pleasures: Watching Videos in Post-Soviet Cuba,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2009): 113–130; Patryk Wasiak, “The Video Boom in Socialist Poland,” *Zeitschrift Für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 61, no. 1 (2012): 27–50.

⁹⁴ Barbara Klinger, “Contraband Cinema: Piracy, *Titanic*, and Central Asia,” *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 2 (2010): 106–24; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008); Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi’s Media Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: BFI, 2012).

their economic efficacy, I foreground the fact that, in the (post-)Soviet context, what may appear as a failure or piracy is often not registered in such a way at all or, moreover, can constitute high aesthetic and social value rather than a mundane norm or merely economically adaptive behavior. Blake Atwood, who abandons such categories as lag or piracy altogether, illustrates a similar dynamic through the distinct case of underground videotape cultures in Iran, where the state banned video from 1983 to 1994.⁹⁵ This is also to say that, although (post-)Soviet video cultures are deeply integrated in the international dynamic, which I will demonstrate, I prioritize the local over the global. In this regard, my research echoes Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar's emphasis on "the indelible presence of local cosmologies and practices in the mediation of globalities" and "the irrepressibility of local media practices in the face of dominant global norms," which is encapsulated in their concept of "the penumbral."⁹⁶

Second, as a broader extension of the above perspective, my research, although selectively adopting presumptions of the media change and (de)regulation models of video historiography when necessary, deflects attention away from the centrality of these paradigms' problematics. Instead, I foreground conflicting policies and economies, everyday experiences, and affective engagement with video as mediated by (dis)continuities and a variety of interacting and merging actors, from institutions to distributors and viewers, which does not always make it possible or necessitate to trace (r)evolutionary paths of media change or (de)regulation. Widely employed to analyze the Euro-American video, the media change and (de)regulation models fail to capture and bracket as abnormal the messiness of (post-)Soviet video cultures shaped by such two critical conditions as the dominance of media imports and the interplay between the state

⁹⁵ Blake Atwood, *Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021).

⁹⁶ Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar. "Introduction," in *Asian Video Cultures: In the Penumbra of the Global*, eds. Joshua Neves and Bhaskar Sarkar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 2–3.

control and the rise of liberalization. These conditions defined most global video cultures. In this regard, as Jonathan Gray's study of video in Malawi demonstrates, radical non-linear shifts in the temporality and spatiality of technology adoption and media flows have occurred, which creates the scholarly "need for more ethnographies of distribution."⁹⁷ The video cultures that emerged in places influenced by state socialist policies are particularly indicative of such shifts, as evident from reflections on Tanzania by Laura Fair or studies of video in Ghana by Brigit Meyer and Carmela Garritano, as well as rare exploration of video halls in the People's Republic of China by Yiyang Hou.⁹⁸ (Post-)socialist video histories, particularly (post-)Soviet video, developing under extreme conditions of the systemic disintegration, are a litmus test for the effects of neoliberal globalization as manifested through video cultures. They do not simply resist the media change and (de)regulation models of analysis but also, as I will show, reveal their simultaneous limited applicability to Euro-Atlantic media cultures envisioned as sites of high possibility for evolutionary vision and exercise of order.

Overview of Chapters

Weaving the technocultural, socio-economic, and aesthetic histories of (post-)Soviet video, *Video Atlantis* uses a variety of methods ranging from archival research and digital ethnography to interviewing and textual analysis of video media. Along with legal decrees, memoirs, video brochures, and videotape covers, (post-)Soviet newspapers, journals, and magazines are print materials that are central sources for my study. Given the scarcity of formal institutional

⁹⁷ Jonathan Gray, "Mobility Through Piracy; or, How Steven Seagal Got to Malawi," *Popular Communication*, no. 9 (2011): 112.

⁹⁸ Laura Fair, *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Urban Tanzania* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018); Brigit Meyer, *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Carmela Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History* (Athens: Ohio University, 2013); Yiyang Hou, "Projecting the 'Modern': The Reconstruction of Urban Cinemas in Post-Mao China, 1987–1989," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 16, no. 1 (2022): 74–91.

documentation relating to home video before and after 1991, mass print media allow to reconstruct, albeit only partially, the narratives around and uses of video. Conversations with video distributors and translators and participation in online communities devoted to digitizing, collecting, and selling analog video, in turn, complement my analysis, simultaneously offering a glimpse into everyday analog video practices, experiences, and memories, as well as their legacies today. Finally, screen media, including video itself, is a crucial source for my dissertation that utilizes television reportages and interviews, advertising films, videofilms, and discovered videotapes with pre-recorded and translated films.

Gathering and gluing bits and pieces of what has been left from (post-)Soviet video histories, my research fills only some gaps. A great multitude of practices of local video production and inter- and intra-regional circulation, specifically those not centered on film, remain beyond the scope of my work. One of the crucial limitations of my study is a reliance on the Russophone sources. Although I deal with diverse video practices across the Soviet Union, I only scratch the surface of what requires more nuanced analysis, including video cultures in rural areas, where video was genuinely a principal (post-)Soviet medium, as well as across different (ex-)Soviet republics and beyond Russian-language discourses.

My dissertation is structured in four chapters. *Chapter 1* traces the concept of video as a media technology as it emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and developed till the mid-1980s. Throughout the chapter, I examine the manufacturing of Soviet (semi-)industrial and consumer-grade video equipment, situating the local engineering projects and technology and knowledge transfer within the broader context of Cold War politics and economies. Emphasizing the importance of video for global competition in telecommunications, I simultaneously foreground the emergence of video in the Soviet context as a television medium for facilitating

and maintaining international and intra-regional cultural connectivity. As this chapter demonstrates, the understanding and use of video as a ‘collective’ machine was central to the Soviet video culture, which manifests in (tele-)video production and exchange and adoption (or imagining) of video in a variety of working and institutional settings. Outlining the impact and refraction of this envisioning with the advent of consumer-grade video, I examine contradictory uses, public critiques, and policies oscillating between praising home video as a humanist and educational medium and condemning video as a vehicle of dehumanizing and commercialized culture. Indicative of the complex interplay between local and global forces, this oscillation underlies the 1985–87 campaign on the criminalization of video (a reaction to the booming circulation of foreign media), which I focus on at the end of the chapter to demonstrate the increasingly fluctuating ideas around video in the context of radical Soviet liberalization.

Chapter 2 focuses on (post-)Soviet video infrastructures, with a particular emphasis on the conflicting yet mutually beneficial and mimetic relationships between the (post-)Soviet state and video entrepreneurs. I will provide an overview of the early paths and cross-border channels of video delivery to the Soviet Union. I will then proceed to the paramount node of Soviet video infrastructures, a video salon, examining the multiplicity of forms Soviet video exhibition halls acquired, fantasies about video they projected, and screen experiences they gave rise to. Situating video salon at the center of interaction between the state directory body for the video market, Videofilm, and (un)official video producers and distributors, I will examine the shifting policies around the regulation of video circulation and exhibition that are integral to the broader process of the post-1985 liberal and democratic reforms. Highlighting the escalating character of the reformation during the post-1991 transition, I will finally discuss the role of outdoor bazaars in

shaping post-socialist habits of media consumption and economies centered on small screens by looking at the case of Gorbushka, a Moscow-based media market.

Chapter 3, bridging the off- and on-screen (post-)Soviet video histories, opens up a discussion about language translation as an object of analysis and epistemic tool to trace geocultural and aesthetic dynamics of emerging video landscapes. The chapter foregrounds two Soviet projects—the translation industry and fully state-subsidized children’s media—as areas of (post-)socialist culture that underwent and reflected the most significant socio-cultural disruptions in the context of the demise of the Second World and the arrival of the First World entertainment via video. Inseparable from the reconfiguration of the geopolitical order and global media economies, these disruptions are examined through the lenses of a particular case study: video circulation and translations of the 1980s animation from the socialist Eastern Europe, particularly the Hungarian animation film *Szaffi* (1985, Attila Dargay). Situating *Szaffi*’s video journeys and (post-)Soviet and ‘First’ World translations within the dynamics of socialist children’s media production and consumption, I will focus on the shifts in the cross-border media exchanges and negotiation of the world, adult-child relationship, and high and low. Simultaneously, by considering *Szaffi* as a phenomenon reflective of the obscured First-Second-World video engagements, I will reconsider the prevailing assumption about the unidirectional media flows in which the First World arises as a provider and the Second World plays the role of receiver and consumer.

Finally, *Chapter 4*, extending the analysis of the relationship between translation and (post-)Soviet popular video cultures, this time with the emphasis on the continuities of socialist cultural values and habits, offers a case study of *boevik* media. The Russophone term *boevik*, originating in the 1910s, was similar to the contemporary use of a blockbuster—a concept for

spectacular entertainment enjoying mass popularity—and represented a particular discourse under socialism to comprehend global screen economies and cinematic reach. This chapter will trace the legacies and transformations of this notion during the 1980s with the advent of video as a word to designate the genre of action, a genre that became one of the crucial sites of (post-)Soviet video culture, echoing the global rise of action cinema. I will discuss the particular aesthetic and socio-cultural lives of this genre in the (post-)Soviet context, emphasizing the mediating role of ‘authorial’ voice-over translation. In particular, I will foreground *boevik* translations provided by one of the most acclaimed VHS ‘auteurs,’ Aleksei Mikhalev, whose renowned voice was a marker of both first-rate ‘beautifying’ translations and high-quality media. In examining Mikhalev’s *boevik* oeuvre that turned out to be B-grade action films, specifically martial arts cinema, with actual and ‘imaginary’ East and South East Asia at the center, this chapter will analyze the paradoxical politics of attributing cultural and aesthetic worth within (post-)socialist video.

Chapter 1—‘Red’ VCRs

“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 and engineer Mark Schubin humorously proclaimed in the opening of his 1991 *Video Review* article.¹ Celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the VCR linked to the 1976 introduction of the VHS-based video recorder in Japan, the article, as opposed to other popular accounts, looked further back and located the birthplace of video in the nascent Soviet Union of the 1920s.

Recognized as a pioneer of video, the scientist with hard-to-pronounce name was Boris Rcheuli (Rcheulov), a physicist of Georgian origin and employee of the Higher Officer Armor School in revolutionary Petrograd (former Saint Petersburg and later Leningrad). 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.² Given the lack of domestic financing in the context of the radical Soviet reformation following the 1917 October Revolution and six years of the Civil War, Rcheuli with the support of science patrons and Soviet diplomats travelled to the United Kingdom in 1926, where he received patent for and worked on his invention at the University of Oxford. In 1927, however, because of the Anglo-Soviet diplomatic break resulted from the accusation of the USSR in espionage and support of the revolutionary Kuomintang government in China, Rcheuli’s application for visa to extend his stay in the UK

¹ Mark Schubin, “Cue & Review,” *Video Review* 12, no. 1 (1991): 31.

² V. Dunaevskaia and V. A. Urvalov, “Boris Aleksandrovich Rcheulov (Rcheuli) – pioner videotekhniki i zvukovogo kino,” in *Deiateli russkoi nauki XIX-XX vekov: vypusk 4* (Saint Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2008), 258–269; Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: BFI, 2007), 20.

was rejected. The physicist came back to the Soviet Union, where he never continued working on his video machine and died during the Second World War Siege of Leningrad in 1942.

An essential part of the end-of-the-Cold War narratives, video emerges in most popular and scholarly debates as integral part of the crisis and demise of socialism.³ In these debates, the VCR seems to represent a technology that significantly challenged state-controlled centralized screen culture and economy, serving as a channel for ‘capitalist’ entertainment and ground to form a free market. Highlighting the enmeshment of video in the global capitalism-vs-socialism confrontation from the outset before the Cold War, the story of the 1920s ‘red’ VCR, albeit unsuccessful, simultaneously points to video, both a concept and technology, as inherent to Soviet modernity rather than merely an import alien to and undermining of state socialism, which the history of video in the Soviet Union of the second part of the twentieth century also confirms.

From the established media thinkers, such as Julio García Espinosa, who situated videotape in the 1969 discussion on the accessibility of means of media production, to the late Soviet video critics, who claimed that video was “communism in the way we [average people] imagine it” in 1991, the reflections on the manufacturing and use of video occupied prominent place under socialism.⁴ In tracing these reflections and material production and deployment of video technologies as they formed in the Soviet Union from the introduction of the first video recorder in 1959 to the beginning of the organized development of the video market in the mid-

³ Lucie Česálková, “Time Bomb from the West: Video, the Advertising Industry, and Consumer Culture in Late-Socialist Czechoslovakia,” *Journal of Film and Video* 74, no. 3 (2022): 34–47; Tristan Mattelart, “Pre-1989 East-West Video—Entertainment Without Borders,” *Réseaux. The French Journal of Communication* 2, no. 2 (1994): 267–280; Tessa Dwyer and Ioana Uricaru, “Slashings and Subtitles: Romanian Media Piracy, Censorship, and Translation,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 63 (2009): 45–57.

⁴ Julio García Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979): 24–26, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>; Vladimir Borev, “Videovskhlip,” *Video Ace*, no. 4 (1991): 6.

1980s, this chapter investigates the main trajectories of the early lives of socialist video. The chapter locates Soviet video within the broader technological and socio-political context of the Cold War, focusing on the particularities of early video cultures and imaginaries that emerged under state socialism and foregrounding the role of video as a medium of television production in the 1960s, the arrival of video users in the 1970s, and the rise and decline of criminalization video policies in the 1980s.

The Socialist Development (Tele-)Video

For the first time, video made its public debut in the Soviet Union during the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. Designed to prove capitalism's superiority in the wake of the 1957 Soviet *Sputnik* satellite launch, the exhibition foregrounded the technologically affluent model home, particularly kitchen, as a reflection of the US 'average' lifestyle. Almost 3 million Soviets attended this six-week event. Meanwhile, the American kitchen, which was supposed to contribute to "the undoing of socialism," elicited an ambivalent response from the visitors anticipating the educating exhibit of 'proper' scientific achievements to learn from and bewildered or even insulted by the vast entertaining display of consumer goods instead.⁵

In prefiguring the tension between the American mode of address and Soviet visions of exhibiting culture, technology, and domesticity, the first round of exchanges, or the so-called 'Kitchen Debate,' between the US Vice President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev opened the exhibition. Khrushchev's greetings, jokes, and persistent remarks on the

⁵ Susan E. Reid, "'Our Kitchen Is Just as Good': Soviet Responses to the American Kitchen," in *Cold War Kitchen Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, eds. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 105, 102. See also Cristina Carbone, "Staging the Kitchen Debate: How Splitnik Got Normalized in the United States," in *Cold War Kitchen Americanization, Technology, and European Users*, eds. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 59–81.

capitalism-socialism antagonisms were interrupted by Nixon, who drew attention to the cutting-edge US technology working right there and then in the room: Ampex color tape allowing for recording and immediate playing back of the meeting on television (Figure 1.1). Video dominated the rest of the taped discussion as the US counterpart to the Soviet space rockets and



Figure 1.1. The Demonstration of the AMPEX Color Tape During the 'Kitchen Debate'. Screen grab, uploaded by user Major Kong, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CvQOuNecy4>.

an area to build, albeit unequal in Khrushchev's opinion, communication between the two countries. Framed "as central tools for global knowledge, diplomacy, and expansion," video technologies emerged during the "Kitchen Debate" as constitutive of the Cold War spectacle at the level of both production and representation.⁶

The Ampex videotape recorder demonstrated in Moscow became a sensation in the US in 1956 and proved to be the first viable professional video machine

widely adopted by local and overseas television networks despite the almost simultaneous Japanese companies' entrance into the video market. In the context of the 1949 trade embargo, Comecon (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) socialist countries, including the Soviet

⁶ Susan Murray, *Bright Signals: A History of Color Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 219.

Union, embarked on their own video engineering projects, applying some of the Ampex innovations in bypassing the official protocols and constraints of international exchange and upon the eager involvement of colleagues from the other side of the Iron Curtain who opposed the embargo in exchange in television technologies.⁷ Following the 1958 state decree, the Soviet electronics manufacturers and research institutes, in particular factory Lenkinap in Leningrad (contemporary Saint Petersburg) and the All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Sound Recording (for Television and Radio since 1970) in Moscow, intensified their ongoing work on developing the video recording technologies to catch up with the US breakthrough.

The first *videomagnitofon*, KMZI-1, was introduced by Lenkinap on December 24, 1959, the official date of birth of the Soviet video according to the Leningrad engineering school.⁸ The term *videomagnitofon*,⁹ a word for both industrial video tape recorders (VTRs) and consumer-level video cassette recorders (VCRs), gradually entered the Soviet everyday lexicon after the Moscow Television Centre broadcasted the first time-delayed program, a musical concert, recorded on magnetic tape in 1960.¹⁰ At that time, the Moscow engineering school was devising and testing its own video recorder, Kadr-1, officially introduced in 1962 with the centre of industrial production in Novosibirsk in Siberia, a crucial scientific hub where the work on the Soviet internet, project OGAS, was going on in the meantime and one of the birthplaces of Soviet cybernetics.¹¹ It is symptomatic here that the Soviet use of *videomagnitofon* does not only

⁷ A. B. Shtein, "Puteshestvie dlinoiu v 30 let," in *VNIITRu-70. Stranitsy vospominanii*, eds. S. Maksimov et. al (Moscow: OAO VNIITR, 2004), 23–4; B. A. Olerich, "AMPEX International Operations, Letter Dated May 26, 1969," in *To Extend and Amend the Export Control Act of 1949* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 417–18.

⁸ Mikhail Shul'man, "Kak delo bylo! Magnitnaia videozapis' v SSSR i Rossii. Gody 1957-1991. Part 1," *MediaVision*, no. 4 (2011): 67.

⁹ 'Videomagnitofon' is the word that has other Soviet analogues such as, for example, *beinemagnitofon* in Kazakh language.

¹⁰ "Poslednie izvestiia," *Izvestiia*, Feb. 21, 1960: 1.

¹¹ See more in Benjamin Peters, *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

refer to the blurry line between professional and home video equipment. While the word contains the Greek root ‘-phon’ (sound), as opposed to the words for VCR in most other languages foregrounding ‘recording’ or ‘registering,’ it also points to the always present emphasis on video as also a sound system and its rootedness in the history of audio industries and cultures: the connection that, as Roy Armes points out, was obscured in the image-centric narratives about video.¹² Here, the beginning of Soviet video with recording and broadcasting a musical concert in 1960 seems particularly illustrative of emergence of Soviet VCR as a sound-and-image phenomenon.

While the Soviet television centers started actively integrating the Leningrad KMZI and Moscow Kadr video machines in the 1960s, the development of the video technologies was considered a “collective victory” as the engineers and electronics workers from across the country were involved in the perpetual (re-)modeling and production of video equipment.¹³ Paradoxically, the centralized model of the Soviet economy ordering the all-country development of video created a ground for the emergence of the immense variety of video recorders, rearranged copies of copies, and ‘do-it-yourself’ hybrid formats. The technological hybridity only intensified in the course of video manufacturing, simultaneously stemming from the chronic breakdowns and processes of repair that beyond the ‘collective victory’ highlighted the ‘collective defeat.’ A laughing matter, the story of the late 1960s semi-consumer video recorder “Malachite” is typical here. Designed at the Leningrad Research Institute of Television, “Malachite” not unusually failed to operate upon arrival at the production site, State Electrotechnical Factory in Riga in Latvia, where the local engineers made significant changes to

¹² See more on the role of sound in shaping video technology and aesthetics in Roy Armes, *On Video* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 12–38, 160–185.

¹³ Lev Balanin, “K 60-letiiu sozdaniia pervogo otechestvennogo videomagnitofona dlia televizionnogo veshchaniia,” *MediaVision*, no. 3 (2019): 41.

the machine that later circulated in various modifications.¹⁴ Such re-modeled video recorders could eventually turn out to be incompatible with special formats of magnetic tapes produced, for instance, at Svema (Shostka, Ukraine) or LOMO (Leningrad, Russia) and the tapes were cut, glued, and adapted to ‘renewed’ recorders on the spot, which often accompanied the re-engineering of TV sets and video cameras.

The cross-border techno-scientific cooperation and know-how borrowings, both official and informal, from foreign video producers also amplified the intra-Soviet technological video mosaic. The story of international technology networks the Soviets participated in is today frequently depicted as a story centered on the Soviet Union as a “scavenger empire” that, being “bereft of vision, innovation, and productivity,” exploited and profited from Central and Eastern European industries.¹⁵ The coercive Soviet regime significantly relied on the industrial potential of the European allies, while the Soviet-led Comecon intrabloc dependence provided the mechanisms, ties, and resources for this potential to grow, resulting in an “economic miracle of sorts in the 1950s.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, despite the trade embargo, the OECD (the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) industries, from Japan in particular, participated in the technological transfer, including video, predominantly via sharing the expertise and direct participation since the 1980s, with Comecon.¹⁷ The electronics enterprises such as Hungarian

¹⁴ “17 ianvaria 2015 goda. ‘Stanovlenie i razvitie Rizhskogo radiozavoda,’” YouTube, January 19, 2015, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exOIAIMJe8c&t=0s>.

¹⁵ Austin Jersild, “The Soviet State as Imperial Scavenger: ‘Catch Up and Surpass’ in the Transnational Socialist Bloc, 1950–1960,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (2011): 113.

¹⁶ Besnik Pula, *Globalization Under and After Socialism: The Evolution of Transnational Capital in Central and Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 60. See also Anna Calori, et. al, “Alternative Globalization? Spaces of Economic Interaction between the ‘Socialist Camp’ and the ‘Global South,’” *Between East and South: Spaces of Interaction in the Globalizing Economy of the Cold War*, eds. Anna Calori, et. al (Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 1–32.

¹⁷ Jürgen Nötzold, “Technology Transfer,” in *Economic Warfare Or Détente: An Assessment Of East-West Economic Relations in the 1980s*, eds. Reinhard Rode and Hanns-D. Jacobsen (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 50–62; Stanislaw Gomulka, *Growth, Innovation, and Reform in Eastern Europe* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1986), 11.

Videoton or GDR's RFZ and ORWO supplied video spare parts and magnetic tapes to the Soviet Union, whereas the specialists from the socialist states, including China before the 1961 Sino-Soviet split, were active contributors to the brainstorming of the Soviet video projects. The OECD players were often behind these processes and, especially since the 1970s, visible participants sharing their know-how knowledge informally during the conferences of International Telecommunication Union or bringing their equipment to such regular exhibitions as Moscow's *Telekinotekhnika* (Television and Film Equipment) which opened up many opportunities for reverse engineering.¹⁸

In parallel, however, Hungarian tapes or the mentioned video recorder "Malachite" created on the basis of Philips machines were habitually malfunctioning. Such breakdowns reflected the broader incompatibility with the overseas standards, which prevented the diffusion of foreign technologies in the Soviet Union—the technologies that were simultaneously too scarce to cover the needs of the giant and economically uneven country.¹⁹ In the domain of video, the technological divide increased with another wave of global movement towards standardization of electronic products in the late 1960s and the arrival of color television to the Soviet Union in 1967, accompanied by the adoption of the SECAM color encoding system.

In the explicitly politicized television regionalization and competition for the markets of electronics, SECAM was developed in France as an alternative to the encroaching US NTSC standard that dominated the Americas and South East Asia. Eventually, SECAM came to mark the television industries of the former French colonies, the Soviet Union, and Eastern European countries. The rest of Europe and most of Africa, the Middle East and Asia, along with the

¹⁸ "Radioveshchanie i televidenie budushchego," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, April 13, 1965; L. Barinov, "Maloformatnomu kino—sovershennuiu tekhniku," *Tekhnicheskaja estetika*, no. 4 (1964), 16–8.

¹⁹ Nötzold, "Technology Transfer."

biggest countries in South America, such as Argentina or Brazil, opted for the PAL system designed in West Germany and promoted by the UK. While the technical differences between NTSC, SECAM, and PAL systems drawing on each other were insignificant, international barriers for circulation of video technologies and products were created, albeit favorable for the flexible TV and video producers such as Japan that, despite the adoption of NTSC, made television goods for all encoding systems.²⁰ Compensating for the technological incompatibility and deficit, the creative innovations ‘from below’ produced the heterogeneous video assemblages through recycling, redesign, and salvage, characteristic of the entire Soviet material video history. This history mirrors the processes of enduring (re-)manufacturing in local radio culture that, as Stephen Lovell notes, reveals “a fundamental, and rather significant, fact about Soviet society: its technical proficiency.”²¹ Cultivated by the state promoting the high prestige of science, this technical proficiency of trained and amateur engineers, simultaneously a back side of precariousness, would play a principal role in the formation of the consumer-level video economies in the 1980s, when the industry-like amateur production of decoders, allowing to watch the foreign NTSC and PAL videotapes on Soviet SECAM TV sets, took rise.

Throughout the 1960s, while video recording remained an area of experiment, Moscow Central Television became one of the most visible sites for video testing and production of narratives about video. Dominated by live broadcasting, Central Television’s two channels were available, first for a few hours per day, across the country, where the number of TV sets was growing from roughly 5 million in 1960 to 25 million per household by the late 1960s.²² “Soviet

²⁰ JoAnne Yates and Craig N. Murphy, *Engineering Rules: Global Standard Setting since 1880* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 158–98.

²¹ Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 146.

²² Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 181.

TV,” to use Kristin Roth-Ey’s words, “like all Soviet culture, was embedded in an international context that was an essential factor in its development.”²³ Video, in turn, served as a vehicle of televisual world interconnectedness nourished by, beyond the Cold War mentality and economies, the socialist culture of internationalism. ‘Recorded on videomagnitofon’ was an indispensable message accompanying the 1960s broadcasting of the cross-border images and sounds of Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to Dania or addresses of the Prime Ministers of Norway and Great Britain, musical concerts from Italian San Remo, and particularly sports events like World Aerobic Championships or the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games.²⁴ Some TV viewers perceived the novelty of video recording gradually replacing live broadcast as a threat to television that, as one of the viewers wrote to the *Soviet Culture* newspaper, was “at risk to lose its inherent quality—an opportunity to make us co-participants of the events.”²⁵ Television workers, such as the host of the TV show *Knizhnaia lavka* (Bookshop) centered on conversations about literature, writer Anatolii Pristavkin, arguing that improvisation is the “soul of television,” were also hesitant about the effects of video.²⁶ Nevertheless, despite the decline in the temporal synchronicity between the audiences and television action, video allowed bringing images from a wider variety of distant cultural settings and avoiding the disconnections characteristic of Soviet live broadcasts and disruptive of the pleasure of belonging.

While bridging between the local audiences and the world, which was also possible due to the integration of Soviet television into transnational networks such as Eurovision and Intervidnie, video equally emerged as a locus of intra-Soviet connectivity. By the mid 1960s,

²³ Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 209.

²⁴ “Na golubykh ekranakh—vizit mira i družby,” *Pravda*, June 18, 1964; “Vystuplenie E. Gerkhardsena po televideniiu,” *Pravda*, June 03, 1965; “Press-konferentsiia Garol’da Vil’sona,” *Pravda*, Feb. 25, 1966; “Na ekranakh televizorov,” *Pravda*, Feb. 02, 1966; B. Chekhonin, “Nadezhdy i prognozy,” *Izvestiia*, July 11, 1964.

²⁵ V. Shashkin, “Vremia i vremechko...,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, May 23, 1968.

²⁶ Anatolii Pristavkin, “Dobro pozhalovat’ v ‘Knizhnuiu lavku’,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Sept. 8, 1971.

according to Kirsten Bönker, there were already about 50 state-sponsored and 300 amateur regional television stations transmitting the programming of central channels.²⁷ In the meantime, Moscow's Central Television conversely broadcasted programs from the Soviet cities, which intensified with the deployment of the first Soviet communications satellite Molniia-1 in 1965 that allowed to circulate video recordings across both nationwide channels and the regions and republics beyond Central TV, increasing the mutual visibility of and ties between the Soviets.²⁸ Whereas video was paving its path in television production, it explicitly became a synonym for advanced Soviet communication since videotelephony gained visibility. Tested in 1961 during the conferencing between agricultural workers from Ukrainian and Russian republics, the first



Figure 1.2. The Soviet 'Videotelephone' in 1961. Screen grab, uploaded by *Sovetskie radiospektakli*, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdkWKbZ8t1c>.

Soviet videotelephony system connected Kyiv, Leningrad, and Moscow.²⁹ The installment of videophones across the country continued, and video acquired the meaning of an indispensable tool in maintaining professional ties and relationships with family and friends or even, as the "apparatus of care," in

offering a potential opportunity to provide intimate emotional support and effective visually-based psychotherapeutic help remotely (Figure 1.2).³⁰

²⁷ Kirsten Bönker, *Television and Political Communication in the Late Soviet Union* (London: Lexington Books, 2020), 4.

²⁸ Bönker, *Television*, 5; A. A. Danilov, *Stanovlenie i razvitie televideniia v regionakh Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XX-nachale XXI vv. (na materialakh Mariiskoi, Mordovskoi i Chuvashskoi respublik)* (Cheboksary: Izd-vo Chuvash. un-ta, 2009), 144; Mikhail Shul'man, "Kak delo bylo!...Part 1," 67.

²⁹ V. Petrusenko, "Slyshu i vizhu vas khorosho...", *Pravda*, Oct. 15, 1961.

³⁰ "Televizor v belom khalate," *Izvestiia*, May 18, 1963.

In seeking to “mobilize citizens towards the construction of socialism”³¹ and maintain the state’s unity, Moscow’s Central Television was at the forefront of organizing a centralized media system that, in turn, persistently came into collision with the centrifugal forces of local and amateur television production. While even children were involved in building their small tele-video stations at schools, which was accompanied by the spread of the newly produced small-scale video equipment for closed telecommunication systems since the mid-1960s, the existence of numerous non-state television centers seemed ambiguous for officials.³² Encouraged by official institutions as a way to bring local cultures and events to the screens and another site of socialist do-it-yourself people’s creativity, amateur television simultaneously presented a challenge to the increasingly centralized and professionalized national TV network. In balancing the national and the local, video that reigned television since the 1970s was instrumental in the censorial control and quick and simple editing of recorded materials.³³ And yet, from the outset, video stayed the medium destabilizing the top-down fixed regulations and homogenous screen culture, which was met with calls for enhancing “video literacy” through collective learning at film and discussion clubs and school elective classes with the principal goal of training selectivity skills to orient in information flows.³⁴

The dominant 1960s public narratives, meanwhile, promoted the idea of the emerging technology of video as, first and foremost, a means of ‘saving’: saving fleeting television programming and cultural heritage, economic resources, and workers in a variety of spheres from exposure to unpredictability and time-consuming labor. Lamenting the loss of most of

³¹ Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 11.

³² See, for example, on tele-video station at a school in Severodvinsk, “Svoiu televizionnuiu studiiu postroili...,” *Izvestiia*, April 14, 1968.

³³ Danilov, *Stanovlenie i razvitie televideniia*, 72.

³⁴ I. S. Levshina, *Liubite li vy kino?* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1978), 199–238.

television programs frequently seen as historical artefacts already at the moment of their release, the cultural industries workers and institutions celebrated video as a technology providing the opportunities to create and preserve the Soviet television archive. One of the first Soviet public representations of video, the 1963 documentary *Videomagnitofon* (G. Tsvetkov), narrated:

“How often we want to re-watch an interesting television program tomorrow or in a year. Oh! If only we could stop the moment! Of course, broadcasts can be filmed. But this is very expensive. The filming requires processing, labour of many people, and large amount of electric energy, and the celluloid film contains precious silver.”³⁵

As opposed to filming of the live broadcasts, video recording, in turn, as the narrator in *Videomagnitofon* optimistically emphasized, allowed to compensate for the costs and served the improvement of working conditions for television workers (Figure 1.3).

The emphasis on video as an inexpensive technology playing an instrumental role in the optimization of television economies and labour quickly gave way to the foregrounding of video as a unique medium of creative visual production, particularly making ‘telefilms’ or



Figure 1.3. The First Soviet ‘VCR’, KMZI-1. Screen grab from the documentary *Videomagnitofon* (1963), uploaded by *Vidachestvo Archive*, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-WxAGTp6Ig>.

‘videofilms.’ Already in 1960, the ideas of “televisual cinema” occupies the debates on the future of video that was first also seen in a utilitarian manner as a means to “reduce the cost, simplify

³⁵ *Videomagnitofon: montazhnaia zapis*’ (Moscow: Reklamfilm, 1963), 5–6.

and speed up the process of film production.”³⁶ One of the advantages of video was simultaneously claimed to be the possibility of an instantaneous access to the recorded material, which allowed the film crew to analyze acting and cinematography on the spot and therefore have better control over the aesthetic qualities of film. Bringing the process of film production and the end product into sync, video technology promised order, logical continuity, and firm adherence to filmmakers’ creative conception. However, in the 1970s, video fully turns from an auxiliary tool to an independent means in film and media production for television and across institutions.

In 1972, directed by Mikhail Litovchin, an Odesa-born pioneer of Soviet television non-fiction films, documentary *My – sovetskie moriaki* (We Are the Soviet Sailors) about the crew of cruiser *Aurora*, one of the symbols of the October Revolution, opened a series of videofilm production, echoing Sergei Eisenstein’s *Bronenosets Potemkin* (Battleship Potemkin, 1925).³⁷ From the outset and throughout the 1970s, celebrated as a new instrument of media creativity and propaganda, “cassette cinema” centered on the history and achievements of Soviet socialism.³⁸ The newness of video in comparison to film, as Soviet critics emphasized, was the sense of lively spontaneity and intimacy it evoked. In relation to biography videofilm *Shag cherez kontinent* (Step Across the Continent, 1975, Anatolii Monastyrev) on the military aviator and Hero of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gromov, the critics praised small and non-intrusive video camera providing an opportunity for filmed characters to perceive recording equipment as a “piece of furniture” and “behave naturally,” which allowed to reveal the personality and make it

³⁶ M. Vysotskii, “Novye metody s’emki fil’mov,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1960): 117.

³⁷ Val. Gol’tsev, “Chudesnaia lenta,” *Izvestiia*, Sept. 2, 1972.

³⁸ Kirill Dombrovskii, “Vpered smotret’! Razmyshleniia o ‘dzhinne,’ spriatannom v kassetakh,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Feb. 9, 1972.

closer to the viewers.³⁹ Video recording in one of the most famous cine-video projects of Soviet television, a cycle of sixty films *Nasha biografiia* (Our Biography, 1976–1977), facilitated the “belonging of Soviet people to every year in the life of the country, common historical cause, and the unity of generations.”⁴⁰ In one of the episodes, as was noted, it was only due to video that it was possible to “capture an amazing, tender and quivering range of feelings on the face of a documentary hero,” a tractorist driver who, after long separation, met his “old friend,” the 1930s tractor Inter-KhTZ, now a museum showpiece: the meeting it would be impossible to show through the “immobilizing eye of film apparatus.”⁴¹

The emphasis on the closeness and connection, along with the historical past as an assemblage point, that raised socialist aesthetics to the new level would dominate the ideas about future videofilms, both foreign and domestic ones booming in the late 1980s. Use of video in Cuban *Hasta cierto punto* (Up to a Certain Point, 1983, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea) to record interviews with Havana workers on machismo and female emancipation was seen as a revelatory technique that represented the workers as equals rather than cinematic objects.⁴² And video recording in Soviet *Kommentarii k prosheniiu o pomilovaniiu* (Commentary on Petition For Clemency, 1988, Inna Tumanian), with the prison meeting room at the center, became not only aesthetic or economic choice but the only ethically acceptable way, as opposed to cumbersome film camera and lightning equipment, to show “people brought there by grief.”⁴³

In addition to videofilms, compact and light-weight video cameras and videocassettes would help to show the Soviet television viewers the places and aspects of socialist life

³⁹ P. Demidov, “S geroem – naedine,” *Izvestiia*, July 28, 1975; Anri Vartanov, *Ot Foto do Video* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1996), 54.

⁴⁰ T. Martynova, “Istoriia glazami sovremennikov,” *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, Nov. 12, 1976.

⁴¹ A. Lipkov, “Beseda,” in *Video: tekhnika—dosug—kul'tura* by Vladimir Borev (Moscow: Profizdat, 1990), 7–8.

⁴² Tat'iana Vetrova, “Chem poveriaetsia chelovek,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 5 (1985): 150–2.

⁴³ Inna Tumanian qtd. in Borev, *Video*, 6. See also on the late 1980s Soviet ‘video diaries’ in Louis Menashe, “Woman With a Movie Camera: The Films of Marina Goldovskaya,” *Cinéaste* 24, no. 2/3 (1999): 85–6

previously inaccessible, from the bottom of the Baikal Lake to the heights of orbital stations routines.⁴⁴ The video equipment would simultaneously gradually enter the everyday life as a means for actors to record, watch and analyze their acting, for doctors and medical students to learn from surgery operations recordings, and even in road inspection to record rule violations.⁴⁵ Throughout the 1970s, the introduction of video as a new exciting window into socialist collectivity was simultaneously accompanied by the rise of rhetorics and attempts to adopt video for the mundane use, taking an individual video user into account.

(Un)Making a Socialist Video User

In the same 1959 year as the demonstration of the Ampex video technology at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, Soviet filmmaker Mikhail Romm contemplated on the prospects of film viewing:

A little time will pass, and every cultured person will have two libraries: a collection of books and a collection of films recorded on magnetic tapes. [...] Loading will be extremely easy: to insert the cassette and press the button. There will be screens in every apartment, maybe in every room. The screen and apparatus will be pre-mounted into the wall. The opportunity to “read” any part of any film at any time will turn out to be a human need. That is when cinema will become an intimate close friend like a book.⁴⁶

In suggesting two paths for video technologies, the pioneering video manufacturers, the US Ampex and Japanese Sony, concentrated their early engineering and marketing efforts in the two domains: television broadcasting and personal use allowing for television recording.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the deployment of video as a home medium for pre-recorded content, including

⁴⁴ A. Malinov and M. Rostarchuk, “Shturm Baikal’skogo dna,” *Izvestiia*, Aug. 17, 1977; V. Kononov, “Orbital’nye dokery,” *Izvestiia*, Jan. 25, 1978.

⁴⁵ G. Kiksmán, “Chto mozhet ‘Video’,” *Pravda*, Sept. 9, 1975.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Romm, “Pogliadim na dorogu,” in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia: Vol. I*, ed. N. B. Kuz’mína, et. al (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), 416.

⁴⁷ Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 43–4.

films, had remained a silenced terrain till Sony released the first consumer-grade VCR Betamax in 1975. In North America, initiated from below by hobbyists and independent entrepreneurs, the post-1975 video circulation of films and TV shows was faced with fierce protest from Hollywood producers. Demanding to introduce the ban on domestic VCRs as a threat to the intellectual property regime, the studios Universal Pictures and Disney filed a lawsuit against Sony in 1976, which culminated in the Supreme Court's 1984 decision legitimizing home video recording as a site of fair use and Hollywood's entrance of the home video market that had already started burgeoning before the decision. Seen as a staple of "the canonical history of the VCR," this moment of "the triumph of David over Goliath"⁴⁸ is largely irrelevant to the Soviet video history that does not simply display the humility of local screen industries to accept home video. In 1984, the first time when the Soviet press addressed the case, it was called "knight tournament of legal theorists," not having anything to do with the reality.⁴⁹ In the Soviet context, as glimpsed in Romm's reflections, video emerges as the inevitable and desirable future of film-viewing, intimately linking an individual person to cinema "created by its fate to serve socialism"⁵⁰ and, similarly to a book, offering a ground for self-improvement and education for the proper 'cultured' socialist subject.

In challenging the scholarly emphasis on the Soviet maintenance of socialist collectivity, Evgeny Dobrenko notes, "Soviet culture as a political and aesthetic project *radically focused on the recipient*."⁵¹ Manufacturing of the socialist personality through media, with literature and reading as a form of individual cultural consumption at the centre, was crucial for this project.

⁴⁸ Joshua Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 2.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Simonov, "Videobezumie," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Jan. 11, 1984.

⁵⁰ Romm, "Pogliadim na dorogu," 393

⁵¹ Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, trans. by Jesse M. Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

Contrary to the early Western debates on electronic media, such as television and video, seemingly signaling the death of print culture and readership as such,⁵² the striking aspect of Soviet video culture is the reception of VCR and videotape as continuation and another form of reading rather than a threat to it. The early Soviet narratives about the possible use of consumer video are marked by the references to education, and as one of them suggests that video is the best helper in cases when a child cannot attend school due to sickness and then parents can bring video camera for teacher to record classes possible to watch at home after.⁵³ These narratives are commonly accompanied by the ubiquitous emphasis on the similarity between video and book throughout the Soviet video history.⁵⁴ As a mode of engagement, video, opposed to movie theater or television, seems to create better opportunities to engage with “serious” cinema, as it allows, just like in reading thick novels, to make interruptions for thinking and returning to film after taking rest.⁵⁵ And library serves as a model for imagining video infrastructure of the future,⁵⁶ as will be evident from the rise of videotheques in the late 1980s.

Designed at the Leningrad factory LOMO in 1970, the video recorder VK-1/2 opened a cycle of Soviet engineering projects in developing the consumer-grade video. A part of portable technological aggregate along with a special compatible video camera and TV set, VK-1/2 served the purpose of video filming, recording TV broadcasts, and playing back tapes and was first tested in producing journalist TV reportages at Kyiv Television Centre, conducting forensic experiments, and using at educational institutions.⁵⁷ In going into serial production, this video

⁵² See, for instance, one of the most oft-cited examples illustrative of this rhetoric in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁵³ A. Iudin, “Vystavka na kolesakh,” *Pravda*, Sept. 25, 1974.

⁵⁴ Dombrovskii, “Vpered smotret’!”

⁵⁵ Valerii Kichin, “Posle starta,” *Nedel’na*, no. 3 (1986): 16.

⁵⁶ G. Panushkin, V. Romaniuk, “Kakim byt’ televizoru,” *Izvestiia*, July 12, 1974.

⁵⁷ M. G. Shul’man, et al. “Malogabarithyi videomagnitofon LOMO tipa VK-1/2,” *Tekhnika kino i televideniia*, no. 1 (1972): 45.

recorder was advertised along with portable mini-TV sets produced at Kaunas Radio Factory in Lithuania on the pages of popular magazine *Radio* targeting amateur engineers and reviewing domestic technologies. Timed to the 50th anniversary of the Soviet Union in 1972, the release of consumer-grade video equipment and portable TV the advertisement invited to watch outside during the walks and picnics marked another celebration of the techno-cultural achievements of socialism (Figure 1.4).⁵⁸



Figure 1.4. Advertisement of the Portable TV, Video Recorder, and Video Camera, 1972. *Radio*, no. 7 (1972), 1.

Throughout the 1970s, following the introduction of VK-1/2, a series of reel-to-reel video recorders labeled “Elektronika” emerged, with the center of construction and production in Voronezh (Russia)—the city that would become the birthplace of the first Soviet videotheque in 1985. Simultaneously, the Soviet electronic industry sought to resolve the task of transitioning from magnetic reels persistently folding and slipping from track to plastic cassettes as a more reliable medium that already proved effective in the booming audiocassette culture across the Soviet Union

and Eastern bloc. Adopting the German experimental formats, the production of videocassettes began in Minsk (Belarus) in the early 1970s, and electronic factories across the country from

⁵⁸ “SSSR–50 let,” *Radio*, no. 7 (1972): 1.

Lviv to Novosibirsk developed their VCRs on the basis of Belarusian cassettes.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, given the technical difficulties ranging from lack of precision in developing tape drive mechanisms to persistent incompatibility of video devices and formats between each other, each factory produced no more than five hundred video recorders per year.⁶⁰ Lamented in the early narratives on home video as “an organizational rather than technological issue”⁶¹ and manifestation of the chaos in the failed centralized management,⁶² the resistance of Soviet video electronics to standardization created the primary obstacle to the large-scale serial production of home video technologies and their mass integration into everyday life in the 1970s.

While “a flood of incompatible and quickly obsolete technologies that discouraged consumer adoption” similarly characterized the global video markets,⁶³ the slow spread of home video in the Soviet Union simultaneously resulted from the immediate status of VCRs as prestige deficit commodities of high cost. The reel-to-reel video recorders retailed at 2,000 rubles, and the price of a videocassette recorder and blank videocassette could reach 3,200 and 90 rubles correspondingly, while the average monthly salary in the decade between 1970 and 1980 was from 122 to 169 rubles with the highest wages in Estonia and Turkmenistan and the lowest ones in Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Belarus.⁶⁴ Unaffordable for ordinary citizens, consumer-grade video technologies became a marker of belonging to the Soviet socio-economic elites, from the Communist party officials to workers who received home equipment as awards for their

⁵⁹ Lavrentii Lishin, “Rozhdenie bytovykh videomagnitofonov v SSSR i vybor bytovoi videokassety,” *MediaVision*, no. 2 (2011): 56–7.

⁶⁰ Lishin, “Rozhdenie,” 57.

⁶¹ Kirill Dombrovskii, “Vpered smotret’! Razmyshleniia o ‘dzhinne,’ spriatannom v kassetakh,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Feb. 9, 1972.

⁶² I. P. Kochevykh, interview by V. Vasilets, “Uverennyi shag,” *Pravda*, Dec. 23, 1974.

⁶³ Hilderbrand, *Video Vice*, 44.

⁶⁴ “Videomagnitofon Elektronika L1-08,” *Novye tovary*, no. 7 (1977): 8; “Tsvetnoi kassetnyi videomagnitofon-pristavka Spektr-205 Video,” *Bytovaya radioapparatura: katalog* (Moscow: Min-vo radiopromyshlennosti, 1979), 22: 6. For statistics in salaries, *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR za 70 let: Iubileinyi statisticheskii sbornik* (Finansy i statistika, 1987).

achievements and profiteers of the vast shadow economy blossoming in the 1970s. The general public could otherwise witness video on the pages of colorful magazines and catalogs or as a sacral showpiece at the exhibitions. Soviet home video recorders were indispensable objects displayed at the expositions such as “Electronics of the USSR,” which represented a mobile science museum on buses traveling across the country and Eastern bloc, or trade shows like “Souvenirs, Crafts, and Gifts” at Moscow’s VDNKh (the Exhibition of the Achievements of the People’s Economy) where video technologies coexisted side by side with artisanal Palekh miniatures or Turkmen rugs.⁶⁵

In the early 1980s, the voices that called for the reduction of prices on Soviet video equipment to stimulate the consumer market and compensate for persistent breakages became louder, simultaneously encouraging the more active development of collective forms of video consumption.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, by that time, the collective use of video, another way for the Soviets to access the technological novelty, had already become a norm established in some professional settings and within the walls of institutions, albeit still predominantly the most prestigious ones. While sport proved to be one of the most ubiquitous objects of Soviet video-based broadcasting, professional sports organizations were among the first Soviet institutions where video equipment quickly entered the everyday and was used for recording and collective viewing and analysis of soccer and hockey matches and other sports performances.⁶⁷ Adopted as an educational tool in the sports training, consumer-grade video predictably became a technology prioritized by the state in the sphere of education and science. With the purposes to optimize and diversify learning

⁶⁵ A. Iusin, “Vystavka na kolesakh,” *Pravda*, Sept. 25, 1974; V. Nazhestkin, “Kazhdomy po vkusu,” *Pravda*, Oct. 3, 1974.

⁶⁶ A. Orlov, “Novinka: Psikhologiya vybora,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 11, 1981.

⁶⁷ L. Lebedev, “Pered ot’ezdom v Luzhniki,” *Pravda*, May 25, 1973; Anatolii Druzenko, “0:0 i sto tysich vzdokhov,” *Izvestiia*, Oct. 31, 1973; L. Lebedev, “Kogda prikhodit vdokhnovenie,” *Pravda*, May 6, 1978.

process, video equipment and videocassettes with pre-recorded materials and films were distributed across a variety of institutions from the newly established Pushkin State Russian Language Institute (opened in 1974) in Moscow to the Lithuanian State Conservatory and the Department of Journalism at the Kishinev University in Moldova.⁶⁸ Video also opened new opportunities to maintain distance education, especially for the student-workers involved in large-scale Soviet infrastructural projects. For example, in the late 1970s, the Ural Polytechnic Institute recorded lectures in sciences and humanities and sent the videocassettes to the workers building the Baikal-Amur Mainline.⁶⁹

Not limited to the preoccupation with consumer-grade video as an educational device, the 1970s debate emphasized the need to provide the individual citizens with access to videocassettes with entertainment films and programs.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the paths for circulation and exhibition of emergent video entertainment still lay through collective leisure and public spaces beyond domestic settings, reaching the outer space. As a means of “psychological support,” VCRs and videocassettes with pre-recorded musical TV programs and films were part of the supply for the cosmonauts who particularly enjoyed the TV musical *Volshebnyi fonar’* (Magic Lantern, 1976, Evgenii Ginzburg), a groundbreaking show parodying foreign Western films and employing the elements of jazz and rock music and having a limited presence on Soviet TV due to the authorities’ concern about its mass appeal to regular audiences.⁷¹ The Soviet citizens serving in the armed and naval forces also proved to be among the first video

⁶⁸ D. Mikhailov, “Mir izuchaet russkii,” *Pravda*, Oct. 25, 1974; B. Mishkin, “Konservatoriia u moria,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Sept. 16, 1977; V. Malikova, “Elektronika v auditorii,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Oct. 30, 1979.

⁶⁹ “Leksii dlia BAMa,” *Izvestiia*, May 29, 1978.

⁷⁰ G. Panushkin, V. Romaniuk, “Kakim byt’ televizoru,” *Izvestiia*, July 12, 1974.

⁷¹ A. Burnazian and A. Eliseev, “Psikhologicheskaiia podderzhka v kosmose,” *Pravda*, Aug. 9, 1978. See on the role of *Magic Lantern*, Sergei I. Zhuk, “Soviet Americanists and American Visual and Media in the USSR during the Brezhnev Era,” in *Entangled East and West: Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Interaction During the Cold War*, eds. Simo Mikkonen, Giles Scott-Smith, and Jari Parkkinen (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2019), 182.

consumers, as VCRs and videocassettes gradually became constitutive of recreational activity at military garrisons and vessels.⁷²

Meanwhile, the so-called Palaces or Houses of Culture, a vast network of community centers and youth clubs, became a site of video consumption for the general public in the late 1970s. In the context of the flourishing discotheque movement frequently transcending the official spaces of public dance halls and clubs, the Houses of Culture aimed to attract the young Soviets by organizing discotheque parties accompanied by video screenings as an ‘ice breaker’ and effective means “to ‘regulate’ emotions of the guests.”⁷³ Watching films and music programs recorded on video from TV broadcasts was considered to contribute to the dialogical and intimate atmosphere among the attendees of discotheques, and, in the 1980s, organizing video screenings popular among the Soviets would turn out to be a regular practice for the Houses of Culture beyond dance parties, as we will see in the next chapter. In reviewing all these early instances of video entertainment’s penetration into the lives of citizens, whether they were cosmonauts or average workers, the public narratives tended to downplay the amusement of video experiences and foreground the capacities of video technology to sustain collective bonds and mental well-being in the contexts of social isolation. In the meantime, the routes for home video to impact Soviet viewers were increasingly through non-normative practices, although, significantly shaped by the habits of and public rhetorics around Soviet media consumption.

⁷² V. I. Kondiurin and E. G. Tiutiunik, *Tekhnicheskie sredstva propagandy v armii i na flote* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1983), 209–14; Andrei Zagarskikh (translator at the Soviet military garrison in GDR) in discussion with the author, March 2023.

⁷³ V. Khalonen, “Kogda nastupaet vecher.” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, April 18, 1980. See on discotheques Kevin C. Karnes, “Disco Culture and the Ritual Journey in the Soviet 1980s,” in *Music and Change in the Eastern Baltics Before and After 1989*, eds. Małgorzata Janicka-Słysz and Rūta Stanevičiūtė (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022); Sergei Zhuk, “‘The Disco Mafia’ and ‘Komsomol Capitalism’ in Soviet Ukraine during Late Socialism,” in *Material Culture in Russia and the USSR: Things, Values, Identities*, ed. Graham H. Roberts (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 173–95.

Whereas the Soviet engineers and electronic industries of the 1970s made efforts in developing local home video technologies, the advent of Japanese Sony's Betamax in 1975 and, in particular, more affordable JVC's VHS in 1976 played a dramatic role in reshaping the emergent Soviet video cultures. Although closely monitored and restricted, Soviet tourism was a crucial factor in paving the way for Japanese and other video equipment to start crossing the Soviet borders in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The representatives of Soviet financial and political elites, along with the workers awarded with the tourist *putevka* (travel voucher) or members of special delegations, who were allowed to travel abroad, usually in other countries of the Eastern bloc, were bringing the non-Soviet VCRs and VHS tapes with pre-recorded films, while the Soviets could also receive video by mail from friends and relatives living outside the country. The beginning of the War in Afghanistan in 1979 equally played a crucial role in the foreign video penetration, as the military personnel was bringing video to the USSR not only for their personal use but for reselling the equipment and cassettes overpriced, which quickly turned into a new form of private business.⁷⁴

The state-run chain of Berezka stores (Ivushka in Belarus, Chinar in Uzbekistan, Kashtan in Ukraine, etc.) and the black market around them allowed for another opportunity to obtain the coveted VCR. An "enclave of capitalism," Berezka stores were selling scarce and non-domestic luxury goods, including electronics, for foreign currency or special certificates.⁷⁵ They were available only for international tourists, diplomats, and those Soviet citizens who officially worked abroad and could not get paid in rubles that was, in turn, an inconvertible currency. The

⁷⁴ Oleg Karpov (video distributor from Tashkent, Uzbekistan) in conversation with the author, March 2021. On Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, and media flows also see in Gladys D. Ganley and Oswald H. Ganley, *Global Political Fallout: The First Decade of the VCR, 1976–1985* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 9, 23, 101.

⁷⁵ Anna Ivanova, *Magaziny "Berezka": paradoksy potrebleniia v pozdnem SSSR* (Moscow: NLO, 2017), 199.

average person formally did not have the right to shop there since the possession of foreign currency was illegal until 1991. Nevertheless, the vast system of illegal reselling of the Berezka goods and certificates, informal exchanges, and bribes allowed ordinary citizens to get access to desirable products. The cost of Japanese JVC or German Grundig could reach four thousand rubles. Yet, home video fantasy forced people to give up their savings and property to get the cherished technology.⁷⁶ As not only in the Soviet Union but entire socialist bloc, VCRs became a prominent symbol of “individual identity” as well as of the sacramental “consumer culture of the West and universal technological modernity” by the 1980s,⁷⁷ the prestige was nourished by the state itself, habitually evoking video as a marker of cultured individual but incapable to provide supply of video, which was compensated by the booming black video market.

The abundant flows and black market of video electronics and cassettes, in turn, contrasted greatly with the lack of pronounced debates on home video technologies and dramatically changing local video consumption in the major official media outlets during the first half of the 1980s. In the press of that period, a period marked by the death of Brezhnev in 1982 and the Andropov-Chernenko interregnum until March 1985, the video boom, occasionally addressed by journalists and film critics, represented a destructive phenomenon characteristic of the capitalist, primarily Western, world. Meanwhile, exposing the deep cracks in the socio-economic integrity of ‘mature socialism,’ a Soviet video user, either real or imaginary, largely disappears from the early 1980s public narratives. Sketchily depicted, Soviet video consumers migrated to cinematic screens as new fictional characters in the emergent sub-genre which Anna

⁷⁶ Ivanova, *Magaziny “Berezka”*, 169. One of Ivanova’s respondents recollects spending all the money saved to buy an apartment on acquiring an import TV set and video player at the store.

⁷⁷ Patryk Wasiak, “VCRs, Modernity, and Consumer Culture in Late State Socialist Poland,” in *The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe*, ed. Cristofer Scarboro et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 132.

Lawton calls “the underground economy films.”⁷⁸ Foregrounding the materialistic universe of shadow economies frequently with a woman at the center, these films, including the exemplary *Vokzal dlia dvoikh* (Station for Two, 1983, El’dar Riazanov) or *Samaia obaiatel’naia i privlekatel’naia* (The Most Charming and Attractive, 1985, Gerald Bezhanov), portray video owners as parasitic, albeit humorously harmless, black marketers with insatiable consumerist appetite.

A locus of the black market consumerism, home video technology, nevertheless, remained among the prime concerns of the late Soviet modernization project. After replacing Brezhnev as the General Secretary of the CPSU in 1982, Iurii Andropov, the former head of the KGB, launched a series of campaigns against secondary economy, corruption, and lack of working discipline. Targeting the archaic centralized management, insufficient integration of technological innovations, and poor supply of consumer goods, Andropov initiated a plan of economic reforms including the expansion of the rights of industries, particularly in electronics, in planning the production process, which anticipated the large-scale liberal reformist experiments of the second half of the 1980s.⁷⁹ Within the framework of the economic reorganization, in October 1983, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union declared the intensification of the sale of VCRs and videocassettes with pre-recorded films and television programs as one of the priorities for local electronics producers and all-Union institutions such as Goskino and Gosteleradio.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 38–42.

⁷⁹ Roger Keeran and Thomas Kenny, *Socialism Betrayed: Behind the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: International Publishers, 2004), 52–4.

⁸⁰ “Postanovlenie Soveta Ministrov SSSR ot 25.10.1983 g. № 1023 ‘O prodazhe dlia naseleniia videomagnitofonov i kasset s zapisiami videoprogramm,’” *Biulleten’ normativnykh aktov Gosteleradio SSSR*, no. 1 (1988): 112–3.

Following the official call, the new consumer-grade VCR Elektronika VM-12 first produced in Voronezh began to appear on the market in 1984, while only about two hundred VCRs of this model were sold that year.⁸¹ Throughout the 1970s, the Soviet engineers participated in international and domestic conferences devoted to home video formats, eventually facing the choice between Phillips's Video-2000, Sony's Betamax, and JVC's VHS and making the decision in 1978 to adopt VHS as a new standard for Soviet VCRs due to the technical simplicity and low cost.⁸² Elektronika VM-12, in turn, became the first Soviet-made mass VCR adapted for the VHS format. This legendary VCR, one of the symbols of the last Soviet decade, represented a modified model of the 1981 Panasonic NV-2000 the rights for which were officially bought from Japan: a prototype that, as the developers would later confess, was a "technical mistake" to rely on.⁸³ Designed predominantly for the PAL encoding systems, Panasonic NV-2000 allowed only for the SECAM variant used in the Middle East with a limited color resolution, which did not precisely match SECAM in the Eastern bloc. Thus, the Soviet mass VCRs operating through the Middle East SECAM, which was difficult to change due to the costs of re-design and re-issue of the machines, shifted the video imagery towards poorer quality and distortions emerging from mismatches with local TV signals and sets and videotapes.

In addition to this technical defect, which could, however, be compensated through decoders or remained not noticeable given the quality of videotapes deteriorating in multiple informal copying, Elektronika VM-12 had other flaws. With the cassette basket on the top, the VCR had a weak spring mechanism to hold the lid, which caused the systematic abrupt ejections of a videotape, encouraging Soviet video users to resort to a variety of tricks such as putting a

⁸¹ "Statistics," *Video Ace*, 1990, no. 1: 129.

⁸² Lishin, "Rozhdenie," 57.

⁸³ Valerii Samokhin, "Ostanovis', mgnoven'e! Ty prekrasno!," Stereo and Video, accessed April 15, 2022, https://archive.stereo.ru/whatiswhat.php%3Farticle_id=345.html.

clothing iron or pile of books on top to fixate the device. The VCR could chew the magnetic tape, which was particularly distressing in the context of the shortage of videotapes, and it was common to avoid exchanging cassettes with owners of the distrusted Elektronika VM-12 to prevent possible damage. Permanently in deficit supply (only ten thousand of VCRs were planned to be produced in 1985⁸⁴), Elektronika VM-12, just like its predecessors, was widely distributed across military, cultural, and educational institutions, while only certain groups of citizens, such as war veterans or honorary workers, could buy the VCRs in retail electronics stores without obstacles.

To acquire the video machines, the rest of the population continued to participate in the black market trade, in which speculators were now selling both the Soviet and imported VCRs, or could join the waiting lists for Elektronika VM-12 at the state stores with the waiting time sometimes reaching more than a year.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the Elektronika VM-12 had one apparent advantage: despite the still high price of 1,200 rubles, the Soviet VCR was two or three times cheaper than foreign video devices. And on top of everything else, during the mid-1980s campaign against video pornography and violence, accompanied by the police raids, Elektronika VM-12 would become the most reliable machine guaranteeing protection for the viewers. During the raids, the common practice for police was to turn off the electricity in the apartments from the outside, which did not provide time for the viewers to hide videotapes and allowed to catch them 'red-handed.' Contrary to foreign VCRs, Soviet mechanical mechanism of cassette ejection, the one that caused so much irritation, helped to take the videotape out without electricity, showing an empty VCR to the police.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ M. Sedov, "Videomagnitofony 'Elektroniki,'" *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, Feb. 14, 1985.

⁸⁵ Aleksandr Lipkov, "Video segodnia i zavtra," *Nedelia*, no. 33 (1985): 18.

⁸⁶ Sviatoslav Biriuchin, "Khroniki vidika: legendy VHS epokhi. Pervaia chast'," June 1, 2019, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLXtum_xY_Y.

By 1986, it was estimated that there were from 350,000 to one million of VCRs in the Soviet Union, and from 10 to 15 thousand foreign films circulating on the black market.⁸⁷ In turn, only 250 and 500 official videotapes were officially released by the state institutions in 1985 and 1986 correspondingly.⁸⁸ The situation was not much different in other countries of the Eastern bloc, and, for example, the Hungarian state film distributor Mokép equally offered 250 titles in 1985.⁸⁹ The lack of films on official video correlated with the overall film repertoire crisis, particularly characteristic of the rural areas. In one of the articles written by a film projectionist from Kazakh village, the absence of films and media for children, who in the meantime tried to self-organize creating their own film club and theater, was particularly emphasized.⁹⁰ The 1980s Soviet public debates were marked by such poignant articles and letters from around the country, while growing informal video circulation increasingly served to compensate for the scarce film and media supply. Carefully discussed in the early 1980s, the problem of inefficient official video distribution was linked to bureaucratism and inertness of sluggish state apparatus, which indeed became a marker of late Soviet state.⁹¹ It was also acknowledged that, except for the Baltic republics, the socio-cultural ‘West’ of the Soviet Union, and such video industry centers as Voronezh, the development of video is hit by “psychological barriers” as institutional workers refused to accept and merely feared the new unfamiliar machine and its impact.⁹²

⁸⁷ V. V. Birkavs, “Videopotreblenie: Pravovye i krimonologicheskie aspekty,” in *Prichiny otdel’nykh vidov prestupnosti i problem bor’by s nimi*, ed. A. I. Dolgova (Moscow: VNII problem ukrepleniia zakonnosti i pravoporiadka, 1989), 23.

⁸⁸ Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11; Valerii Kichin, “Raketa na priviazi,” *Nedelia*, no. 40 (1986): 10.

⁸⁹ John Cunningham, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffee House to Multiplex* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 118.

⁹⁰ A. Inkarebekov, “Repertuar–problema № 1,” *Kinomekhanik* no. 3 (1984): 9.

⁹¹ “Videotekhnika: zaboty segodniashnie,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, June 27, 198; V. Sergeev, “Novye vremena–novye formy,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, July 25, 1984.

⁹² E. Voitovich and V. Olitskii, “Za chem delo stalo?” *Nedelia*, no. 33 (1985): 18.

Echoing Romm's dreams about video library, in 1981, more than twenty years after, Soviet director Mark Zakharov still fantasized about the arrival of home video that, as he believed, would create "an extremely demanding and even fastidious viewer"—the viewer who, given the unrestricted and easy access to the best world and Soviet cinema and television on tape, would pay attention only to the media constituting "an event in the cultural life" and bringing "new conceptual and aesthetic information."⁹³ The director rightfully predicted the Soviet video audiences' enthusiasm about the eventful, unconventional, and new. However, he failed to locate the viewers' ideas about what constituted a genuine 'event.' Formerly expressing optimism about the progressiveness of video, Soviet cultural critics found themselves paralyzed by the screen tastes, actual and imagined, emerging from video consumption that, along with video technology itself, was increasingly acquiring eerily dystopian meanings in the public debates.

The Video Obscene

Against the backdrop of actual and declared state investment in home video industry, a plurality of anxious voices and suspicions with regard to VCR penetration and video content overtook the public sphere in the early 1980s. Repeatedly a signifier of anti-culture, anti-humanism, and eventually anti-socialism, VCR re-surfaces as a dangerous platform so that by the mid-1980s "the potential owner of video system is determined in advance to perceive it as a matter, if not explicitly of a criminal case, then clearly of reprehensible and asocial behavior."⁹⁴ Like elsewhere, in the Soviet Union, the rise of backlash surrounding home video seems to derive

⁹³ Mark Zakharov, "Po voskhodiashchei: Zametki o razvitii khudozhestvennogo televeshchaniia," *Pravda*, April 25, 1981.

⁹⁴ Lipkov, "Video segodnia i zavtra," 18.

from seeing it as a vehicle of unregulated pornographic and violent imagery. However, the Soviet debates, resonating with the rhetoric characteristic of the Eastern bloc more broadly, and consequently emerging, albeit short-lived, policies of video criminalization are characterized by two distinctive qualities. On the one hand, rather than pointing to the danger of the new medium to social morality as it is typical of most cultural contexts,⁹⁵ the Soviet narratives manifest anxiety about video linked to pornography and violence as a challenge of capitalism to the global cultures and socialism in particular, which, in fact, transferred the problem of video distribution and consumption to the existential and ideological domain of self-preservation. On the other hand, the Soviet case demonstrates particular, habitually arbitrary and disordered, approach to understanding what constitutes pornography and screen violence, which contributed to drastic instability of early video cultures and social landscape as such. In the context of underdeveloped local state video economies, both factors shaped the unprecedented public investment in video education gradually turning into specific form of marketing by the late 1980s.

A manifestation of the deformity of cultural production and consumption under capitalism, video as a pernicious medium emerged in the Soviet debates, beginning with the accounts of the campaign against the unregulated circulation of horror and pornographic videocassettes, or the so-called ‘video nasties,’ in the UK in 1982. In the UK, while the public called for censorship and control over the nascent video distribution, “children and the protection of childhood” constituted “an integral part of the rhetoric that was mobilized around the video nasties.”⁹⁶ In their responses to the phenomenon, the Soviet critics similarly expressed concerns

⁹⁵ See, for example, Douglas A. Boyd, Joseph D. Straubhaar, and John A. Lent, *Videocassette Recorders in the Third World* (New York and London: Longman, 1989), 67, 82–3, 259; Peter Alilunas, *Smutty Little Movies: The Creation and Regulation of Adult Video* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016); Mark McKenna, *Nasty Business: The Marketing and Distribution of the Video Nasties* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

⁹⁶ McKenna, *Nasty Business*, 95.

about the young generation, “the future of the country,” as the “first victim” of the ‘nasty’ misuse of video technology: a technology that “promised to give a powerful impetus to the process of school education, to promote the popularization of knowledge, and to enrich the sources of information and entertainment.”⁹⁷ Nevertheless, free market video economies, with the drive towards profit and the neglect of aesthetic value in the context of commodification of violence, became the primary target of Soviet critique. The video nasties campaign, as such, seemed to be problematic, criticized for the weak forms of combating the video dealers and the sensationalism that heightened the lure of the forbidden, which resonated with silencing the issues of local video consumption but simultaneously contradicted the graphic retelling of ‘nasty’ films in the Soviet press, particularly foregrounding cannibalism as one of the hottest video commodities in the capitalist West.⁹⁸ The Russian-language publication of the essay “The Genuine Art and the Video Nasties” by the Australian-British writer James Aldridge, favored in the Soviet Union, further solidified the parallels between the ‘dirty’ video market and capitalism. In solidarity with the Soviet voices, Aldridge proclaimed the video nasties a symptom of the capitalist “flagrant desecration of art,” reaffirming such video-based “degeneration” of cultural and artistic life to be “incomprehensible” under socialism.⁹⁹

Located at the core of the confrontation between capitalism and socialism in the early 1980s Soviet debates, the emerging video markets represent not only the capitalist “school of crime” in “cruelty, violence, murders, thefts, tortures and so on,” as, for example, West Germany seemed to prove.¹⁰⁰ The flows of video pornography, horror, and action cinema are interpreted as a straightforward challenge to socialism. In linking the 1980s “porno-epidemic” to the attempts

⁹⁷ V. Mikheev, “Prestupnyi biznes,” *Izvestiia*, Oct. 21, 1982.

⁹⁸ Mikheev, “Prestupnyi biznes.”

⁹⁹ Dzheims Oldridzh, “Istinnoe iskusstvo i ‘videomerzost’,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Nov. 12, 1985.

¹⁰⁰ “Posobie po prestupnosti,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Oct. 11 (1983).

to distract viewers from socialist ideas, the Soviet press quoted the West German film and television producer Günter Rohrbach saying: “From now on, it is not the bare breast that is something reprehensible, but the Red Banner.”¹⁰¹ Another confirmation of the weaponizing video against socialism but already in the sphere of gaming industry was the release of the US video game *Communist Mutants From Space* (1982, Starpath), which accompanied the new wave of the Cold War tension followed by Ronald Reagan’s 1983 speech on the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire.’

As a reaction to the intensification of the rhetorics on imperialism, the US, Japan, and France as the most powerful video economies and their relations between each other and to the Global South provide a lens through which the Soviet public attempts to comprehend the implications of the growing video industries on the global scale. Acknowledging the positive role of some French video distributors in the release of a series of Soviet films from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925, Sergei Eisenstein) to *Fate of a Man* (1959, Sergei Bondarchuk), the Soviet critics depict the French video market as both an emerging aggressive hub for pornography and low-grade entertainment and a victim of the US and Japanese video monopolies.¹⁰² While Japan, producing about 94 per cent of all VCRs in the world by 1982, becomes an indisputable leader of video industry, the Soviet public expresses confusion about the market-oriented policies in Europe, including France and Spain, that focused on the raise of taxes and introduction of quotas for Japanese technology imports.¹⁰³ Still perceiving video as a futuristic technology and matter of ideological rhetorics rather than already existent and booming economic sector, the Soviet press

¹⁰¹ R. Kotenok, “V labirintakh ‘videobuma,’” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Jan. 10, 1984.

¹⁰² V. Baskakov, “Ekrannaia agressia,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 4 (1983): 114–28; “Sinerama,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 4 (1983): 166–71.

¹⁰³ See more in Mark Mason, *Europe and the Japanese Challenge: The Regulation of Multinationals in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.

presented this pragmatic protectionism as unethical in the context of much more serious danger: the deployment of video in the “undisguised aggression of colonialism” and “information imperialism” across the globe and particularly developing countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, or India.¹⁰⁴ Drawing attention to video in South and Southeast Asia around the mid-1980s, for the first time the debates addressed the question of piracy, illustrating the inherent Soviet ambivalence about the phenomenon that challenged the regulations of capitalist markets to the approval of the Soviets and yet seemed to ease the flow of the Western entertainment and operate according to the same principles of profitability.

While the foreign video cultures epitomizing the market-oriented and consumerist attitude toward culture dominated the Soviet public discussions of video, the 1960s and 1970s utopian ideas about the progressive potential of the medium were getting pale in giving way to louder disappointment about and distrust for video technology rather than video content only. “The very intimate nature of video,” as one of the most bitter publications on video concluded, “makes it easier than ever for dealers to replace artistic criteria with commercial ones.”¹⁰⁵ The Soviet critics and scholars desperately denied the most vocal propositions of the Western video advertisers and theoreticians, questioning the ideas of the medium as an individual private technology and utterly rejecting the representation of pleasure of video as resulting from mere control over the image. Such notion of video seemed to be distorting of the genuine mission of technology, socially alienating, and aggressive, as it deprived cultural life and interaction with the screen of their meaning of aesthetic and spiritual elevation and integration into the world. Among all foreign intellectuals dealing with video, only German media philosopher Siegfried

¹⁰⁴ M. Tsyganov, “Chto neset informatsionnyi imperialism,” *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, Feb. 21, 1984; M. Tsyganov, “S kassetoi pod polio,” *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, June 28, 1984.

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Simonov, “Videobezumie,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Jan. 11, 1984.

Zielinski gained recognition, though highly limited. His critique of the role of miniature televisuality as a driving force behind the lessening of ‘big’ events, including war conflicts, provided a ground for expressing the broader sense of suffocation and threatening “small being,” which the “small screens” of video increasingly evoked.¹⁰⁶

Despite the fact the informal video circulation and consumption already became an indispensable part of the Soviet everyday, although mostly in the urban centers and among the upper strata of the Soviet society, the public debates remained surprisingly silent about local video culture. A key turning point was in 1985, when the April plenum of the CPSU led by the new General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev proposed the policy of *uskorenie*, or acceleration, as a strategy of urgent modernization of the Soviet socio-economic and management system, thereby providing a basis for the further radical reformation unfolding in 1987. A response to the continuing recession exacerbated by the steady decline in oil prices, the acceleration policy reproduced the preceding conservative scenarios suggesting the intensification of labor discipline and industrial production, predominantly in the heavy sector. Avoiding challenging the centralized command model of governance, the policy, nevertheless, fueled a shift that dramatically reshaped the nomenklatura cadre and control over information under the new watchword of *glasnost*, or transparency. Deriving from the Russian *glas/golos*, that is ‘voice,’ *glasnost* gradually turned into a fundamental programmatic tactic that centered on the encouragement of vocal “criticism and self-criticism as a means of reviving a stagnant party apparatus”¹⁰⁷ and openness in public discussion of acute socio-political issues, including video.

¹⁰⁶ G. Petrova, “Za fasadom video buma,” *Innostrannaia literatura*, no. 4 (1985): 202.

¹⁰⁷ Michael S. Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 54.

Both a condition and effect of *glasnost*, the massive turnover of Soviet elites occurred across administrative organs at all levels and in all republics, extending to governing bodies over film and telecommunications and editorial personnel in the press. The period between 1985 and 1986 saw the replacement of Filipp Ermash and Sergei Lapin, the powerful heads of Goskino and Gosteleradio correspondingly since the early 1970s, along with the appointment of the new chief and deputy editors and department heads to the majority of Soviet newspapers and magazines from all-Union *Pravda* and *Soviet Culture* to the republican press with the highest turnover rate in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan and to the specialized periodicals such as *Film Art* or *Soviet Screen*.¹⁰⁸ Emblematic of the revolutionary transformations in the film industry was the Fifth Congress of the Filmmakers Union, taking place in May 1986. Created during the heyday of the Thaw era in 1957 as an organization of film workers from across the country, the Filmmakers Union regressed from a dynamic reformist institution responsible for developing film policies in the 1960s to the “limp and voiceless appendage of Goskino” in the 1970s.¹⁰⁹ One of the key late Soviet cultural “upheavals,” the Fifth Congress, however, signaled a reversal in power now delegated in the hands of the thoroughly renewed leadership of the Filmmakers Union.¹¹⁰ In the spirit of *glasnost*, condemning Goskino’s planned film economy and repressive censorship, the organization remerged as a mouthpiece of the determined liberal reforms, including the rehabilitation of the “shelved” (previously banned for ideological reasons) films to be released on the Soviet screens.

¹⁰⁸ See more on the turnovers in Thomas F. Remington, “Gorbachev and the Strategy of Glasnost” in *Politics and the Soviet System: Essays in Honour of Frederick C. Barghoorn*, ed. Thomas F. Remington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989) 56–82; Also, Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev’s Glasnost: The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Perestroika* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁹ Marina Kosinova, “Parametry krizisa organizatsionno-ekonomicheskoi sistemy sovetskogo kinematografa,” in *Posle ottepeli. Kinematograf 1970-kh*, ed. Andrei Shemiakin and Iuliia Mikheeva (Moscow: NII kinoiskusstva, 2009), 39.

¹¹⁰ George Faraday, *Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle For Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 126–7.

As a means of administrative revitalization, the large-scale shake-up among media institutions simultaneously served to guarantee support for the Gorbachev-initiated policies “by disrupting existing political alliances” and promoting media personnel loyal to “enforcing the objectives of the *glasnost*’ campaign.”¹¹¹ In 1985, in line with the *glasnost*’ policies, the public discussion of home video as a social ill characteristic of the Soviet life, albeit coming from abroad, began to appear, accompanied by and simultaneously fueling the erupted crackdowns on video distributors and average consumers. A variety of new concerns, ranging from the relationship between video and decline in reading culture to the threat of cultural deformation of personality under the influence of video distribution of low cinema were articulated in the mid-1980s debates. The rhetoric on Soviet video madness and hypnotic video consumption compared to the AIDS epidemic and nuclear weapon accompanied the fear of the viewers’ imitation of crimes depicted in films arriving through mushrooming video channels.¹¹² Nevertheless, these concerns crystallized in the issue dominating the debates up to 1987, namely video as a channel for pornography seen as a “vehicle of bourgeois ideology”¹¹³ and considered to be a legal crime against the public health and social order.

Traditionally seen as one of the most ‘Westernized’ republics of the Soviet Union, Latvia, a principal outpost of the Soviet informal video market along with other Baltic republics (due to the closeness to European video markets), opened a ‘criminal’ series of video cases targeting the distribution of illegal content in 1985. In Riga, the wave of police raids at private apartments, summer camps for children, and abandoned buildings that typically served as sites for video screenings led to arrests and confiscation of VCRs and videotapes containing,

¹¹¹ Remington, “Gorbachev and the Strategy of Glasnost’,” 69.

¹¹² Kichin, “Video: ot bezumiia”; V. Gul’dan, “Video i prestupnost’,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, Dec. 17, 1988; Vsevolod Vil’chek, “Esli vam ne nraivitsia Shekspir, ia pozovu militsiiu!” *Video Digest*, no. 5 (1991): 6.

¹¹³ “Tsena klubnichki,” *Smena*, no. 6 (1989): 16.

according to a special ‘expert commission,’ pornographic films such as *Taxi Girls* (1979, Jaacov Jaacovi), along with propaganda of cruelty, violence, and anti-Sovietism.¹¹⁴ Following the 1985 arrests, as a response to the new phenomenon of video, the new article was introduced to the Civil Code of the Latvian SSR, implying fines or confiscation of video materials and equipment in case of the dissemination of recordings posing a threat to the state.¹¹⁵ Such soft punitive measures were not characteristic of most other Soviet republics having, albeit synchronized in basics, their own legal codes since 1960. In responding to the intensifying video distribution, republican police conventionally weaponized the previously rarely deployed Article of the Soviet Criminal Codes known as “Production or circulation of pornographic objects,” or Article 215 in Kazakh SSR, Article 244 in Tajik SSR, Article 228 in the Russian SSR, etc., and following Latvia, by 1986, the widely discussed cases were investigated in Armenia, Moldavia, Russia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine.¹¹⁶ The formulation in most of the Codes targeted “Production, circulation, or promotion of pornographic works, printed publications, images, or any other objects of pornographic character, along with trade in or possession of the above with the purpose of sale or circulation.”¹¹⁷ Yet, some differences were present, and, for instance, the Criminal Codes in Estonia, Kazakhstan, or Ukraine traditionally did not prescribe punishment for production of or keeping pornography, addressing only dissemination.¹¹⁸ The punishment was also not equal. Marked by one of the strictest approaches to regulation of pornography, the Criminal Codes of the Russian and Tajik SSRs prescribed up to three years of imprisonment or fine up to three hundred rubles with confiscation of pornographic objects and means of their

¹¹⁴ N. Kishchik and E. Vostrukhov, “Videouroki,” *Izvestiia*, Oct. 15, 1985.

¹¹⁵ Birkavs, “Videopotreblenie,” 25.

¹¹⁶ Iurii Liapunov, “Video s tochki zreniia zakona,” *Zhurnalist*, no. 12 (1986): 58.

¹¹⁷ Paul W. Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization: Legislating Obscenity in Post-Communist Russia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 168.

¹¹⁸ A. N. Ignatov, *Kvalifikatsiia polovyykh prestuplenii* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaya literatura, 1974), 246.

production.¹¹⁹ For comparison, in the Moldavian SSR, the analogous article prescribed a punishment up to one year of imprisonment or compulsory work or fine up to 200 rubles with confiscation.¹²⁰

“In our socialist society, just as in a well-groomed field, there should be no weeds,” the head of KGB Viktor Chebrikov commented later on the need to oppose video distribution of capitalist media, specifically addressing home video in his speech at the 27th Congress of the Communist Party in the beginning of 1986.¹²¹ Following the speech in the same year, the Criminal Codes of the Soviet Republics introduced a new legal prohibition, “Propaganda of the Cult of Violence and Cruelty,” combined with articles on pornography as, for example, Article 215(2) in Kazakhstan or Article 228(1) in Russia, which allowed to criminalize a broader scope of video imagery. Merging together, the articles on pornography and violence often went side by side with the well-known article on the prohibition of anti-Sovietism, and such productions as the *Rambo* series simultaneously described as “anti-Soviet” *boevik* (action film) and “war pornography” epitomized the symbolic and real fusion of these legal violations in the field of video.

Paradoxically, however, the campaign condemning and fighting video as a channel for pornographic and violent imagery provoked decisive public resistance to the ethical and legal prosecutions almost from the outset. Sanctioned by the same *glasnost*’ policies that enabled the campaign, the backlash seemed to expose the monolithic Soviet society as “a person whose left hand cannot synchronize with the right one” in forming the attitudes towards video.¹²² The

¹¹⁹ On Russian SSR, Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, 169–73; on Tajik SSR, *Svod zakonov Tadzhikskoi SSR, Vol. 8*. (Dushanbe: Irfon, 1987), 387–88.

¹²⁰ *Ugolovnyi kodeks Moldavskoi sovetskoi sotsialisticheskoi respubliki*, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://www.ulpmr.ru/ul/show/6ri7GpP7K2Xv7nzTk8LHOHOug1uct7H7c6CU=>.

¹²¹ “Rech’ tovarishcha Chebrikova V. M.,” *Pravda*, March 1, 1986.

¹²² V. Kichin, “Raketa,” 10.

lawyers, scholars, journalists, and regular video viewers expressing their opinions in letters to newspapers and magazines questioned the procedures of legal investigations that, as public debates emphasized, de facto resulted in outlawing the use of VCRs due to the arbitrary identification of pornography and violence, as any videotape could eventually turn into a



Figure 1.5. Video as a Criminal Object. Recording of the Interrogation of a Video Distributor, Voronezh, 1986. Screen Grab from *Vesti, Voronezh*, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://vestivrn.ru/stories/2019/12/23/sideli-za-eto-v-tyurme-kak-rabotali-nelegalnye-videosalony-v-sovetskom-voronezhe/>.

criminal artefact (Figure 1.5). A viewer from Belarus wrote in this regard, “I forced my son to resell our VCR because it has become something like the sword of Damocles. After all, any film that shows a woman’s bare shoulder can be interpreted as pornography if desired,

especially if random people or mossy traditionalists are judging.”¹²³ The ‘judges’ involved in the investigation of video crimes were usually the representatives of police or members of special ‘expert commissions’ that became a primary object of critique (and ridicule) targeting the legal proceedings against video distributors and owners.

The problem was described as twofold. On the one hand, gathered to evaluate the confiscated videotapes in each investigatory case, the local expert commissions habitually consisted of medical workers, particularly gynecologists and urologists, or even veterinarians in some cases, school teachers, and museum and movie theater personnel. On the other hand, while such ‘experts’ did not have competence in assessing pornography and screen violence, the lack

¹²³ Quoted in Valerii Kichin, “Chudo veka ili Damoklov mech,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Sept. 3, 1987.

of concrete legal definitions and instructions resulted in returning the verdicts based on “subjective views and individual life experience” as well as local cultural values, and therefore “the evaluation of the same videofilms varied in different regions of the country.”¹²⁴ Given the fuzziness of regulations, expert reports might contain such resolutions as “The film does not include direct depiction of erotic scenes, but the general line of thought [behind the plot] is that it can be considered pornographic.”¹²⁵ In attempting to provide guidelines for the investigators and citizens, the Soviet lawyers addressed the legal terminology by commenting that pornography constituted “videotapes that contain obscene, cynical depiction of human sexuality, designed to induce the unhealthy arousal of sexual instincts.”¹²⁶ However, the idea of what could be considered “cynical depiction” or how to measure unhealthiness of arousal remained a mystery.

The new criminal category of the films that propagandized “the cult of violence and cruelty” caused even more confusion, provoking hesitancy towards the status of films that were already part of the established Soviet screen culture and programming. While the viewers perplexedly asked whether *Battleship Potemkin* available on video would be possible to include in this category or not, the experts vaguely stipulated that the law persecuted only the films with the philosophy of “violence and cruelty” at the center as “a single, fundamental life value” with no alternatives.¹²⁷ In the meantime, in answering the questions about the well-entrenched law against “anti-Sovietism,” commonly paired in video investigations with prohibitions of pornographic and violent content, the legal specialists openly shrugged their shoulders: “It is difficult to unambiguously and briefly characterize the term ‘anti-Soviet.’ Anti-Sovietism

¹²⁴ V. Gul’dan, “Ekspertiza videofil’mov,” *Sotsialisticheskaia zakonnost’*, no. 12 (1989): 49.

¹²⁵ Quoted in “Kruglyi stol—‘Problema zastala vrasplokh,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, June 6, 1987.

¹²⁶ V. Gal’perin, “Delo o videodele,” *Nedelia*, no. 3 (1986): 16–7.

¹²⁷ “Video i zakon: vopros—otvet,” *Argumenty i fakty*, April 4, 1987; “Video i zakon: vopros—otvet,” *Argumenty i fakty*, Sept. 12, 1987.

includes slanderous fabrications discrediting the Soviet state and social system and propaganda of ideas and views hostile to the Soviet state, that is, the acts aimed at undermining or weakening Soviet power.”¹²⁸ If pinpointing anti-Sovietism in literature or song lyrics was common, classifying the feature entertainment films that dominated video circulation as anti-Soviet with legal clarity represented a problematic task, except for *Rambo: First Blood* (1982, Ted Kotcheff) on the Vietnam War and later *Rambo III* (1988, Peter MacDonald) set during the Soviet-Afghan War. Moreover, within the context of the rising *glasnost*’ era, when the criticism of Soviet institutions and practices was not merely permitted but promoted by state officials and ideologists, the accusations of anti-Sovietism seemed to be an inadequate, albeit ubiquitous, response to the problem of video distribution till 1989 when the article was abolished in the Criminal Codes of republics declaring their sovereignty one by one since the end of 1988.

The inconsistency of legal frameworks and regulatory arrangements, exacerbated by the general ambivalence about aligning films and media circulated on video, as well as medium as such, with the Soviet viewing habits and sensibilities, is reflected in the eccentric ‘criminal’ canons that emerged from Soviet video cultures. In addition to Sylvester Stallone-starring action films, among media deemed as anti-Soviet and particularly short-lived in terms of illegality were, for example, the US CBS biopic *Coming Out of the Ice* (1982, Waris Hussein) about the former prisoner of Gulag Victor Herman, British comedy telefilm *Red Monarch* (1983, Jack Gold) based on the collection of essays by the KGB agent Iurii Krotkov, James Bond film series, including *Octopussy* (1983, John Glen) depicting Brezhnev and Andropov-inspired character, and anonymous archival-like documentary on the 1918 murder of the Russian Imperial family by the Bolsheviks *Ot dvuglavogo orla k serpu i molotu* (From the Double-Headed Eagle to the

¹²⁸ V. Liapunov, “Video s tochki zreniia zakona,” *Zhurnalist*, no. 12 (1986): 58.

Hammer and Sickles) accompanied by Russian-language voice-over commentary.¹²⁹ In the meantime, while the police and press were battling the video flows of anti-Soviet imagery seemingly pouring from the other side of the border, the film that is traditionally considered the most audacious denunciation of the Soviet regime, Tengiz Abuladze's *Monanieba* (Repentance, 1984), was produced in Georgia and informally circulated among film and television workers on videotapes. Following the Fifth Congress of the Filmmakers Union in 1986, *Repentance*, metaphorically labeled as “political porn”¹³⁰ in the context of the persistent equation of the anti-Soviet and erotic, was decided to be released to the theatrical screens in 1987. Yet, even before the film reached movie theaters, it was already a hit in video parlors even in the Siberian peripheries of the country.¹³¹

The titles of criminalized ‘violent’ and ‘pornographic’ videotapes, in turn, revealed strikingly paradoxical and disordered Soviet everyday attitudes toward the relationship between screen representation and ethics—the attitudes simultaneously being reshaped in the course of the development of video culture and broader shifts in media policies and economies accompanying the erosion of Soviet political landscape. *The Godfather* (1972, Francis Ford Coppola) habitually crisscrossed the pages of press and police reports as a “conditionally pornographic” film and epitome of the cinematic “cult of violence and cruelty.”

Symptomatically, while the video owners of the film were subjected to moral condemnation and arrests, “Love Theme,” composed by Nino Rota, sounded from the Soviet radio and television screens since the 1970s, and its lyricized version “Speak Softly, Love” was performed by Soviet

¹²⁹ “KGB protiv Dzheimsa Bonda,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 57, 59. The anonymous documentary *Ot dvuglavogo orla k serpu i molotu*, YouTube, December 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5jbvafAVsU>.

¹³⁰ Igor Aleinikov, “Between the Circus and the Zoo,” in *Russian Critics On the Cinema of Glasnost*, ed. Michael Brashinsky and Andrew Horton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 55.

¹³¹ “Videosalony Irkutsk: ot ‘Pokaiania’ do ‘Emmanueli,’” *IRK.ru*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.irk.ru/news/blogs/irk-1522826645.94/1253/>.

singers in a variety of languages, which accompanied a vast series of critical and scholarly publications, both dismissive and increasingly celebratory, about the film.¹³² Along with *The Godfather*, videotapes with the pre-recorded *Straw Dogs* (1971, Sam Peckinpah), the remake *Breathless* (1983, Jim McBride), or *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984, Sergio Leone) remained under dispute and were pretexts for the actual criminal cases across the country.

Even by the late 1980s, when many guilty verdicts related to the video distribution of these films were cancelled, and the legal debates reassuring the abolishment of the articles on propaganda of the cult of violence were almost over, there was no consensus regarding the decriminalization and evaluation of violence on video.¹³³ For example, the list of the ‘violent’ films confiscated by the police in Azerbaijan in 1989 included Bruce Lee movies, anti-mafia non-fiction *Cento giorni a Palermo* (One Hundred Days in Palermo, 1984, Giuseppe Ferrara), as well as the officially released and popular films such as Indian romantic legal drama *Mujhe Insaaf Chahiye* (I Want Justice, 1983, Rama Rao Tatineni), Romanian-French peplum co-production *Dacii* (The Dacians, 1967, Sergiu Nicolaescu), East German *Spur des Falken* (Trail of the Falcon, 1968, Gottfried Kolditz) starring the Eastern bloc icon Gojko Mitić, and even Soviet science fiction *Cherez ternii k zvezdam* (Per Aspera Ad Astra, 1981, Richard Viktorov).¹³⁴

Video ‘pornography,’ in turn, often crystallized through the film lists that could stand for screening programs across the Western art house and festival circuits, including *Belle de Jour* (1967, Luis Buñuel), previously acquired by Sovexportfilm and shelved till the Fifth Congress of the Filmmakers Union, *Il Decameron* (The Decameron, 1971, Pier Paolo Pasolini), *Narayama Bushikō* (The Ballad of Narayama, 1983, Shōhei Imamura) that became a sensation among video

¹³² Stanislav Rostotskii, “Vremia s sem’ei – “Krestnyi otets’ v sovetskoi kritike i zhizni,” *Seans*, February 23, 2022, <https://seance.ru/articles/our-godfather/>.

¹³³ Vladimir Borev, “Videokukhnia: meniu na segodnia,” *Moskovskaia pravda*, Sept. 24, 1988.

¹³⁴ The list was published by Valerii Kichin, “‘Povestvuiushchie uzhas’?..” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, March 18, 1989.

viewers in Uzbekistan, Federico Fellini's films officially released in movie theaters since the 1970s, or *Last Tango in Paris* (1972, Bernardo Bertolucci).¹³⁵ As an iconic marker of the Soviet 1980s, evoking the "transgression of the moral order established by the society," "passion," and "emancipation,"¹³⁶ the latter would later be depicted in famous film scenes of collective video viewing and police confiscation of pornography in Vladimir Men'shov's *Zavist' bogov* (The Envy of Gods, 2000) (Figure 1.6). In the meantime, although pornographic video was indeed present, the majority of video titles stigmatized as pornographic were European erotic films that



Figure 1.6. Scene From *Zavist' bogov*: Watching *The Last Tango in Paris* on Video. Screen Grab.

simultaneously circulated globally across official big and small screens. Some exceptions to European productions were the US sex comedy *Porky's* (1981, Bob Clark) and musical comedy *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*

(1982, Colin Higgins) that was mistakenly seized by the Soviet police, just like in the UK during the video nasties campaign, merely because of the title. Innocent in other historical and cultural settings, these two films were at the center of one of the most famous video trials in 1986 for an artist from the Russian Ural region who was sentenced to three years of imprisonment but, due to

¹³⁵ G. Simanovich, "Ostorozhno, 'Dnevnaia krasavitsa!'" *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, April 21, 1988; Borev, *Video* 101; Igor' Kon, "Sexuality and Culture," in *Sex and Russian Society*, eds. Igor Kon and James Riordan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 15–44; Oleg Karpov (video distributor from Tashkent, Uzbekistan) in conversation with the author, March 2021.

¹³⁶ Vladimir Men'shov, interview by Valerii Kichin, "V spetsial'nom pokaze festivalia 'Dubl' dv@' – fil'm 'Zavist' bogov,'" *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, April 15, 2015, <https://rg.ru/2015/04/14/d2-zavist-site.html>.

assertive public protests, justified and released one year after. Nevertheless, getting the court judgments set aside in such video cases still led to social ostracism, dismissals at work, and family breakdowns, provoking “severe psychological trauma” among video viewers.¹³⁷

The films that formed the core of Soviet ‘pornographic’ video canon and repertoires of informal video parlors in the 1980s were Dutch *Turks fruit* (Turkish Delight, 1973, Paul Verhoeven), Swiss *Heisser Sex in Bangkok* (Hot Sex in Bangkok, 1974, Erwin C. Dietrich), Spanish-Swiss co-production *Sechs Schwedinnen auf Ibiza* (Six Swedish Girls on Ibiza, 1981, Gérard Loubeau and Antonio Molino Rojo), Israeli-West German teen comedy *Eskimo Limon* (Lemon Popsicle, 1978, Boaz Davidson), with the unquestionable dominance of West German softcore erotic comedies by Sigi Rothemund. One of these comedies, *Griechische Feigen* (The Fruit is Ripe, 1977), along with Just Jaeckin’s *Histoire d’O* (Story of O, 1975) and iconic *Emmanuelle* (1974) that divided the Soviet cultural life into “before and after,” constituted the “leading trio” not only of erotic video but Soviet, Eastern bloc, and global video culture more broadly turning into hits in such places as Turkey or Hong Kong.¹³⁸ The Soviet critics debating the genre of these films throughout the second half of the 1980s firmly confirmed the misclassification of the movies as pornography by 1990.¹³⁹ And although such films as *Drei Schwedinnen auf der Reeperbahn* (Three Swedish Girls in Hamburg, 1980, Walter Boos) could still provoke resistance on part of medical workers from Tajikistan or Russia who drew attention to their dangerous influence on children or rise of prostitution,¹⁴⁰ they became banal commodities widely available on video market. Moreover, as evident from one of the fullest

¹³⁷ “Tsena klubnichki,” 16.

¹³⁸ “Eroticheskie fantazii,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 74; Denis Bocharov, “Do i posle Emmanuel’,” *Kul’tura*, Sept. 21, 2012.

¹³⁹ Kirill Razlogov, “Da net tam nikakoi pornukhi!” *Ekran*, no. 12, (1991): 27; Oleg Goriachev, “Ot pornuhi i do programmy ‘Vremia’,” *Ekran*, no. 12 (1991): 26.

¹⁴⁰ M. Mukhametdinova, “Po sosedstvu s obkomom,” in *Partiinaiia zhizn’*, *Issues 19–24* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), 35; “Pis’mo iz glubinki: Vizit ‘Troianskogo konia,’” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 10.

post-Soviet video catalogs of erotic cinema, offered by distributors from Kyiv and, in fact, reproducing the Soviet list of persecuted ‘porn,’ the legal restrictions and regulations, rather than aesthetic criteria, shaped the formation of the established video ‘classics’ in the genre of erotica. As the catalog’s “Erotic cine-calendar” 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.”¹⁴¹

In characterizing the 1985–1987 “terror campaign against video culture,” Igor’ Kon, one of the first Soviet scholars of sexuality, who considered the arrival of VCR to be an essential factor of the sexual revolution in the Soviet Union, provided a twofold explanation for the criminalization of video: on the one hand, as Kon notes, criminalization constituted a defensive response of the Soviet elites to the fact that video distribution, and pornographic imagery in particular, shattered the fundamental privilege to have “their own personal keyhole into people’s lives” and blurred the lines between the ruling classes, that habitually accessed what was otherwise banned or unavailable, and the masses; and on the other hand, it resulted from the “adolescent perception” of visual culture and erotica on part of both “aesthetically illiterate investigators” and average Soviet viewers restricted by socialist socio-cultural and body politics and disoriented in the terrains of the high and the low and of sexuality.¹⁴²

In pointing at the role of elites in outlawing video in the face of the loss of monopoly on the regulation of cultural consumption, this explanation echoes some of the timid objections occasionally present in the mid-1980s debate and intensified by the 1990s. In these objections, the opponents of video ‘witch-hunt’ sarcastically raised a question of whether, unlike average Soviet viewers, the ‘experts’ who decided what videotapes were dangerous had immunity to

¹⁴¹ Galina Klevtsova and Andrei Kosach, *100 eroticheskikh fil'mov* (Kyiv: Slovo Polissia, 1994), 13.

¹⁴² Kon, “Sexuality and Culture,” 37.

unsafe content or not, hinting at the paternalism of Soviet officials framing citizens as weak-minded and hypnotized by video. Simultaneously, the opponents addressed the fact that most of the condemned and jailed video consumers were average workers, students, pensioners, and collective farmers rather than diplomats, military personnel, scientists, or other high-rank professionals who had an opportunity to travel abroad and were indeed the principal deliverers of video to the Soviet Union in the 1980s.¹⁴³ It is noteworthy that the issue of customs regulations was virtually absent in the public discussions of video. Only in the early 1990s, the customs authorities commented that, first, there were no clear and stable instructions regarding what constituted illegal video content, which made the procedure of confiscations at the border cumbersome and arbitrary, and, second, the travelers usually justified bringing in the videotapes, including erotica, from abroad by “educational purposes.”¹⁴⁴ Given the ‘nobility’ of the intentions and, no less importantly, of the travelers, video of various origins and genres was allowed to cross the Soviet borders to be persecuted from inside and among ordinary video viewers.

Derived from the same paternalistic policies of the state, the nearly-sacral status of education and culture played a decisive role in shaping Soviet video policies and understanding their implications, as also evident from the second part of Kon’s interpretation of the reasons behind the criminalization of video. Ignorance and infantilism of the Soviet audiences become an explanation for and assumed source of aberrations in both video control and consumption—the assumptions that similarly underlay the 1980s debates emphasizing the necessity of legal and

¹⁴³ “KGB protiv Dzheimsa Bonda,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 58. According to the statistics published in the article, about one hundred criminal cases against video distributors/consumers were opened between 1987 and 1989; 39% of the convicted ‘video criminals’ were workers, 20% were engineers, medical doctors, and public employees, 18% were students, and 11% were collective farmers.

¹⁴⁴ “Kasseta na tamozhne,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 120

aesthetic education. As underscored above, the enlightenment of the video viewers about legal acts and definitions and the promotion of professionalization of video expert commissions constituted the primary strategy the Soviet legal specialists and intellectuals embarked on to oppose the draconic bans on video. This strategy mirrored the broader didactic address characteristic of the state. In this regard, Paul W. Goldschmidt, commenting on the crucial role the alliance between the Soviet authorities and representatives of intelligentsia played in regulating the morals and pornography in the 1980s, notes that “The *intelligentsia* focus on the corruption of souls while the state is most concerned with its own continuance, but the interests are compatible. In practice, the state establishes the laws while the *intelligentsia* finetune the application of the laws. They become fellow travelers.”¹⁴⁵

Expanding the educational initiatives beyond the law, the public debates and institutions began to heavily focus on viewing habits of the Soviet viewers as the key issue in video pedagogy. It was acknowledged that “the most serious advantage and simultaneously the most dangerous disadvantage of video is that everyone will be able to compile their ‘cultural menu’ not from the offered ‘products’ but from what they really like.”¹⁴⁶ This, in turn, shifted attention to manufacturing the audiences’ preferences and tastes and forming the ethical and aesthetic values relevant to the emerging media landscape. As opposed to the centralized control and punishment, to facilitate the creation of a viewer “insensitive to low commercial art” and having “individual aversion to vulgarity [poshlost’]” was claimed to be a primary task in the context of the chaotically growing video market and flows of uncensored foreign media.¹⁴⁷ New video rubrics opened across newspapers and magazines in the mid-1980s, and later the research

¹⁴⁵ Goldschmidt, *Pornography*, 186.

¹⁴⁶ S. Bestuzheva, “Vzgliad v budushchee,” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 23 (1988): 20.

¹⁴⁷ “Video i zakon: vopros–otvet,” *Argumenty i fakty*, April 4, 1987; “Video i zakon: vopros–otvet,” *Argumenty i fakty*, Sept. 12, 1987.

institute “Video culture and youth” dealing with the study and popularization of video emerged in Moscow in 1988. Educational videofilms arrived to the video market, and such film as a three-hour *Iuridicheskie i esteticheskie aspekty eroticheskogo kino* (Legal and Aesthetic Aspects of the Erotic Film, 1989), produced by the magazine *Smena* and including commentaries of journalists, art scholars, legal experts on erotic imagery with the case of *9½ Weeks* as an example of high erotic aesthetics, served to purpose to develop erotic taste.¹⁴⁸ Reminding advertisement rather than socialist pedagogy by the late 1980s, the educational efforts that significantly centered on film erotica provoked ambiguous reaction on part of the audiences, as best illustrated by two letters from the viewers. In adopting the rigid rhetorics of Soviet officials, a viewer from Minsk (Belarus) celebrated the initiative, calling for more discussion and exhibition of erotica and building “our own sex industry” that would “catch up and surpass the West.”¹⁴⁹ In the meantime, a viewer from Tashkent (Uzbekistan), while defending film erotica on video, simultaneously sarcastically pointed to the tendency to “cram erotica into the framework of ideology, party spirit, and socialist realism,” which was indeed a signature of the new video education.¹⁵⁰

Although leaving considerable room for the citizens to express their opinion on video policies and cultures, the public debates and institutions rarely addressed the aspirations, motifs, and material conditions that propelled the consumption of ‘bad’ video among the viewers. Ironically, in echoing the official discourses on video as a site of education and cultural exchange that allows “peoples to learn about each other and become closer,”¹⁵¹ the viewers hardly mentioned entertainment or pleasure and foregrounded curiosity about the outside world and

¹⁴⁸ Vladimir Borev, “Molodezh’ i videocul’tura,” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 23 (1988): 21–2; “Fil’m pervyi,” *Smena*, no. 10 (1989): 20.

¹⁴⁹ L. Likhodeev, “Shtuchnoe delo,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 11 (1988): 34.

¹⁵⁰ “Erotika na ekrane: Dve tochki zreniia,” *Televidenie i radioveshchanie*, no. 11 (1989): 30.

¹⁵¹ Kichin, “Raketa,” 10.

desire for knowledge as a main source of interest in video. Video was a “substitute of *Travelers’ Club*,” as was noted with reference to the legendary Soviet television show on tourism.¹⁵² The forbidden, particularly erotic imagery, in turn, evoked the sense of cultural dislocation with particularly indelible force. In this regard, Soviet teenagers, in their letter, expressed the common view by concluding that video provided access to what “is impossible to either see in movie theaters or learn at school or from parents” and adding that “The films, especially *The Fruit is Ripe*, teach us how to live and love beautifully.”¹⁵³ Explicitly focusing on such responses from the video viewers could be an uncomfortable reminder of what the dominant accounts of late Soviet period tend to depict as the solid alienation from the domestic culture. Nevertheless, closer attending to the viewers’ preferences would, first and foremost, mean acknowledging that they formed in the context of the lack of alternative local offers and state video infrastructure rather than merely the lack of good taste among the audiences—the condition invariably located at the margins of the mid-1980s video debates despite the beginning of the *glasnost*’ campaign.

In explaining their choice to watch and organize screenings of video considered ideologically and ethically dangerous, the viewers simultaneously emphasized “prestige” and “the desire to surprise and ‘show off’ with something unexpected and original, which others do not have.”¹⁵⁴ Determined by the promise of sensation, shock, and transgression, the prestige attached to condemned video spectacle simultaneously derived from the broader status of video as a luxury. Given the high cost and deficit of VCRs, video represented a marker of high social standing throughout the 1980s, and, in the context of prosecution of erotic content, possession of video technology itself was appealing and eroticized. As a slippage of tongue, Soviet legal

¹⁵² Sergei Dobrotvorskii, “V storonu raia,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 10 (1996): 54.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Elena Mikhailovskaiia, “Video: perekhodnyi vozrast,” *Rabotnitsa*, no. 1 (1991): 32.

¹⁵⁴ Birkavs, “Videopotreblenie,” 31.

specialists, providing an explanation of the law on pornography, could present VCR as a means of male courtship, noting that, while video allows inviting a “pretty woman” at home, it helps a video owner demonstrate “confident handling of the complex apparatus and erudition in comments to a masterpiece of film art,” which the guest would appreciate.¹⁵⁵ The social, cultural and symbolic power that VCR endowed its owner contributed to delegitimization of video, provoking the “class hatred” critics carefully paid attention to by looking at some of the Soviet citizens’ letters calling for ban on video.¹⁵⁶ While Kon and the occasional mid-1980s critical voices depicted criminalization of video as an effect of seeking to control the masses from above, video was similarly criminalized and seen as a pornographic and violent technology from below while it highlighted the socio-economic inequality and class divide. Again, while the 1985–1987 campaign put emphasis on low morals, inexperience, and ignorance of video consumers who needed to be ‘cured’ through education, this factor usually remained silenced as it disclosed the failure of the state to create conditions for the VCR production and supply and the emergence of effective local video market as opposed to the booming informal video sector.

Scapegoated in the context of ineffective economic and media policies, the viewers and their criminal and flawed tastes remained at the center of the debates on video till 1987. The year 1987 saw the end of silence around Soviet video economies, with the beginning of the new period of liberal and democratic reformation known as *perestroika* (restructuring). At that time, public discussions and institutional policies abruptly shifted to the issue of “videofication” of the country, foregrounding the operation of the new state divisions of Goskino: Kopirfilm and Videofilm, created already in 1985 and 1986 correspondingly but staying on the periphery of video cultures until the *perestroika* age. This was the beginning of the story about the brutal

¹⁵⁵ Gal’perin, “Delo o videodele,” 17.

¹⁵⁶ Kichin, “Raketa,” 10.

struggle between the state and the private video business for the Soviet viewer who transformed from an object of socialist pedagogies into a consumer and source of gain, as it was proclaimed that “the criterion of ideological efficacy of video is the indicator of its viability in market competition, namely profit.”¹⁵⁷ The idea of pornography and violence as a social ill sunk into oblivion, while the public and state itself embraced their crucial role as a new commodity and powerful vehicle of video economy.¹⁵⁸ Instead, the concept of another video crime, copyright infringement, was gradually gaining prominence, while weaponized by the emerging video actors against each other in the 1990s. These shifts in cultural ideologies and economies, accompanying the extensive building of the video infrastructure since 1987, will be at the center of the next chapter.

¹⁵⁷ Vil’chek, “Potesniv riady muz,” 5.

¹⁵⁸ See more in Paul W. Goldschmidt, “Pornography in Russia,” in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999),

Chapter 2—From the Milk Mail to Bazaar: (Post-)Soviet Video Infrastructures

In 1990, film critic Leonid Pavliuchik, describing video parlors that became a symbol of the last Soviet years, wrote, “On Arbat [the birthplace of the first state videotheque in Moscow], in remote Tiumen’ [Siberia], in Tajik Kolkhozabad (I was in three locations in Tajikistan on a work trip a month ago), and in my own Ukrainian town Volhynia—everywhere, the same videoclip, violent, anti-humanist and ominous, is going around.”¹ Putting aside ethical considerations regarding the distributed video content, this observation reveals the ferocious efficiency, coherency, and coalescence of Soviet video networks, as opposed to the radical disorder and diversity often associated with their operations.

These networks emerged ‘from below’ in the early 1980s as an informal and cross-border distribution system. Given the lack of local home video policy and industry, for some they became the rescue from the “spiritual hunger” of the Soviet society.² Living under state centralized control, censorship, and permanent deficit, these viewers, who had been “isolated from the world film art for too long,” with the help of deft video entrepreneurs finally got to catch a glimpse of it “through the keyhole of ‘video.’”³ For others, as is evident from the film critic’s opening objections, these networks (epitomized by video salons and later media bazaars during the post-1991 market transition) were seen as having given birth to cultural impoverishment and a new tyranny, not least due to their highly efficient organization. Within the postsocialist context “of the deepest crisis and collapse of traditions and foundations,” including those of the Soviet film industry and distribution, entrepreneur-controlled video was

¹ Leonid Pavliuchik, “Kak ukrotit’ ‘dzhinna,’” *Pravda*, Jan. 26, 1990.

² Vladimir Borev, “Videokukhnia: meniu na segodnia,” *Moskovskaia pravda*, Sept. 24, 1988.

³ “V pogone za chernoi koshkoi,” *Moskovskaia pravda*, Jan. 22, 1989.

feared “to become the carrier of the spiritual AIDS virus, aggravating the process of dehumanization of the society.”⁴

Despite the apparent polarization between these two (post-)Soviet narratives, both reflect a shared deeply-seated fear of cultural confinement and its effects. There was no doubt for the Soviets that video opened the window on, or even the door, to the world. But this world had its own limits. Video became a “‘window onto Europe,’ and more often onto the United States, or, to put it simply, a means of accessing the kind of foreign feature film that had been previously outside the Soviet distribution.”⁵ Here, the rise of consumer video cultures seemed to signal the end of suffocating Soviet monopoly on screen culture and beginning of integration into the Western modernity with its freedoms, from market initiative to self-expression. From this position, everything Western, from Hollywood blockbusters to European auteur cinema and B-grade erotica and horror, could be potentially seen as “world film art,” and this leveling of cinematic registers is evident from indiscriminate categorization across video catalogues and ‘top lists’ circulated across magazines and newspapers. Simultaneously with this expansion of cinematic experiences, the video boom signaled the arrival of new cultural hegemony with its own limitations: the audiences, far from naïve and omnivorous, albeit very curious about any foreign video, were thereby expected to discard their previous viewing habits and attachments to other media formations and learn an entirely new—and often alien—film vocabulary. Thus some audiences inevitably perceived such celebrated foreign ‘film art’ as a mere flow of cheap and violent trash, shocked at the fact that such “filth” was not only popular abroad but even nominated for an Academy Award, as was the case with *The Fly* (1986, David Cronenberg): this

⁴ Vsevolod Vil’chek, “Esli vam ne nraivitsia Shekspir, ia pozovu militsiiu!” *Video Digest*, no. 5 (1991): 6.

⁵ L. Alova, “Dobryi dzhinn iz kompakt-kassety,” *Video Digest*, no. 3 (1990): 33.

could only be possible, as one female viewer from Kyiv (Ukraine) joked, because of exceedingly “healthy nerves and healthy life of the people living ‘there’” (meaning abroad).⁶

Praised or blamed for the closure of one world and opening of another, the providers of this new entertainment (the newly minted video entrepreneurs), as well as the vast circulatory infrastructure and economy they managed, seemed to occupy an ambiguous and somewhat autonomous socio-political space, existing in opposition first to the socialist state and, after 1991, to its capitalist heirs alike. In tracing the history of the (post-)Soviet video infrastructure, this chapter foregrounds the conflicting, and yet opportunistic, mimetic, and mutually beneficial transactions between the state and video entrepreneurs. Opening with a short overview of the emergence of Soviet video networks in the first half of the 1980s, it proceeds to examine the creation in 1986 of Videofilm, an all-Union state institution aimed at building of the centralized system of video distribution, and its eventual failure. Against this background, the chapter considers the formation of the more informal business cultures of video distribution: the legal private and on-and-off legal cooperative video enterprises linked to the *perestroika* (“restructuring”) era (1987–1991), the first stage of market liberalization, democratization, and removal of censorship. By looking at the two trajectories together, this chapter argues that, while influenced by the broader socio-economic and legal transformations, both the failure of Videofilm and the success of the new entrepreneurs stemmed, above all, from the involvement of the Soviet public institutions in video distribution. Sanctioned and encouraged by the socialist policies, these institutions were the Houses of Culture network of community clubs, Workers’ Unions, and youth organization Komsomol (the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League). In fact, destroyed after 1991, it was initially these public bodies that allowed for the formation of

⁶ V. Morgulina, “Mukha,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, April 14, 1990.

the post-1991 video economies, as exemplified by media bazaar Gorbushka (Moscow, Russia). Situated within the context of postsocialist transition to capitalist market, the case-study of Gorbushka (1987–2001) closes this chapter.

The Rise of the Soviet Video Networks

The exact origins of the video flows traversing the country in the first half of the 1980s perplexed and bewildered the Soviet critics, who acknowledged that “cassette cinema came to us in strange ways—arriving from the roadsides, from the edges, in the ways unfathomable and not always righteous.”⁷ While in the early 1980s, the official public debates depicted consumer-level video as a technology of the future, and local official home video production and distribution remained dormant, already existent video circulation, growing in size and impact since the late 1970s, appeared as a leap into the unknown. The informal networks of reproduction and exchange of textual content (*samizdat*) or audiotapes (*magnitizdat*) formed prosaic and everyday aspects of sociocultural life under late socialism. These networks, simultaneously reliant on simple manual copying, involving equipment that much more accessible and cheaper than video, developed alongside the domestic centralized publishing and record-producing markets, and the two realms partially overlapped in content, means of distribution, and circulatory channels. This, however, does not appear to be the case for the formation of Soviet video distribution. As discussed in the previous chapter, video technologies occupied local engineering thought and practice for decades, and professional video became the crucial television medium in the 1960s. Yet, there was no local state-sanctioned home video industry to counterbalance the rise of the

⁷ Valerii Kichin, “Video ot bezumiia k razumu,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 11, 1984; Aleksandr Lipkov, “Video: segodnia i zavtra,” *Nedelia*, no. 33 (1985): 18.

new inherently informal border-crossing Soviet consumer video culture; one that brought to life distinctive connections and ways of private and public being.

Irregular and random at first, these informal media flows of both, equipment and content, could, however, legitimately stem from the capitals of Soviet republic, as evident from the case of Berezka stores, or retrace the travel paths of the Soviet citizens permitted to journey abroad. More mobile elites, from diplomats to scientists and ballet dancers, were bringing video from around the world; Soviet tourists, usually allowed to visit the Eastern bloc countries, would spend their savings on VCRs and videocassettes purchased 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 the military personnel, whose principal location was Afghanistan (due to the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–89), was coming back to the Soviet Union with video bought in South Asia.⁸ A technological wonder intended for family, especially children’s entertainment, as well as that of friends and colleagues, video quickly became a crucial commodity, circulating in bulk via the growing cross-border and local channels, dependent in particular on transport workers servicing planes, ships, and railways.⁹ For instance, paving the way for one of the busiest informal media routes in the ex-Soviet region in the 1990s, Soviet sailors were the principal suppliers of video and audio media from Singapore

⁸ F. Luk’ianov, “Nashestvie na zakhon’,” *Izvestiia*, Aug. 27, 1989; Tristan Mattelart, “Pre-1989 East–West Video—Entertainment without Borders,” trans. Liz Libbrecht, *Réseaux: The French Journal of Communication* 2, no. 2 (1994): 267–280; Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11; Gladys D. Ganley and Oswald H. Ganley, *Global Political Fallout: The VCR’s First Decade, 1976–1985* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 22–26; Oleg Karpov (a founder of a video salon in Tashkent, Uzbekistan), in discussion with the author, March 2021.

⁹ The intersections between the Soviet transport systems and video distribution channels can be seen in the context of the broader history of the role of transport economies in shaping media cultures, as discussed by Elena Razlogova, “An Air Map for World Cinema: Aeroflot as an Infrastructure for Cinematic Internationalism,” *The Russian Review*, no. 80 (2021): 661–80.

in the 1980s, where the stores created “especially for the Soviets” showcased VCRs and VHS tapes as one of their key attractions.¹⁰

In the meantime, the Soviet border control was highly tolerant, not least due to the fact that throughout its history until 1991, international mobility was a privilege reserved for very few, thus traditionally limiting the flow of contraband. Regular citizens, not to mention transport workers and ‘special’ tourists, were allowed to bring unlimited amount of video goods, and customs duties were levied if travelers brought more than one VCR and two video cassettes, and by the late 1980s only 8–10 percent of the imported video was confiscated.¹¹ Confiscated usually during the 1985–87 video censorship and criminalization campaign or if were simultaneously delivered through contraband routes for other goods, these video tapes and equipment, however, still made its way into the country: the border control, which for the first time in 1990 allowed bringing copying machines (paradoxically, VCR was obviously not perceived as a copying technology) and television equipment into the country, introduced auctions of contraband goods, including jewelry, furs, and video, as the means to bring additional revenues to the dwindling state budget.¹²

The 1980s video trade in the Soviet Union, merging circulatory paths from a variety of places across the globe, however, did not have fully rely on transnational transport infrastructures and physical travel to acquire content. Both regular viewers and video entrepreneurs, including traders coming from remote regions like Siberia, recorded films and programs by catching broadcasts from European television, whose signals were available

¹⁰ D. Kosyrev, “Moriak s avos’koi v Singapore,” *Pravda*, Jan. 4, 1990; Erkin Tuzmukhamedov, “Situatsiia s audiopiratsvom v Rossii,” *Kommersant*, July 22, 1994.

¹¹ A. Morozov, “Tamozhennyi kontrol’,” *Video Digest*, no. 2 (1989): 7–8.

¹² “Tamozhnia-90: Kto bol’she?” *Pravda*, Jan. 19, 1990; A. Kurbatov, “‘Besplatnye’ tsennosti? Tamozhennyi auktsion,” *Pravda*, May 29, 1990.

through the airwaves in the ‘West’ of the USSR—Baltic republics, Belarus, Western Ukraine, and Central Russia.¹³ Broadcasts from other regions, like the Middle East, were also increasingly available, and, by the early 1990s, for example, video recordings of Iranian television programs, as well as VHS tapes from Iran emerged in Tajikistan (the republic whose dominant language is a variant of Farsi), from there circulating towards other (ex-)Soviet cities along with the Caspian caviar.¹⁴ The broadcast contraflows also existed, particularly in places with the large Soviet diasporas, such as Israel, where viewers circulated videos recorded from Soviet television, as well as sent locally distributed foreign tapes back to the USSR, thus contributing to the creation of a separate distribution channel.¹⁵ Cross-border mail delivery of videos was also becoming increasingly frequent. Nor was it reduced to the circulation of films and TV programs: by the 1990s, the Soviet enthusiasts, as members of the International VideoPals Foundation based in the US, could exchange video letters and other amateur recordings with the citizens of twenty countries.¹⁶

In continuation of these already dizzyingly diverse circulatory routes, the local Soviet market, in turn, formed a “fantastic network of exchanges [...], purchases-sales, renting, and re-recording.”¹⁷ Barely visible on the surface of public life until the mid-1980s, this network made itself felt through the emerging secret vernacular language, breaking through in conversations between ordinary citizens. *Pisateli* (‘writers’), *triapki* (‘rags’), *molochnaia pochta* (‘milk mail’), *gnusavyi* (‘nasal’), and *salon* (similar to ‘parlor’) were the cryptic words added to the Soviet

¹³ “Problema zastala vrasplokh,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, June 6, 1987; Nikolai Stepanchenko, “V setiakh mafii ili blagie namereniia,” *Video Ace*, no. 2 (1990): 12–14; Iuliia Perelomova, “Televizor plius vidak,” *Irkutskii reporter*, Sept. 9, 2016.

¹⁴ Eric Hooglund, “Iran and Central Asia,” in *From the Gulf To Central Asia: Players in the New Great Game*, ed. Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), 122; A. Urvantsev, “Poimany s polichnym,” *Pravda*, Sept. 13, 1989.

¹⁵ Vladimir Volov, “‘Russkaia antenna’ v Izraile,” *Video Ace*, no. 2 (1990): 72–3.

¹⁶ “Videos for Peace,” *Video Review*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1991): 31.

¹⁷ Leonid Parfenov, “Tretii ekran,” *Pravda*, Sept. 25, 1987.

everyday vocabulary registering the arrival of and the collective attempts to give signification to the new cultural phenomena and practices. Increasingly, everyone knew that ‘writers’ were the entrepreneurs who received films and programs from abroad to copy the content to blank videotapes and circulate them across ‘milk mail’: the informal network of video sales and exchange. The term was not metaphorical: by coincidence, the size of the standard VHS cassettes coincided with the most common Soviet dairy packaging, therefore tapes were usually distributed in plastic bags marked “Milk.” While in the vortexes of ‘milk mail’ high-quality videos were rare and in high demand, ‘rags’—meaning either low-quality copies of copies or camrips (bootleg recordings made in movie theaters)—were perfectly acceptable to viewers and the norm of Soviet video consumption.

Similarly common and accepted was the distribution and consumption of foreign-language videos mediated by the ubiquitous monotonous and monovocal voice-over translations made by ‘the nasal,’ a video translator—this practice quickly becoming mundane. Translation was the first and foremost condition for successful local video distribution, and the video ‘writers’ actively sought out translators, particularly those experienced in and capable of fast and efficient screen translation. Subtitling, rarely employed even in the official Soviet screen distribution, was a time-consuming method that also required the use of additional hard to come by equipment. The preference was therefore given to voice-over translation: a practice that, along with dubbing, was constitutive of the local audiences’ viewing habits as it was widely employed on television, as well as during film festivals and other screenings limited to specialized movie theaters and cultural institutions, which were common in major cities and in all of the republics’ capitals. Unlike the expensive studio-made and synchronous dubbing, voice-over was performed by a single simultaneous translator ‘on the fly’: cheap and quick, it was a

perfect solution for any pragmatic Soviet video distributor. Small video entrepreneurs hired translators from among the students of the Foreign Language university departments or enthusiasts who knew foreign languages, especially English that was in the highest demand. From the outset, however, it became clear that it was the professional film translators who would guarantee stable video distribution. Such professionals could be found within the walls of official Goskino institutions, such as, for example, the divisions of Sovexportfilm, the state organization responsible for foreign film distribution.

These professional film interpreters were part of video circulation from the earliest days of the ‘milk mails.’ For example, Aleksei Mikhalev, one of the main protagonists in the forthcoming chapters, who was a personal translator of Leonid Brezhnev and the voice of Soviet film festival circuits, translated and voiced his first film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Miloš Forman, 1975), for Moscow’s informal networks as early as 1979. The common practice for a video translator, who rarely had an opportunity to watch a film or program in advance, was to interpret and record vocal translation over the original soundtrack directly onto a videotape. After that, a videotape with the translator’s voice-over imposed over the original soundtrack (both audible in this new version), was copied and circulated. Re-recording of the voice-over translation in case of errors was usually impossible, at least until the arrival of the more advanced professional VCRs, such as, for example, JVC-BR6400-TR that had an option of parallel tracks recording. Yet, even after that, corrections were rare: translators had to work fast, as it wasn’t uncommon for them to translate up to seven videotapes per day.¹⁸

These material factors of clandestine video distribution shaped both the linguistic and vocal performance aspects of video translation. Tired translators made mistakes, had no chance

¹⁸ Sviatoslav Biriuchin, “Khroniki vidika: legendy VHS epohi. Vtoraya chast’,” June 1, 2019, video, 23:35, <https://youtu.be/N3YtrT0AjHg?t=1414>.

to think through a translation strategy, and improvised by trying to guess the meaning of unheard or unknown 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” machine-like quality, hence the slang word. This ubiquitous ‘nasal’ translation delivery on video, in turn, engendered the 1980s rumor that the video translators used clothespins on their noses so that KGB and the police could not identify them. Yet, translators, whose number was very small, despite being easily recognizable and soon widely known across the Soviet Union, were never persecuted. As another famous video translator, Vasilii Gorchakov recalls, they could translate *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) for the officials at their dacha party one day and do the same for unofficial video distributors the next day.¹⁹ In fact, translation was seen as the creative practice, which made Soviet video circulation look less ‘pirate’ and therefore less objectionable.

The early video networks gave birth to a few star translators, later called ‘authors’ or ‘auteur translators,’ and most videotapes spoke in their voices, typically in Russian, which allowed for broader country-wide distribution, given its status as a Soviet lingua franca. And that voice was almost always male. Female voices, like that of Liudmila Skalova, a Soviet film festival translator from French and Italian, were extremely rare and predominantly emerged in the 1990s, when single-voice interpreting was still the dominant video distribution practice. In Skalova’s account, after translating just a few films, such as *Noce Blanche* (White Wedding, 1989, Jean-Claude Brisseau) and *Volere volare* (To Want to Fly, 1991, Maurizio Nichetti), she

¹⁹ Vasilii Gorchakov, “Odin na odin,” interview by Vladimir Glazunov, *Nostalgia*, May 15, 2012, video, 15:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cbr-XQ8OWW8>.

cut ties with video distributors: she was not capable of working at the speed they required, and the distributors themselves did not like her voice, letting her know they preferred men.²⁰

A symbol of the (post-)Soviet video, in the early 1980s, while the video networks based on uninterrupted and systematic translation labour were only forming, voice-over interpreting could also be performed by regular viewers right during collective screenings. These translations offered their own form of entertainment due to mistakes and improvised and made-up dialogue: as one such viewer from Surgut (Siberia), an ‘oil town,’ where video was more affordable from the outset of the VHS era, humorously recalls, in translating some Turkish film he compensated his limited knowledge of the language by adding “oriental expressivity” to any love scene with remarks such as “I love you, dear, like I love the sun and the moon.”²¹

An expensive commodity, video, regardless of its technical or aesthetic qualities, was a symbol of high social status not available to many, therefore collective screenings were another norm of Soviet video culture. Owned by few but viewed by many, it marked the underground culture of the young and the hip, epitomized by video *salon* gatherings. The term was a deliberate evocation of the cultural sensibilities of the pre-1917 Russian Empire, where ‘salons’ borrowing this tradition from France, emerged as centers of artistic life, gathering intellectuals and aristocratic elites. The late- Soviet and early post-Soviet video parlors were likewise called ‘salons,’ and the same word was later used to refer to computer clubs in the late 1990s and 2000s. From its origins as informal collective home screenings, video salons transformed into secret thirty-to-forty-seat exhibition sites—usually a large room filled with chairs and one TV set and VCR at the center. By the mid-1980s, they started unofficially mushrooming across the abandoned buildings, basements, and increasingly, the Houses of Culture, the community clubs

²⁰ Liudmila Skalova (film translator) in conversation with author, April, 2022.

²¹ Rustam Arifdzhonov, “Kak sinkhronno dublirovat’ Khemingueia, ne vykhodia iz doma,” *Izvestiia*, May 28, 1996.

that were principal Soviet cultural institutions regulated either directly by the state or working collectives and responsible for enlightenment and organization of leisure time for citizens.

As the deputy minister of culture of USSR acknowledged with regard to the obvious informal video boom, Soviet people's new cultural needs turned out to be more numerous and diverse than expected, which "placed increased demands on the material base of culture—the base that has lagged far behind in its development."²² In attempting to catch up with the blossoming 'milk mails' and video salons, it was decided in 1985 to begin the active 'videofication' policy that seemed to be finally feasible, as the first Soviet VCRs went into mass industrial production. This policy implied the mass opening of official video salons and also introduction of *videotheques*, or 'video libraries' (*videoteki* in Russian as a term modeled on the French word 'bibliothèque') that functioned as a state rental site either in video salons or independently.

State Video: *Videofilm*

Following the opening of the first official videotheque in Voronezh (Russia) in May 1985, in the same year, videotheques emerged in six Soviet capitals, including Baku, Kyiv, Minsk, Riga, and Vilnius, and Moscow, along with four other cities in the Russian SSR, such as Kaliningrad, Leningrad, Novorossiysk, and Rostov-on-Don.²³ Located in the cities where the sails of the VCR "Elektronika VM-12" started, the 1985 videotheques were an initiative and area of control of Goskino, namely the newly established video division responsible for centralized running the video repertoire planning and distribution at Soiuzkinofond (the All-Union Association for Film

²² T. Golubtsova, "Mir uvlechenii—novye formy, novye problemy," *Kommunist*, no. 1 (1987): 84.

²³ M. Sedov, "Kassety na vybor," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, June 13, 1985; "Otkryta videoteka," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, Nov. 08, 1985; K. Abaev, "Pokazhet video," *Izvestiia*, no. 174 (1985): 6; V. Markov, "Sovetskaia videoteka: pervye shagi," *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 2 (1986): 7; E. Askerov, "Novoe delo," *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 4 (1986).

Distribution). Since 1986, in the course of the state ‘videofication’ policy, the official cultural and public institutions, from movie theaters to Houses of Culture and Workers’ Unions, were encouraged and even required to open videotheques and video halls, or ‘salons,’ for the citizens, which signaled the beginning of the large-scale attempt to create a regulated Soviet video economy with the emphasis on advancing rental services and public exhibition sites. In this context, the Soiuzkinofond video division was reorganized in Moscow-based VPTO (the All-Union Production-Creative Association) “Videofilm” in November 1986 with branches in Soviet republics and at major film studios. Along with Kopirfilm, a Goskino body performing all-state control over the industrial production of film and video copies, Videofilm served two fundamental goals: the development of video programming in collaboration with film and television producers and distributors, both domestic and foreign; and the organization of the mass supply of video to the emerging institutional video centers that were opening upon submitting an application to and approval of Videofilm.

Beyond providing an alternative to the vast underground video market, the ambitions of Videofilm were to create a whole new sector of profitable state media industry and vibrant cultural consumption. The approach to envisioning this sector, along with paradoxes and shifts in official video policies, is best seen through the advertising films promoting state video, particularly the Mosfilm short *Vpolne veroiatnye videoprikliucheniia* (Quite Believable Video Adventures, 1985, Vitalii Fetisov) and Kyivnaukfilm (Kyiv Science Film Studio) production *Oborudovanie videosalonov* (Equipment of Video Salons, 1988, Fedor Gorodetskii). While overlapping in locating video in relation to other media and addressing the Soviet video viewer, these two twenty-minute films reveal the different assumptions underlying the building of the state video market. These films, produced in 1985 and 1988 years correspondingly and seen

together, also reflect the fluctuation caused by the issue of the crucial interrelated *perestroika* laws: the Law on Individual Labor Activity (November 1986), the Law on State Enterprise (June 1987), and the Law on Cooperatives (May 1988).

Providing the grounds for the emergence of legal private entrepreneurship in the Soviet Union, the 1986 law permitted the individual and collaborative family labor that allowed earning additional income in free time from the main professional occupation (as full time employment with the state was still mandatory in most cases), and the 1988 reform legalized ‘cooperatives’ as private collective economic enterprises independent from the state. In turn, the 1987 law significantly relaxed the administration of state enterprises, including Goskino and particularly Videofilm, shifting to the *khozraschet* (economic accounting) system, which implied the gradual re-orientation from the reliance on state funding to self-financing model through making a profit. In the context of economic liberalization and deregulation, first, Videofilm faced competition not only with the informal video networks. Now, the emerging legal, albeit typically linked to shadow sphere, sector of video economies, embracing both straight-to-video production and distribution, represented a main threat to monopoly of Videofilm. And second, as a state institution, Videofilm was itself transforming into an autonomous economic actor operating on the basis of market-oriented and profit-driven strategies.

Released at the dawn of emergence of Videofilm and before the wave of economic reformation, the 1985 advertising film *Quite Believable Video Adventures* represented a collage juxtaposing redubbed scenes from the Soviet-Italian comedy *Neveroiatnye prikliucheniia ital'iantsev v Rossii* (Unbelievable Adventures of Italians in Russia, 1974, El'dar Riazanov and Franco Prosperi) and musical film short depicting video salon opened in the heart of Moscow—the Arbat Street, later referred to by Svetlana Boym as “a monument to the newly born Soviet

market economy.”²⁴ The film was included in each state-produced videotape and widely shown at movie theaters before screenings and on television. Hunting for the treasure of the Russian white émigré in the original 1974 film, this time, the revoiced Italian travelers fly from Rome to the Soviet Union to search for the cultural “cure”: a 300-title video collection released by Goskino (Figure 2.1.). The advertising short, allegedly having “a ‘family’ audience in mind,”



Figure 2.1. *Quite Believable Video Adventures*. Display of the Videofilm Productions at Videotheque / Video Salon in Moscow, 1985. Screen grab.

aimed “to demonstrate the capacities of ‘video’ as a spectacle.”²⁵ It showcased a vortex of videocassettes with pre-recorded concerts of the Soviet stars Alla Pugacheva and Liudmila Gurchenko, described in the film as “musical hallucinations,” or

Soviet-Romanian musical fairy tale *Ma-ma* (1976, Elisabeta Bostan), along with “old films that are better than the new ones,” such as musical film marking the Stalinist era *Veselye rebiata* (Jolly Fellows, 1934, Grigorii Aleksandrov) or war film *Dva boitsa* (Two Soldiers, 1943, Leonid Lukov); comedies *Aibolit-66* (1966, Rolan Bykov) and the 1960s hits directed by Leonid Gaidai; and films allowing a female viewer to see “a real man with the tender and kind soul,” namely *Ne goriui!* (Don’t Grieve, 1969, Georgii Daneliia), *Vertikal’* (1967, Stanislav Govorukhin and Boris Durov), and *Beloe solntse pustyni* (White Sun of the Desert, 1970, Vladimir Motyl). Under the

²⁴ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 233.

²⁵ “Vpolne veroiatnye videopriklucheniia,” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 6 (1986): 3.

accompaniment of a song glorifying video as a magician that “gives choice” and is the “enemy of boredom, spleen, and loneliness,” the Italian guests find all these precious videotapes at videotheque of Moscow’s video salon to bring them back to Italy.

In foregrounding video salon as a site of “saving films of many generations” and the state video repertoire predominantly consisting of the canonical exemplars of popular Soviet cinema, the Mosfilm *Video Adventures* highlights the major trajectory in developing the state video economy, namely seeing video as a channel of re-release film distribution, or, in the words of critics of Videofilm, an “appendage and stepchild of film network.”²⁶ The representatives of the forming Videofilm tended to underscore that feature films would represent only a part of the planned video programming for official videotheques and video salons, emphasizing the distribution of musical programs and children’s animation, as well as ‘how-to’ instructional videos covering topics of housekeeping, fashion, psychology, health, pets, and a variety of everyday competencies from driving a car to swimming, which reflected the deeply rooted notion of video as an educational medium.²⁷ Emerged as a distribution organization, Videofilm planned to circulate films, television programs, and straight-to-video media by deploying the archives and newly forming collections of Soiuzkinofond and Gosteleradio, that is “using others’ capital and others’ productions to give them a different, new life.”²⁸

Nevertheless, while local straight-to-video production remained dormant, video circulation of recent films and media seemed to threaten their theatrical and television viewership and revenues, and, for example, it was not until 1988 that Gosteleradio signed an

²⁶ G. Ugol’kov, “Podriad na prokat,” *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, Jan. 29, 1988.

²⁷ E. Voitovich and V. Olitskii, “Za chem delo stalo? Interview,” *Nedelia*, no. 33 (1985): 18; “Sovetskoe video segodnia i zavtra,” *Video Digest*, no. 1 (1989): 15–16; L. Alova, “Dobryi dzhinn iz kompakt-kassety,” *Video Digest*, no. 3 (1990): 33–5.

²⁸ L. Chirkov, interview with Konstantin Kochuashvili, “‘Videofilm’ na marshe,” *Tekhnika kino i televideniia*, no. 4 (1993): 3.

agreement to provide Videofilm with only fifty hours of programs annually.²⁹ The first state video offers included foreign cinema, such as the US films *Scaramouche* (1952, George Sidney) and *Convoy* (1978, Sam Peckinpah), Spanish animation *Los Viajes de Gulliver* (1983, Cruz Delgado), and Italian-Franco-Algerian musical *Le Bal* (The Ball, 1983, Ettore Scola). Yet, video distribution of foreign productions was equally challenging, as it required the acquisition of copyright licenses through bilateral agreements, given the non-participation of the Soviet Union in any international copyright regimes except for the 1952 Universal Copyright Convention it signed in 1973, which I will return to below.³⁰

In this context, already distributed films and some television programs, particularly musical concerts and clips, proved to be constitutive of state video content dominated by well-familiar domestic productions. Rather than competing with the informal video market in its battleground, which is foreign content, Videofilm, as manifested in *Video Adventures*, invited the Soviet video consumers to adopt the position of the ‘Western’ viewer (Italian protagonists here) in relation to the video ‘archive’ of Soviet cinematic heritage as an exotic spectacle and therapeutic cultural alternative. As it was taken for granted that the “video production that is in the highest demand among consumers is distinguished by low artistic quality, unassuming content, and alien worldview,”³¹ the Soviet viewer was already framed as a foreigner alienated from this heritage in navigating the video flows of informal distribution and, therefore, possible to be attracted by the Soviet classics that, in the meantime, could now bring additional grosses to Goskino budget through secondary video renting and exhibition.

²⁹ Svetlana L’vova, *Po zakazu Gosteleradio SSSR: osnovy pravoobladaniia na telefil’m y zolotogo fonda sovetskogo kino* (Moscow and Berlin: Direkt-Media, 2020), 40.

³⁰ Markov, “Sovetskaia videoteka.”

³¹ Vladimir Borev, “Klub i SMK: konkurentsiia ili perspektivy vzaimodeistviia?” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 6 (1988): 4.

In 1987, Oleg Uralov, the former documentary filmmaker and head of the Central Studio of Documentary Film (CSDF)—“the loyal squad of the Party” and a key site of production for Soviet media propaganda—became the head of Videofilm. He remained in this position until 2002, while the organization, which continues to exist as of today, went through a series of transformations from state “corporation” to a private media company.³² Uralov was the secretary of the Filmmakers’ Union after the 1986 Fifth Congress, and the Vice Chair of Goskino since 1988, making him one of the most influential figures within late Soviet film administration, later described as a builder of “his own video empire.”³³ With his arrival, Videofilm made an attempt to actively organize its straight-to-video production. Its production plan, meanwhile, was clearly modeled on the creative practices and policies of CSDF. One of the first productions released by Videofilm was the CSDF documentary by Uralov himself: *Delo ob ukradennoi skripke* (The Case of the Stolen Violin, 1986) centered on the problem of Soviet contraband. This choice of topic unambiguously signaled the decisive challenge to the shadow market, including shadow video market. The straight-to-video production of Videofilm also included “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 documentaries on the history of Russian primitivist art, romance and guitar music or bell ringing.³⁴ In other words, the state straight-to-video repertoire represented standard Soviet educational fare, simultaneously pointing to the attempts of Videofilm to address emerging local popular trends, such as the recently re-discovered interest in primitivism and re-legitimization

³² Oleg Uralov, “Neokonchennye vospominaniia,” last modified March 2, 2016, <https://csdfmuseum.ru/articles/36-почему-это-произошло-с-нашей-студией>; Oleg Uralov, interview, *Rozhdeniye v SSSR*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJq7Z8fsYOY>.

³³ Liubov’ Arkus, ed., *Kino i kontekst: Volume 4, 1986–1988* (Saint Petersburg: Seans, 2002), 602.

³⁴ Oleg Uralov, “V kadre–segodniashnii den’,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Jan. 13, 1987; Oleg Uralov, “Videofil’m rodilsia!” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, Jan. 1, 1988.

and rise of popularity of sentimental romance that formed under the influence of Romani music and was previously officially condemned by the socialist state as one of the genres of imperial and monarchic Russia.

In his comment on the Videofilm strategy, Uralov noted, “We start mastering cinema of the twenty first century,” arguing that, unlike the Western commercial model of video business, Videofilm develops “marketing” as “cultural building” that “does not allow for commodity to follow the consumer but, on the contrary, forms the consumer’s taste [...], therefore I do not have to wait for what the consumers will want from me because, of course, they will want pornography.”³⁵ While adhering to the rhetoric on video as an electronic technology of the future and adopting liberal market parlance, this commentary revealed the Soviet nomenklatura’s firmly established vision of media consumption as a one-way, top-down phenomenon and the Soviet viewer as a subject whose cultural preferences must be supervised and who needs re-education—the vision transferred to the realm of the state video economy. In the meantime, this “marketing” obviously failed, as most Videofilm productions, which by 1989 consisted of more than 1,000 films, remained “dead weight” in low demand: typically, some four hundred out of six hundred Videofilm videotapes at any given videotheque would never get requested for rental.³⁶

Another significant factor that influenced the low demand for Videofilm cassettes was the relatively high rental and exhibition prices, especially given the wide availability of the offered content in movie theaters and on television. The price for official videotapes with pre-recorded films and media was equal to about one hundred rubles, that is half of an average monthly salary of a Soviet citizen in the 1980s, making their sales barely viable. In the meantime, the fixed

³⁵ Oleg Uralov, “Kinopanorama: Videosalony, 1988,” April 4, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsvGds_UpPc.

³⁶ Parfenov, “Tretii ekran”; I. Petrov and L. El’nikova, “Kinorynok i sotsial’naia spravedlivost’,” *Video Digest*, no. 1 (1989): 23–5.

prices of video rentals per day at official videotheques depended on the four-category system developed by Goskino as follows: the first category of historical, revolutionary, political, and children's films could be borrowed for 1.50–2 rubles; the second category of masterpieces of the Soviet and world cinema and films on the social issues could be available for 2–2.50 rubles; the third category, encompassing the hits of Soviet film distribution and foreign films of socialist countries, along with concerts and performances, prescribed the price of 2–3 rubles; and the fourth, and the most demanded, category of films produced in capitalist countries entailed the rental price of 4–5 rubles per day.³⁷ The price of tickets for watching videotape at an official video salon, in turn, varied from 4.40 rubles for the films in the first category to 7.20 rubles for the fourth category and also, depending on the time length, could reach about 10 rubles for a three-hour 'capitalist' film, which significantly exceeded the movie tickets prices ranging from thirty kopecks to one ruble and tickets to non-state video salons with the average price of one ruble for any film beyond the standard state media categorization.³⁸

This state pricing system reflected the emphasis on the value of video experience, specifically experience of public video exhibition, that would become one of the primary areas of competition between Videofilm and video entrepreneurs. On the one hand, Videofilm policy advanced video as a medium *for* theatrical film, an additional distribution channel serving to maintain cultural visibility and financial returns of Soviet film studio production. On the other hand, video also emerges in this policy as a medium governed and exhibited *as* theatrical film.

³⁷ "Videokasseta naprokat," accessed May 15, 2022, https://oldclippings.ucoz.net/index/video_v_vashem_dome_2/0-16; A. Pozdniakov, "Strasti vokrug video," *Avrora*, no. 10 (1986): 121–8.

³⁸ "Esli doma poka net videomagnitofona," accessed May 15, 2022, https://oldclippings.ucoz.net/index/video_v_vashem_dome_2/0-16; Marina Kosinova, "Kinofikatsiia sovetskoi kinematografii v gody 'zastoia,'" *Vestnik universiteta*, no. 3 (2016): 226; R. P. Petrov, "Seans nachinaetsia: Videosalony, Berezniki," accessed May 15, 2022, <https://museum-berezniki.ru/nauchno-issledovatel'skaja-rabota/seans-nachinaetsja-videosalony-g-berezniki>.

Commonly coupled with videotheques, state video salons often either replaced movie theaters or, more often, emerged as new exhibition halls at existent theatrical sites. In the latter case, video salon remained under the control of the movie theatre administration, and all the rented and watched films on video automatically contributed to the movie theater economic plan, which, in turn, blurred the statistics of film and video attendance, as their audiences were framed as one.³⁹ Meanwhile, promoting video salon as a modern advanced analogue of traditional movie theater gradually turned into one of the major ways for Videofilm to attract the viewers, as evident from the 1988 advertising film *Equipment of Video Salons* produced by order of Goskino, a guided tour across the first state video salon “Orbita” in Kyiv.

Similarly to the 1985 *Video Adventures*, the 1988 *Equipment* points to videotheque and video salon as a second life of Soviet movies standing in an organized row of Videofilm cassettes on the shelves. Yet, dissimilar from the emphasis on Soviet popular film ‘classics’ in



Figure 2.2. Videotheque, Kyiv, Ukraine. Shot from *Equipment of Video Salons*, 1988. Screen grab.

Video Adventures, the 1988 short foregrounds contemporary imagery associated with television and geoculturally diverse. This imagery includes excerpts from the Ukrainian animated TV series *Kozaki* (Cossacks, 1967–1995, Volodymir Dakhno), life video

footage of the Carnival of Brazil, a wildlife documentary centered on the savanna in Africa, and the performance of “Manuel Goodbye” by the US singer and star of soap opera *Dallas* (1978–

³⁹ “Video—perspektivy i problemy,” *Kul'turno-prosvetitel'naia rabota*, no. 6 (1987): 7.

1991, CBS) Audrey Landers, among others. Also, unlike *Video Adventures*, which focused on the content of videotapes, this film stresses the lure of video salon as urban public entertainment and technological novelty. The female administrator guides us through cabins, where a small group of four people watch a rental video together, using headphones. We are then taken to a forty-seat auditorium, where viewers watch videotapes projected on a large screen. The video auditorium is simultaneously a familiar albeit smaller movie-theater and a highly complex technological system, as explained by an engineer joining the tour. Accompanied by animated special effects and electronic music, the representation of the anatomy of the VCR and network of machines becomes a moment of technological awe and euphoric wonderment. After the administrator's voice-over notes that "the possibilities of video are wide and not yet fully comprehended by us," the closing titles locate video as the next stage of human invention after the beginning of space travel. Thus, while *Video Adventures* presents video as a site of preservation of the Soviet cinematic legacy, *Equipment* offers an image of the up-to-date video salon as the core of state video infrastructure, and a part of cosmopolitan and technological future accessible to everyone.

The shift in promotion of state video partially reflects the impact that the 1986–1988 gradual legalization of private entrepreneurship had on Soviet video economy. As a result of the emergence of legal video entrepreneurs, Videofilm lost its status of a single authorized monopolist in video production and distribution, which forced the organization to adapt to a new market by foregrounding the distinctive strengths of state video consumption, including the high quality of technology, aesthetic refinement, and theatricality of state video salon. Nevertheless, from the outset in 1985, although the Kyiv "Orbita" represented a standard state video center in a big city, the operating and timely maintenance of such video salons represented a challenge for

Videofilm due to the scarcity of technologies, from VCRs to blank videotapes, and poor video programming, which slowed the development of the state video network. The Soviet viewers from across the country stayed in the permanent expectation of opening the official video salons in their home towns, while attending informal video screenings organized by enthusiasts at apartments or semi-legally in public buildings.⁴⁰

In 1986, as the representatives of the Main Administration for Cinefication and Film Distribution at Goskino explained, the biggest obstacle to the development of the network of video salons was not the technical base but the lack of available locations.⁴¹ In the meantime, the administrators of local video centers complained about the low quality of VCRs that, as, for example, in Minsk (Belarus), could break down during the very first days of opening a video salon.⁴² Also, while the movie and concert halls at the Houses of Culture proved to become a major site for opening video salons, the lack of projectors led to the emergence of phantasmagoric exhibition practices. In this regard, Oleg Karpov, one of the founders of “Disc,” the first video salon in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), that opened in the 200-seat concert hall of the House of Architect, recalls “It may sound surreal but we put one video player and two television sets on the stage, and showed films for the viewers, who were sitting in parterre.”⁴³ Although the video salon, turned into a video theater, did not always fill the entire space with two hundred viewers, there were memorable seances, such as the screening of the French-Japanese erotic drama *Ai no Korīda* (In the Realm of the Senses, Nagisa Ōshima, 1976), where two hundred seats were not enough. As Karpov tells, “It was such a poor-quality videotape that film looked

⁴⁰ “Videostradaniia,” *Sovetskaiia kul’tura*, Feb., 1988; Leonid Parfenov, “Tretii ekran,” *Pravda*, Sep. 25, 1987.

⁴¹ Evgenii Voitovich, “Na rubezhe piatiletok,” *Kinomekhanik*, no. 3 (1986): 5.

⁴² Valerii Kichin, “Posle starta,” *Nedelia*, no. 3 (1986): 16.

⁴³ Oleg Karpov (video distributor from Tashkent, Uzbekistan) in discussion with author, March, 2021. See also in A. Morozov, “Gde uvidet’ ‘video’,” *Moskovskaiia pravda*, Dec. 9 1988.

black and white with colors occasionally seeping through the surface, yet it was a furor and people were sitting on the floor.”⁴⁴

The screenings of such films as *Ai no Korīda*—that is films that were not among Videofilm official releases—were common among video salons, especially those outside capital cities or located in rural areas. The representatives of small local videotheques, like, for example, in Tiumen’ (Siberia), confessed that Videofilm was an “unreliable and irresponsible partner”: it tended to ignore the submitted orders from the provinces or sent very small number of videotapes. As a result, the local video salons had to turn to informal video networks and collaborate with video entrepreneurs.⁴⁵ Caught between the imperatives of the state videofication program and the centralized model of management embodied by Videofilm failing to provide the conditions for the realization of this program, local cultural and public institutions merged with the shadow video market right at the moment for the latter was transforming into a legal economic sector.

Soviet Video Entrepreneurs

As the new legal framework (the 1986 law on individual labour and the 1988 law on cooperatives) fully legitimized private enterprise, the informal Soviet video market came out of the underground. And contrary to the unitarian vision depicted in the 1988 advertising film *Equipment*, private video salons acquired multiple forms and served a variety of tasks.

Evoking the early Soviet cine-trains, mobile video salons, from video vans to video trains, emerged as one common practice organized by video entrepreneurs and cooperatives,

⁴⁴ Oleg Karpov (video distributor from Tashkent, Uzbekistan) in discussion with author, February 2021.

⁴⁵ V. Orlov, “Zlokliucheniia video,” *Pravda*, May 3, 1988. See also on videotheque in Tomsk (Siberia), L. Levitskii, “Video mezhdru vedomstvami,” *Izvestiia*, May 14, 1987.

especially characteristic of rural areas and small towns, where video was otherwise unavailable.⁴⁶ Another was the practice of video-café: as the video boom coincided with the large-scale anti-alcohol state campaign (1985–1987), former bars refashioned their services, transforming into “milk” video bars and alcohol-free video cafés, where video displayed on television sets, served to attract visitors. Some private video salons, like the first small salon organized by a family in Pärnu (Estonia) with the help of the city administration, tried to recreate a home-like environment through its interior with “white little tables, white openwork chairs, and flowers on the table and on the walls” and by offering “amazingly delicious buns and pirozhki” to the viewers.⁴⁷ Other video salons, particularly those emerged out of the Houses of Culture (which had been regular fixtures of Soviet state-run public sphere), became essential part of the everyday communal leisure time, alongside discotheques, debating societies, poetry fan clubs, fashion clubs, or ‘Do-it-Yourself’ workshops.⁴⁸ While such public institutions provided spaces for video cooperatives, the latter contributed about twenty percent of their profits back to their organizational budget thus helping support their other activities and meet the economic plan by attracting viewers curious about video.⁴⁹ Many of such video evolved into amateur film clubs, particularly common beyond Soviet urban capitals, that gathered local cinephiles.⁵⁰ What all these forms of video exhibition shared was their emphasis on video as a participant in the public sphere, not merely an entertaining and profitable spectacle. Within this rhetoric, video salon

⁴⁶ A. L’vov, “K vam edet video,” *Izvestiia*, August 16, 1987; “Gde my vstrechaemsia s video?” *Video Digest*, no. 1 (1989): 7–10; Elmar Hashimov, “The Bootleg Video Vans of the Soviet Union,” *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/bootleg-video-vans-soviet-union/577060/>.

⁴⁷ Z. Starovoitova, “Semeinyi videosalon,” *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia*, no. 20 (1987): 4.

⁴⁸ T. Golubtsova, “Mir uvlechenii–novye formy, novye problemy,” *Kommunist*, no. 1 (1987): 87.

⁴⁹ Vadim Gil’mitov, “Videobar ‘Sadko’: Letter,” *Kul’turno-prosvetitel’naia rabota*, no. 2 (1989): 48; Orlov, “Zlokliucheniiia video.”

⁵⁰ Aleksei Kolbasko, “Predlagaiu svoi usluzhi,” *Kul’turno-prosvetitel’naia rabota*, no. 2 (1989): 49; A. Morozov, “V sel’skom klube–videosalon,” *Klub*, no. 5 (1989): 37.

represents a place that, unlike the alienating movie theater, could compensate for the “deficit of socialization” increasingly seen to be one of the main social issues of the 1980s.⁵¹

Beyond public video screenings, individual entrepreneurs and video cooperatives also engaged in a variety of video production and circulation practices. Exposing the qualities of video as a medium that is “very ‘private,’ intimate, even sentimental,” video recording of personal events from weddings to video letters to relatives and dissertation defenses was becoming a widespread phenomenon.⁵² Capturing the mundane scenes of local social life, including amateur concerts or public gatherings and holidays, such videographic practice was an “eye-opening” experience for many Soviet citizens, allowing them to “see themselves from the outside.”⁵³ The images of Soviet everyday and collectivity were carefully manufactured and ideologically framed in the state film and television production that had a long-lasting monopoly on the projection of Soviet life. Video, offering an alternative screen vision of this life, brought about genuinely revealing and distinct (self-)representations beyond the familiar portrayal circumscribed by the state and ideology. In addition to individual videographers, by the middle of 1988, the number of video production cooperatives—whether independent or linked to various cultural organizations—in the country was estimated at nearly three hundred.⁵⁴ This estimation, however, takes into account only the most visible video cooperatives, usually producers of videofilms, advertisement, and music videos for the largest fashion centers, national magazines such as *Ogonek* or *Smena*, or even such giants as the state music record company Melodiia. The

⁵¹ Kichin, “Video: ot bezumii k razumu.” Also, “U televizora, no ne doma,” *Klub*, no. 5 (1989): 38–9.

⁵² V. Vil’chek, “Potesniv riady muz,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, July 25, 1987.

⁵³ A. Zaikin, “U nas videostudiia, a u vas?” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’* no. 1 (1986): 21–2.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Borev, *Video: tekhnika—dosug—kul’tura* (Moscow: Profizdat, 1990), 74; Vladimir Borev, “Video: proizvodstvo, prokat, izuchenie, obuchenie,” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 23 (1988): 19–20.

actual number of video cooperatives, often not juridically registered and scattered across the country, was significantly higher and impossible to assess.

An essential part of the emerging vanguard of the free market more broadly, video cooperatives played a formative role in reshaping the Soviet media landscape, filling the void seemingly left by the state. Operating under the motto “Think globally, act locally,” one of the most advertised video cooperatives, Sintez, emerged in Moscow in 1987 as a producer and distributor of music video programs even before the law permitting cooperative enterprise was issued. It guaranteed seamless video services and underscored the cooperative’s impeccable labor and social ethics, including its charity mission. Making Soviet citizens accustomed to the new image of a media provider, the advertisements of Sintez promised that “the style of the firm is friendliness and goodwill in dealing with people, accuracy and thoughtfulness in contacts with business partners, conscientiousness and honesty of employees, and exactingness and fairness of management.”⁵⁵

Another highly promoted Moscow’s video cooperative, Konkord, functioning primarily as a video production company, nonetheless also proved to be one of the most flexible and versatile video distributors. A cable television pioneer serving hotels across Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, Konkord opened a network of videotheques offering VCRs for rent and lending videotapes for free. This practice, characteristic also of some other socialist countries such as Cuba, offered viewers the option to contribute to the video collection by either donating their videotapes or paying the membership fees—and borrow videotapes for free. Along with services of videotheques, Konkord offered video-by-mail delivery: recording the programs of Central Television round-the-clock, the cooperative accepted requests from

⁵⁵ Vladimir Borev, “Analiz ‘Sinteza,’” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 1 (1989): 40.

individuals and cultural organizations and formed “individualized programming” sent on video by mail.⁵⁶

In the meantime, while the rate of personal VCR ownership among Soviet citizens remained low, video salons remained the primary site of distribution and consumption and, therefore, the primary form of business enterprise until the mid-1990s.⁵⁷ From the beginning of the cooperative movement, both Videofilm and Goskino officials, treated the emerging video cooperatives competitors with hostility. They insisted that such ideologically and culturally important area as video distribution was “not the sphere of activity where personal initiative could be allowed.”⁵⁸ Pointing to the fact that cooperative video salons, just like any non-state exhibition spaces, screened primarily foreign “bourgeois” cinema, many state ideologues and journalists joined the struggle against video cooperatives, presenting them as agents of shadow market. Particularly representative of this new wave of moral panic and widely discussed in the press were the articles and 1988 book *Paradoksy video* (Paradoxes of Video) by Veronika Kononenko, the editor of the journal *Chelovek i zakon* (Man and Law). Shifting emphasis from pornography, which dominated the rhetorical attacks on video on morality grounds, to the broader ideological harm caused by the aesthetically low and politically corrupting productions, she further highlighted cooperative video salons’ complicity in dubious (semi)legal economic operations.⁵⁹

Up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, one of the crucial arguments in the debates against video salons bypassing the policies and control of Videofilm remained the

⁵⁶ K. Volodina, “‘Konkord,’ NTR i videonianiia,” *Klub*, no. 1 (1989): 17; Natal’ia Davtian, “Dhazdans Feliksdala,” *Klub*, no. 1 (1989): 18; V. Borev, “Videokukhnia: meniu na segodnia,” *Moskovskaia pravda*, Sept. 24, 1988.

⁵⁷ Kseniia Leont’eva, et al., eds. *Kinoindustriia Rossiiskoi Federatsii: Issledovanie dlia Evropeiskoi audiovizual’noi observatorii* (Strausburg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2009), 119.

⁵⁸ Z. Starovoitova, “Semeinyi videosalon,” *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia*, no. 20 (1987): 4.

⁵⁹ Veronika Kononenko, *Paradoksy video* (Minsk: Universitetskoe, 1988).

quality of exhibited content and the demographics of their audiences. Sociological surveys and ethnographic narratives about the everyday practices of a typical video salon persistently confirmed their vision as a site of the invasion of pornography and violence targeting children and men. Thus, the 1989 study conducted in Kyiv (Ukraine) concluded that 50 percent of the visitors of local video salons were children between the ages of twelve and sixteen, and 25 percent were young viewers between sixteen and twenty, while the repertoire was calculated as consisting of 30 percent *boeviks* (action films), 25 percent erotica, and 15 percent horror movies: all three being genres historically absent from Soviet cinematic repertoire and continued to be seen by many as morally questionable and particularly dangerous for young audiences.⁶⁰

Descriptions of video salons in Moscow (Russia) offered the image of the audience as consisting predominantly of male viewers between the ages of twelve and twenty five, while their repertoire was often presented as almost exclusively “pornographic.” For instance, the overview of the repertoire of the video salon “Uspekhn” (Success) with screenings from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. was listed as following: Italian *Undici giorni, undici notti* (Eleven Days, Eleven Nights, 1987, Joe D’Amato), the US *Sex Star* (1983, Paul Vattelli), Argentinian *Insaciable* (The Insatiable Widow, 1976, Armando Bó), Swiss *Heisser Sex in Bangkok* (Hot Sex in Bangkok, 1974, Erwin C. Dietrich), Dutch *Turks fruit* (Turkish Delight, 1973, Paul Verhoeven), and Spanish-Swiss *Sechs Schwedinnen auf Ibiza* (Six Swedish Girls on Ibiza, 1981, Gérard Loubeau and Antonio Molino Rojo).⁶¹ The movie selection of the last, 10pm screening was “on demand” —making its genre “not hard to imagine,” as one reviewer noted, while adding that at such

⁶⁰ V. Nesterchuk, “Pervoocherednye zadachi,” *Kinomekhanik*, no. 3 (1990): 5.

⁶¹ Oleg Goriachev, “Ot pornukhi i do programmy ‘Vremia’ krutiat v moskovskikh videosalonakh,” *Ekran*, no. 12 (1991): 26; “Poshlost’ pravil bal,” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, March 17, 1990.

depressing places, “the deprivation of the people is particularly felt” arousing in him “pity and hurt for each individual and for the whole of our society.”⁶²

At the same time, Videofilm itself disseminated paradoxically conflicting accounts of this phenomenon. In 1988, for example, the organization presented the results of video audience research allegedly conducted in eight unidentified Soviet industrial cities whose goal was to compare video consumption at the “white” market of state video salons and the “black” (non-state controlled) market of video distribution. Confirming that the majority—71 percent (77 percent in later statistics)—were male viewers, Videofilm, nevertheless, demonstrated that children and teenagers barely attended the video salons and videotheques, either “white” or “black,” as estimated 75 percent aged between nineteen and forty years old, with the largest group of the viewers between thirty one and forty years old. In general, Videofilm acknowledged that the biggest revelation of the research was that no clear division between the ‘white’ and ‘black’ video markets existed. The consumers of both spheres tended to have higher education employed by the state apparatus (28.5 percent), in science (17 percent) and culture (13 percent), preferred mostly the same genres (the one exception were detective films, which were in high demand but only accessible via “black” market).⁶³ It was also noted that interest in erotica and horror films was significantly declining, and these film categories, albeit still popular with some forty percent of the viewers, were in the lowest demand in comparison with all other genres. The films from the US enjoyed the highest popularity across the state and informal spheres, followed by the films from France, Italy, UK, Poland, and Hong Kong.⁶⁴ The viewers of the “white” (official) video market, however, had more diverse preferences, including films from India,

⁶² Goriachev, “Ot pornukhi,” 26.

⁶³ A. Gotlib, “Otvety na voprosy po video,” *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 37 (1988): 8; “Nasha anketa,” *Novosti video*, no. 1 (1989): 1.

⁶⁴ Statistics on the countries in “Nasha anketa,” *Novosti video*, no. 1 (1989): 1.

Yugoslavia, Hungary, GDR, Bulgaria, and Brazil, which were almost absent in non-state video salons and videotheques. It is noteworthy that, according to Videofilm, Soviet films also remained highly popular among the video audiences, ranking second in popularity after the US movies.

The late Soviet contradictory imaginaries around the state and demonized underground video salons stems from the fact that due to the chaotic state of the video circulation and the lack of systematic research, in reality, as film critic Kirill Razlogov concluded, “we know nothing about the video repertoire in the country,” or about the audience demographics and preferences.⁶⁵ Commenting on the general ambivalence and confusion vis-a-vis the programming and popularity of exhibited video content, Razlogov furthermore emphasized that “an ‘average’ film critic was as incapable of distinguishing an outstanding film from a cheap forgery, as any other visitor of video salon.”⁶⁶ The latter remark reflects the general consensus about the indiscriminate consumption and aesthetic evaluation as characteristic of Soviet video cultures, and salons in particular. Dominated by foreign, primarily Western, content unfamiliar to Soviet viewers before the VHS era and disruptive of local viewing habits and experiences, the video repertoire was consumed *en mass*, with few distinctions drawn across the different levels of production or aesthetic registers. According to the conventional narrative that similarly persists in contemporary scholarly accounts of Soviet video (however rare these account may be), as Alexander Pavlov and Polina Khanova argue, video salons were somewhat similar to the US 1960s–1980s grindhouse theaters, which is evident from the Soviet video viewers’ “preference for entertainment movies featuring excessive amounts of violence and nudity.”⁶⁷ Unlike the

⁶⁵ Kirill Razlogov, “Da net tam nikakoi pornukhi!” *Ekran*, no. 12 (1991): 27.

⁶⁶ Razlogov, “Da net tam nikakoi pornukhi!”.

⁶⁷ Alexander Pavlov and Polina Khanova, “Cult in Everything But Name? Transnational Experiences of (Western) Cult cinema in Late Soviet and Early Post-Soviet Russia,” in *Transnational Cinemas* 8, no. 1 (2016): 55.

specialized grindhouse audience that was consciously interested in B-grade production, Soviet viewers “didn’t make any distinction between ‘low’ and ‘high’ genres.”⁶⁸ Overarching curiosity about any foreign, or Western, media, as well as the lack of knowledge about the non-Soviet film aesthetic hierarchies, are therefore commonly given in these accounts as explanations for the ubiquity of and demand for ‘bad’ cinema across video salons.

Indeed, B-movie productions, whether it was low-grade erotica, horrors, or action films, were widely shown across the Soviet video salons, often seen as valuable as any other foreign films, due to their novelty and the surprise (or even shock) they evoked in the viewers. For instance, in a small Ural town, Berezniki (Russia), the central state video salon, while still screening the typical Videofilm productions referred to as “konservy” (“canned food”), that is “morally obsolete” Soviet movies which had been in wide distribution for generations, simultaneously exhibited the previously “shelved” (i.e., banned for ideological reasons) Soviet films like *Komissar* (Commissar, 1967, Aleksandr Askol’dov). European auteur cinema such as *Paris, Texas* (1984, Wim Wenders) or *L’Amour Nu* (Naked Love, 1981, Yannick Bellon) was screened together with the Italian soft-core erotica *La signora della notte* (Lady of the Night, 1986, Piero Schivazappa), the cult US horror *Fright Night* (1985, Tom Holland), or kung fu films with Bruce Lee, which proved to be a major success among the local audiences.⁶⁹ Anecdotally followed by the wave of mental disorders from insomnia and depression to hallucinations and somnambulism among the teenagers, the screenings of such a wide range of films united through their emphasis on visceral corporeality become constitutive of the collective memory surrounding video.

⁶⁸ Pavlov and Khanova, “Cult in Everything But Name?”

⁶⁹ Petrov, “Seans nachinaetsia.”

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to insist on the naivety of the Soviet viewer or video salon programmers and the rule of ‘low-quality’ cinema in video exhibition. Whereas the discourse on ‘bad’ cinema repertoire at video salons and ignorance of Soviet viewers was a common argument weaponized against the threat of the new uncontrollable cultural industry of video, even such institutions as Videofilm shifted their rhetoric emphasizing the danger of piracy rather than aesthetic and moral decay brought by video salons. On the one hand, it could be explained by the merge of the state and private video distribution in terms of the circulated content, as evident from the Berezniki video salon repertoire. On the other, it was increasingly difficult to label this content as corrupting ‘trash,’ given the increasingly obvious innocence or even high aesthetic value of films shown in video salons, although such a ‘discovery’ could also result from the broader democratization of Soviet political and cultural life.

In this regard, the case of the above-mentioned video salon “Disc” in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) is illustrative. It emerged first around 1987 as a city mobile informal ‘milk mail’-type network, whose founders delivered videotapes by order from house to house in their suitcases, and then turned into a small private video salon in the basement of one of the city’s science institutions. The video salon soon turned out to be the major video hub in the city, with the richest video collection, and, upon an agreement with the local community club, the House of Architect, it moved to the centre of the city in the early 1989 to show video in the concert hall. One of the first repertoire posters, drawn by hand and inviting the citizens of Tashkent to familiarize themselves with the “masterpieces of the world cinema” (Figure 2.3), displayed a variety of productions not significantly dissimilar from the university syllabus for introductory film courses across North America.

One of the founders of the salon characterized the repertoire as the mixture of “regular” cinema, or recent popular US films, widely circulated across other video salons, and “classical”

cinema “impossible to imagine to be distributed in Tashkent otherwise except through video,” or the recognizable canon of Hollywood cinema and European arthouse circuits.⁷⁰ As seen from the program that includes ninety one-time-only screenings, just two films in the repertoire of the video salon, John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982) and *They Live* (1988), would be possible to qualify as B-movies,

albeit already acquiring the status of cult B-films.

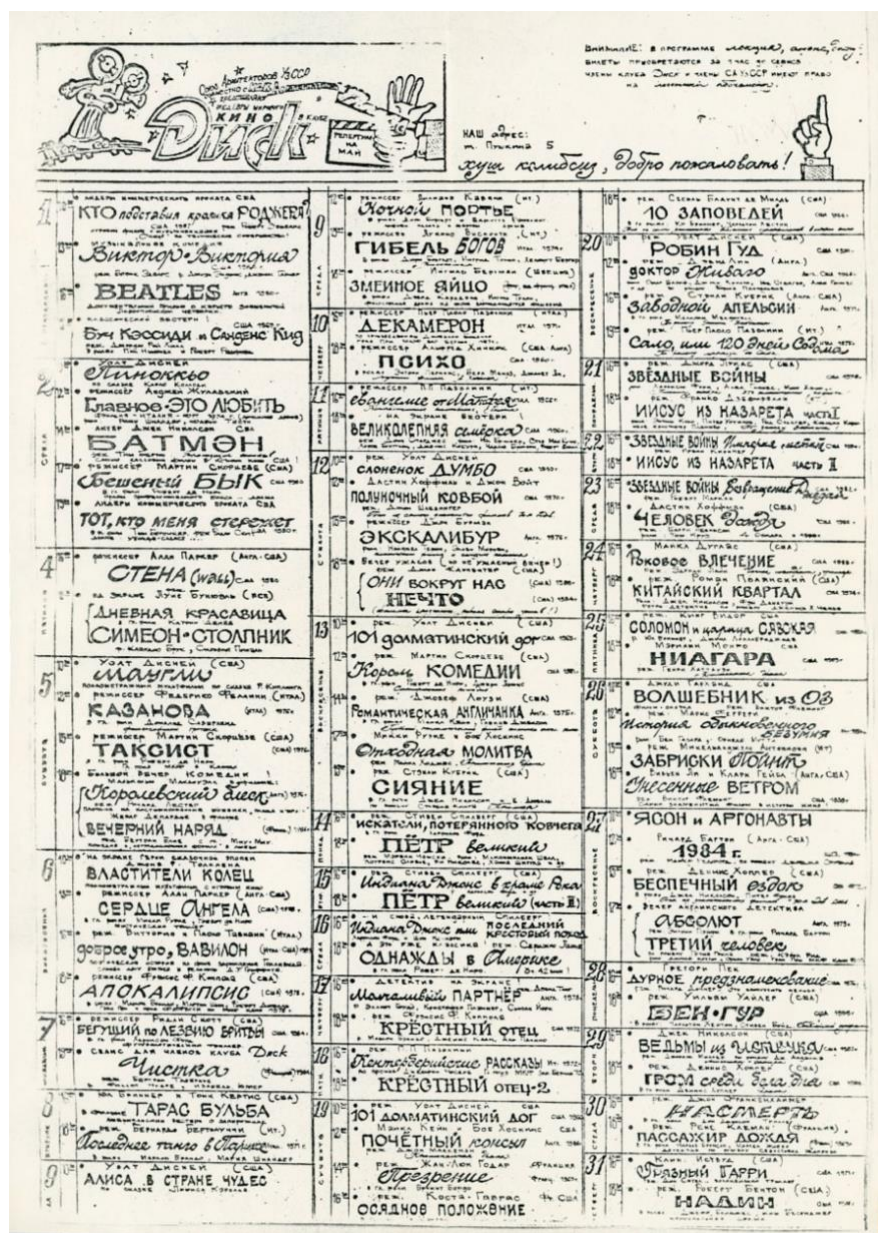


Figure 2.3. Repertoire of Video Salon in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 1989. Provided to the author by the founder Oleg Karpov.

Among the risky films falling under the category of erotica or even pornography on some

⁷⁰ Oleg Karpov, in discussion with author, March, 2021.

occasions in the Soviet context are *The Night Porter* (1974, Liliana Cavani), *The Last Tango in Paris*, *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1981, Marco Ferreri), and *Fatal Attraction* (1987, Adrian Lyne). Yet, the program is dominated by Hollywood majors' iconic films from the classical to the New Hollywood and blockbuster eras. The rest of the repertoire, in turn, consists of auteur cinema, including films by Luis Buñuel, Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. It is noteworthy, meanwhile, that many of the Tashkent video programming entered the list of the most popular videotapes on the Soviet video market, published in the first 1990 issue of the one of the pioneering video magazines, *Video Ace*. In other words, rather than serving as a special cinephile-driven exceptional case, the popularity of these "classics" on the video market points to the salon's repertoire as representative of the Soviet video 'mainstream.'

As video salons mushroomed across the country, one of the main complaints on part of the visitors was having to wait in long lines to get in to the video screenings.⁷¹ In attempting to maintain competitive advantage in the context of the growing influence of entrepreneurs offering the distinctive repertoire and transfer of the state enterprises to self-financing management, Videofilm responded with an initiative first announced at the conference of Ukrainian Republican Council of Workers' Unions, namely to oblige video cooperatives to register all the VCRs at Goskino as film apparatuses and deduct forty percent from profits to the budget of Videofilm.⁷² Reflecting the persistent attitude towards the consumer electronics as a theatrical film equipment, the initiative, nevertheless, was met with resistance on part of both video cooperatives and public cultural institutions and never implemented.

⁷¹ "A vashe mnenie?" *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, Jan. 29, 1988.

⁷² Vladimir Borev, "Zhestokie videoigry," *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel'nost'*, no. 12 (1988): 6; Vladimir Borev, "Skol'ko raz platit' za video," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, March 12, 1988.

As a result of the failed efforts to centralize and restrict the operation of video business ventures, Videofilm had to resort to a new strategy framed as struggle against piracy, simultaneously trying to compete with private enterprise by officially promoting and distributing Western films, such as *Red Heat* (1988, Walter Hill) or *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985, Susan Seidelman), starring Madonna.⁷³ By the end of 1988, copyright violation, previously rarely discussed in the Soviet context in relation to video and cultural industries more broadly, became the main pretext for accusation of and excuse for the spontaneous closure of video cooperatives, especially video salons. Calling for the closing of video entrepreneurship, Videofilm insisted that video piracy, epitomized by cooperatives, “acquired the nature of organized system” with fully developed infrastructure and even its own press such as the journal *Kul’turno-prosvetitel’naia rabota* (Cultural-Enlightenment Work).⁷⁴ One of the principal sources on the history and imaginaries surrounding Soviet video cultures, this magazine was state-run, founded in 1940, and served as a discussion site for questions of cultural work, particularly in the sphere of community clubs. While announcing video to be a new key means for the advancement of public and cultural life in the 1980s, it provided the most decisive critique of Videofilm, which reflected the emerging partnership and co-dependence between public cultural institutions and video entrepreneurs and indeed posed a challenge to Videofilm.

The paradox of the Videofilm-driven anti-piracy sentiment gaining prominence in the area of video distribution was double, given the particularity of strictly absent copyright regulations in the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the active involvement of Videofilm itself in ‘pirate’ economies, on the other. Appealing to the multilateral copyright treaties regulating the international circulation of printed and audiovisual materials, such as the 1886 Berne Convention

⁷³ “Komandirovka na Arbat,” *Video Digest*, no. 3 (1990): 6–8.

⁷⁴ “Konkurenty, gde vy?” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, March 28, 1989.

or the 1961 Rome Convention for the Protection of Performers, Producers of Phonograms and Broadcasting Organisations, Videofilm called attention to the rampant intellectual property violations by Soviet video cooperatives reproducing and capitalizing on the circulation of films and media obtained informally, predominantly from abroad. The opponents of Videofilm and defenders of video cooperatives, in turn, objected that the USSR did not sign these conventions and could not consider the regulations prescribed by the treaties as legal and legitimate.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, in the course of the nascent anti-piracy campaign, Videofilm spread false information about supposed persecution resulting from international copyright violations, informing the public about the video cooperatives in Moscow or entire unidentified Soviet republic that were allegedly fined thousands of US dollars for exhibition of foreign video.⁷⁶ Despite the acknowledgement of the falsity of these claims, the rumors resulting from this disinformation led to the actual closure of video cooperatives, including official state video salons. For example, as the citizens of Kishinev (Moldova) wrote to the press, all video salons disappeared in the city in 1988 after the decision of the local prosecutor.⁷⁷ Or, in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), the highly popular central video salon-videotheque “Oko” (“Eye”) set up by a local cinephile using his personal video collection of foreign arthouse cinema and Soviet classics, was threatened with closure, causing fan protests, given the continuing existence of the similar cooperatives across the country.⁷⁸

In response to the letters of the Soviet viewers and entrepreneurs, equally confused about copyright legislation, the press offered some clarification. It published sections from the All-

⁷⁵ “Izbrannye mesta iz perepiski kluba,” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 12 (1988): 41–2; Borev, “Videokukhnia.”

⁷⁶ N. Gorbachev, “Oshibka ili podtasovka?” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, June 15, 1988; Vladimir Borev, “Ostanovite ‘Videofilm!’” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, no. 13 (1988): 21.

⁷⁷ “Pis’mo-predislovie,” *Kul’turno-prosvetitel’naia rabota*, no. 3 (1989): 47.

⁷⁸ A. Karpov, “Pochemu pogaslo ‘Oko’,” *Nedelia*, no. 31 (1988): 8–9.

Union Copyright Agency (AUCA) established in 1973, when the USSR signed the 1952 Universal Copyright Convention, which remained the only international copyright agreement adopted in the country, as noted above. In the course of its gradual integration into the global copyright regime, the Soviet Union did begin updating its copyright legislature and sign other, usually bilateral, treaties, such as the never publicized 1988 USSR-US Science and Technology Agreement that included intellectual property annexes.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the clarifications of the AUCA in the sphere of video acknowledged the legitimacy of the Universal Copyright Convention exclusively. The specificity of the latter, in turn, prescribed the protection of authors' rights to works of literature, science, and art on the basis of the national legislation, which implied the priority of local legal notion and norms of copyright. Going back to the first 1928 Soviet law on authors' rights, which targeted primarily local authors and protected only those foreign citizens who first released their works in the USSR, the late Soviet legal regime foregrounded the rights of an individual author or creator but allowed for public distribution and exhibition of works without a permit, which, as later legal and cultural scholars noted, was the crucial effect of the fundamental value of socialism: free access to knowledge and education.⁸⁰ The condition upon such distribution without a permit could be fully acknowledged as legal though was the payment of fees directly to the author. According to AUCA, thus, non-payment of the authorial fees of between 6 and 16 percent from the sale cost for reproduction and exhibition was the only violation the Soviet video cooperative distributors and exhibitors

⁷⁹ *Intellectual Property, Domestic Productivity and Trade: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Courts, Intellectual Property, and the Administration of Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, One Hundred First Congress, First Session, July 25, 1989* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), 51.

⁸⁰ Ilya Kiriya and Elena Sherstoboeva, "Russian Media Piracy in the Context of Censoring Practices," *International Journal of Communication*, no. 9 (2015): 842–3; Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), 112.

committed; and after all, it was responsibility of ‘authors’ to request compensation in case of such violations.⁸¹

Despite such copyright freedom, while video entrepreneurs perceived foreign cinema to be the main source of profit and guarantee of competitiveness in the video market, many of them expressed willingness to pay authorial fees or royalties for video exhibition of foreign films through AUCA. Lenkinovideofilm, the institution responsible for film and video distribution in Leningrad (Russia), even planned buying copyright licenses on two hundred foreign films to circulate on video, upon the financial support of local industrial producers.⁸² With the rise of the anti-piracy rhetoric that was supposed to target video cooperatives, Videofilm itself became the object of critique on the part of those Soviet film directors who, in turn, never received authorial fees for video distribution of their works. Accused of piracy, Videofilm was called out by the 1980s Soviet film directors whose recent and highly popular films, such as *Assa* (1987, Sergei Solov’ev), *Malen’kaia Vera* (Little Vera, 1988, Vasilii Pichul), *Igla* (The Needle, 1988, Rashid Nugmanov), or *Dorogoe udovol’sstvie* (Expensive Pleasure, 1988, Leonid Mar’agin) were released on video a few months before their theatrical distribution, creating a “lost gain” for film studios.⁸³ Later, in 1992, after a few years of court trial initiated by seven film directors and workers, such as El’dar Riazanov, Emil’ Braginskii, Kir Bylychev and others, Videofilm was found guilty of authorial rights violation, leaving the court with the reputation of the “major

⁸¹ “Izbrannye mesta iz perepiski kluba.”

⁸² Ia. Ioskevich and V. Potemkin, “Zatianuvshaiasia ‘videozaria,’” *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, June 29, 1989; Arnol’d Vitol’, “V ozhidanii peremen,” *Kinomekhanik*, no. 3 (1990): 6–8.

⁸³ L. Mariagin, “Piraty XX veka,” *Klub i khudozhestvennaia samodeiatel’nost’*, 1989; Margarita Voronkova, “‘Piraty’ idut na abordazh,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 121–4.

pirate in the country.”⁸⁴ With time, the workers of Videofilm would acknowledge that “it was the state organizations that became the first pirates.”⁸⁵

By the end of 1988, however, Videofilm suddenly appeared to be the ultimate winner in the competition with and struggle against video entrepreneurs. The issue of a new state decree “On Regulation of Specific Types of Cooperative Activity” on December 29, 1988, a few months after the approval of the Law on Cooperatives, abruptly banned private production, distribution, and exhibition of any materials on video, as well as any video-related foreign economic activities, along with private markets for the products of the arms, agricultural and medical industry and services in education and health care.⁸⁶ Effective since 1989, the decree, meanwhile, did not produce significant changes, except for demonstrating the incoherency and spontaneity symptomatic of the Soviet state adapting to manage the emerging free market.

The decree seemed particularly paradoxical, given that video cooperatives were deeply integrated in the work of public institutions, and many of them fulfilled orders of the state organizations. For example, the cooperative Sintez, mentioned above, was a partner of Soiuzteatr (the All-Soviet Union of Theatrical Workers), circulating recordings of theatrical performances, and also actively participated in the production of propaganda and educational videos, ranging from the propaganda of *perestroika* policies to films on international Workers’ Unions and local ethnoreligious groups, particularly in high demand across the Houses of Political Enlightenment.⁸⁷ Even Videofilm, celebrating the decree that promised the reconstruction of the

⁸⁴ E. Aleksandrova, “Pyraty v strane pyratov,” *Video Ace Ekspress*, no. 11 (1992): 4.

⁸⁵ L. Chirkov, interview with Konstantin Kochuashvili, “‘Videofilm’ na marshe,” *Tekhnika kino i televideniia*, no. 4 (1993): 3.

⁸⁶ “Decree № 1468,” accessed January, 2023, <https://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=ESU&n=43723#8YjCxxTq8FBImOL1>.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Sintez-produced film *Dukhobory* (1987), accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvreuatzaP4>. “Analiz ‘Sinteza,’” *Video Digest*, no. 1 (1989): 80; A. Morozov, “Gde uvidet’ ‘video,’” *Moskovskaiia pravda*, Dec. 9, 1988; “Za kulisami, na stsene i na ekrane,” *Video Ace*, no. 3 (1990): 24–30.

organization's status as an only legal video distributor, worked in collaboration with cooperatives. Among them was Pilot, one of the leading independent animation studios in the post-Soviet region later, which produced video animation for the organization and technically turned out to be illegal with the issue of the new law.⁸⁸

Yet, video cooperatives continued to exist by simply ignoring the decree. Some of them registered at the regional Ministries of Culture and Household Services as state self-accounting enterprises, following the path of the *khozraschet* transfer among the state institutions, such as Videofilm, or officially reframed their activity as video salons and studios owned by the Houses of Culture, Komsomol, and Workers' Unions, so that many Soviet citizens did not even notice the effects of another legal experiment.⁸⁹ The unproblematic work of private video enterprises was re-confirmed with the issue of the new Decree "About the Restructuring of Creative, Organizational and Economic Activity in Soviet Film Industry" on November 18, 1989, which again permitted video cooperatives, while granting the full economic and cultural independence to the all-state and republican film producers and institutions, which became the turning point in the reformation and simultaneous disintegration of Soviet film industry.⁹⁰

In the middle of 1989, Videofilm entered into a lease contract with Goskino, upon the agreement to rent the state film studios and equipment for nine years. In fact, eventually it turned into a private video production, distribution, and exhibition company, one among many but, as later the head of Videofilm, Uralov, would announce, "the first in the Soviet Union."⁹¹ By 1990, Videofilm quietly withdrew all support for about 1,000 state video salons, reorienting all its

⁸⁸ "Podderzhka ili podnozhka?" *Nedelia*, no. 2 (1989): 9.

⁸⁹ "Ka keto delaetsia v Alushte," *Video Digest*, no. 2 (1989): 56; "Video samodeiatel'nost," *Pioner*, no. 6 (1990): 6.

⁹⁰ "Delovye liudi, vnimanie!" *Video Digest*, no. 2 (1989): 66–69; "Decree № 1003," accessed on January 22, 2023, <https://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=ESU&n=667#LyaJolT8bpxyQrqd>.

⁹¹ Uralov, interview, *Nostal'giia*.

activities towards film and video production, including production of commercials in partnership with foreign companies such as BBC and feature films, beginning with video drama *Piat' uglov* (Five Corners, 1989, Valerii Bunin) and one of the earliest films by Aleksandr Sokurov *Spasi i sokhrani* (Save and Protect, 1989).⁹² Informally commenting on the activity of Videofilm to the magazine *Video Ace*, the head of the organization's Division of Sociological Studies and Marketing explained the withdrawal by the flourishing "mafia" of distributors who copied and circulated pirated films among about 150,000 Soviet video salons, which made the involvement of Videofilm, a legal actor, in the business of video distribution unprofitable and therefore meaningless.⁹³ Against this background, the continuing release of ideological notes by the Communist Party, aiming to counter the "commercialization of culture" and "mercantile focus on profit" that "distort the criteria for film and video production," looked either anachronism or cynicism.⁹⁴

With the dissolution of the USSR, by 1992 the all-Soviet Goskino ceased to exist, and Videofilm became fully independent. Until it happened, however, Videofilm continued to use all the privileges of the Goskino division, albeit in the nominal status, while competing with emerging video companies or even giving the birth to some of them, such as infamous Russkoe Video ("Russian Video"). Founded in 1989, Russian Video, one of the key 1990s official video and television distributors, particularly of the hit soap opera *Santa Barbara* (1984–1993, NBC), is today remembered for a series of the early 2000s criminal cases on theft of state property, including the buildings and equipment it appropriated from the Soviet Union via Videofilm.

⁹² M. Frolov, "Spasi i sokhrani: Debiut A. Sokurova na Videofilme," *Video Digest*, no. 2 (1989): 29–30; "Videofilm predlagaet, tvorit, obeshchaet," *Video Digest*, no. 3 (1990): 9–11; R. Sel'skaia, "Uchimsia videoreklame," *Izvestiia*, Nov. 26, 1989.

⁹³ Nikolai Stepanchenko, "V setiakh mafii ili blagie namereniia," *Video Ace*, no. 2 (1990): 12–14.

⁹⁴ "Ob usilivaiushchikhsia tendentsiakh kul'tury i merakh po ikh preodoleniiu. 11 iulia 1990 g.," *Izvestiia TSK KPSS*, no. 10 (1990): 25.

While some newly minted respectable video companies were busy redistributing the still-Soviet film studios and capitals and then emerging post-Soviet media market, the so-called video “mafia” became the major supplier for videotheques, salons, and growing number of individual consumers across the region. Established by the All-Union Research Institute of Film Art at Goskino in 1989, the bulletin *Video Digest* introduced the rubric “That Motley ‘Black Video Market’,” reviewing the hits of the “unofficial cine-video fund” almost exclusively consisting of the US 1970s and 1980s commercial films with occasional intrusion of European auteur cinema. This rubric was printed side by side other lists such as a series “American Video Collection” or “Top Ten According to *Time*” and did not significantly differ. To the question about how this “fund” was available by the early 1990s, the founder of Tashkent’s video salon “Disc” replied, “Of course, Gorbushka.”⁹⁵ An open-air weekend market in Moscow and the largest center for selling pirated media in Russia and across the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, Gorbushka joined the ranks of the giant video bazaars experiencing their rise predominantly in the disintegrating Second and Third Worlds, with the most famous examples of Silesia in Krakow, Alaba Market in Lagos, Palika Bazaar in Delhi, El Tepito in Mexico City, or La Salada in Buenos Aires.

Video Bazaar: *Gorbushka*

In the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Soviet Union dissolution, film critic and committed advocate of video in the 1980s, Valerii Kichin, comparing the “chic” and “library-like” video rental stores he witnessed in Canada and a typical (post-)Soviet videotheque, unfavorably depicted the latter as follows:

⁹⁵ Karpov, in discussion with the author, March, 2021.

“a dirty kiosk with the illegibly printed lists under the glass. Poor copies of randomly selected *boeviki* 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. Will we ever come to the victory of civilized labor?”⁹⁶

Popular narratives ubiquitously took up the metaphor of ‘bazaar’ to describe the post-1989 domestic video economies and cultures, as well as the broader societal transformations linked to the reinvigorated liberalization and decentralization policies and, eventually, the end of the USSR and official transition to market economy across the ex-Soviet states influenced by diverse economic models. Migrating to the critical accounts of late- and post-socialist reformatations and informalities in the former Eastern bloc, the ‘bazaar’ idiom has been widely adopted by scholars to refer to the actual 1990s boom in the large-scale and often deceptively small-scale marketplaces, commonly open-air, multiethnic, counterfeit, and selling an unlimited variety of goods from home-made jams and fake designer clothes to antiques and computers side by side.⁹⁷ ‘Bazaar’ has become a notion denoting a distinctive post-socialist sensibility of unruly anarchy and turbulence that erupted in the context of “the loss of a master narrative” (for critics like Svetlana Boym) or of “the collapse of the order represented by the queue” as the “frenzied release of energy” (most recently, for Karl Schlögel).⁹⁸

In the late 1980s, VCRs and videotapes, still highly expensive, started circulating at the *tolkuchka* (roughly translated as ‘pushing place’ in Russian) markets. Spontaneously emerging

⁹⁶ Valerii Kichin, “Mister Video,” *TV Review*, no. 23 (1992): 36.

⁹⁷ See, for instance, Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020); Oleg Pachenkov, “Every City Has the Flea Market It Deserves: The Phenomenon of Urban Flea Markets in St. Petersburg” in *Urban Spaces after Socialism: Ethnographies of Public Spaces in Eurasian Cities*, eds. Tsypylma Darieva, Wolfgang Kaschuba, and Melanie Krebs (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2012), 181–206; Gertrud Hüwelmeier, “Postsocialist Bazaars: Diversity, Solidarity, and Conflict in the Marketplace,” *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 5, no. 1 (2013), 52–72; Karina Kreja, “Spatial Imprints of Urban Consumption: Large-Scale Retail Development in Warsaw,” in *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe: Space, Institutions and Policy*, eds. Sasha Tsenkova and Zorica Nedovic-Budic (Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag, 2006), 253–72.

⁹⁸ Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 225; Karl Schlögel, *The Soviet Century: Archaeology of a Lost World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 549.

with the legalization of individual and cooperative enterprise, a run of the mill *tolkuchka* was a bazaar-like gathering, often set up in the urban parks and outskirts or out-of-city forests, where individual sellers offered goods that were usually in deficit and high demand, including media goods, such as foreign and *samizdat* books, vinyl records, audiotapes, and video. With the 1992 transition to the free market, the ubiquitous opening of the video stalls at most street markets and the growth of media bazaars as video sale hubs signaled the formation of infrastructure allowing for the unprecedented speed and scope of video dissemination among regular viewers, kiosks, and still active video salons. In Russia, for instance, aimed at combating the commodity shortage and boosting the market from below in the spirit of Poland, the 1992 liberalization of most prices and import and the radical Decree on Free Trade, which allowed everyone to participate in untaxed trading at any place, were the key reforms that stirred the bazaar boom. As the unregulated prices initially skyrocketed and the new waves of shortages spread, “All kinds of people,” as Anders Åslund noted, “took to the streets, not to protest but to sell.”⁹⁹

Usually originating from the *tolkuchka* markets, outdoor video bazaars, “schools of folk capitalism,”¹⁰⁰ became a symbol of postsocialist everyday life and essential part of collective fantasy of the market economy and culture and their freedoms. The rise of video bazaars, associated with piracy, excess and sloppiness of circulation, and word-of-mouth promotion, simultaneously accompanied the development of official video trade system with the distribution brands guaranteeing access to licensed high-quality and diverse entertainment and educational products sold predominantly via mail by order. Among the most famous Russian official video distributors, that simultaneously distributed videos to other ex-Soviet states upon the cheaper

⁹⁹ Anders Åslund, *Russia's Capitalist Revolution: Why Market Reform Succeeded and Democracy Failed* (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007), 97.

¹⁰⁰ Igor' Pichugin, Mikhail Umarov, and Bogdan Chaikovskii, “Mitinskii radiorynok: shkola narodnogo kapitalisma,” *Kommersant*, June 22, 1996.

conditions of sub-licensing, were Krupnyi plan (“Close Up”), Varus Video, Premier Film, or Ekaterinburg ART.¹⁰¹ They habitually specialized in the US cinema, and, occasionally, in case of Ekaterinburg ART, the US melodramatic television mini-series, and foreign festival cinema. The exception was Krupnyi plan led by film director El’dar Riazanov, a company that grew from the association between the leading former Soviet film studios, such as Mosfilm and Lenfilm, and distributed Soviet hits and new films from across the post-Soviet states, now foreign.

In the course of adopting the international copyright norms, post-Soviet states, joining Berne and Rome Conventions in the early 1990s, passed their new Copyright Statutes. For example, in July 1993, Russia issued the new Law on Authorial Right and Related Rights, with the most notable change: prohibition of the use and distribution of copyrighted products without the permission of the copyright owner. Culminating into the release of the new Criminal Code of Russia, which replaced the 1960 Criminal Code of Russian SSR and came into force in 1997, for the first time, the regulations prescribed criminal penalties for piracy, which signaled the beginning of decisive, albeit rarely effective, anti-piracy policy. The 1990s were marked by the emergence of multiple anti-piracy unions and associations, including the Association for the Protection of Authorial and Related Rights for Video in 1995. In the meantime, the building of official video market itself reminded the dizzy ‘bazaar’ atmosphere, which related to both the opening of vast post-Soviet markets and video medium as such. Already in 1987, 4,000 films were brought to the 15th Moscow Film Festival, which was possible due to video, and thirty eight video cabins allowed Videofilm and newly emergent video distributors to watch and acquire

¹⁰¹ As evident from the advertisements, Video Association of Ukraine, described as “the largest provider of video products” in Ukraine offered “licensed” video from such owners as Krypnyi Plan, Varus Video, and other main distributors operating from Russia. See, for example, “Video Assosyatsiia Ukrainy,” *Videomagazin*, no. 39 (1997): 65.

films, with the US, Italy, and India emerging in the leading positions right on the spot.¹⁰² Since 1989, VDNKH (Moscow-based Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy) regularly displayed VCRs, cameras, and videos, calling “to conduct commercial negotiations right at the exhibition.”¹⁰³ Never-ending fairs for video distributors, cable television workers, and workers of culture were revolving around the selling and buying video copyrights.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, cheap and accessible outdoor video bazaars remained the main site of video distribution and consumption in the post-Soviet region throughout the 1990s, symbolized in Russia and beyond by Moscow’s Gorbushka that kept a metonymical relationship with the larger bazaar media economy—“countless ‘gorbushkas’ across Moscow and Russia.”¹⁰⁵ As is typical of Soviet video salons and videotheques, the origins of Gorbushka lie in the walls of the community club: the Gorbunov Palace of Culture owned by the Khrunichev Machine Building Factory, the leading Soviet aviation and rocket industrial producer. Founded in 1938 and named after Soviet aviation engineer Sergei Gorbunov, hence the colloquialized name of the market, this Palace of Culture represented one of the most vibrant spaces of Moscow’s public cultural life throughout the Soviet era and after up to the 2000s. Symbolically, as one of the city emblems, the Gorbunov Palace of Culture appears in two crucial films, one marking the beginning of the 1980s and another drawing a line to the 1990s and both reflecting the broader shifts in the cultural role of the Palace. A place for a public dancing club, for both, socializing and romantic dating, we see it in *Moskva slezam ne verit* (Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears, 1980, Vladimir Men’shov).

¹⁰² “Chto kupleno s ekrana festivalia,” *Izvestiia*, July 28, 1987.

¹⁰³ “Japan Sea Corporation,” *Izvestiia*, Dec. 11, 1989.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Aleksandr Atlantov, “Televidenie po podpiske,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 26–30; Nikolai Lutsenko, “Nika TV nachinaet...i vyigryvaet,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 42–9.

¹⁰⁵ Valerii Turovskii, “Vorovat’ kino v Rossii, vozmozhno, ne budut, no—zavtra,” *Izvestiia*, Dec. 23, 1995.

Some twenty years later, it is now seen in the form of a loud pirate media market in *Brat 2* (Brother 2, 2000, Aleksei Balabanov).

In the 1980s, the Gorbunov Palace of Culture was a well-known space for film screenings and theatrical and music performances and home for a variety of open amateur and hobby groups, including the Club of Record Collectors (“Klub filofonistov”). Founded in 1987 by Igor’ Tonkikh, an engineer working at the Khrunichev Factory and later one of the most influential music event managers in the 1990s, the Club was a community of music lovers and, in fact, an informal network for exchanging and selling bootlegged vinyl records and audiotapes, primarily with the Western rock music, right in the palace’s lobby on the weekends.¹⁰⁶ Quickly achieving the status of “rock and roll Mecca of Russia,” the Gorbunov Palace of Culture, upon the initiative of the Club of Record Collectors and not without resistance from the Union of Soviet Composers, opened its doors for the concerts of the young Soviet rock bands from the Russian synth-pop *Bioconstructor* with their album “Dancing on Video” to Estonian progressive rock *Nezhdali*, Georgian glam metal *Mtsyri*, or Ukrainian punk *Vopli Vidopliassova*, followed by the arrival of *World Domination Enterprises* in 1989 and *Depeche Mode*, *Coil*, or *The Smashing Pumpkins* by the late 1990s.¹⁰⁷ While the Gorbunov Palace of Culture, with the army of musicians, fans, and bootleggers, was transforming into an unsanitary place for drunken freaks in the eyes of many critics,¹⁰⁸ the Club of Record Collectors migrated outside to the square in front of the palace to turn into the major music *tolkuchka* market in Moscow by 1990, known as Gorbushka.

¹⁰⁶ See more on the Gorbushka music distribution in Marco Biasioli, “Piracy as an Institutionalized Social Practice and Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,” in *Eastern European Music Industries and Policies After the Fall of Communism: From State Control To Free Market*, ed. Patryk Galuszka (New York: Routledge, 2021), 41–61.

¹⁰⁷ Marina Agliullina, “Rock, tolkuchka, VHS: kratkaia istoriia legendarnoi Gorbushki,” *Time Out*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.timeout.ru/msk/feature/470946>; Petr Kamanchenko, ““Narod togda vintili pachkami, a v Gorbushke mozno bylo vse.”” *Lenta.ru*, February 11, 2019, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2019/02/11/feelee1/>.

¹⁰⁸ Sergei Menzheritskii, “Chetvertyi internatsional,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Nov. 26, 1997.

Next to the towering Vladimir Lenin monument (Figure 2.4), the Gorbushka *tolkuchka* continued to gather individual sellers and buyers every weekend, offering not only audio



Figure 2.4. The Vladimir Lenin Monument, Gorbushka Market, 1997. Screen grab from the archival recording, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.net-film.ru/film-55378/>.

recordings but serving as a meeting point for a variety of subcultural groups. Simultaneously, Gorbushka rapidly started to attract video entrepreneurs, now sharing the square with music vendors and later

with computer software distributors and contributing to the exponential growth of the giant outdoor media market entirely legitimate and taxes-free since 1992. In 1992, the number of films circulating across video markets in Moscow was estimated at approximately 10,000 with a rate of pirated content of 95–97 percent; and the turnover of the nascent all-Russian video market evolved into a 70 billion ruble business (about US\$560 million at that time), while, for instance, the revenue of the Russian film industry constituted 12 billion rubles (about US\$96 million) in the same year.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, acknowledged to be the “largest illegal trading floor of pirated materials in Europe” and included in the list of so-called “Notorious Markets” by the Office of the US Trade Representative in the 1990s, Gorbushka proved to be at the center of the enormous pirate vortex of video goods, people, and money.¹¹⁰ Along with traditional Moscow’s tourist

¹⁰⁹ “Prestupnost’ i kul’tura,” *Observer* 6, no. 2 (1993), accessed January 17, 2023, https://i-sng.ru/observer/observer/N02_93/2_12.HTM.

¹¹⁰ Rick Howard, *Cyber Fraud: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2009), 102.

attractions, the 1990s Moscow travel guides, such as *Lonely Planet* or *Frommer's*, included the market as a worthwhile sightseeing destination, while the Gorbushka mythology necessarily included stories about foreign visitors dazed not only by extremely low prices but unlimited media on offer, shockingly surpassing the world legal consumer markets.¹¹¹

Tolerated by the authorities as a means of market saturation, facilitating competition, and accumulation of capital throughout the decade, Gorbushka existed for a decade till the 2001 closure that happened under the accompaniment of the following statements pointing at the pivotal cultural role of the bazaar for media consumers:

“For people born in the last two or three decades, Gorbushka meant much more than the sacral Kremlin, Lenin’s Mausoleum, GUM [Main Universal Store], and TsUM [Central Universal Department Store] altogether meant to their parents. For many, it was a kind of a window into civilization, a place where everyone could easily taste the newest, most interesting and forbidden fruits of modern culture.”¹¹²

“The importance of Gorbushka in the life of the city is reflected in the crowds of people seeking to satisfy musical, cinema, or computer hunger. Gorbushka can be considered the next wonder of the world. Its fame spreads far beyond the Moscow Ring Road in the direction of the large cities of the once immense Soviet Union. It is to Gorbushka, always colorful and cheerful, that we are obliged for being able to keep up with the times.”¹¹³

Compensating for the actual and assumed information scarcity and perennial living under state censorship, Gorbushka also served to compensate for the overwhelming feeling of backwardness and sense of the temporal and epistemological gap between the ex-Soviets and the rest of the ‘world’ frequently shrunk to the West as a role model in the context of postsocialist transition. Bridging the gap did not prove to be seamless though, as the shock of overabundance abruptly replaced the boredom of deficiency. Thus, Gorbushka simultaneously emerges in the memories of former vendors and visitors as an unnerving, “scary” place that “seemed to have

¹¹¹ Andrei Lavrov, “Kak ia torgoval nelegal’nymi diskami na Gorbushke,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, Sept. 23, 2009.

¹¹² Ivan Kopytsev, “Proshchai, Gorbushka!” *Zolotoe kol’tso*, Dec. 28, 2000.

¹¹³ Vadim Peresvetov, “Gorbushka kak tsentr Vselennoi,” *Moskovskaia pravda*, July 30, 1999.

everything,” including videocassettes with diverse content, video magazines, electronics, T-shirts, and posters, and that frightened with the speed of circulation and exchange of knowledge.¹¹⁴ At the center of this exchange, in turn, were the Gorbushka sellers seen as the “missionaries bringing the light of the world cultures into the dark masses.”¹¹⁵

By the late 1990s, the Russian press reported a figure of 5,000 people involved in the activities of the bazaar, with about 2,500 sellers.¹¹⁶ A Gorbushka video vendor always appear to be male, and, as ex-workers note, “women were absent as a class” at the market.¹¹⁷ Female video sellers, however, are occasionally visible in the 1990s life video footage from the bazaar. Women also emerge as participants of shadow operations, including, according to the memories of one of Moscow’s prosecutors, the distribution of fake trade permits, creating the visibility of bureaucratic regulations that, similarly to the market itself, officially did not exist till 1996–1997.¹¹⁸ As was typical of the post-Soviet Russian bazaars, the Gorbushka hidden media ‘bosses’ habitually employed unrestricted and unprotected hired labour of regular citizens as street vendors.¹¹⁹ Some vendors joined the market for economic survival and promise of social mobility during the perpetual transition crisis. Albeit often overlapping with the above category, another group of the Gorbushka sellers consisted of genuine film and music buffs and computer geeks (many of them were members of the former Club of Record Collectors), seeing the market as an opportunity of belonging to and accessing the vast media economy and culture where they

¹¹⁴ See blog by Gorbushka seller Oleg Bocharov, “Moskva nedavniaia, vek proshlyi’,” *LiveJournal*, September 19, 2007, <https://bocharoff.livejournal.com/2007/09/19/>.

¹¹⁵ “Filosofiia Gorbushki. Chitateli ‘Izvestii’ zashchishchaiut ‘narodnyi’ rynok,” *Izvestiia*, June 25, 2003.

¹¹⁶ “Panorama,” *Ogonek*, no. 10 (1998): 3; Ol’ga Bobrova, “Gor’kii khleb ‘Gorbushki,’” *Trud*, March 21, 2001; Marina Shpagina, “Kroshki Gorbushki,” *Ekspert*, April 2, 2001.

¹¹⁷ Bocharov, “Moskva nedavniaia.”

¹¹⁸ Sergei Smirnov, “Azбука Tsyrkuna,” *Mediazona*, June 19, 2017, <https://zona.media/article/2017/06/19/tsyrkun-1>.

¹¹⁹ See more in A. Iakovleva, et al. *Otkrytye rynki i “chelnochnaia” trgovlia v rossiiskoi ekonomike: vchera, segodnia, zavtra* (Moscow: VSHE, 2006).

also could apply their competencies and maintain connections with a community of like-minded people. These two trajectories of the sellers' participation in the market everyday resonate with the dominant representations of a regular Gorbushka vendor. At Gorbushka, "an absolute evil" for some sellers, a vendor appears as a subject of virulent market struggles for territory and consumers and, as a result, inflictor/victim of physical assault, robberies, and racketeering; and yet, at the same time he is also a "good tradesman, loving his job, who turned into a personal mentor in the field of modern culture and an attentive critic who cultivated taste."¹²⁰

Seen as powerful media taste-makers, the Gorbushka vendors indeed significantly influenced the dynamics of video circulation and consumption. Bringing the video flows to order, they provided the former Soviet viewers, often unfamiliar with the original contexts of films and media they were surrounded by, with the knowledge about genres, directors, actors, and, importantly, broader aesthetic hierarchies with Hollywood blockbusters and European auteur cinema as the most prestigious products. The main source of information for vendors, in turn, were foreign film and trade magazines. They were translated, and their contents recounted for the video consumers. Extending beyond the mundane market operations, the Gorbushka vendors played the role of major film experts for the Russian press, from the all-Russian influential newspaper *Izvestiia* to youth magazines *Ptiuch* or *Rovesnik* and video magazines like *Video Ace*, that compiled their lists of the best films in consultation with the Gorbushka sellers and, no less importantly, basing their reports on bazaar 'video grosses' as a marker of popularity.¹²¹

¹²⁰ David Kramer, "Odin den' na 'Gorbushke,'" *Moskvich Mag*, August 22, 2022, <https://moskvichmag.ru/gorod/odin-den-na-gorbushke/>.

¹²¹ For example, see Gennadii Charodeev, "Reiting videofil'mov," *Izvestiia*, June 14, 1997.

With all the mediating agency of individual vendors, the principal role of Gorbushka in shaping the video circulation and consumption in Russian, and somewhat broader ex-Soviet, video market is attributable to a wide variety of other factors, not least to the highly organized machinery of governance and infrastructural building. By 1995, according to the newly established Association for the Protection of Authorial and Related Rights for Video in Russia, four large and about ten smaller pirate video firms strictly divided the spheres of influence across all Moscow's bazaars and kiosks, monopolizing video distribution, with Gorbushka to be their largest video outlet.¹²² Among the most influential pirate distribution companies that dominated Gorbushka from the outset were those known under the names Studio Vist, Russian Company "Laser-Video," and Studio One, semi-official video distributor West Video since 1994, owned by the "father of Moscow piracy" standing at the origins of informal Moscow's 'milk mail' in the 1980s and businessman of Armenian origin Tigran Dokhalov. Following the 1996 tax reform that obliged private enterprises to register the ownership, have cashboxes, and pay taxes, another representative of the Armenian diaspora, Grant Grigorian, established Gorbushka as an official "brand" and private enterprise under his leadership, which also points to the principal involvement of Armenian, and broadly Caucasian, elites in control over the Russian media market.¹²³ In the meantime, like most post-Soviet businesses, the Gorbushka video companies maintained their presence and domination over the bazaar, operating under *krysha* ('roof'), or protection from the bribed local police and so-called OPGs (Organized Criminal Groups),

¹²² Aleksandr Golubev and Oleg Borisov, "Veselyi Rodzher na 'Gorbushke,'" *Kommersant Vlast*, May 9, 1995.

¹²³ Shpagina, "Kroshki Gorbushki."

particularly, in case of Gorbushka, “Moscow’s largest and most feared Russian Mafia organizations,” such as the Solntsevo and Izmailovo criminal syndicates.¹²⁴

In overturning assumptions about ‘bazaar’ video circulation as a triumph of chaos, the distribution schemes at Gorbushka, widely known and discussed in media, caused ill-concealed admiration with their “filigree beauty” and “ingenious simplicity,” given the speed, precision, and well-developed mechanism of pirate supply in which the films not yet received the theatrical distribution and recent sports events, such as mixed martial arts competitions, were the most precious trophies.¹²⁵ Each pirate distribution firm had ‘their people’ abroad, usually representatives of the Soviet diasporas, who either acquired licensed videotapes and laser discs at local stores, produced video camrips, or worked at foreign (especially the critically important Hollywood) film studios, where they could steal video workprints. In the meantime, special carriers delivered the videos to Moscow, not facing significant difficulties at the borders. While pirated and pornographic materials were now the only restricted objects, customs officers, either bribed or deceived by the wrong video covers depicting animation or film titles from the previous decades, did not pose a threat. Anecdotally, it could take no more than four-five hours between the arrival of new video to Moscow and showcasing the translated and freshly copied videocassettes sold for US\$5 at Gorbushka. Among the most famous pirate “achievements,” Hollywood movies distributed at the bazaar before their official distribution, were *Basic Instinct* (1992, Paul Verhoeven), *Pulp Fiction* (1994, Quentin Tarantino), *Forrest Gump* (1994, Robert

¹²⁴ Gregory F. Tverton, et al., *Film Piracy, Organized Crime, and Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009): 141; Maksim Varyvdin, “‘Kirill i Mefodii’ ne ispugalis’ solntsevskikh piratov,” *Kommersant*, Oct. 1, 1996; Ivan Petrov, “‘Solntsevskaiia’ Ispaniia,” *Izvestiia*, Oct. 2, 2017.

¹²⁵ Sergei Mostovshchikov, “Russkoe narodnoe cherno-beloe video,” *Izvestiia*, Jan. 14, 1995; Golubev and Borisov, “Veselyi Rodzher.”

Zemeckis), *True Lies* (1994, James Cameron) and many other 1990s hits, with *Titanic* (1997, James Cameron) at the top of the list at the end of the decade.¹²⁶

The first high-quality copies often made from laser discs, or the so-called *nulevka* videos (“zero copy”), which almost instantaneously appeared on the Gorbushka stalls and stands, were not meant to be sold to the general public. Owners of video salons and kiosks, as well as representatives of other media bazaars, from across Russia and other former Soviet states, including Uzbekistan, as also evident from the case of Tashkent’s “Disc,” were the primary buyers of the cheap and Russian-language translated copies of usually excellent quality to bring them to their regions for the following reproduction, circulation, and exhibition both at salons and increasingly via local television networks. By the mid-1990s, approximately 80 percent of the two thousand Russian television stations that grew from Soviet amateur television centers locally broadcasted films and other materials from pirated videotapes.¹²⁷ It was also the case for other former Soviet television networks. For example, in Tashkent, the 1990s television film series *Kino-oko*, *Video Guide*, and *Oscar* broadcasted movie entirely borrowed from “Disc” and presented by Oleg Karpov as a host in exchange for the advertisement of the videotheque; the partnership ended when, after airing *Film d’amore e d’anarchia* (Love and Anarchy, 1973, Lina Wertmüller), Karpov, forced to adopt censorial instructions and cuts, left.¹²⁸

The Gorbushka video companies owned clandestine video copying studios with dozens of VCRs always on, and, only in Moscow, the number of such studios reached the number of five hundred by 1997.¹²⁹ While some of these studios, that allowed for copying of videotapes at

¹²⁶ Georgii Bovt, “Pyraty XX veka: chuzhie mozgi berut na abordazh,” *Kommersant*, Nov. 11, 1995.

¹²⁷ I. S. Volkov, “Piratsstvo na regional’nom televidenii,” *Kinoproizvodstvo*, February 1996, 77.

¹²⁸ Irina Shmeleva, “‘Titanik’ tonet kazhdyi den’.” *Tashkent: Kinozal*, May 1997, 32; Oleg Karpov, in discussion with the author, February 2021.

¹²⁹ “V bor’bu za avtorskie prava vkliuchilos’ ORT,” *Kommersant*, April 15, 1997; Vladimir Gendlin, “Poimannye piraty stanoviatsia dilerami videokompanii,” *Kommersant. Den’gi*, Sept. 22, 2014.

industrial scale, were located in private apartments, others could be found 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.¹³⁰ These studio-produced copies of poorer quality were the productions eventually sold to regular viewers at Gorbushka; yet, they were predominantly distributed in bulk among other selling hubs, usually in provinces, where poor quality was more tolerated, and pirated copies were more difficult or not particularly important for the local police to trace, so the market received about 80 percent of the profit from wholesale trade, significantly defining the video assortment across the country.¹³¹ Gorbushka simultaneously played the role of a “‘leading and guiding’ force” in the area of video equipment and videocassette supply, also habitually contraband, defining the terms of price formation and producing companies of the video technologies, mostly South Korean since the mid-1990s, for the entire Russian market.¹³² While the bazaar became the crucial hub for the large consignments of imported video goods through parallel supply channels, it simultaneously served as a key outlet for other businesses to re-sell shadow video electronics for lower prices to get cash, which simultaneously also allowed the Gorbushka entrepreneurs to cut their prices.

Beyond copying studios, Gorbushka firms owned clandestine polygraphy centers printing colorful video boxes and shining holograms imitating official anti-counterfeiting marks. In 2000, the newspaper *Kommersant* reported that Gorbushka, “under the contract” with the administration of a mental hospital located near the bazaar, had a long-established practice of employing the labor of the hospital’s patients as packers of videotapes and discs, cynically joked

¹³⁰ Gendlin, “Poimannye piraty.”

¹³¹ Golubev and Borisov, “Veselyi Rodzher”; “Panorama,” *Ogonek*, no. 10 (1998): 3.

¹³² Igor’ Pichugin, Ruslan Tarasov, and Mikhail Umarov, “Rynok bytovoi elektroniki v 1994 godu,” *Kommersant*, Dec. 24, 1994; Mikhail Umarov, “Vizit glavy Kolon International GMBH,” *Kommersant*, May 20, 1995.

about as “labor therapy.”¹³³ Continuing the deployment of single-voice interpreting conducted by the same 1980s translators alongside the new recognizable interpreters, in its media translation speed Gorbushka could effectively compete with most official companies. While the latter increasingly used more expensive and time-consuming professional multi-vocal voice-overs and dubbing, video consumers, who had already developed an attachment to recognizable voices on their VHS, often disliked these official translations, thus favorably singling out Gorbushka productions. Linked to this infrastructural organization and cheap labour, low pricing, in turn, was the key reason for Gorbushka’s continuous status as one of the major players and taste-maker in the region.

In the course of the gradual stabilization of official video market and Russia’s integration into the international copyright regime, local authorities and media companies adopted bolder anti-piracy rhetoric in the second half of the 1990s. Despite their pronounced anti-piracy stance, however, independent video distribution companies took a somewhat careful approach in dealing with Gorbushka, given that many of them were born out of the bazaar’s economy, and were well aware of the power of the Gorbushka pirates. The killing of Georgian businessman Tamaz Topadze, the founder of one of the first and most influential legal distribution companies Varus Video, in 1994, served as a reminder that video pirates, controlling one of the most profitable sectors of Russia’s post-1991 economy, would not give up their positions easily. Signaling the attempts to divide the distribution sphere into zones of influence, the common practice was the circulation by official companies of the lists of media “not recommended for sale” among the Gorbushka vendors.¹³⁴ These were the films, usually produced by major Hollywood players who were at the time actively mastering the newly opened vast post-Soviet markets, and programs for

¹³³ Valerii Paniushkin, “Ostrovok sokrovishch,” *Kommersant. Den’gi*, Feb. 16, 2000.

¹³⁴ “Panorama: Chast’ 2,” *Ogonek*, no. 46 (1996): 6.

which the companies actually acquired the distribution rights. Besides, the “loyal, somewhat fatherly” attitude of official video companies towards Gorbushka pirates was due to the fact that the latter were gradually turning into the key sub-licenses buyers and retail distributors of the increasingly cheaper licensed videotapes produced by the legal companies, a relationship which created conditions for a mutually beneficial partnership.¹³⁵

In the meantime, as in the face of devastated theatrical infrastructure the mighty economic players (commonly subsidized by local business tycoons, the emerging media holdings) focused all their attention on ‘small screen’ industries, thus using increasingly more uncompromising tactics in the war against the Gorbushka trade. Within the course of the holding consolidation, the close interdependence of television and video industries was becoming more evident in all parts of the former USSR. In Russia, the case of the first commercial television channel NTV established in 1993 is particularly illustrative of this process. Financed by Gazprom, one of the largest energy corporations in the ex-Soviet region, NTV actively collaborated with such video distribution companies as the above-mentioned Varus Video and Russian Video (Videofilm’s progeny) to the point of forming the mutually beneficial and entwined bodies of the media holding Gruppya Most (“Group Bridge”). Such collaboration under Gazprom’s financial protection allowed NTV to offer the viewers a unique licensed film programming consisting of “genuinely first-class cinematic productions,” quickly became an “object of understandable envy in television circles.”¹³⁶ Securing diverse audiences and significant advertising revenues, NTV broadcasted the new films of allegedly dead Russian cinema along with foreign erotica and retrospectives of global film auteurs and introduced the daily program “The World of Cinema,” a showcase of international commercial and art films.

¹³⁵ Dmitrii Liudmirskii, “Rossiia pered vyborom: pirat ili kopirait?” *Kommersant. Vlast’*, March 26, 1996.

¹³⁶ Nataliia Osipova, “‘Sladkaia zhizn’ nezavisimogo TV,” *Kommersant*, Jan. 15, 1994.

Using and simultaneously promoting the vast collection of films acquired by video distribution companies, NTV was at the forefront of circulating new releases and foreign films previously unknown to viewers from Russia and other ex-Soviet states where the channel was increasingly available.

Such interdependence characteristic of other television channels resulted in their decisive engagement in the anti-piracy struggle. The most large-scale anti-piracy campaign, the 1997 “Video is a Territory of Law,” was conducted under the auspices of the major all-Russian TV channel ORT (today, Channel One) that replaced Program One of the Soviet Central Television and was during the 1990s along with NTV at the avant-garde of the former Soviet media market redistribution. In 1997, actively collaborating with and guided by the US Motion Pictures Association (MPA), representing the global trade interests of Hollywood majors, ORT declared the war against video piracy and particularly Gorbushka as a major pirate hub. The TV channel’s security service, aided by the Moscow’s police, began to carry out regular raids, confiscating films and programs for which ORT had the broadcast and video rights. According to the then-general producer of ORT, now the CEO of the channel, Konstantin Ernst, “in Russia, it is television that spurs the interest in video,” and the broadcasted media, whether on ORT or NTV, defined what the viewers would later search on video markets.¹³⁷ As Gorbushka circulated the ORT-owned films like *Les Compères* (ComDads, 1983, Francis Veber) or *Down By Law* (1986, Jim Jarmusch), along with the channel-produced *Starye pesni o glavnom* (Old Songs About the Most Important Things, 1995, 1996) musicals recycling the Soviet cinematic and television tropes, the bazaar emerged as one of the main obstacles for ORT to protect their copyright

¹³⁷ Konstantin Ernst, “ORT ne vedet kontrprogramirovaniia protiv drugikh kanalov,” *Kommersant*, May 24, 1997.

property and distribution profit.¹³⁸ However, the pressure of foreign media companies, especially MPA, that repetitively framed Russian piracy epitomized by Gorbushka as the reason for avoiding investments in or blocking the Russian media market internationally, was, indeed, another major driver of such anti-piracy campaigns. As such, their function was rather performative, aimed at demonstrating the loyalty of the Russian official distributors.

Media conglomerates' confrontation with Gorbushka was supported by Moscow's authorities. The latter, in turn, proclaimed that the existence of the bazaar, inherently dependent on large-scale theft of foreign products, would force "the world community to react in the same way as in Yugoslavia," depicting Gorbushka as a national security threat and targeting the general public, particularly exposed to such rhetoric after witnessing the 1999 NATO bombing of the former socialist ally.¹³⁹ While the police raids and fines remained ineffective, and the entire closure of the market was still risky till the early 2000s, given the continuing centrality of Gorbushka in providing media, jobs, and, after 1996, significant tax payments, the rise of such sinister narratives signaled attempts to undermine the bazaar's impact on consumers still seeing Gorbushka not only as a shopping destination but an underground scene and cultural value. These narratives revealed, as journalists noted, that the struggle against Gorbushka was "not a struggle against the phenomenon [of piracy] but merely a symbol."¹⁴⁰

The formation of the image of the bazaar as 'pornographic,' meanwhile, proved to be at the heart of this struggle. Since the release of the first issues of the pioneering Soviet video magazine *Video Ace* teeming with sexualized female-centered imagery, whether it depicted scenes from films or ubiquitously used it for promotion of video equipment, it was clear that

¹³⁸ "V bor'bu za avtorskie prava vkluchilos' ORT"; Nataliia Osipova, "Telemost po problemam videopiratsva," *Kommersant*, Feb. 3, 1996.

¹³⁹ Boris Klin, "'Gorbushka' budet, no ne tam i ne 'Gorbushka,'" *Kommersant*, March 21, 2001.

¹⁴⁰ "Filosofiia Gorbushki. Chitateli 'Izvestii' zashchishchaiut 'narodnyi' rynok," *Izvestiia*, June 25, 2003.

erotica and video merged and together channeled the main postsocialist commodity: freedom. The nascent official video distributors, from legal companies to newspapers such as *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* (former major publishing organ of the Komsomol youth communist organizations), eagerly embraced video circulation of erotic feature and educational films and pornography as an epitome of democracy. Nevertheless, the development of urban video markets instead sparked a new wave of the criticism targeting the spread of porn. Ironically, contrary to the 1980s video debates that foregrounded pornography as a vehicle and product of capitalism, the 1990s criticism increasingly framed the dissemination of pornographic materials, seemingly intensified in the context of unruly bazaar activities, as a threat to the formation of 'proper' market economy.

Allegedly more disruptive of the order of intellectual property and authenticity than any other media content, pornography emerged in these narratives as an ultimate pirate commodity the bazaars thrived on. This was particularly the case with Gorbushka, which was famous for its "Alley of Eroica." The porn spoofs like *The Penetrator* (1991, Sebastian), Paul Norman's *Cyrano* (1991) and *The Erotic Adventures of the Three Musketeers* (1991), or adult animation based on the stories of Snow White and Cinderella caused particular indignation. Here, pornography's principal crime was that of repetitiveness, imitation, and sensitivity to distortions of translation manifested in the Russophone circulation through the regular intrusion of the Soviet sports slogans from "Ready to Labour and Defence" to "Strength Is In the Movement."¹⁴¹ Pornography, seen to be a mode of screen production inherently rooted in tedious copying and emulation, was easy and cheap to buy and distribute for the bazaar vendors and, therefore, was an especially dangerous commodity and a challenge to a piracy-free and regulated media

¹⁴¹ Sergei Mostovshchikov, "Piratskii videorynok vyros i pristupil k polovomy sozrevaniuu," *Izvestiia*, Oct. 8, 1994; "Odná 'Gorbushka' na vsiu strany," *Argumenty i fakty*, Oct. 6, 1999.

market. Beyond piracy and other occasionally mentioned reasons, such as involvement in the drug trade or the sale of pornography, including child pornography, which emphasized the monstrous face of the bazaar, was pronounced to be a major cause for the eventual closure of Gorbushka in 2001.¹⁴²

With the closure of Gorbushka, the “victory of civilized labor” in media distribution, which film critics hoped for in the early 1990s, appeared to triumph. Albeit accompanied by bloody market redistributions, killings, and mass bombings, the accelerated closure of murky and dirty street bazaars—the embarrassing and irritating vestiges of the postsocialist transition—became a marker of the 2000s, signaling the beginning of the big ‘order’ with “glamour” as the new “post-Soviet didactic program”¹⁴³ at its core. As the sarcastic publicist wrote in the *Ogonek* magazine, in Russia, video bazaars, as well as piracy, abruptly appeared to be:

“the fate of the semi-communist Asian countries with a deeply nurtured nihilism regarding someone else’s private property. [... Meanwhile] Everyone wanted to wander around the Milan/Cannes film market, wearing plaid jackets, attending screenings, signing contracts, and drinking martini with a filet mignon, that is, feeling like people and participants in the film process entering through the front door.”¹⁴⁴

Indeed, the new strata of media executives embarked on journeys to international trade fairs, adjusted to the requirements of major Hollywood studios that increasingly controlled all distribution sectors, including the casting of Russophone dubbing actors, and opened multiplexes and specialized stores full of glossy VHS and, more often since 1997, DVD sets. By the late 2000s, occasional video bazaars survived in Russia’s provinces, with pirated video kiosks

¹⁴² Ol’ga Bobrova, “Gor’kii khleb ‘Gorbushki,’” *Trud*, March 21, 2001.

¹⁴³ Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov, “Introduction,” in *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*, eds. Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 4.

¹⁴⁴ Igor’ Mal’tsev, “Epitafiia ‘Gorbushke,’” *Ogonek*, no. 9 (March 9, 1997): 21.

lurking in the cities' quiet corners and outskirts, but, in general, docking with the 'civilized' world apparently took place.

In the meantime, this idyllic landscape looked somewhat vintage as soon as it formed, obscuring the parallel emergence of the new powerful 'bazaars' spreading across everyone's homes. Preceded by the long-lasting Soviet projects in the development of computer networks, like the All-State Automated System (OGAS), *Relkom*, the first network in Russia, was launched already in 1990 and jokingly stood for "*real communism*."¹⁴⁵ In the same year, Russia was first connected to the internet via the domain *.su*. During the first decade of its existence, the Russian internet, known since the mid-1990s as the Runet, developed as the Russian-language "samizdat, archive, and library" and "in complete accordance with literature-centric traditions" mostly represented the circulatory vortex in literature, amateur poems, esoteric books, and other text-centered content.¹⁴⁶ With the high-speed unlimited access in 2004, the Runet became a new Gorbushka, where the actual former Gorbushka sellers and the new generation of their cyber-followers found their shelter. Occupying the torrent websites, with the future *RuTracker* at the forefront, streaming platforms, and social media, the Runet informal video distributors demonstrated notable adherence to the real-world bazaar practices breaking through the aesthetic surface of the network. They digitized the VHS cassettes and DVDs, circulated notorious camrips side by side high-quality videos, and employed in their still predominantly cross-border distribution the same or similar translation voice-overs that define the Russophone digital screen cultures up to date. These video translations, as a crucial economic factor and aesthetic device, will be at the centre of the following chapters.

¹⁴⁵ Natalya Konradova and Henrike Schmidt, "From the Utopia of Autonomy to a Political Battlefield: Towards a History of the Russian Internet," in *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture and Politics of New Media Communication*, edited by Michael S. Gorham, et. al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2014): 39.

¹⁴⁶ Sergei Kuznetsov, *Oshchupyyaia slona: zametki po istorii russkogo interneta* (NLO, 2004): 11, 73.

Chapter 3—Video Journeys and (Post-)Socialist Fairy Tales

In the 1982 Soviet film *Vokzal dlia dvoikh* (Station for Two, El'dar Riazanov), guests come to visit Uncle Misha, a “typical *kolkhoznitsa* [a collective farm woman]” and savvy black marketer, played by all-Soviet favorite Nonna Mordiukova. To the delighted sighs of the friend Vera, Uncle Misha proudly demonstrates her new acquisition, a VCR, pausing, rewinding, and turning play a videotape with pre-recorded performance of the Eastern bloc hit song “Hafanana” by the Mozambican musician Afric Simone. Soon the moment comes for Uncle Misha to present her collection of videotapes with movies. “An American film. In two parts, about a rhinoceros headbutting people. Scary! It’s called either *Horns*, or *Teeth*,” she announces. “And how much is



Figure 3.1. Uncle Misha shows her video recorder and video collection. Shot from *Station For Two*, 1982. Screen grab.

the tape?” Vera asks. “Three hundred,” Uncle Misha exhales, “What did you think? It’s already translated into Russian.”

One of the earliest depictions of video on the Soviet

screens, the scene—simultaneously a denouncement and promotion of, as well as a manual for, the use of video—offers a glimpse into the principal fantasy, aspect of experience, and material condition of (post-)Soviet video culture: language translation. The (Third World) foreign tunes here come across as beyond the need for decoding, an asymbolic material to demonstrate the

work of technology. Meanwhile, (the First World) cinema brought by video belongs to the realm of the unintelligible, or genuinely ‘foreign,’ that produces the need for and value of translation. Translation expenses account for the high cost of the videotape: worth about two average monthly wages in the early 1980s Soviet Union. And yet, as soon as translation emerges as an indispensable and yet undeniable luxury, it immediately reveals its comical failure and detours: in fact, the film that Uncle Misha advertises as vaguely titled story about a rhinoceros turns out to be none other than *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975).

As this episode captures, translation is the key additive in the Soviet trade of video and, as such, an essential commodity. Translation is constitutive and simultaneously indicative of cultural and aesthetic negotiations, particularly tangible in translation failures, that underpin the (post-)Soviet video experiences. At the same time, translation arises as fundamental for and reflective of the process of (post-)Soviet constructing the popular. In a symbiotic fusion, video entertainment, here epitomized by Hollywood and *Jaws* specifically, is a driving force behind the valorization of translation, and vice versa: translation allows for entertainment to move, gaining meaning and, therefore, visibility and popularity. Symptomatically, *Jaws*, along with Steven Spielberg’s oeuvre more broadly, has become one of the main objects of narratives about late capitalism and the rise of Western entertainment as essential for post-socialist and post-Cold War popular cultures. Consider, for instance, Fredric Jameson’s and Anikó Imre’s critiques that provide a starting point for this chapter that focuses on the relationships between the ‘First’ and (former) ‘Second’ Worlds as manifest in video circulation and translation.

Addressing the emergence of the phenomenal multiplicity of readings, or “polysemousness,” of *Jaws*, interpreted as a reflection on the Vietnam War, ‘Red Scare,’ etc., Jameson deflects attention from the content of the readings to this precise desire for and an

overabundance of meaning-making around the film. A paradigmatic example of how a cultural work achieves mass appeal and becomes popular, *Jaws*, for him, bribes by absorbing numerous, uncertain, and yet “the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity” and, more importantly, driving the public to participate in the process of articulation and interpretation of their obscure and variable implications, “no matter in how distorted a fashion.”¹ The most often-reproduced anecdote that illustrates the unprecedented scale of interpretation play triggered by *Jaws* and their effects has been a story of the film’s circulation in socialist Cuba. Allegedly Fidel Castro ordered to release pirate copies of *Jaws* in local movie theaters, claiming that “It is a Marxist picture” denouncing the operation of capitalism.² Allowing and inviting for the vast work of interpretation, *Jaws*, thus, seems to be flexible enough to cross the Cold War borders and even gain official recognition in state socialist context. The amplified role of translation in (post-)Soviet video cultures, meanwhile, does not simply illuminate the centrality of meaning-making process for manufacturing and maintaining the mass appeal. Reflective of significant (albeit fluctuating) displacement of the popular, these cultures outwardly foreground meaning-making materialized through ubiquitous monovocal voice-overs as a part of the spectacle. And while, for Jameson, the extent to which meaning production is aberrant or distorted is insignificant, (in)voluntary error is central for understanding (post-)Soviet video entertainment, an argument I will return to later.

Meanwhile, Imre draws attention from the role of ‘interpretation games’ in shaping the popular to what she calls “identity games” of global mass entertainment and in the postsocialist context in particular.³ Moving away from the shark to the dinosaur, she interrogates the

¹ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 144.

² Ian Freer, *The Complete Spielberg* (London: Virgin, 2001), 55.

³ Anikó Imre, *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 11–7.

phenomenon of the mass popularity of Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) among the postsocialist audiences, "long deprived of spectacle, tired of the ascetic spirit of politically infused modernist media."⁴ Imre argues that there are two main ways to understand this phenomenon. The 'simplistic' one, rooted in the masculine cult of high culture and nationalism according to her, is that the postsocialist fascination with *Jurassic Park* signals "a shift from a very 'grown-up' children's media culture overwhelmed by adult control and overt political content to an intentionally depoliticized, commercial children's culture that engulfs and infantilizes the realm of adults."⁵ Another approach Imre herself suggests in echoing Svetlana Boym, who introduced the idea of the "Jurassic Park syndrome,"⁶ is that *Jurassic Park* provided an appealing playground for negotiating postsocialist identities based on the "nostalgic" reassessment of and reconnecting with the dinosaur-like "extinct world of communism,"⁷ especially its popular children's culture. Referring to socialist children's media as "perhaps the most forgotten aspect of communism," Imre argues that such films as *Jurassic Park* allowed for pleasurable re-playing of some sensibilities evocative, albeit not similar, of popular socialist entertainment.⁸ These sensibilities, in turn, are, first, the persistent socialist adult-child hybridity of popular culture and, second, self-identification through transplanted, recycled, and imitated imports, best exemplified by East European film and animation adaptation of the genre of Western. Whereas, as Imre writes, many socialist children's media "never crossed borders" and "they were certainly not exported to the West," Western imaginaries, even if domesticated, significantly defined socialist popular and children's culture, which legitimized and contributed to advancing Western

⁴ Imre, *Identity Games*, 68.

⁵ Imre, *Identity Games*, 68.

⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 33–9.

⁷ Imre, *Identity Games*, 65.

⁸ Imre, *Identity Games*, 71.

entertainment at the forefront of the postsocialist mass culture after the Cold War.⁹ The opposite is also true: Western entertainment brought to the fore the longing for socialist children's cultures replaced by global mass media. Thus, importantly, to understand the mechanisms of the production of the popular under postsocialism, as Imre concludes, one must be attentive to "children's media that has become one of the most influential dimensions of the future of postcommunist, and by extension, global, media cultures."¹⁰

The "identity games" that unfold at the intersection between the two popular forms—Hollywood cinema and socialist children's media—is a culturally contextualized variation of the process of interpretation or meaning-making foregrounded by Jameson as integral to the mass appeal. In tying together these two parallel critiques of the popular, this chapter focuses on the interplay between children's animation and meaning-making, specifically translation, in the (post-)Soviet video deeply embedded into and reflective of the 1980s and 1990s global media cultures emerging through the radical reconfiguration of the world order. As a crucial aspect of this reconfiguration, the rise of video-driven dominance of and fascination with Western entertainment, including children's media, in the (former) Soviet Union seems to be an indisputable fact. This entertainment allegedly emerged as a central area to play identity and interpretation games for the (post-)Soviet public eagerly disseminating, translating, and consuming what was unavailable and unknown before. However, how might our understanding of these games, this chapter asks, be deepened by looking at the specific video-shaped cross-cultural paths of circulation and translation mediation? What cultural and aesthetic negotiations, as evident from these paths, accompanied the formation of new (post-)Soviet popular culture?

⁹ Imre, *Identity Games*, 77.

¹⁰ Imre, *Identity Games*, 72.

And what is specific about these negotiations, as soon as we situate them in relation to children's media, especially animation, essential, as Imre emphasizes, for the post-Cold War media era?

In reflection on the global media circulation patterns emerging at the end of the twentieth century, Arjun Appadurai foregrounds animation as one of the “cultural forms,” such as ballet or fashion photography, that “create circuits of circulation which did not exist before.”¹¹ The often-emphasized “malleability” of animation that “offers up a limitlessness that live action cinema does not” creates a storm of possibilities for the on- and off-screen worldmaking through transcultural, transmedia, and transitional remixes and exchanges—phantasmagorical, hybrid, deceptive, and frequently seeming aberrant.¹² The same can partially be said of translation, always implying the deviation from the ‘original’ and assuming the potentiality of error and misinterpretation. Resulting from censorship, artistic re-appropriation, informalities, market-driven formal regulations, or broader cultural asymmetries, translation (in)voluntary failures are essential for global screen cultures, as demonstrated by scholars as diverse as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Abé Markus Nornes, Mark Betz, Nataša Đurovičová, and Tessa Dwyer.¹³ Seen together, animation and translation, in turn, open up a particularly transformative space reflective of the cultural (in)congruencies, tensions, and oddities, which is particularly true for the (post-)Soviet video cultures. In these transitory and messy screen cultures, things can turn out not what

¹¹ Arjun Appadurai, “How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective,” in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 64.

¹² Jane Batkin, *Identity in Animation: A Journey Into Self, Difference, Culture and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1.

¹³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “The Cinema After Babel: Language, Difference, Power,” in *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, ed. by Ella Shohat (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 106–38; Abé Markus Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Nataša Đurovičová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic Translatio,” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 90–120; Tessa Dwyer, *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

they seem, not least due to video allowing for the increasingly networking global media landscapes in the 1980s and 1990s.

In what follows, I will foreground a particular case of what appeared Western Anglophone animation films arriving in the post-1991 Russophone video market. Titled *Friends Are Forever: Tales of the Little Princess*, *The Treasure of Swamp Castle*, etc., these animated features were advertised through video catalogues as North American productions and distributed via Russian-language monovocal male voice-overs overlapping with the audible English-language dialogues. However, it was not the first time these films circulated across local screens. They were Eastern European animation features the Soviet Union distributed across movie theaters and on television and video in the 1980s—the productions that disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet media industry. Focusing on the example of the Hungarian animation film *Szaffi* (1985, Attila Dargay), also known as *The Treasure of Swamp Castle*, I trace the video and translational journeys of socialist animation that challenge our ideas about the West as a media supplier and the (former) Second World as a receiver swallowed by and making meaning of itself in relation to Western entertainment.

Translation here is, first, an epistemic tool of my analysis, which, in fact, allowed me to reconstruct the routes and routines of *Szaffi*'s distribution and reception. Second, translation as a language transfer is an object of my analysis. I will examine the key transformations of *Szaffi* by looking at Soviet dubbing of the original Hungarian-language version, Anglophone dubbing, and Russophone post-Soviet re-translation of the English-language dub. In the meantime, I will analyze a broader historical and cultural contexts of the Eastern bloc children's media habits and exchanges, as well as their disruptions, providing a background for understanding the role of *Szaffi*. In doing so, I seek to discern and outline the shifts in aesthetic and cultural politics, as

well as the visions of the world more broadly, symptomatic of the restructuring of global and (post-)socialist media entertainment. Before examining *Szaffi*'s history of travels and incarnations, I will first outline the role of screen translation and animation culture in the Soviet Union—two cultural industries that experienced the most rapid and irreversible changes and revealed the deepest cracks with the advent of home video and the 1991 Soviet dissolution.

Two Soviet 'In-Betweens': (Screen) Translation and Animation

Among all Soviet projects driven by a desire to reconfigure the individual and organization of society and usually described as 'utopian' today, (screen) translation and animation play a remarkable role, echoing each other's paradoxical statuses and histories and, symptomatically, sharing the institutional origins.

In his book *High Art*, one of the chief theoreticians of Soviet translation, children's poet Kornei Chukovsky, rejects any assumptions about translation as a subservient or peripheral cultural practice. Providing us with a glimpse into the meanings of translation in the Soviet context, Chukovsky claims that translator "is not a craftsman, not a copyist, but an artist," who "does not photograph the original" but imaginatively re-creates guided by the principles of socialist realism.¹⁴ Translation "under the Soviet system is a matter of national importance" and "sublime mission" as it serves as a bridge between peoples to facilitate mutual exchange, cultural enrichment, and internationalist uniting.¹⁵ In a similar vein, throughout his works, one of the key Soviet historians of animation, Sergei Asenin, recurrently argues for the need to move beyond the idea of animation as "Cinderella in the big house of cinematic arts."¹⁶ Drawing on the

¹⁴ Kornei Chukovsky, *Vysokoe iskusstvo: Iz anglo-amerikanskikh tetradei* (Moscow: Aгенstvo FTM, 2012), 9.

¹⁵ Chukovsky, *Vysokoe iskusstvo*, 10.

¹⁶ Sergei Asenin, *Volshebnyki ekrana. Esteticheskie problem sovremennoi mul'tiplikatsii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974), 3.

theories of Sergei Eisenstein about animation as a “flame” best capable of expressing “the dream about the fluid diversity of the Universe,”¹⁷ Asenin foregrounds animation as an artistic practice that “does not copy the reality” but is based on the “principles of re-creation” that are “all-pervasive and ‘total’” and radically apt for the utilizing the transformative potential of socialist realism.¹⁸ The unique social power of animation, meanwhile, is the “deep and inextricable link with *narodnoe tvorchestvo* [popular/folk creativity],” which positions animation as one of the principal means of democratic engagement with culture and of saving “multinational” cultural heritage.¹⁹

Soviet cultural discourses, thus, argue against, albeit implicitly recognizing the haunting presence of, the notions of translation and animation as marginal areas of copying, imitation, and surrogate. Instead, they emphasize the agency of creator, artistry, and imaginativeness as crucial ingredients of the two, simultaneously endowing these spheres with the task of facilitating social progress and intercultural connections. Seen as dynamic realms of innovation, Soviet translation and animation, however, just like all Soviet creative industries, had precepts laid down by the official artistic doctrine of *socialist realism*. Central for state-socialist cultural production till the mid-1980s, this doctrine suggested such guiding principles as “*partiinnost*’ [party-mindedness], *narodnost*’ [accessibility to the people and the deployment of popular cultural traditions], humanism, and active political and civil position.”²⁰ The cultivation of translation and animation as grounded in diversity, openness, and imaginative re-articulation of the world, along with the prescriptive ideology of socialist realism and accompanying censorship and centralized control,

¹⁷ Quoted in Sergei Asenin, *Mir mul'tfil'ma. Idei i obrazy mul'tplikatsii sotsialisticheskikh stran* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986), 29.

¹⁸ Asenin, *Mir mul'tfil'ma*, 20.

¹⁹ Asenin, *Volshebnykh ekrana*, 279.

²⁰ R. Iurenev, “Kinoiskusstvo sotsializma i mirovoi kinoprotsess,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1981): 125.

meanwhile, have been seen among scholars as the source of highly ambiguous and contradictory developments of these fields under socialism.

The Soviet translation culture, as Susanna Witt points out, is “the largest more or less coherent project of translation the world has seen to date—largest in terms of geographical range, number of languages involved and timespan; coherent in the sense of ideological framework (allowing for fluctuations over time) and centralized planning.”²¹ From the first gatherings of the Communist International to the World Youth Festivals, from the monumental *World Literature* series to the circulation of foreign and local films produced in the multiple national languages of the Union, translation formed an indispensable part of Soviet culture.²² It haunted the public and private spheres of Soviet life with monotonous voices and machines of simultaneous interpreting, sung music lyrics, written words, and cinematic dubs. The distinct geocultural vastness and capacity to accumulate a multitude of cultural flows, nevertheless, went hand in hand with the universalizing (even if fluctuating), assimilative, and top-down model of production and government via state-issued decrees, censorship bodies, and State Committees for Publishing/Cinema, etc.

Sanja Bahun, in turn, foregrounds a very similar dynamic as characteristic of Soviet, and broadly socialist, animation production. Although not reaching the same scale as translation production, Soviet animation experienced a boom after the Second World War. By the 1970s, the Soviet animation industry, just like state-socialist animation as such, was considered the largest

²¹ Susanna Witt, “Between the Lines: Totalitarianism and Translation in the USSR,” in *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Brian James Baer (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), 149.

²² See, for instance, such comprehensive accounts of the cultural role of translation under (Soviet) socialism as Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018); Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020); Christopher Rundle, Daniele Monticelli, and Anne Lange, *Translation Under Communism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

in Europe. The animation's quality of being "beyond-the-possible" emphasized under socialism, as Bahun notes, made animation "simultaneously consonant and dissonant with the ideological parameters of the socialist project," while it represents a complex terrain, where the unprecedented polyphonic integration into the world, creative liberty, and interactive nature of animated films coexisted with political overdetermination and centralization.²³ In this ambivalent realm, a key "feature of socialist animation" proved to be a blurry line "between commercial vs. artistic films, 'normal' vs. experimental films or children vs. adult animation," with the centrality of didactic address that, however, manifested "not only as transfer of educational content, but also as impulse to arouse the interest of the viewers through unusual form."²⁴

Albeit having diverse genealogies and pre-histories, Soviet screen translation and animation as systematic and regular production can be said to have grown out of the same setting: film studio Mezhrabpromfilm in Moscow. In 1935, associated with Mezhrabpromfilm, NIKFI (the Cinema-Photo Research Institute) conducted the first Russophone dubbing of a foreign film in the Soviet Union: *The Invisible Man* (1933, USA, James Whale). Since then, dubbing remained the dominant translation mode for the all-country circulation of foreign and domestic film and television media until the advent of video. In 1936, Mezhrabpromfilm gave life to two studios: Soiuzdetfilm, the future Gorky Film Studio specializing in the production of films for children and youth, and Soiuzdetmultfilm, the future Soyuzmultfilm (All-Union Animated Cartoon Studios) the major animation studio in the country. Compared to the "deep-space communication centre," Gorky Film Studio, beyond being a key hub for children's screen

²³ Sanja Bahun, "The Human and the Possible: Animation in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Cinema, State Socialism and Society in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1917–1989. Re-Visions*, eds. Sanja Bahun and John Haynes (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 189.

²⁴ Paweł Sitkiewicz, "Animation: Parallel Worlds," *Ekrany. Special Issue: Socialist Entertainment* 56, no. 4 (2020): 43.

production, became a place for the Soviet oldest and biggest dubbing guild, accumulating film streams to translate from abroad and across the country.²⁵ Similarly, Soyuzmultfilm, given the need for voice acting in animation films and possession of the necessary facilities, proved to be one of the major dubbing providers, and both translation and animation dubs traveled through the same recognizable voices within an overlapping acoustic space.

Upon its introduction in the mid-1930s, screen dubbing was deemed the most effective means to distribute national motion picture imports and exports. In defending the choice of dubbing, film workers and critics commonly emphasized that a dubbed film secures larger audiences and, therefore, higher revenues, as well as greater intensity of cinematic exchanges and of ideological and educational impact. Such mass appeal of dub, in turn, was linked to the accessibility and aesthetic superiority of acoustic translation to subtitling. The latter, while initially less expensive and less technologically cumbersome, was seen as creating a distraction for the viewers' and reason of the "impoverishment and oversimplification of the content."²⁶ Beyond import/export circulation, dubbing enabled the distribution of locally produced films among the peoples of the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic Soviet Union in their native languages, a declared priority of the early Soviet film distribution.²⁷ Despite the economic constraints, particularly pressing during and immediately after the Second World War, dubbing centers complete with armies of translators, voice actors, and technicians emerged across the Soviet republics. By the mid-1960s, approximately 70 percent of all films screened in local cinemas were dubbed and supplied by these centers.²⁸ Foreign and local films were dubbed not only into the titular 12–15 languages of the Union republics but also the languages of ethnic minorities and

²⁵ F. Andreev, "Sedoniia i Iason govoriat po-russki," *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, Dec. 30, 1971.

²⁶ O. Lil'burg, "Obsluzhit' zritelei soiuznykh respublik," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (1938): 42–5.

²⁷ Nikolai Kiva, "Pogovorim o dubliazhe," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1936): 47.

²⁸ A. Zolotnitskii, "Pogovorim o dubliazhe," *Kinomekhanik*, no. 12 (1966): 16–19.

native peoples. For example, from 1949 to the mid-1990s, Sverdlovsk Film Studio and several others translated as many as 500 films into Chuvash, a Turkic language of the Chuvash people indigenous to the Volga-Ural region of Russia.²⁹

By the moment the dubbing industry started developing in the mid-1930s, Soviet animation had been making its first steps since the 1920s as political agitation and children's shorts, both fulfilling the task of socialist mobilization and enlightenment. The common goals significantly blurred the distinctions between adult and children's media, which informed, albeit not uniformly, Soviet animation cultures throughout their history. From the outset, with the collaborative production of such animated films as *Mezhplanetnaia revoliutsiia* (Interplanetary Revolution, 1924) or *Kitai v ogne* (China in Flames, 1924) in Moscow, Soviet animation was involved in the manufacturing of alternative geographies remapped and re-created through the ideologemes of socialist internationalism and struggle. Beyond the screen, Soviet animation was first envisioned as an intercultural enterprise. Rich animation traditions began to form in Kyiv and Odessa (Ukrainian SSR), with the notable example of *Murzilka v Afritsi* (Murzilka in Africa, 1934), in Tbilisi (Georgian SSR), with the first animation film *Argonavtebi-Kolkhida* (The Argonauts, 1935), and a few other capitals of Soviet republics, all produced in local languages. Formed at the intersection of Soviet revolutionary avant-garde, republican artistic schools, and international animation influences, including an adaptation of the Disney techniques, albeit deemed "uncritical" during the Cold War,³⁰ Soviet animation was born as a genuine cultural 'translation' site. By the 1960s, when the Soviet animation industry recovered after the Second World War, it proved deeply "transnational in subject, Soviet in practice," blending world and

²⁹ "Kulturnoe nasledie Chuvashii: Teatr, kino," accessed on February 24, 2022, <http://nasledie.nbchr.ru/nasledie/teatr-kino/>.

³⁰ Asenin, *Mir mul'tfil'ma*, 47–8.

local cultural and literary heritages, landscapes, and peoples under the auspices of socialist realism in phantasmagoric amalgamations.³¹ Under socialism, animation became an area of “socialization with the [entire] world,” through the re-imagining of the latter.³²

Rooted in the project of alternative worldmaking, Soviet translation and animation cultures remained systematic and regulated. One of the most significant features of the Soviet translation culture, as Elena Razlogova notes, was production of “communication within a stable geopolitical hierarchy, enshrining differences between languages, cultures, and the ‘three worlds’—capitalist, socialist, and non-aligned.”³³ This division, in turn, mirrored the official Soviet routing and organization of broader cross-border circulation in texts, music, and images, including animation films. In the Soviet cultural exchange, the priority was typically given to socialist productions for economic and ideological reasons. Acquired by Sovexportfilm through media exchanges or for low price and distributed on television, socialist animation gained high popularity. Among the most famous examples are the Polish series *Bolek and Lolek* (1962–1986), the Czechoslovak series *Krtek* (The Mole, 1957–2002), Soviet-Vietnam co-production *Trời sắp mưa* (It is Going To Rain Soon, 1959) made during the studying of Vietnamese animators at Soiuzmultfilm, or Cuban *Filminuto* series (1980–2008). Socialist animated films were praised as another achievement of the humanist culture of socialism, simultaneously serving to create for the Eastern bloc children a common ground of attachments, values, and sentiments shared up to date.

³¹ Maya Balakirsky Katz, *Drawing the Iron Curtain: Jews and the Golden Age of Soviet Animation* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 15.

³² David MacFadyen, *Yellow Crocodiles and Blue Oranges: Russian Animated Film Since World War Two* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 119.

³³ Elena Razlogova, “On Soviet Spoken Cinema,” in *Remapping Cold War Media: Institutions, Infrastructures, Translations*, eds. Alice Lovejoy and Mari Pajala (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 170.

The regulation and maintaining of divisions and hierarchies in cross-border exchanges extended to the intra-state production and distribution, which created particularly problematic and unequal conditions for development of both translation and animation cultures in the Soviet Union. Declared to serve cultural connections, along with maintaining local artistic visions and integrity, Soviet dubbing and animation industries were perpetually facing the frequently corrosive effects of a policy of Russification and centralized management.

Breaking the promise of internationalism, the 1930s cinema's transition to sound and adoption of dubbing paradoxically immediately signaled the shift from the 1920s *korenizatsiia* (nativization) policies to overwhelming Russification. While nativization had been aimed, among other aspects of local and national heritage, at the maintenance and promotion of Soviet peoples' languages, the opposite linguistic policies began to steadily intensify through the 1930s onwards. Russification reached its peak in the 1970s with the rise of official rhetoric on Russian as constitutive of the Soviet collectivity and the issuing of mandates to further advance Russian across educational institutions. Before dubbing began to discipline, standardize, and ultimately mute the cacophony of Soviet voices, sound initially provided grounds for "the creation of a multilingual cinema not available elsewhere"—capturing the enormous heteroglossia of "foreign, accented, non-Russian, and in other ways 'estranged' speech."³⁴ And this very heteroglossia—which from the Soviet everyday broke into the film screen and was supposed to be maintained—became the main obstacle for dubbing to ensure the unobstructed media circulation and, therefore, profit and political unity.

³⁴ Lilya Kaganovsky, *The Voice of Technology: Soviet Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1928–1935* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 32. See also Evgeny Margolit, "The Problem of Heteroglossia in Early Soviet Sound Cinema (1930–35)," in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, eds. Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 119–28.

From its onset in the 1930s, despite all the official claims of its importance as the government's prime concern and "political task," the development of dubbing industries in the Soviet republics systematically failed, not least due to a lack of material resources.³⁵ Although gradually the work of local dubbing industries stabilized, the ubiquitous agent of film translation proved to be Russian used as a pivot language for the Soviet screens. In Union republics, dubbing of foreign and domestic movies into local languages was commonly a re-translation of Russian-language versions. To continue their journeys—whether straight to screens, or further on to the republican dubbing hubs—foreign and domestic films were edited and dubbed into Russian. Dubbing centers in the republics also performed Russian translations, and Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kyiv (Ukraine) was in fact one of the major Soviet producers of Russian-language dubs. It was a common practice among local filmmakers and actors to conduct the so-called 'self-dubbing' supervised by a film's creators. Presumed to bear the 'auteur' stamp, such dubs were considered particularly prestigious forms of translation with the full status of the 'original.' At the same time, they were often criticized for their pursuit of reproducing the artificially strict literary norms of the target language, incompatible with source material—as it happened in the case of Armenian *Ashnan arev* (Autumn Sun, 1977, Bagrat Oganessian).³⁶ This target language was typically Russian, guaranteeing the all-state distribution as a lingua franca. In the context of asymmetrical bilingualism, while Russian film workers and audiences stayed predominantly monolingual, self-translation was often a task imposed on those producing films in their first native languages.

³⁵ Lil'burg, "Obsluzhit' zritelei soiuznykh respublik"; "Obsuzhdaem problemu dubliazha," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1938): 60–2.

³⁶ G. V. Zakoian, "Kakim iazykom dolzhny govorit' geroi armianskikh fil'mov?" *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, no. 15 (1992): 124–36.

It is important to emphasize that these policies significantly impacted (post-)Soviet video market dominated by Russophone translations. The first videotapes translated into local language in Lithuania, for example, arrived only about 1998, and the voice-overs were blamed for “hurting the country’s integration into Europe.”³⁷ The Ukrainian voice-overs, rarely present in video circulation, emerged on television predominantly as translations of soap operas by the mid-1990s, and Uzbek translations started gradually entering the video screens only in the early 2000s.³⁸ Resulting from the economic factors as the video distributors saw Russian, a ‘Soviet language,’ to be a guarantee of broader circulation, the dominance of Russian in (post-)Soviet video cultures reflected the long-lasting legacies of Soviet language and translation politics.

Significant asymmetries similarly marked the development of entirely state-subsidized Soviet animation. Up to 1991, Soiuzmultfilm based in Moscow remained the major animation studio recruiting animators from across the country. Maya Balakirsky Katz notes that at the studio “a multicultural and multilingual group of civilian employees mined their own non-Russian traditions of the Jewish, Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek, and Lithuanian “peoples” (*narodnost’*) to create one of the most popular forms of Soviet culture,” arguing that, at least in the field of animation, “the staid image of a Russo-centric Soviet culture requires substantial revision.”³⁹ Beyond Soiuzmultfilm, the Soviet second-largest animation studio was founded at the Kyivnaukfilm (Kyiv popular science films) in Ukraine in 1959. During the late 1950s and 1960s, new animation divisions continuing and forging their traditions and employing animators from diverse Soviet regions were established in the Baltic, Transcaucasian, and Central Asian

³⁷ Darius James Ross, “Dubbing It Out; One Man’s Battle Against TV Voice-Over,” last modified May 25, 2005, <https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/12793/>. See more in Ieva Grigaravičiūtė and Henrik Gottlieb, “Danish Voices, Lithuanian Voice-Over,” *Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (1999): 89.

³⁸ Laada Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 93; Oleg Karpov (video distributor from Tashkent, Uzbekistan) in discussion with the author, March 2021.

³⁹ Balakirsky Katz, *Drawing the Iron Curtain*, 3.

republics. However, some studios in such places like Belarus or Tajikistan experienced significant delay in joining the animation production, forming their animation centers closer to the 1980s. The educational institutions for training in animation production and such major governing centers as Goskino, supervising animation industries, meanwhile, were concentrated in Moscow.

In the context of aesthetic regulation, Soviet translation and animation cultures were characterized by a tension bridging the imperative of internationalism and precepts of socialist realism, implying the radical domestication and re-appropriation in the spirit of Soviet creative doctrine. This exact doctrine, seemingly prescriptive and limiting, opened up a space for aesthetic practices and effects that were transformative, albeit not unproblematic. Contrary to the sub/dub divide characteristic of many Western, particularly Anglophone, screen cultures, where subtitles commonly accompany high-value media and art films, and dubbing is a conduit for B-grade and children's entertainment,⁴⁰ dubbing in the Soviet Union was envisioned as a vast creative industry not in name only. Dubbing stood for the artistry capable of—and frequently aiming at—aesthetically elevating the original both at the level of language and of performance. For example, *The Pickwick Papers* (1952, Noel Langley), the first British film acquired by the Soviet Union in the postwar period, was seen as “poor” and paling in comparison to its original Charles Dickens's 1837 novel. Consequently, in its dubbing, original dialogue from the film was replaced with the lines from Russian translation of the literary source.⁴¹ Or, in Russian-dubbed Yugoslav war film *Mačak pod šljemom* (Cat Under the Helmet, 1962, Žorž Skrigin), a partisan commander's dubbed performance turned him into a stutterer, apparently in order to compensate

⁴⁰ Dwyer, *Speaking in Subtitles*, 19–51.

⁴¹ “Dublirovanie fil'mov,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 6 (1954): 127.

for the “consequences of the [bad] director’s taste.”⁴² In the dubbing director Vitalii Voitetskii’s opinion, the commander’s constant screaming at the partisans in the original Serbo-Croatian version, made him look like a villain, and this acting seemed to disrupt the logic of the plot. Dubbing allowed to reinterpret the angry facial expression of the actor as manifestations of speech disorder and served to recuperate the character as a positive hero and, therefore, to “save” the film. In re-appropriating, domesticating, and ‘saving’ world cinemas, Soviet dubbers reimagined films and their modes of representations following local literary, albeit asymmetrically Russian, and ideological standards, which contributed to the emergence of the myth that “the Soviet translations were supposedly the best in the world,” often believed to supersede the quality of the originals.⁴³

Similarly, Soviet animation, in transplanting themes, plots, and forms from world literature, folklore, and screen production, became a site of their re-articulation and re-creation in accordance with the local aesthetic and cultural ideologies. The most significant changes usually occurred through animated adaptations of Western literary works, with one of the most famous examples of *Prikliucheniia Buratino* (The Adventures of Buratino, 1959, Dmitriy Babichenko and Ivan Ivanov-Vano) inspired by Carlo Lorenzini’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), *Winnie-the-Pooh* series (1969–1972, Fedor Khitruk), or *Malysh i Karlson* (Junior and Karlson, 1968, Boris Stepantsev) based on *Karlsson-on-the-Roof* (1955) by the Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren. The idyllic representations of “bourgeois everyday” and morals here were often either avoided or replaced with an outward or subtle critique of social and ethical wickedness, or the conflicts at the center of the plots were intentionally complicated through satire, puns, and

⁴² Artem Karapetian, “Dublirovanie – internatsional’noe sblizhenie kinokul’tur,” *Tekhnika kino i televideniia*, no. 4 (1989): 32.

⁴³ Vitaly Chernetsky, “A Battle for Translation,” in *Translation Under Communism*, eds. Christopher Rundle, et. al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 419.

parodies, which was typical for Soviet and socialist animation more broadly.⁴⁴ Beyond literary adaptations, the Western influences could be seen in borrowing storytelling strategies and motifs, as evident from “the new age musical” *Bremenskie muzykanty* (The Bremen Town Musicians, 1969, Inessa Kovalevskaia), inspired by *Yellow Submarine* (1968, George Dunning),⁴⁵ or the Hare-Wolf series *Nu, pogodi!* (Well, Just You Wait!, 1969–1991) “modeled on” *Tom and Jerry* (1940–present),⁴⁶ although significantly departing from the US series by introducing more plot threads in each episode, reflecting on diverse societal settings rather than the private sphere, and remixing local popular cultural icons. The basis of late Soviet animation, however, was adaptations of world mythologies and folkloric fairy tales from as diverse places as Mongolia (*Gunan-Bator* [1965, Roman Davydov]), India (*Devochka v dzhungliakh* [Girl in the Jungle, 1956, Vera and Mikhail Tsekhanovsky]), Japan (*Zhuravlinye per'ia* [Crane Feathers, 1977, Ideia (Ida) Garanina) and many others, not to mention Soviet peoples’ folklore, commonly delivered through elevated literary language and served to educate about world cultures. Or, as one of the most surprising late Soviet children’s animation shorts, *Dva bogatyria* (Two Bogatyrs, 1989, Aleksandr Davydov), demonstrates, the folkloric adaptations could explicitly promote political agendas till the last days of the Soviet Union: this story about Kazakh and Russian bogatyrs, who, in saving their Kazakh and Russian brides, accidentally confuse them, uses the motif of interracial romance and folklore as a way to maintain the idea of Soviet ‘friendship of peoples,’ while incorporating racist and sexist ideologies and at the historical moment when this idea seemed to be dead.

⁴⁴ I. Kukulin, et. al. *Veselye chelovechki: Kul'turnye geroi sovetskogo detstva* (Moscow: NLO, 2008).

⁴⁵ Balakirsky Katz, *Drawing the Iron Curtain*, 21.

⁴⁶ Elena Prokhorova, “Cinema of Stagnation, Late 1960s–1985,” *The Russian Cinema Reader: Volume Two, The Thaw to the Present*, ed. Rimgaila Salys (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 112.

Transformative in relation to ‘originals,’ both Soviet translation and animation were often seen transformative, or even disruptive, of local official norms. Among the “best” translations in the world, there were also the ‘bad’ ones—that violated the institutional discipline of socialist realism (typically through the use of Aesopian language) and/or produced outside the centralized systems of publishing (e.g., through *samizdat* practices of informal copying and distribution of texts) and dubbing (e.g., simultaneous voice-over translations at film festivals) which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4. In this regard, it is often noted that Soviet translation, even performed in the walls of official institutions, often represented “a second culture,” paralleling ‘secondary’ or ‘shadow’ economy in cultural production, opening a space for language play, incorporating hidden critique on the Soviet state, and allowing for access to the non-Soviet or non-dominant Soviet cultures, which was a genuine privilege in the context of closed borders and ideological control.⁴⁷ Seen as an area where restrictions of official ideologies were particularly tangible and debilitating, socialist animation is also repeatedly shown, especially in the Western accounts, as a space of unprecedented freedom, resistance, and, again, use of Aesopian language subversive of the socialist regime.⁴⁸ And yet, as David MacFadyen notes in relation to the Soviet context, animation became a particular mode of socialist being and “is in no way a subversion of Soviet art, but a romantic, ever-mobile, and willingly shifting form of it.”⁴⁹ Screen translation and especially animation were radically undermined by the (post-

⁴⁷ Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Post Stalin Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 75; Brian James Baer, “Literary Translation and the Construction of a Soviet Intelligentsia,” *The Massachusetts Review* 47, no. 3 (2006): 537–9.

⁴⁸ William Moritz, “Narrative Strategies for Resistance and Protest in Eastern European Animation,” in *A Reader In Animation Studies*, ed. Jayne Pilling (London: John Libbey, 1997), 38–47; Marina Balina and Birgit Beumers, “‘To Catch Up and Overtake Disney?’: Soviet and Post-Soviet Fairy Tale Films,” in *Fairy-Tale Films Beyond Disney International Perspectives*, eds. Jack Zipes, et. al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 133.

⁴⁹ MacFadyen, *Yellow Crocodiles and Blue Oranges*, 43.

)socialist transition and changing media economies because they always, not being resistant, contained the powerful potential for rupture.

Animation in Transition

Soiuzmultfilm existed “despite and due to the Soviet power,” Iurii Norshtein, one of the most prominent Soviet animators, bitterly concluded, while equating the post-1991 decline of the Soviet animation industry and culture with the collapse of the Soviet state itself.⁵⁰ The cultural sphere that suffered the most from the post-1985 Soviet *perestroika* reforms and collapse of socialist statehood proved to be fully state-subsidized children’s animation. It was quickly replaced by commercial global media newly arrived predominantly through video and circulated not in professionally made dubs but quick and cheap voice-overs. The story of Soiuzmultfilm, major Soviet animation centre, is illustrative and, at the same time, not unique for the Eastern bloc. Re-organized as a half-commercial enterprise in 1987, the studio failed to make enough profit and continue production without a sufficient state’s financial support. After 1991, during chaotic liberalization and growing competition with media distributors mastering the newly emerged post-Soviet market, Soiuzmultfilm tried to survive by renting its property and dubbing facilities. The studio’s animation collection was sold to the US company Films by Jove that translated and circulated Soviet animation across the world, while Soiuzmultfilm could not officially distribute its own productions globally.

Animation quickly became a visible import on the late Soviet and post-Soviet video market. Habitually, like elsewhere, this market, simultaneously defining the local television programming, surfaced as a new domain of Disney. In 1989, in celebrating the 60th anniversary,

⁵⁰ Iurii Norshtein, “Kuda prishli my?” *Iskusstvo kino* no. 8 (2006): 71.

Mickey Mouse made visits across the Eastern bloc, including the Soviet cities, and the Walt Disney festival in Moscow in 1989 confirmed the ultimate legitimization of Disney on the screens.⁵¹ The high-budget Disney's colorful features produced with the use of advanced behavioral modelling and computer technologies as well as the cheaper Disney-affiliated Buena Vista Home Video productions seemed to occupy video bazaars and catalogues from the mushrooming video distribution companies. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, these productions' distribution was accompanied by the gradual arrival of other US producers such as low-budget video-oriented Jetlag Production or Japanese animation and occasionally could even neighbor such artifacts as *Sinkha* (1995), a groundbreaking CGI comic created by Italian graphic novelist Marco Patrito.⁵²

Among the most visible video distribution companies whose animation selection stood out was the Moscow-based Arena, formerly known as Videoman and emerged in 1995 as a short-lived semi-legal company that disappeared as quick as it arrived. The first Arena's video package included a variety of Japanese anime and an unusual set of animated feature films whose packaging, opening credits, and the Anglophone soundtrack underlying Russian-language voice-over translation hinted at the North American origins of the new acquisitions. Among these productions offered on the Arena videotapes were *The Elm-Chanted Forest* (*Enchanted Elms* in Russian), Silverline Pictures' *Friends Are Forever: Tales of the Little Princess*, and Sefel Pictures' *The Treasure of Swamp Castle* (*The Treasure of Magical Castle* in Russian). Compared to the Disney/Buena Vista productions that shaped the post-Soviet image of and expectations about the foreign animation, however, the mysterious newcomers were strikingly different.

⁵¹ "Walt Disney predstavliaet," *Ekran detiam* no. 2 (1989): 8–9.

⁵² "Grafik vypuska litsenzionnykh videoprogramm," *Videomagazin*, no. 39 (1997): 26.

Translated through the monovocal Russophone interpreting by Aleksandr Kashkin, whose fast-paced and “mannered” voice was a signature of Arena-distributed video, and by Sergei Vizgunov, whose similarly recognizable voice one can hear on *The Elm-Chanted Forest*, these seemingly low-cost animated features were predominantly hand-drawn and marked by drastically quick editing that produced the effect of the characters’ implausible transformations and movements. In each of these films, the characters, from humans to animals, objects, and hardly identifiable magical creatures, were abundant and interconnected through dense dialogues and sophisticated plot lines that were not always easy to follow. Enhanced by the inconsistency of simultaneous translation whose monovocality also did not always allow to pinpoint a speaking character, the narrative obscurity was derived from the centrality of complex antagonisms in these films that, meanwhile, mostly had specific folkloric undertones.

While the younger viewers like myself (all these three animated films were bought for me by my mother around 1996–7) might be bewildered by the aesthetic sensibilities and story trajectories, the older generations familiar with the late 1980s Soviet media landscape had other reasons to be confused. Hidden beneath the unknown titles and intersecting layers of English-language dubbing and Russian-language voice-over, these films turned out to be the hits produced in Central-Eastern Europe and staples of the late socialist children’s screen cultures. Only opening credits “Doro Vlado Hreljanovic presents” in *The Elm-Chanted Forest* vaguely hinted at the Yugoslav origins of the cartoon that was, in fact, *Čudesna šuma* (Wondrous Forest, 1986, Milan Blažeković), the first animated feature made in Yugoslavia at Zagreb’s Croatia Film studio. This story about the painter, who gets the magical gift to understand animals’ language and helps the forest inhabitants in their struggle against the authoritarian Cactus King, was an adaptation of popular children’s book of the same name by Croatian writer Sunčana Škrinjarčić

and became all-children's favorite across the Eastern bloc. In the meantime, *Friends Are Forever: Tales of the Little Princess*, directed, according to the description on the Arena-printed VHS boxes, by James Kellahin, was Polish *Porwanie w Tiutiurlistanie* (The Kidnapping in Tiutiurlistan, 1986, Zdzisław Kudła). Similarly adapted from literature, the anti-war children's novel written by Wojciech Żukrowski during the German occupation of Poland, this animation

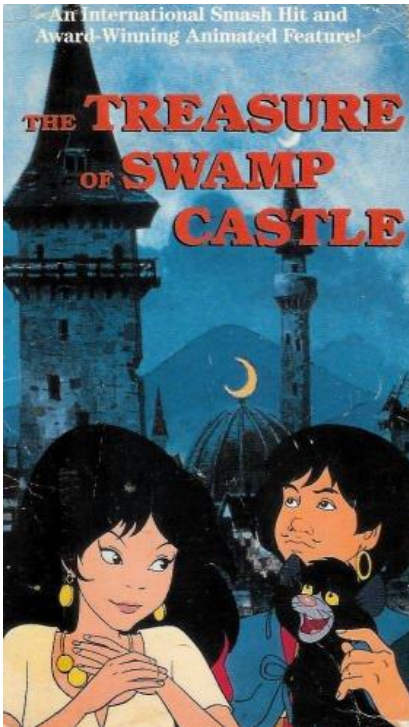


Figure 3.2. *The Treasure of Swamp Castle/Szaffi*. VHS Cover. Source: TV Tropes.Org.

film, albeit not uncontroversially, centers on the kidnapping of a princess by Romani villains and attempts of her saviors—roster, vixen, and cat—to return the girl home to prevent the war her father-king declares against Tiutiurlistan's ruler, a suspect in kidnapping of the princess. Finally, *The Treasure of Swamp Castle* (Figure 3.2) turned out to be *Szaffi* (1985, Attila Dargay) produced at the heart of Hungarian animation, studio Pannónia. Based on Mór Jókai's 1885 novel *The Gypsy Baron*, this another adaptation, that, similarly to *The Kidnapping in Tiutiurlistan* deploys the Romani trope, traces the adventures of the Hungarian nobleman who seeks to reclaim his estate after the end of the Ottoman Wars in the

early eighteenth century Hungary and finds his love, Szaffi, a daughter of Turkish pasha.

All these three animation films from the socialist Europe were acquired by the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s after the release in their home countries and distributed via Russian-language dubs made at the major country's dubbing centers: *The Kidnapping in Tiutiurlistan* was dubbed at the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kyiv, and the dubbing of *The Elm-Charnted Forest* and *Szaffi* was conducted at the Moscow-based Mosfilm and the Gorky Film Studio

correspondingly.⁵³ All three films were shown not only in Soviet movie theaters and on television but were also officially released on videotapes by Goskino in the late 1980s. After their post-theatrical initial television and video circulation, the films, unsurprisingly for the dissolving Soviet Union, disappeared from TV programs and video catalogues, except for those kept in audiovisual archives and libraries, till the mid-1990s, when they returned via English-language dubs retranslated by Arena. Their return, meanwhile, was not uncomplicated, as we will see further by looking at the case of *Szaffi*, an animated feature whose journeys in translation best illustrate the vagrancies of cross-border (dis)connections and aesthetic and cultural shifts brought by video to the (post-)socialist world.

***Szaffi* On the Late Socialist Big and Small Screens**

The animated feature *Szaffi* was produced in Hungary in 1985 to commemorate the centenary of the canonical Jókai's novel *The Gypsy Baron* and directed by Attila Dargay. As described by a pioneering British-Hungarian animator, John Halas, Dargay was “the most popular-film-cartoonist in Hungary,” “a natural entertainer,” and “a very appealing artist whose work is easy on the eye and uncomplicated in content.”⁵⁴ Since the late 1960s, Dargay, formerly a master of animated advertisements, was a symbol of the re-orientation of Pannónia studio from specializing in art and adult animation towards the production of more market-driven popular media for children. This re-orientation proved one of the effects of the 1968 reform: the decentralization and transition of Hungarian industries, including the media sector, from a

⁵³ The dubbing studios are identified based on the opening and closing credits in the Soviet theatrical versions of these films available online on the Russophone web today.

⁵⁴ John Halas, *Masters of Animation* (Topsfield, Mass.: Salem House, 1987), 88.

command economy to limited adoption of the principles of profitability.⁵⁵ Dargay was also at the forefront of Pannónia's entrance the international media scene with the children's animated series and feature films, including his hit *Lúdas Matyi* (Mattie the Gooseboy, 1976), that, in the 1970s, allowed the studio to turn into "one of Europe's busiest contributors to domestic and global TV market."⁵⁶

Nevertheless, contrary to Halas's remark about Dargay's animation as accessible and narratively unsophisticated, which must explain the domestic and international success of the Pannónia cartoonist, such film as *Szaffi* reveals a rather highly exuberant aesthetic and cultural complexity. *Szaffi* is deeply integrated into the Austro-Hungarian romantic tradition, national epic, and folklore and, at the same time, rooted in the early modern mass culture. The author of literary *Szaffi*, Jókai, is one of the most prolific Hungarian writers working in the genre of historical adventure and "a European classic of the serial novel" considered as a father of the genre along with Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, and Charles Dickens.⁵⁷ Since the 1960s, Jókai's literary corpus served as a source for many film adaptations in Hungary. In turn, Szaffi's musical score, Johann Strauss Jr.'s *The Gypsy Baron* (1885), based on the story by Jókai, points to the animation film's origins in the long-standing operetta tradition. A "basic Central-European cultural form," operetta constituted a key vessel of the popular in Hungarian film and television, and operetta-based musical (tele-)films matched utopianism and the cult of people's culture under the precept of socialist realism.⁵⁸ In the mixture of "polkas, recruiting

⁵⁵ Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Animation: A World History: Volume II: The Birth of a Style–The Three Markets* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2016), 258.

⁵⁶ Rolf Giesen, *Animation in Europe* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2022): 186.

⁵⁷ Ágnes Hansági, "Literary Capital and Mass Media: Umberto Eco, Charles Dickens, Mór Jókai, Zsigmond Móricz," in *Hungarian Perspectives on the Western Canon: Post-Comparative Readings*, ed. by Laszlo Bengi et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017): 80.

⁵⁸ Balázs, Varga. "Transformations: Hungarian Popular Cinema in the 1950s," in *Popular Cinemas in Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories*, eds. Dorota Ostrowska, Francesco Pitassio, and Varga Zsuzsanna (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2017), 90–1.

music (*the verbunk*), and Gypsy songs, with the waltz binding them all together,” *The Gypsy Baron* is an ultimate operetta that, as this “medium of metropolitan mass entertainment” implies, draws out of the intricate intersections of high and low, social critique and sentimentality, and elite theatre and lavish folklore spectacle,⁵⁹—the sensibilities that are at the heart of *Szaffi*.

Simultaneously, *Szaffi* is far from being a simple story. It is set in the early eighteenth century Hungary, as briefly outlined above, and begins with the Temesvár battle between the army of the Austrian Prince Eugene of Savoy and the Turks, the battle that put an end to the Ottoman power in the Central-Eastern Europe. Witnessing the failure of Turks to defend Temesvár, the Ottoman Ahmed Pasha escapes the fortress with his newborn daughter Sofia and the treasure chest he buries at the estate of his friend, Hungarian nobleman Gáspár Botsinkay, whose little son Jónás must become a future husband of Sofia, as the fathers have arranged. In the rapidly changing political environment, when Austria establishes control over Hungary, Ahmed Pasha, Gáspár, who would be considered a collaborator with the Turks, and their children run away to Turkey. On their way, crossing the river, the Pasha loses the cradle with his daughter, who is carried away by the waves. The Romani witch Cafrinka, living alone in the forest in the company of animals, finds the cradle with the documents revealing Sofia’s origin and adopts the girl. Sofia gets a new name Szaffi after Cafrinka’s black cat. Meanwhile, her father is executed in Istanbul for surrendering Temesvár, and Gáspár dies, leaving his young son Jónás alone. Homeless and poor Jónás grows up with the group of Romani people who become his new family. As an adult, he returns to his native land and is full of hopes to reclaim his home and find Ahmed Pasha’s buried treasure. To his dismay, Jónás discovers that his former estate has been reduced to ruins, submerged in a swamp where the treasure, simultaneously searched

⁵⁹ Péter Hanák, “The Cultural Role of the Vienna-Budapest Operetta,” in *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 136–8.

for by the wicked Austrian governor and his Italian servant Puzzola, is impossible to find. Jónás meets Szaffi and Cafrinka, who, reading his palm, predicts that he will find the treasure on the day he finds his wife. So, he embarks on a search for a wife in the company of the black cat Szaffi, whom simple-minded Jónás believes is Szaffi the girl capable of transforming into animals. In this search, Jónás and Szaffi the cat go through many adventures, overcoming the machinations of the treacherous governor, getting out of prison, thanks to the help of a Roma friend, and returning to the forest to Cafrinka, as Jónás develops feelings for the cat and realizes he wants to marry Szaffi. Cafrinka reveals the secret of Szaffi's origin and also gives away Ahmed Pasha's treasure chest that she has been keeping all this time. The film ends with the Roma people helping Jónás to eventually get rid of the Austrian governor and the beginning of the new life. Jónás restores the estate where he lives with his Roma family, his wife Szaffi, and their little daughter, also Szaffi, now knowing what the true treasure is.

Szaffi became one of the most viewed films in Hungary in 1985, overshadowing other animated productions and most of cinematic imports, including those from Hollywood except for such late-comers as *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg) and *Tootsie* (1982, Sydney Pollack).

⁶⁰Acquired by the Soviet Union, Cuba, and almost all socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe for theatrical and television distribution, *Szaffi* proved to be among the chief commodities on the late socialist screen market. Moreover, from the outset, this animated film entered state-regulated local video distribution channels across the Eastern bloc, forming visible part of official video canons. In 1988, Mokép Videoteka, state video distributor in Hungary, included *Szaffi* on the top twenty list of video hits.⁶¹ Headed by domestic *Macskafogó* (Cat City, 1986, Béla Ternovszky), the list mostly included animation productions, such as Soviet long-

⁶⁰ *Filmévkönyv 1985: A magyar film egy éve* (Budapest: Magyar Filmintézet, 1986), 300, 438.

⁶¹ "A Mokép Videotéka sikerlistája az 1987-es esztendőben," *Video Magazin*, no. 9 (1988): 33.

running series *Well, Just You Wait!* (see above) and Hong Kong martial arts films, pointing to the fundamental role youth-oriented media played in shaping the emerging video habits.

After arriving in the Soviet Union in 1986, *Szaffi* was edited and shortened from a 77-minute to 66-minute running time. Most of the edits were not radically transformative and served to match the standard duration of about one hour for the animated features. However, as we will see, some of the cuts did adjust plot elements, adapting the story to fit the broader Soviet cultural politics related to the representation of ethnicity and class, which emphasizes both the differences in representational codes across the Eastern bloc and continuity of socialist agendas despite the amplifying Soviet liberalization in the late 1980s. Simultaneously, *Szaffi* was translated and dubbed into Russian, a common practice in the Soviet Union to circulate films across the country. While the edits functioned as a means of censorship, language transfer mostly remained faithful to the original, retaining the culturally specific nuances and literary sophistication of original dialogues.

One of the most prominent Hungarian dubbing actors gave their voice to the characters of *Szaffi*. For example, *Szaffi* received the “unmistakably recognizable voice”⁶² of Judit Pogány, an actress who dubbed the little fox Vuk in *Vuk* (1981), another animated hit from Dargay, and the characters in the popular Disney animated series imported with the 1989 market transition. Not limited to her dubbing career in animation, Pogány was a theatre and movie actress, starring in films by Béla Tarr and Michael Haneke. András Kern, admired for his comical talent and dubbing of Woody Allen, became the voice of another protagonist, Jónás.⁶³ The Soviet dubbing

⁶² Szűcs Gyula, “5 és még 70 jól ismert hang, amiért imádjuk Pogány Juditot,” *Port.hu*, September 10, 2022, <https://port.hu/cikk/tv/5-es-meg-70-jol-ismert-hang-amiert-imadjuk-pogany-juditot/article-87084?token=3fed422cc62136b82a94cbc7292e6824>.

⁶³ John Cunningham, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffee House to Multiplex* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 32.

cast was similarly notable and included the established dubbing stars, such as Iurii Sarantsev and Nina Nikitina. Nikitina, the voice of Cuba in *Soy Cuba* (I Am Cuba, 1964, Mikhail Kalatozov) and of the golden antelope in the eponymous Soviet landmark animation film (*Zolotaia antilopa*, 1954, Lev Atamanov) based on the fairy tales of India, had a reputation of a “universally acclaimed and respected master of psychologically subtle and complex female characters” in dubbing and creator of “heroines unforgettable in their voice timbre and intonations.”⁶⁴ Replacing the icon of Hungarian theatre, Hilda Gobbi, Nikitina lent her voice to the wise Roma witch Cafrinka.

In the Soviet Union, *Szaffi*, shown in movie theaters and on television since 1986, was officially released on video as part of the series *Video Program* by Goskino’s Videofilm. In planning the video repertoire, Goskino, whose centralized control over local media circulation was similar to that one of Hungarian Mokép, devoted particular attention to the selection and distribution of children’s films and animation and actively advertised its video production on the pages of such magazines as *Ekran detiam* (Screen to the Children).⁶⁵ Goskino’s video policy reflected the broader institutional emphasis on video as a pedagogical tool in the context of raising concerns about young viewers’ fascination with smuggled video entertainment, including erotica, horror, and action films, and state discomfort about home screens as an uncontrolled terrain of the private sphere as discussed in Chapter 1. In the Soviet context, where the line between children’s and adult cultural industries was historically blurry, the 1980s proliferation of media channels, opening new paths for international radio broadcasts and unofficial circulation of print, screen, and music content, spurred the Soviet competition with emerging popular cultures and the need to attract young people as these cultures’ key participants and consumers.

⁶⁴ V. Legoshin, “Iskusstvo dubliazha,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 7 (1953): 110.

⁶⁵ “Videokino. Film’y v kassetakh: Videoprogramma Goskino.” *Ekran detiam* no. 5 (1987): 14.

Goskino and other media distributors, such as the Central Television, which embarked upon updating the entertainment programming and producing new youth-centered shows, were receptive to this need.⁶⁶ The growing importance of the young viewers, accompanied by the shifts in understanding of the relationship between children and the emerging multi-media landscape, finally manifested themselves in the creation of the All-Union Centre of Film and Television for Children and Adolescents in 1989. Gaining the state financial support and unique privileges, such as the cancelation of customs duties and fees on the import of films and video, the Centre was supposed to serve the tasks “to unite the efforts of the state and public organizations in the development of cinema and television for children and youth, to facilitate significant increase in production and distribution of films of various genres and of great artistic and educational value, and to create a film, tele- and video-industry for young audiences.”⁶⁷

Szaffi, as Goskino videotape boxes described, was a “fairy-tale film” in which “the history of Hungary, love between young people, struggle for inexhaustible treasure, and the intervention of magical forces are inventively and vividly intertwined.” The film, targeted to the audiences as a potent mix of national history, romance, and adventures, matched both the state’s educational mission and care for amusement in organizing institutional video distribution competing with informal channels. After the transition of Hungary to socialism in 1949, the Soviet Union tended to adopt a cautious approach to the distribution of Hungarian media, given Hungary’s membership of the Axis powers during the Second World War and the Revolution of 1956 repressed by the USSR and followed by János Kádár’s introduction of the socialist model

⁶⁶ Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 235.

⁶⁷ Postanovlenie ot 20 maia 1989 № 419 “Ob organizatsii Vsesoiuznogo tsentra kino i televideniia dlia detei i iunoshstva,” accessed on April 15, 2022, <http://www.economics.kiev.ua/download/ZakonySSSR/data01/tex11303.htm>.

with elements of market economies. Colloquially called “the happiest barrack in the socialist camp,” Hungary represented, in the Soviet film critics’ view, a producer of films revealing “the undigested recipes of bourgeois commercial cinema.”⁶⁸ In the 1980s, especially with the beginning of *perestroika*, these exact recipes pushed Hungarian screen productions, including *Szaffi*, to the center of official Soviet media distribution searching for “safe” socialist entertainment. Scholars in Hungarian cinema, such as Aleksandr Troshin, a founder of the first independent Soviet film journal, legendary *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* (Film Scholars’ Notes), moved to the forefront of the liberalization of media cultures. And Hungarian films, recent and previously shelved, enjoyed their success on the Soviet screens, particularly among the urban intelligentsia, which culminated in the 1987 three-week retrospective of Hungarian cinema in Moscow, the last massive cross-socialist film event in the USSR.⁶⁹

Similarly, Hungarian animation, occasionally criticized for commercialism, that is, the making of TV animated series equally booming across the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union, attracted the attention of distributors and critics who praised Pannónia for the “strong links with folklore and national literary and visual arts heritage”⁷⁰—one of the classical Soviet criteria of high aesthetic quality. And although Dargay’s animation films were considered “weaker” than other Pannónia productions,⁷¹ his *Szaffi*, given the film’s commercial success and firm embeddedness in the Hungarian literary and music canon, could not stay unnoticed in the Soviet Union. In belonging to the canon the Soviet culture itself drew on, *Szaffi* also resonated with the relentless search for the ties between Hungary and Russia in the socialist “epoch of the forced

⁶⁸ Aleksandr Troshin, *Vengerskoe kino: 70-80-e gody* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986), 45–6.

⁶⁹ Liubov’ Arkus, ed., *Kino i kontekst: Vol. IV, 1986–1988* (Saint Petersburg: Seans, 2002), 567–69.

⁷⁰ Asenin, *Mir mul’fil’ma*, 117.

⁷¹ Asenin, *Mir mul’fil’ma*, 123.

ideological friendship.”⁷² While Szaffi’s literary source, *The Gypsy Baron*, was never translated into Russian, Jókai was a well-known writer whose historical fiction fitted into the all-socialist literature pantheon of “proper” entertainment head by Alexandre Dumas and other nineteenth-century serial novelists. More importantly, Jókai was a central figure connecting Hungary and the Soviet Union via the Russian holiest of holies: the poet Aleksandr Pushkin. Seen by the Hungarian writer as his “forerunner in destiny and soulmate,” Pushkin is at the center of the Decembrist revolt forming the plot of Jókai’s 1879 novel *Freedom Under the Snow, or The Green Book* that also included Jókai’s translation of Pushkin’s 1827 narrative poem *The Gypsies*.⁷³ Another familiar reference point allowing to locate Szaffi’s status in the Soviet cultural landscape was, of course, just like in Hungary, Strauss Jr.’s *The Gypsy Baron*, one of the most popular operettas in the Russian Empire and, after the post-Stalinist gradual reconstruction of this “light” genre on theatrical scene and screens, the Soviet Union.⁷⁴

In this regard, linked to the complex network of aesthetic traditions and legacies, Szaffi was a unique cross-media and cross-cultural, both in terms of the extradiegetic relations and its plot, artifact, matching the Soviet ideals of “an anti-masscult culture for the masses”⁷⁵ in the realm where it was traditionally challenging: the children’s screens. Less compatible with the public terrain of movie theaters, children’s media prefer living at home. In the Soviet Union, like elsewhere, television became the “second lifeline for fairy-tale films, both animated and live-action,”⁷⁶ until the advent of video opened up new opportunities. Goskino released Szaffi on

⁷² Iurii Gusev, “Obrazy Rossii v tvorchestve klassika vengerskoi literatury Mora Iokai. Razmyshleniia nad knigoi,” *Slavianovedenie*, no. 1 (2013): 62.

⁷³ Bela Rigo, “Pushkin i Iokai,” translated from Hungarian by T. Voronkina, *Inostrannaia literatura*, no. 6 (1999): 196, 199.

⁷⁴ Moisei Iankovskii, *Sovetskii teatr operetty: ocherk istorii* (Leningrad, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962).

⁷⁵ Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 2.

⁷⁶ Balina and Beumers, ““To Catch Up and Overtake Disney?””, 133.

video along with other domestic and foreign children's productions. The latter comprised, for example, the Quebecois anti-war film *La guerre des tuques* (The Dog Who Stopped the War, 1984, André Melançon), which won Golden prize in the competition among children's films at the 14th Moscow International Film Festival in 1985, and animation produced by Japanese Toei Company, including *Nagagutsu o Haita Neko* (The Wonderful World of Puss 'n Boots, 1969) or *Soratobu Yūreisen* (Flying Phantom Ship, 1969), the first anime hits of the 1970s Soviet movie theaters that later paved the way for the Soviet-Japanese animation co-productions most famously exemplified by *Mori wa Ikiteiru* (Twelve Months, 1980) from Toei series World Masterpiece Fairy Tales and trilogy *Prikliuchenia pingvinenka Lolo* (The Adventures of Lolo the Penguin, 1986).

The official children's video, however, was dominated by socialist productions such as Soviet-Romanian-Moldovan musical fantasy *Maria, Mirabela* (1981), the Czech *Krtek* series (Mole, 1957–2002), the mentioned Hungarian favorite *Cat City*, or Yugoslav *The Elm-Chanted Forest*, accompanying *Szaffi* on its video return in the mid-1990s. While there is a consensus among historians that the states of the Eastern bloc ceased to exist as a principal political realm for the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the vibrant cultural exchange, particularly in the sphere of children's media, and the crucial role of the Eastern bloc in shaping Soviet television and video cultures, as discussed in previous chapters, are hard to ignore. Importantly, the inexpensiveness of socialist children's imports and the late 1980s Soviet bilateral agreements that allowed for distribution of previously acquired media on television and video without permission, as opposed to other foreign films and programs, economically predetermined such preferences.

In the meantime, socialist children's films and cartoons gained genuine popularity among Soviet audiences that were increasingly associating film productions from socialist states with

adventure, folklore, and magic. The 1989 best socialist films questionnaire among the readers of the popular film magazine, *Sovetskii ekran* (Soviet Screen), was topped by *City Cat* and followed by Bulgarian fantasy *13ta godenitsa na printsa* (The Thirteenth Bride of the Prince, 1987, Ivanka Grybcheva), Chinese fairy tale *Kong que gong zhu* (Peacock Princess, 1982, Fei Su et al.), North Korean martial arts adventure *Hong Kil-dong* (1986, Kim Kil-in), also released on video, and *The Elm-Chanted Forest*.⁷⁷ Obviously confused by such a fantastic and “infantile” face of the socialist cinema, one of the Soviet film critics indistinctly noted regarding the list, “To comment on the films-winners following the criterion of sociali...that is, sorry, I do not know how to put it more accurately. Well, I will not comment on the films from all those countries because I simply do not know what to talk about and whether it makes sense to have such a conversation, given the weird [state’s] buying policy in those parts of the world.”⁷⁸ This tongue-tied remark reflects the puzzlement about both the viewers’ preferences and Soviet distribution institutions progressively prioritizing “fairy tales” in the socialist media exchange, as opposed to more habitual socialist realist dramas, as well as the intricate status of children’s media in socialist taste politics more broadly. Animation was the “combatant, sharp, topical art of accurate observations, excitingly modern themes, deep thoughts, and artistic synthesis,” on the one hand, and could appear the “childishly toy, fake, third-rate” brother of “big cinema,” on the other.⁷⁹

Such reception also indicates the deep-seated asynchrony in understanding or articulating the heterogeneity and developments in socialist media cultures, paradoxically including the Soviet ones: as such, a result of the Soviet top-down cultural politics. For example, as a critic remembers, “till the late 1980s, we, here in the USSR, knew for sure: Yugoslavia makes only

⁷⁷ “Chitateli zhurnala o fil’makh 1989 goda,” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 8 (1990): 2–5.

⁷⁸ Aleksei Erokhin, “Avtoportret neizvestnogo,” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 8 (1990): 5.

⁷⁹ Asenin, *Volshebnyki ekrana*, 1–2.

and exclusively films about partisans,” adding that, although there were films for children, there was a scarce number of productions that touched upon “real problems of ‘adult life’” beyond the WWII-partisan mythology.⁸⁰ Persistent in the 1980s, the firm belief in the socialist realism doctrine as a set of criteria of aesthetic quality complicated the embrace of children’s film and animation as a site of socialist cultural production. While the traditional criteria of appreciation failed in the attempts to comment upon the *Sovetskii ekran*’s top list, the contours of state socialist screen cultures, emerging in the Soviet viewers’ preferences as the cultures of children by the late 1980s, became ultimately obscure.

In the meantime, “everything was clear with the Western films” on the journal’s 1989 best foreign films topped by *Romancing the Stone* (1984, Robert Zemeckis): as anticipated, they helped the Soviet viewers “to run away from the hustle and bustle and have fun for an hour or two, forgetting about the daily filth for a while.”⁸¹ Socialist screens were expected to be necessarily dreary, resisting the drive to entertain and bring pleasure, and the criminal cats, aliens, princesses, flying ninjas, magicians, and talking battle axes now made “those parts of the world” they came from look distant and barely recognizable, paralyzing film critics who had difficulties even of applying the marker “socialist” to these productions. In part, such aphasia was not surprising, given the rapid growth in the socialist media industries’ engagement with the capitalist world, traces of which were particularly evident in the field of animation and family films since the 1970s.

⁸⁰ Sergei Lavrent’ev, “Svoboda—kak na Zapade. Iz zapisok kinomana,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 10 (2009): 129.

⁸¹ Erokhin, “Avtoportret neizvestnogo.”

For example, already in the 1960s, the Zagreb Film studio, whose animation was typically dismissed by local Yugoslav critics as “hermetic, abstract and uncommunicative,”⁸² gained an international recognition as the first non-US Academy Award winner in the category of short animated film and “one of the major artistic powers in world animation.”⁸³ Following its predecessors such as commercially successful children’s animated series *Professor Balthazar* (1967–1978) widely distributed far beyond the Iron Curtain, *The Elm-Charnted Forest* paved the way to Zagreb’s entrance of the global television and video market of fairy tales and signaled the arrival of what Nikica Gilić called children’s “populist” or genre cinema in post-Yugoslav region.⁸⁴ Hungarian Pannónia, in turn, is even more illustrative of the increasingly porous boundaries that allegedly separated the children’s socialist and capitalist screens. Since the early 1970s, Pannónia, echoing the decline in short animation film production characteristic of the capitalist markets with the 1950s rise of television, heavily invested in the making of children’s animated TV series and feature-length films with Dargay, “a bright humorist” and creator of *Szaffi*, at the forefront.⁸⁵ The studio became a home for many international co-productions, attracting capitalist Europe by cheap labor of local animators and production facilities. One of such co-productions made in Pannónia, sci-fi feature *Les Maîtres du temps* (Time Masters, 1982, René Laloux and Tibor Hernádi), was warmly received in the Soviet press in 1985 as “a remarkably interesting, fascinating and beautiful film” in which “French artists used all their brightest and most magical colors and mobilized all their imagination,”⁸⁶ while the involvement

⁸² Andrijana Ružić, “The Importance of Ranko Munitić’s Work on the Zagreb School of Animation,” in *Global Animation Theory: International Perspectives at Animafest Zagreb*, eds. Franziska Bruckner, et al. (New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 171.

⁸³ Bendazzi, *Animation: A World History: Volume II*, 262.

⁸⁴ Nikica Gilić, “New Croatian Cinema: Literature and Genre in the Post-Yugoslav Era,” in *Small Cinemas in Global Markets: Genres, Identities, Narratives*, eds. David Desser, Janina Falkowska, Lenuta Giukin (New York: Lexington, 2015), 152.

⁸⁵ Bendazzi, *Animation: A World History: Volume II: The Birth of a Style*, 260.

⁸⁶ V. Aleshina, “Vlasteliny vremeni,” *Ekran detiam*, no. 5 (1985): 5.

of Hungarian animators went unnoticed. *Cat City*, meanwhile, a feature centered around the high-tech war between cats and mice, that enjoyed tremendous popularity both in Hungary and the Soviet Union, represented the culmination of the integration of socialist children's entertainment with the global youth media scene. The Soviet press described *Cat City* as a “super-boevik” (blockbuster and/or action film), a “parody of the popular Western ‘cine-colossi’ such as *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and others,”⁸⁷ highlighting the dizzying generic and intertextual hybridity of the Hungarian hit. Moreover, *Cat City* simultaneously pointed at the video origins of this hybridity: it was a patchwork of the cine-tropes and icons delivered to Hungary primarily via video, a remix emerged out of “the decline of the institutional background and industry infrastructure in late-communist Hungary”⁸⁸ and the rise of low-budget and do-it-yourself media, including video, which was symptomatic of the late socialist bloc more broadly. In *Cat City*, cats themselves watch video and use it as a new advertisement outlet, celebrating the new technology. *Cat City* reflects an amalgam of infrastructural and aesthetic shifts linked to the arrival and development of home video cultures in the socialist world. Yet, distributed on television and videotapes far beyond the borders of the Eastern bloc just like *The Elm-Chanted Forest* and many other socialist children's productions, *Cat City* highlights the reverse media flows facilitated by video.

Szaffi Goes West

⁸⁷ “Lovushka dlia koshek,” *Ekran detiam* no. 1 (1989): 7.

⁸⁸ Gábor Gergely, “Only Drawn That Way: Ethnic and Racial Difference in *Macskafogó/Cat City* (1986) and *Macskafogó 2/Cat City 2* (2007)”: 2. Conference Paper, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/id/eprint/29929/1/GG%20Cat%20City%20paper.pdf>.

In the 1980s, the exchange in children's animation and films between the socialist states with the consequent transfer of these productions to video was simultaneously accompanied by the increasing presence of the media distributors from beyond the Iron Curtain in the region. Among them was the company Sefel Pictures, which eventually appeared as a producer of *Szaffi* as it circulated on the post-Soviet Arena videotapes. Established in the late 1970s by Joseph Sefel, a Hungarian refugee and Canadian mogul, Sefel Pictures was an entertainment division of the Sefel Group that included one of the most influential geophysical corporations in Canada at that time and a real estate company. Sefel, who "had a dream to create a Canadian identity through entertainment and culture,"⁸⁹ was personally involved in running the entertainment division that emerged as a distributor of music, including symphonic records from Hungary.

Later, he became interested in film, and his newly established Sefel Pictures made its first steps by producing George Mendeluk's serial killer film *Stone Cold Dead* (1979) and political thriller *The Kidnapping of the President* (1980). With the development of pay television and video that opened up new financial opportunities, Sefel Pictures paid attention to the international markets in search of productions to buy for home screen distribution. Given the business and personal ties that Sefel had with Hungary, the choice of simultaneously low-cost Hungarian films, particularly easy-traveling animation films, was not unusual. Sefel, a self-described fighter against socialism he associated with Pierre Trudeau in Canada and the erosion of leisure time, repetitively framed his aspirations as a drive to support talents and contribute to Canadian cultural life.⁹⁰ "An abiding love of the arts," as *The Financial Post Magazine* explained, "was one souvenir he retained from his European upbringing," describing Sefel's

⁸⁹ Maxwell Foran and Heather MacEwan Foran, "The Sefel Group of Companies," in *Calgary, Canada's Frontier Metropolis: An Illustrated History* (Windsor: Windsor Publications Inc., 1982), 347

⁹⁰ David S. Boyer, "Calgary: Canada's Not-So-Wild West," *National Geographic*, no. 165 (January-June, 1984): 394.

collection of “French sculpture, Byzantine frescoes, Chinese vases and, of course, Hungarian landscapes” along with “1,000 Eskimo prints.”⁹¹ *Szaffi* became another souvenir Sefel acquired and brought to Canada in 1986.

In Canada, *Szaffi* was simultaneously dubbed in French and English by the notoriously famous Montreal-based company Cinar that used to be described as a “state-of-the-art dubbing supplier.”⁹² Similarly to most other animation producers across the world, including Hungary, Canadian animation underwent a significant shift from adult animation-making to children-oriented business in the 1970s, since then turning into “a market-driven industry that exists primarily to feed the global entertainment machine.”⁹³ Along with Toronto’s Nelvana Studios, Montreal’s Cinar, in turn, established itself in the 1980s as a key producer and distributor of popular children’s animation and television in Canada and internationally. As is typical of major Canadian media players, one of the most profitable segments of Cinar’s economy was, “by aggressively exercising merchandising and licensing rights,”⁹⁴ distributing the foreign media which the company hold copyright for. *Szaffi* became one of such items on the co-owned Sifel-Cinar package and could be sold across local and global television and video networks the companies had connections with. The booming development of Cinar ended in 1999, when it was discovered that the company participated in offshore money transfers and appropriated the U.S. media productions as Canadian to receive governmental funding.

The Sefel-Cinar French-language dubbed version of *Szaffi*, titled *Le trésor des marécages*, was distributed on videotapes and broadcasted on Télé-Québec as part of the 1989

⁹¹ Ken Waxman, “The Penetrating Vision of Joseph Sefel,” *The Financial Post Magazine*, no. 1 (1983): 26, 24.

⁹² “Dubbing a growing, but fragile, industry,” *Playback*, May 22, 1995, <https://playbackonline.ca/1995/05/22/4355-19950522/>.

⁹³ Chris Robinson, “English-Canadian Animation: 1975-2000,” in *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980*, eds. William Beard and Jerry White (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press 2002), 60.

⁹⁴ Katya Einola and Normand Turgeon, “International Marketing of Canadian Television Programs: Industry Players, Export Successes and Strategic Challenges,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 3, no. 1 (2000): 58.

Ciné-Cadeau edition, a Christmas season program showing films and animation for children. The Quebecois viewers who witnessed the arrival of *Szaffi* to local TV remembers it as an “Americanized” film “reminiscent of Disney’s fairy tales adaptations” and “lacking in originality.”⁹⁵ In the meantime, while Sefel Pictures stood up as a mediator between socialist Hungary and the capitalist markets and was selling *Szaffi* via and without the Cinar-made English-language dub across the United States, Europe, and Japan for video distribution in the late 1980s, the reception of the film varied. For instance, in West Germany, where *Szaffi* was dubbed in German from Hungarian and circulated on video as *Jonas und der verschwundene Schatz* (Jonas and the Missing Treasure), this “fairy tale of the Turkish war” was described as an intricate and pleasurable film “overflowing with ideas (which are sometimes too many to children’s confusion), full of historical references and allusions to the present, with—in double sense—lovingly drawn characters.”⁹⁶ Not least due to the geocultural proximity, the Hungarian origins of the film were acknowledged, and *Szaffi* was seen as another great cartoon produced at Pannónia, the rare studio that could successfully compete with the US “because the stories are nicer, and the creators have more taste.”⁹⁷

At the same time, *Szaffi*, bought from Sefel-Cinar, was going through its own transformations across the United States. The VHS boxes of *The Treasure of Swamp Castle*, seemingly coming from nowhere, were screaming “a top-grossing international sensation” and “a richly rewarding, heartwarming story that is a must-see for all ages!” and included advertisements of another “award-winning” film that turned out to be *Cat City*. By the late

⁹⁵ Simon Predj, “Le trésor des marécages,” Ciné-Cadeau (blog), December 7, 2016, <http://cinecadeau.blogspot.com/2016/12/le-tresor-du-marecage.html>.

⁹⁶ Walter Schobert and Horst Schäfer, eds., *Film Almanach...: Filme, Festivals, Tendenzen, Mit Video-Erstaufführungen, 1988* (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1988), 169.

⁹⁷ Schobert and Schäfer, *Film Almanach*, 168.

1990s, the videotape descriptions of “An Award-Winning, Animated Spectacular” ascribed the production to “acclaimed animators Joseph Sefel and Pannonia Film Studios.” It was exactly this new repackaged *Szaffi* that returned to the former Soviet small screens through Canada-produced translations with the fresh flavor.

Such a detour is not surprising, including the fact that it was easier to obtain films from non-domestic, primarily North American, distributors, given the chaotic restructuring of collapsing post-socialist media institutions, and the crucial role of the English language that was “marketable” and delivered the sensibility of opening to the Western world, on the one hand, and was easy to translate, on the other. In the context of quick pirate production and circulation, it was particularly difficult to provide translations for media in such rare languages as Hungarian. Even in the Soviet period, Hungarian, which belongs to the Uralic language family, was considered one of the most “exotic” in the Eastern Europe, along with Albanian and Romanian.⁹⁸

In the meantime, what *Szaffi*’s journey, just like the journey of the other socialist children’s media mentioned above, demonstrates, is that the prevalent view of a unidirectional media traffic from the First to the Second World is misleading. Contrary to Imre’s argument that socialist children’s media did not cross the borders of the capitalist West, such a reverse flow from the Eastern bloc is not new. What is noteworthy, however, is that, in these flows, socialist children’s entertainment, especially if travelling to the US, fluctuated from artistic to cult objects or ‘trash,’ often dissociated from the original contexts through (lack of) translation. This fluctuation, for instance, is evident from the story of the Soviet folklore-based film *Sadko* (1953, Aleksandr Ptushko). It was first shown in the US in the 1950s but, after the 1960s dubbing by Roger Corman’s The Filmgroup Inc. with the involvement of Francis Ford Coppola, circulated

⁹⁸ Tatiana Voronkina, “Ot nostalgicheskikh chuvstv tepleet na serdtse,” *Pampambuk*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.pampambook.ru/articles/729/>.

as Orientalized *The Magic Voyage of Sinbad*. In the 1990s, this dubbed version was featured in the comedy TV show *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, an outlet for global cinematic ‘oddities’ and B-grade films shown under the accompaniment of mocking on-the-fly commentary (a practice known as riffing).⁹⁹ Another example is the Soviet animated film *Snezhnaia koroleva* (Snow Queen, 1957, Lev Atamanov) distributed at the North American festivals and movie theaters in the 1960s but later could be found, along with other socialist animated films, sold on VHS for 25 cents with no translation.¹⁰⁰

While the video translations of *Szaffi* erased the Hungarian dubbing voices, *Szaffi* simultaneously went through the significant language transformations. Although the Russian-language Soviet dub transferred the original, delivering almost all historical details, names, and geographical locations, it also included some changes. In terms of language, Soviet Russian-language dubbed version and Russian-language video voice-over were close to their original transformations, whose effects stretch beyond the purist objections against breakage of authenticity and emphasis on the original. Instead, all the versions, compared together, allow to see the mechanisms of the shifts in shaping the vision of the world, child, and the cultural division between high and low, as mediated by video as such and those cross-cultural and economic processes that accompanied the development of video cultures under (post-)socialism and beyond.

Journeys in Translation

⁹⁹ Tessa Dwyer, “B-Grade Subtitles,” in *B Is for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics, and Cultural Value*, eds. Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis (Albany, SUNY Press, 2014), 43–64; Tim, Lucas “Video Restored and Compared: *Sadko* and *The Magic Voyage of Sinbad*,” *Video Watchdog*, no. 9 (1992): 48–53.

¹⁰⁰ Eleanor Cowen, *Animation Behind the Iron Curtain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 2.

In the Anglophone dub and its Russophone voice-over translation for the mid-1990s video distribution, the historically and geoculturally complex universe of *Szaffi* shatters as soon as the film begins and gets replaced with the portrayal of the world that may appear simplified. Imposed on the animated image of a dark cloud that turns into the head of a European nobleman and fiercely swallows the crescent moon, the English-language female storyteller narrates in a traditional fairy tale manner, “Once upon a time long ago, the great kingdoms of the East lived in peace and prosperity, which had always infuriated the great kingdoms of the West. They assembled a huge army and invaded the wealthiest kingdom of the East.” The Russophone male voice-over accurately translates this audible opening.

Meanwhile, in the Soviet dubbed version, which also remains accurate in delivery of the source narrative, this time original Hungarian, the voice of Nikitina starts with one of the classical Hungarian, and broadly East European, fairy tale prologue “It was long time ago and, who knows, maybe what I will tell you indeed happened” and continues:

“At those times, the Ottoman half-moon hung in the sky of Hungary, which the invincible commander Eugene was biting like a kifli. The last bite of that kifli was the fortress Temesvár. It remained for him to take possession of this tiny castle, and then the Austrian emperor would rule in the country instead of the Turkish sultan.”

Easily possible to run incomprehensible for young viewers, such an introduction establishes a particular vision of the historical past and interconnectivity. The narration of the historical events here unfolds with factual precision regarding the involved agents and geographies, all located within complex relations as imperial entities and ethnic subjects. Yet, simultaneously, this narration is a poeticized history bordering on mythology. Referred to as what ‘maybe indeed happened,’ this history stays in the domain of myth and mere possibility, while its protagonists, even if firmly defined, operate in a pre- and already semi-national space of borders forming through clashing and territorial struggles. The post-1991 Russophone *Szaffi*, adopting and

reproducing the Anglophone re-interpretation, offers a vision of the indefinite world divided between the de-nationalized and hermetically closed-off but colliding realms of the East as prosperous and peaceful and the West, overcome with envy, as an invader.

In bringing to the surface the complex intraregional connections, the multi-ethnic world of *Szaffi* highlights the local racial hierarchies, effects of historically conditioned ethnic alliances and antagonisms, and the nationalist aspirations or the nation's founding myth of Hungary. Whereas the Soviet dub remains a faithful representation of the ethnocultural polyphony and cross-border porosity characteristic of the world of *Szaffi*, all translation versions, although in dissimilar ways, fail to deliver the complex web of relations between concrete identities and geographies present in the original. In the Soviet Union, usually publicly defended as the lesser evil and aesthetically and economically superior to other translation practices, dubbing always stressed the limitations of Soviet internationalism. Not only the dominance of the Russian language in the intra- and cross-national media circulation in the multi-language state undermined the utopia of socialist equality and friendship of the peoples. As a translation device, dubbing itself, commonly associated in screen histories with ventriloquism of nationalist unification, produced effects of univocal homogenization and appropriation of identities, which is particularly tangible in multicultural and multilingual film and media.¹⁰¹ The Soviet critics were not oblivious towards these politically controversial consequences of dubbing, which manifests in the never-ending debates about alternatives to the Russian-language dubs that entail risk in terms of “the erasure of the subtlety of intonations...and indifference to the word”¹⁰² in

¹⁰¹ See, for example, seminal works centered on the relationship between dubbing, nationalism, and effacement of the ‘foreignness’ or ‘otherness’ by Martine Danan, “Dubbing as an Expression of Nationalism,” *Meta* 36, no. 4 (1991): 606–14; Antje Ascheid, “Speaking Tongues: Voice Dubbing in the Cinema as Cultural Ventriloquism,” *Velvet Light Trap* 40 (Fall 1997): 32–41; and Nornes, *Cinema Babel*, 188–228.

¹⁰² N. Sergeeva, “Do dubliazha i posle,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 4 (1960): 115.

films in other languages or “discoloring the ‘internationalist’ flavor”¹⁰³ of multicultural cinema. Since the arrival of sound, the Soviet film practitioners, in turn, searched for the strategies to highlight screen multiethnicity and heteroglossia, deploying a variety of foreignizing methods from non-translation to the introduction of narrator’s voice-over and the use of accented Russian for the ‘marginal’ languages, which simultaneously often had exoticizing and racist implications.¹⁰⁴ The dub strategy deployed in *Szaffi* was to precisely situate geocultural realities and ethnicities through the translation of storyteller’s narration and dialogues, which, at the same time, corresponded with the original soundtrack and the differences in costumes, interiors, and musical scores of the animated film.

In reproducing the ethnocultural diversity of *Szaffi*, the Soviet dubbed version had only one apparently politically and ethically motivated divergence. In the context of the historically solid Soviet-Italian diplomatic and cultural relationship, which also found its expression through media exchange and co-productions, the Hungarian representation of the character Puzzola (“polecat” in Italian) could not be deemed acceptable. Speaking in an Italian accent in Hungarian dub, Puzzola is a petty and cunning companion subservient to his patron, the Austrian governor. This image reflects the Hungarian attitudes towards the alliance between the Italian aristocracy and the Austrian Habsburg dynasty controlling Hungary after the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Accompanied by stereotypical clichés, the derogatory depiction of Puzzola achieves culmination in the final scene of punishment for being an accomplice of the greedy governor. Puzzola, revealed to be Giuseppe, comes back to Bologna and finds himself in a dungeon, tortured by his mother as retribution for her “hurt maternal heart.” The Soviet distributors partially cut the scene, eliminating any hint at the mother-son connections between the tormentress and Puzzola, as

¹⁰³ A. Bragin, “‘Gibel’ Vatslava Malogo,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (1960): 53.

¹⁰⁴ Margolit, “The Problem of Heteroglossia,” 119–28.

Szaffi, in Soviet dubbing especially, emphasized the idealized parent-child relationship. The traces of the character's Italian origin, such as phonetics of the name, accent, and geographical ties, are also erased in the dub.

Returned to the post-Soviet video screens through an English-language dub, *Szaffi* does not simply include the entire torture scene with the female figure as a mother at the center. The dub sarcastically amplifies the sadistic character of the mother, described in translation as an “amateur torturer.” Her heart hurts no more, and the female character—in asking “Now where it hurts sweetie?”—derives pleasure from the physical pain of her son. The Russian translation contributes to the eeriness of the scene, while the male interpreter adds more terms of endearment and tries to imitate the insinuating female voice. The location of Bologna, as well as the Italian descent of Puzzola, now Ollie, disappear similarly to the Soviet version. At the same time, the vanishing of any other references to geographical localities and renaming of all characters divided into either Westerners (Jónás Botsinkay becomes Jonathan) or Middle Easterners (Hungarian Gáspár Botsinkay, father of Jónás, turns into Sheik Ali Suleiman) maintain the de-nationalized East/West world division the video translations establish at the film's opening.

Video translations of *Szaffi* permit only one culture to emerge into the fissure between the West and the East: the global marketable ‘Other,’ the Roma. The Anglophone distribution of *Szaffi* was anchored in Roma's global translatability, along with the translatability of the supra-national formations of “West” and “East,” as opposed to articulate ethnic identities, national histories, and local geographies that seemed to create obsolete obstacles to the cross-border screen circulation. The words “Gypsy” in English and “tsygan” in Russian are used throughout the translated film. The witch Cafrinka and Szaffi herself, the key Romani-looking characters,

get their respective names—Esmeralda and Sabrina. The name Esmeralda apparently served to evoke one of the most globally known Roma heroines—Esmeralda from Victor Hugo’s novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831). By the moment *Szaffi* was distributed as *The Treasure of the Swamp Castle* across the Anglophone television and video, Hugo’s Esmeralda have already appeared in numerous screen adaptations of the novel, including animation for children. And her international recognition among young viewers only increases with the 1996 Disney release of the feature animated film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* coming to Russia almost simultaneously with the new *Szaffi* on videotapes. Meanwhile, the new name of *Szaffi*, Sabrina, allowed to domesticate the heroine, who could be associated in Anglosphere with Sabrina Spellman, the character of the popular teen comic book series *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Although *Szaffi* does not have magical talents and appears to be a witch capable of metamorphosing into a black cat only because of Jónás’s preposterous assumptions, these vague connections with witchcraft and the fact of being raised by the Roma witch were enough to construct the intertextual links to secure the North American children’s engagement, the links that were nonexistent for the children in the ex-USSR in the 1990s.

As is common of the rich history of Romani-themed popular films and media, marked by the representational demonization, exoticization, and romantic idealization at once, Roma people in *Szaffi* become, to use Dina Iordanova’s words, a “metaphoric material.”¹⁰⁵ The stereotypical Roma femininity of *Szaffi*—subhuman, unruly, and frolic—provides an outlet for melodramatic sensibilities secured by the heroine’s ‘Gypsy’ passionate impulses, including casting love spells and threats of killing herself in case of the lost love. In turn, the Roma upbringing of Jónás, now a thief and money hunter, creates a pretext for a didactic lesson against materialistic values, as

¹⁰⁵ Dina Iordanova, “Images of Romanies in Cinema: A Rough Sketch?” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 44, no. 2 (2003): 8.

the hero, in his quest for the buried treasure, learns that love and friendship are the real gold. Moreover, in *Szaffi*, the Roma community explicitly serves as a means to negotiate Hungary's past and heterogenous nationhood along with the broader outsider position of Central-Eastern Europe to the rest of European neighbors.

Central to the Hungarian screens in shaping the national self-definition, as Imre argues, the 'Gypsy' images, as well as the "Gypsy problem" as such, tend to oscillate between the two poles: "sameness," or forceful assimilation of Roma to the nation, which she considers to be typical of the socialist era, when the Roma representation in media and political life was rare, and "difference" utilized to highlight the superiority of national majority paving their way in the context of post-socialist Europeanization and globalization.¹⁰⁶ Produced in the mid-1980s Hungary, *Szaffi* might be considered a reflection of the switching between these two representational regimes, heightened by the increasing crisis of the socialist state and growing liberalization. The 'Gypsy' is the masquerade identity of Turkish princess Sofia/Szaffi and Hungarian aristocrat Jónás—a reminder of Hungary's assumed inferiority to the rest of "proper" Europe—and an internalized position allowing for exceptionality and distinctiveness from the Europeans, the Austrian governor and his Italian servant. The Roma people are a community that, as we see in one of the final *Szaffi* scenes, must be settled under the shadow of Hungarian in little houses next to his castle. Yet, they are a family and companions. Moreover, as reflected in the role of Cafrinka and Jónás's Romani friends throughout the film, the 'Gypsy' is a parental figure, wise savior, and guarantor of Hungary's survival and wealth.

Since the Roma-centered Mexican melodrama *Yesenia* (1971, Alfredo B. Crevenna), which proved to be the most viewed film in the history of Soviet movie-going to the surprise and

¹⁰⁶ Anikó Imre, "Screen Gypsies," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 44, no. 2 (2003): 17.

demise of Soviet film critics and intelligentsia, arrived in the USSR in 1975, the ‘Gypsy’ as a protagonist in cinema and television productions and Romani aesthetics across music and fashion constituted one of the cornerstones of everyday experiences under late socialism in the Soviet Union. Similarly to Hungary, as Masha Salazkina shows, in the Soviet context, the Gypsy emerges as a mythology to reflect upon cross-historical and cross-cultural structures of identification, albeit of a different kind: the Romani theme constitutes a locus of nostalgic desire for the pre-modern past associated with the pre-1917 Russian literary and musical culture and an area of forging translocal and transregional, including Soviet-Latin American, affinities. However, while, in Imre’s reading, Hungarian Roma serves the purpose of the national self-definition, Romani theme in the Soviet Union allows for the negotiations “inseparable from the ongoing attempt to reclaim and redefine the ‘private’ sphere” and provides a model for the self-definition beyond the state and its official public norms and narratives.¹⁰⁷

Enmeshed in a myriad of affective and exoticizing associations with romance, sensuality, and emotional sentimental intensity, the ‘Gypsy,’ a romantic outside of the state law, becomes a hero securing a space for a fantasy of non-belonging, alternative selfhood, and taste sensibility contrasting with the official socialist “good taste” that foregrounded asceticism in feelings. *Szaffi*, a nationalist tale in Hungary, joined the Soviet Romani-themed canon centered on this idealized image of Roma, “the brave and cheerful people” as straightforwardly described in the dubbed version—the addition absent both in the original and the later translations. Released on videotapes almost simultaneously with the 1988 telefilm-operetta *Tsyganskii baron* (The Gypsy Baron, Viktor Okuntsov), both adaptations highlight the significance of small screens in creating of the Soviet ‘Gypsies.’ Their presence was more pertinent to the private realm of homes and

¹⁰⁷ Masha Salazkina, *Romancing ‘Yesenia’: How a Mexican Melodrama Shaped Global Popular Culture* (Oakland, CA: California University Press, forthcoming), n/a.

compatible with the “small” media forms, such as television and video, which also resonates with the crucial role video played in the (post-)socialist Romani self-representation and socio-economic participation, as demonstrated.¹⁰⁸

Although overlapping with the original, the Soviet dub over-emphasizes these two dimensions of the local Roma fantasy—emotional sentimentality and “at-homeness”—and de-emphasizes *Szaffi*’s deployment of the trope of the “greedy” and materialist ‘Gypsy.’ The reverse shift happened through the Anglophone dub and especially Russian voice-over translation. In the Soviet version, the fluctuation of the meaning production is particularly evident in the translational journeys of Jónás. Reminiscent of the Russian folkloric Ivan the Fool, Soviet Jónás is a child-like character who displays an affective attitude toward his friends and animals and is tender or awkward in front of the women. Returning to his ruined home, he directly addresses his mother’s portrait, saying “Hello, mommy. I am back,” a phrase not present in the original. And he remains humble and respectful in the presence of the witch Cafrinka whom she calls “granny” (babushka). Similarly to the original, the dub presents Jónás’s dreams about the estate and lost treasure in an ironic way. Yet, the Soviet version cuts or changes the scenes in which arrogance and greediness of Jónás are hard to hide under the mask of humor. The original scene in which the character treats Cafrinka and *Szaffi* as servants, talking about his limitless wealth, is removed in Soviet version. And after Cafrinka’s prediction about him finding a treasure on his wedding day, Jónás’s pompous remarks about the careful search for a proper wife, who would match his status, are translated as “How will I feed my wife?”, a concern reflective of his poverty and implied obligation of being a breadwinner. The idealized Jónás here is the ‘Gypsy’ who is

¹⁰⁸ On the Romani people in Romania and video production/circulation, see Jonathan Larcher, “Shot and Never Seen Again: Videotapes as Waste and Merchandise in Post-Socialist Romania,” *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies. Solidarity* 10, no. 1 (2021): 121–43.

sentimental, innocent, and ‘domesticated’ through the motifs of homecoming, accentuated family-like relationships, and closeness to the people.

Traveling on video through the Anglophone dub and its Russian translation, the retraction of this amalgam of meanings is manifested in the very change of the title from *Szaffi* to *The Treasure of the Swamp* [or *Magical* in Russian] *Castle*. While the key Romani heroines, now Esmeralda and Sabrina, maintain their exotic ‘primordial’ existence, the sensitivity they embody turn pale. Crying Szaffi/Sabrina does not promise to drown herself in the lake in case Jónás will marry the other woman anymore but is simply upset. Cafrinka/Esmeralda, in turn, comforts her with rational arguments: she tries to convince the girl that Jónás/Jonathan will return because “any noble woman is not a fool enough to fall in love with an empty title.” As this conversation vaguely echoes the original Cafrinka’s advise to allow Jónás to marry a woman of his class, the Soviet version cuts this line completely. In replacing sentimentality with the rationalist worldviews and centrality of the “treasure of the castle,” the new translations foreground Jónás and his aspirations. In these translations, even the stereotypical images of the ‘Gypsy’ as a thief, images that remain uncommented in both the Hungarian and Soviet versions, are accompanied by sarcastic Jónás/Jonathan’s voice-over “And if sometimes I forgot to ask for what I wanted to, I never helped myself to take more than I could have handled.” Jónás/Jonathan here is a modest intuition, although not new, of the forthcoming rise of “the Roma media star” as one of the post-socialist symbols whose stardom derives from his very relationship with the things he can possess. Especially characteristic of Hungary itself, the post-socialist media will “revel in the

image of ‘the Gypsy’ as a larger-than-life cultural icon that is fun to watch as he wastes money and dispenses with morality in jaw-dropping examples of hyper-materialism.”¹⁰⁹

Set at the nexus between the West and the East, simultaneously boundless, overlapping, and yet sealed in their homogeneity, the post-1991 *Szaffi* is split between the audible English-language dub and Russian-language voice-over. In this cracked English-Russian sonic regime, which came to dominate (post-)Soviet video, the voice-over, replacing the monolingual impervious dubbing and allowing to hear foreign speech, does not meet Soviet critics’ expectations about the method’s more politically progressive capacity to shed light onto the mosaic of international connections and cultures. In the global video vortex that brought the ubiquity of translated translations to the surface, Russian voice-overs, the conveyor belt of postsocialist video circulation, often emphasized the disconnection, distortion, and dispersion emblematic of cross-border media flows and video flows in animation particularly. Being mostly semantically faithful to the English-language dub that targets a child as an individual with limited access to the adult world, the Russian video voice-over destabilized the Soviet politics of childhood aimed at the forging of an internationalist subject and replicating an ‘adult’ address via high cultural idioms.

Simultaneously, however, this voice-over similarly detours from the English-language targeting regime that maintains the discipline of children’s media predicated on didactic imperative and accessible aesthetics. The same conveyor-like translation production of post-Soviet video, with a simultaneous interpreter at the center, results in the persistence of colloquial hasty intonations bordering with irritation, while the translator’s voice also displays sarcasm and

¹⁰⁹ Annabel Tremlett, “Why Must Roma Minorities be Always Seen on the Stage and Never in the Audience? Children’s Opinions Of Reality Roma TV,” in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Anikó Imre, Kati Lustyik, and Timothy Havens (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 241.

lack of the sentimental, refracting both the original and dubbed versions. The translation regime exemplified by *Szaffi* will become a persistent concern around the 1990s children's video as vulgar media intersected with ambiguous allusions and obscene language and yet simultaneously appealing to adult audiences willingly consuming animation.

In the 1990s, the disappearance of the former socialist address, along with the established dominance of Western children's entertainment, became one of the oft-repeated concerns among cultural critics tending to romanticize socialist children's culture, which, as mentioned above, Imre explained by nationalism and the masculinist cult of high culture. Meanwhile, linked to the new postsocialist media landscape, the post-Soviet sense of the triumph of "aggressive childhood" and "forced rejuvenation" of both children and adults also went hand in hand with the feeling of the societal rupture and accelerated renewal in which "every day you live instantly becomes remoted past."¹¹⁰ The ideas about 'aggressiveness' of the arrived 'silly' and 'infantile' images and sounds, thus, was not only a manifestation of the stance of cultural superiority but also of lived experience of sharp contrast and abrupt change. This change, particularly tangible in children's animation, as opposed to more 'universal' adult live-action cinema, with its unfamiliar or modified, like in the case of *Szaffi*, creatures, colors, stories, language, and sensibilities, was what could be felt as near-bodily, rather than only cultural, wounding and threat.

¹¹⁰ Pavel Lungin, "Bloshinyi rynok odinochestva," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (1999): 43, 45.

Chapter 4—‘Auteur’ Voice and *Boevik* Video Cultures

“Gay and squeaky,” “soulful,” “disgusting and feminine,” “attractive,” or just “legendary” are the epithets awarded by video viewers to the voice of the translator of *Szaffi*, Aleksandr Kashkin. Although the opinions are conflicting and vary from pejorative to enthusiastically laudatory, this translator’s voice remains the unrepressed part of the collective memory about the VHS era.¹ Since the arrival of video to the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, no ‘foreign’ videotape could rapidly circulate and reach a significant number of small screens if not accompanied by a cheaply and quickly made translator’s voice-over, a key vehicle of (post-)Soviet video economies. The translating voice was not merely a semantic bridge but an indispensable chord of the aesthetic experience and negotiations of taste and viewing conventions related to video consumption. The effect voices of video translators produced in the 1980s at the outset of the video boom is described as follows:

Pirate videotapes, no matter 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 knowledge received from the black video boxes that resembled secret caskets, chests, or safes. [...] The translation connected us with the mystery, with the transcendence.²

Video quickly migrated from the ‘underground’ zone to state and private video salons, media bazaars, stores, and television, not least due to the influence of translators whose number was limited and whose names ceased to be anonymous for the public by the late 1980s. The

¹ “Golosa kakikh perevodchikov vam nraviatsia, a kakikh net? (forum thread),” VKontakte, accessed on October 2, 2022, https://vk.com/topic-14277899_24518888; “Aleksandr Kashkin (forum thread),” RuTracker, accessed on October 2, 2022.

² Elena Kutlovskaja, “Golos,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (2002): 90.

translators' voice-overs turned into a mundane aspect of video consumption, whether 'informal' or 'formal.' Yet, these voice-overs, which eventually proved to be cult objects, while translators achieved the status of local stars, never stopped shaping and reflecting the sociocultural and aesthetic dynamics of (post-)Soviet video and the conditions of video viewers' engagement.

The practice of video voice-over is known in the post-Soviet region as an 'authorial voice-over' or simply 'authorial translation' (*avtorskii perevod*), which signals nothing less than the status of the translators as 'auteurs' seen to be "virtuosos"—a distinct cultural detour from the more typical view of the translator as subordinate to 'original' author.³ This notion refers to a monovocal voice-over screen translation performed by a translator himself (during the VHS era, almost all video translators were men). The popular periodization adopted today among post-Soviet scholars and audiences suggests a division of the history of 'authorial translation' into three stages associated with three 'generations' of video translators. The "first generation" is usually used as a reference to a small group of pioneers who started translating in the late Soviet context of emerging video cultures, whereas the "second generation" (from the 1990s to the early 2000s) are translators who entered the booming postsocialist VHS and later DVD market, followed by the "third generation" (since the mid-2000s till now), the army of independent translators, including women, arriving with the internet and increasingly translating screen media into a variety of post-Soviet languages beyond Russian that dominated the VHS distribution in the (post-)Soviet region.⁴ The criteria of such periodization, except for the socio-political and technological shifts, are vague, and the particularities characteristic of the translational

³ 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), 53.

⁴ Aleksandr Pavlov, "'Videodrom': formirovanie videokultury v Sovetskoi Rossii v 1980–1990-e gody" ['Videodrome': formation of video culture in Soviet Russia in the 1980s and 1990s], in *SSSR: Zhizn' posle smerti*, ed. Irina Glushchenko et al. (Moscow: VSHE, 2012), 142.

“generations” and relations between them are rarely an object of scholarly discussion. However, what this periodization points to is the formation and continuous development of a particular tradition of media distribution and aesthetic production established via analog video and moved to the cyberspace of peer-to-peer file sharing and streaming platforms (both informal and formal), whose visibility in and centrality for post-Soviet screen cultures are hard to overestimate.

In examining the emergence and socio-economic and aesthetic impacts of this tradition, this chapter foregrounds the case of Aleksei Mikhalev, one of the most acclaimed VHS translators from the ‘first generation’ and a star voice associated with the high-cultural video distribution and consumption and ‘beautifying’ vocal performance. As this chapter argues, the area of (post-)Soviet video that is particularly illustrative of the role of ‘authorial translation,’ specifically of such translators as Mikhalev, in mediating screen experiences is *boevik*. The Russophone term *boevik* emerged in the 1910s as a concept evocative of ‘blockbuster’ and, with the arrival of video, increasingly began to mark the genre of action, encompassing productions ranging from high-budget Hollywood action movies to low-budget sword and sorcery and martial arts films.

Action cinema and media (e.g., wrestling TV shows) epitomizes the popular of global analog video cultures. Video is typically seen as a driver of pornography and children’s media, “two of the busiest sections” at the opposite ends of a Western video store.⁵ Yet, videotape simultaneously proved to be a vehicle for the global projection of action blockbusters and facilitated action film production as direct-to-video action movies that experienced their global

⁵ Joshua Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 93.

rise during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ “Rambo had conquered Asia,” as Pico Iyer acknowledged, witnessing the 1980s audiences’ craze in China, the flow of *Rambo* remakes in India, and selling the posters of Siva along with the ones depicting Sylvester Stallone, a new “deity,” in Indonesia.⁷ Hearing the word ‘video,’ viewers across the globe, whether it is Poland, Malawi, or Iran, recall the pantheon of action heroes and refer to the *Rambo* franchise or *Commando* (1985, Mark L.

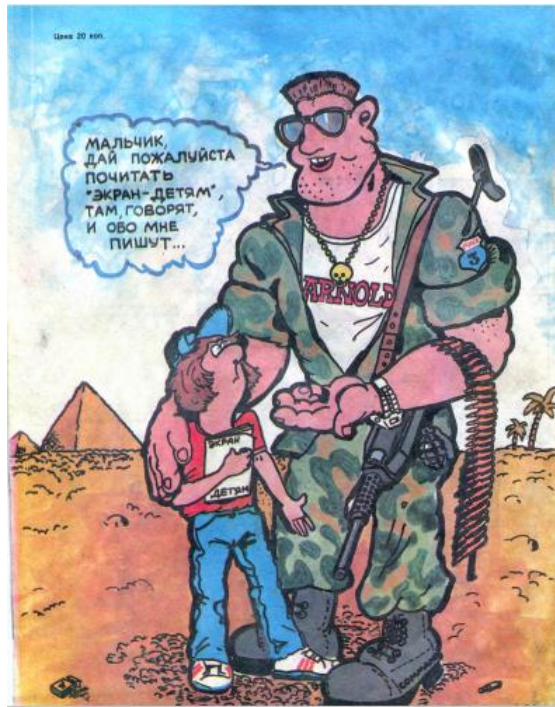


Figure 4.1. The Soviet magazine, *Screen To Children* (Back Cover, 1990 no. 6): “Boy, borrow me *Screen To Children* please. People say they write about me there.”

Lester) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as the most important films of the VHS era in their local contexts (Figure 4.1).⁸ The (ex-)Soviet Union was not a bystander but passionate participant in the world action video cultures, albeit these cultures had complex history in the Eastern bloc, given their initial association with anti-socialism and anti-Sovietism, as addressed in the previous chapters. Gradually defined as *boevik* in the 1980s onward, action cinema as one of the key dimensions of late and post-socialist video culture resonated with the global processes and was central for the

experiences across the borders. However, in the (post-)Soviet context, action cinema, seen through the lenses of the legacy of the term *boevik* and the practice of ‘authorial’ video

⁶ See, for instance, one of the recent studies on the topic in Tom Mes, *Japanese Film and the Challenge of Video* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁷ Pico Iyer, *Video Night in Kathmandu: And Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 9.

⁸ Patryk Wasiak, “The Video Boom in Socialist Poland,” *Zeitschrift Für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 61, no. 1 (2012): 27; Jonathan Gray, “Mobility Through Piracy; or, How Steven Seagal Got to Malawi,” *Popular Communication*, no. 9 (2011): 99–113; Blake Atwood, *Underground: The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021), 90.

translation, displays paradoxical politics of attributing value to the genre and simultaneously sheds light on the (post-)Soviet production of the myth of the video ‘auteur’ translator.

In what follows, I will first revisit the notion of *boevik*, central to the Soviet cultural vocabulary since the 1917 October Revolution, as an umbrella term to designate the spectacular, entertaining, and popular media. I will highlight the persistent ambivalence about the aesthetic parameters and socio-cultural worth of *boevik* under socialism, where this concept simultaneously turned a framework to reflect upon global screen economies and spectatorship. I will also examine how *boevik* came to designate the action genre with the US blockbuster at the center during the 1980s and early 1990s video boom, extending the discussion to the relationship between ‘authorial translation’ and male-centered corporeal action film aesthetics. Second, I will trace the origins of ‘authorial translation,’ inseparable, just like *boevik*, from the post-1917 early film culture, outlining the factors that shaped the rise of video ‘auteurs’ and such figure as Mikhalev whose voice was a signature of ‘high-quality’ media. Finally, I will look at a particular site of (post-)Soviet *boevik* culture, marked by the voice-over of Mikhalev, which turns out to be B-grade action and martial arts cinema linked to real or imaginary ‘Asia,’ to illustrate the postsocialist unexpected translations between big and small, popular and marginal, or high and low.

Boevik: (Post-)Soviet (Action) Blockbuster

One of the keywords of the late and post-Soviet vocabulary, as evident from the previous chapters, *boevik* constituted, along with erotica, a staple of local video circulation in the 1980s, and a site of the fiercest political and cultural contestation around postsocialist screens. Today, in the Russophone context, *boevik* (derived from the Russian words “fight” or “fighter”) is often

used as a synonym of the genre of action and, at the same time, refers to a local tradition of action storytelling in film and literature.

In attempting to locate the emergence of *boevik* in Soviet movie culture, most academic accounts of the phenomenon tend to apply the contemporary association between *boevik* and the action genre—the association that, however, fully stabilized only by the mid-1990s—and trace the origins of this phenomenon back to the video arrival of the 1980s action cinema from the US. *Boevik*, “seen as an American product,” became a marker of the high-budget US action spectacle that, in turn, as Eliot Borenstein explains, inspired the formation of the Russian *boevik*—the post-Soviet “product of cross-fertilization” with the distinctive set of national action heroes, devices borrowed from socialist aesthetic conventions, and themes concerning the socialist disintegration, particularly the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) as a reverberation of Vietnam central for the 1980s US action film.⁹ In the same vein, in the field of literature, *boevik*, both as a broad genre category that emerged from adventure and detective fiction and as the local Russian action novel, is seen as a cross-cultural post-Soviet aesthetic mode reflecting the overlapping between and “transition from Soviet ideologemes, values, and literary models to some new, more universalist, and all-civilizational ones, commonly marked as the ‘Western.’”¹⁰

These readings suggest that *boevik* itself—as a postsocialist aesthetic category and media, whether foreign or domestic, it describes—signifies a complex translation zone between the Western/US and post-Soviet action imaginaries. In reflecting the disparities and clashes arising from the encounter between these imaginaries, the postsocialist *boevik*, in contemporary interpretations, nevertheless, refers to the unified realm of mass entertainment with men as

⁹ Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 162, 170.

¹⁰ Boris Dubin, *Slovo—pis'mo—literature: Ocherki po sotsiologii sovremennoi kul'tury* (Moscow: NLO, 2001), 241.

protagonists, producers, and consumers at the centre. Coinciding with the basic parameters of the action genre, *boevik*, a hyper-masculine visceral universe, foregrounds a hero-savior and “mechanistic drama played out on the hero’s own body” as he undergoes a series of violent direct combats with clearly identified evil in the name of good.¹¹ While the scholars of *boevik* outline these general contours of the phenomenon, they tend to focus on the formation and refractions of post-Soviet action aesthetics by looking at locally produced *boevik* media and often on par with their assumed prototypes—American action and crime genres. Meanwhile, in doing justice to this scholarship, I simultaneously foreground *boevik*, not limited to the concept of genre, as a more variegated and geoculturally dynamic terrain of postsocialist media experience and negotiation of the popular, which is simultaneously dependent on the specific articulations of *boevik* in the Soviet context.

Tracing of the *boevik* genealogies brings us to the originary moment of Soviet film culture. On the one hand, the word ‘boevik’ emerges as a signature of the early 1910s socialist vocabulary and crosses the pages of the post-1917 revolutionary press regarding the members of both the Red Army and counter-revolutionary resistance. Simultaneously, ‘boevik’ becomes a catchword of the pre- and post-1917 film distribution as it circulates across promotional advertisements. Among them are such blurbs as “another foreign boevik of Italian cinema”¹² in relation to *La trilogia di Dorina* (The Dorina Trilogy, 1917, Gero Zambuto) starring Pina Menichelli or the promotion of German *Das indische Grabmal* (The Indian Tomb, 1921, Joe May) as “another ‘world boevik’” with such “typical features” as “high form and empty content” and accompanied by remarks of a confused reviewer expressing doubts whether this film is

¹¹ Borenstein, *Overkill*, 162.

¹² “Ital’ianskii boevik,” *Izvestiia*, May 4, 1922.

indeed set in “real” India or it is a “fabrication” characteristic of regular boevik hits.¹³ ‘Boevik’ is a way to label Eddie Polo’s serial films “unparalleled in breathtaking stunts”¹⁴ and high-budget domestic productions taking about a year to produce, such as the Soviet historical-revolutionary film *Dvorets i krepost’* (The Palace and the Fortress, 1924, Aleksandr Ivanovskii). At the same time, the production of early local typical ‘boevik’ was described as a formula: the involvement of famous directors and actors, big budget, and such ironically described film openings as “The sea...The rock...The surf...Mephistopheles sits on the rock and plays violin” suggesting that boevik was, first and foremost, a “sugary-sentimental” melodrama.¹⁵

In the 1930s, ‘boevik’ migrates to the pages of literary press, and “kniga-boevik,” as “the popular and bestselling book,” is a label applied to such novels as Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).¹⁶ As for the cinematic context, ‘boevik’ further solidifies as a marketing category foregrounding expensive production and big audiences and an aesthetic regime characterized by a lavish spectacle and uninhibited emotional and physical expression. In fact, from the outset, ‘boevik’ emerges as an equivalent of ‘blockbuster’ before the latter concept arrives in the English-language 1940s film lexicon, which challenges both the Russophone and Anglophone critical and scholarly debates that persistently frame blockbuster as the US 1970s model and discourse the late Soviet and post-Soviet film industries tried to “translate.”¹⁷ The location of boevik media in the emerging official taste politics, accompanied by the 1930s rise of Stalinism and socialist realism, was unstable and contingent though. While Mikhail Dubson’s *Granitsa* (Border, 1935) about the class struggle on

¹³ “Indiiskaia grobnitsa,” *Pravda*, March 6, 1923.

¹⁴ “Eddie Polo,” *Izvestiia*, Jan. 18, 1924.

¹⁵ Lev Nikulin, “Pervye shagi,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 11 (1957): 84–5.

¹⁶ “Knigi-‘boeviki’,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 20, 1934.

¹⁷ “Blokbuster: perevod na russkii. Kruglyi stol,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (2005): 4–23; Dawn Seckler and Stephen M. Norris, “The *Blokbuster*: How Russian Cinema Learned to Love Hollywood,” in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 202–3.

the Polish-Soviet border is criticized for bearing the attributes of a “regular American boevik,” such as “staring eyes, tense grunts, and heavy turns of bodies entangled in an embrace,”¹⁸ Dziga Vertov’s travelogue *Shestaia chast’ mira* (A Sixth Part of the World, 1926) is commemorated and praised as a “sublime [pateticheskii] boevik.”¹⁹

In the 1950s, it appears that the place of boevik in taste hierarchy stabilizes after one of the chief voices of Soviet cinema, director Sergei Gerasimov, proclaimed that Soviet orientation towards the “boevik production” resulted in “the monotonous flow of monumental on the surface but not valuable in the ideological and artistic content” films and was detrimental and alien to socialist film culture.²⁰ While this 1950s criticism echoed the condemnation of Stalinist monumentalism with boevik, here glossy musical comedy, as one of its epitomes, in the 1960s and 1970s, the phenomenon acquired an increasingly pronounced profile of an all-encompassing term for mass cultural production, distribution, and reception. It described manufacturing of media that targeted not simply mass and ‘tasteless’ but often global audiences via stereotypical and culturally translatable garish aesthetics. In some sense, the boevik concept, central for the Soviet cultural vocabulary, encapsulates what Rosalind Galt calls a “suspicion of the perfect image” and decorative surfaces as opposed to the meaningful content, a suspicion characteristic of global cine-Marxism.²¹ A local reiteration of global left aesthetic ideologies, boevik simultaneously becomes a ground for investigating the global screen appeal and popular consumption rather than merely a term connoting condemnation of the spectacle. *Boevik* is a way of critiquing and reflecting upon the aesthetic regimes widely resonating with the world and mass audiences’ sensibilities and the socio-economic models these regimes predicate upon. The

¹⁸ N. Oruzhenikov, “Logika emotsii,” *Sovetskoe kino*, no. 9 (1935): 30

¹⁹ “‘Kalendar’ istorii kino,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1938): 64.

²⁰ S. Gerasimov, “Za ideinoe, vysokokhudozhestvennoe kinoiskusstvo,” *Pravda*, March 25, 1954.

²¹ Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 206.

persistent socialist condemnation of the decorative surfaces, in turn, usually stems here from the fact that the boevik economies often seemed to represent the high-budget production and distribution strategies whose standards and operations are unachievable in most cultural settings, creating the context for reinforcing the inequalities and extractivism. And it is not difficult to see that one of the names for this economy was Hollywood.

Hollywood, as one of the superpowers of the world's popular culture, was indeed a persistent point of reference. Yet, in the Soviet debates, Hollywood boevik, always dispersed and not self-contained, was located within a larger landscape of screen aesthetics and economies, whether as the phenomenon intrinsically “built on *lubochnaia* [do-it-yourself, of poor quality, ‘mass’] South American exotica,”²² particular economic formation allowing for the production of such franchises as *Star Trek* that itself represents a paradigm of global imaginary,²³ or one of the embodiments of the emerging 1980s transnational phenomenon of “cine-disco-boevik”²⁴ epitomized for Soviet viewers by Indian film *Disco Dancer* (1982, Babbar Subhash). In pinpointing the parameters of world boevik, the Soviet discourses address diverse cinematic and media cultures bypassing Hollywood. In the early 1970s narratives, “boevik of the season” internationally, Hindi *Purab Aur Paschim* (East and West, 1970, Manoj Kumar), centered on the theme of Westernization of India, is a film to reflect on the spectacles of nationalism and denial of the West.²⁵ And in the same narratives, Bolivian *Ukamau* (1966, Jorge Sanjinés) was complementary described as a “boevik hit” the context of discussion about Jorge Sanjinés's oeuvre and representation of the indigenous peoples' struggle.²⁶ In the 1980s, Franco Zeffirelli is

²² G. Avenarius, “Kino Latinoamerikanskikh stran v bor'be s Gollivudom,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 11 (1954): 107.

²³ M. Sturua, “Vot takoe kino...” *Izvestiia*, May 12, 1980.

²⁴ Al. Naloev, “...ritmov i komertsii,” *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, March 19, 1982.

²⁵ R. Sobolev, “Mnogolikii ekran Indii,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 5 (1972): 177–8.

²⁶ St. Belousov, “V gorakh Bolivii,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (1970): 167–170.

discussed as a boevik film auteur whose TV series *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) or even the Metropolitan Opera's 1987 telecast of *Turandot*, forthcoming and not seen at the moment of discussion, constitute the locus of extravagant boevik production symptomatic of the Italian media industry struggling to survive in the global market, while Tinto Brass's *Caligula* (1979) is a boevik exemplifying the operations of "supranational commercial cinema" economically as a co-production and aesthetically as a grotesque combination of epic and erotica.²⁷ And at the same time, Sergei Eisenstein's *Stachka* (Strike, 1925) appears in the 1980s debates as an ultimate "proletarian boevik,"²⁸ pointing at the indelible link between the montage-of-attractions political mobilization of shock, mental agitation, and bodily innervation and Soviet understanding of 'high' boevik sensibilities, as opposed to the centrality of diegetic immersion and pleasure suggested by 'low' commercial boevik.

As the above articulations of the idea of boevik imply, this concept, which emerged in the early twentieth century, has never been a stable geocultural, generic, or taste category and could acquire both positive and negative meanings. If contemporary accounts, as we saw above, foreground postsocialist boevik operating through the Soviet-US split, boevik was and is far from being a site of such duality. From the outset, films labeled as 'boevik' indicated a variety of spatial convergence, links, intersections, and, as the etymology of the word itself suggests, struggles on the level of production, consumption, and aesthetics. In fact, boevik provided a particular standpoint for what David Martin-Jones calls "looking transworld"—a viewing position that "means to be open to connections evident in films from around the world, but also to be able to contextualise them in relation to world rather than national history."²⁹ In this

²⁷ G. Bogemskii, "Kinozrelishche beret revansh," *Mify i real'nost'*, vol. 9 (1985): 91–4.

²⁸ Sergei Iutkevich, "Poetika kinorezhissury," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 6 (1981): 158.

²⁹ David Martin-Jones, "Film-Philosophies For World Cinemas' Engagement With World History," in *The Routledge Companion To World Cinema*, eds. Rob Stone et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 280.

regard, the umbrella term ‘boevik’ was a Soviet ‘transworld’ device to identify the aesthetic and socio-economic mechanisms across world cinemas allowing for the production of the cinematic popular.

Neither is the straightforward relation of the notion ‘boevik’ to a particular genre, even in the 1980s, when allegedly boevik emerges as a term to describe action cinema. Evocative of the concept of blockbuster, ‘boevik’ foregrounds the size and ‘bigness,’ including spectacularity beyond predetermined generic conventions. Blockbuster, a “site of constant struggle” itself refusing clear-cut understanding, is associated with excess, suggesting “a going beyond of what had been the size norms, of accepted or established practice; the adding on of something special; the presence of an extra dimension of some kind or other.”³⁰ And yet, in the Soviet context, like elsewhere, the ever-shifting sense of size and ‘going beyond’ produced conflicting and diverse views on and experiences of what may constitute the popular boevik spectacle and its cultural and aesthetic worth or worthlessness. The arrival of video in the 1980s only fueled this disorientation, placing the magnitude of the popular and spectacular in the realm of small screens, shabby videotapes, and soundscapes of repetitive monovocal voice-overs. The first issue of one of the first Soviet video magazines proclaimed in 1990:

Rejecting the callous dogmas of yesterday and plunging into the world of video, we begin to understand that *zrelishchnost’* [spectacularity] is one of the staples of world cinema and not at all a way of mass stultifying the viewing audience through ‘mass culture,’ as it was presented before by our ‘stagnant’ criticism. Cinema should be spectacular, and culture should be mass. The spectacle is art.³¹

Contrary to multiplexes, “cathedrals of consumption,” emblematic of the blockbuster culture in the Western settings,³² Soviet home video screens become a site of absolute boevik sensibilities

³⁰ Julian Stringer, “Introduction,” *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 3, 5.

³¹ Valentin Mikhailov, “Spetseffecty,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 84.

³² Mark Jancovich and Lucy Faire, “The Best Place To See a Film: The Blockbuster, the Multiplex, and the Contexts of Consumption,” in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 192.

and experiences in which each movie had a chance to become an event, particularly at the beginning of the video era in the 1980s.

Then, how did boevik, a multifaceted phenomenon, turn into the action genre? In her analysis of Soviet hit films Birgit Beumers calls “Soviet blockbusters,” she suggests that, although “destruction and a sudden impact” are constitutive of blockbuster, it represents a calculated expensive repackaging of genre cinema and conventional aesthetic forms, which guarantees a mass appeal.³³ Meanwhile, there are some genres, the reassuring anchors of stability, that, as Beumers points out, dominate over a particular historical moment, usually a moment of crisis, and provide a basis for ‘blockbusters,’ such as musical comedies in the late 1930s at the peak of Stalinism or detective film after World War II in the Soviet context.³⁴ Paradoxically, as already hinted in Gerasimov’s condemnation of Soviet boevik production in the 1950s, boevik, or blockbuster, can indicate a site of monotony, dreariness, and habit.

Seemingly shocking and disruptive, the Rambo-led video flows of action cinema, the flows persistently framed as the origin of postsocialist boevik, were simultaneously uncannily familiar and intimate for the Soviet viewers. Answering the question, “What emotions did you feel at the sight of so much violence and blood?”, the video translator Andrei Gavrilov, the principal VHS voice-over of action cinema, replied, “As a Soviet citizen, I had seen so many films about war that all this blood was, in the worst case, raspberry juice [to me].”³⁵ Often “featuring strikingly graphic depictions of torture, violence (including sexual), and death,” the “socialist cinema of armed struggle” constituted one of the key poles of the Soviet festival film

³³ Birgit Beumers, “Soviet and Russian Blockbusters: A Question of Genre?,” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 3 (2003): 441.

³⁴ Beumers, “Soviet and Russian Blockbusters,” 443.

³⁵ Andrei Gavrilov, “Poltora chasa s prishchepkoi na nosu,” interview by Tatiana Trofimova, Colta, May 15, 2014, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/90s/3188-poltora-chasa-s-prischepkoy-na-nosu>.

culture and international exchange,³⁶ and the grand themes of revolutionary and war martyrdom, socialist heroism, and collective resistance marked the Soviet screens throughout their history. In turn, Soviet television, “never completely feminized” and framed as a “masculine, high-status medium,”³⁷ secured a small screen as a welcoming space for male-oriented spectacles of action video reinforced by the pervasive accompaniment of the male authorial translation. Though thrilling and defamiliarizing in depicting a hero and the settings of his combat, action film elicited shadowy sensory recognition heightened by language translation. The genre, thus, became the quintessential embodiment of boevik in the video era: sensational and aesthetically agitating yet comfortably consumable.

At the same time, the conflation of boevik as the marker of popular hit film with the action genre results from the very structure of the 1980s video circulation significantly shaped by action cinema. The mere visibility of these films on video screens, attracting Soviet viewers, endowed them with the status of boevik, and the anxiety of the official public discourses strikingly preoccupied with video as a domain of John Rambo created an identity between action video entertainment from the US and boevik. In attempting to explain the newly forming meaning of boevik, film critic Sergei Kudriavtsev, one of the major Soviet video reviewers, provided two definitions in 1990. In broad sense, he described the notion conventionally as a synonym of “hit,” “blockbuster” or “smash” but now referred to boevik almost exclusively as an American high-budget and high-grossing film. At the same time, the critic provided a description of the “pure” boevik as a genre having such vague features as “unpredictable development of

³⁶ Masha Salazkina, *World Socialist Cinema: Alliances, Affinities, and Solidarities in the Global Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 243–4.

³⁷ Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 12. See also Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 267–8.

plot” and emphasis on the “action predominantly concentrated around one event, specific activity, performed by characters who are not policemen, cowboys, gangsters, private detectives, historical heroes, and so on.”³⁸ Pure *boevik*, in the critic’s view, is about soldiers, warriors, and



Figure 4.2. *Video Ace Express* magazine 1994 cover of the issue devoted to the *boevik* film. The front cover (on the right) depicts action heroes. The back cover (on the left) is an advertisement of the magazine (“*Video Ace*, a magazine that s not for everyone”).

fighters, and the primary examples are the Rambo series, *Uncommon Valor* (1983, Ted Kotcheff), *Commando* (1985, Mark L. Lester), and a rare non-US but Swiss-British co-production *The Wild Geese* (1978, Andrew V. McLaglen) (Figure 4.2). Thus, already by the 1990s, *boevik*, marking the shifts in the popular and simultaneously the adjustments of the local critics to the US film culture and discourses, seemed to turn into a particular site of action cinema battles led by the US, or at least Western Anglophone, combatants.

³⁸ Sergei Kudriavtsev, “‘Boevik’ ili ‘film deistviia,’” *Kul’turno-prosvetitel’naia rabota*, no. 2 (1990): 31–2.

A vibrant site of global action video culture, postsocialist boevik simultaneously provides a clear example of the ways in which world action cinema can be locally remapped and rearticulated in terms of aesthetic effects, taste, and cross-cultural identifications. Postsocialist boevik as a video formation accumulates the long-lasting legacy of Soviet narratives foregrounding boevik as a transworld experience and displaying ambivalence about what constitutes the ‘big’ boevik wonder. While this legacy only flickers in public and scholarly reflections on boevik, authorial voice-over, an essential ingredient of postsocialist boevik spectacle and what paradoxically abolishes it, becomes a crucial entry point for understanding this legacy’s refractions and manufacturing of boevik video culture more broadly.

The emphasis on language translation may appear counterintuitive here. After all, the easy translatability of such ‘body genre’ as action film seems to determine the speedy cross-border journeys of and cross-cultural affective investments into the action genre. The averse evaluation of popular action cinema, “Dumb Movies for Dumb People,” as Yvonne Tasker observes, indicates not only the exercise of cultural power that is in play in the terrain of action film production/consumption but also “the primacy of the body over the voice” and “the extent to which the pleasures of the action cinema are primarily those of spectacle rather than dialogue”—factors that contribute to the low status of these productions.³⁹ The reflections upon the relationships between the post-Soviet boevik film/literary fiction and orality evoke this broader idea of action media sensibility as a “postliterate spectacle.”⁴⁰ The boevik language, in Boris Dubin’s description, is “the bearer of the norm of the real, and, therefore, it is ‘general,’ ‘whatever,’ ‘nobody’s’” or site of “grey language and language clichés, social and cultural

³⁹ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 6.

⁴⁰ Borenstein, *Overkill*, 164.

speech impairment, speech inauthenticity, tautology and repetitions—‘chewing gum’ or semantic stuttering—and so on.”⁴¹

As this description simultaneously suggests, however, boevik is not mute or the realm of repressed language staying in the background of the action. It is the terrain where language operates, first and foremost, as an additional powerful affective register—intrusive, broken, and aberrant voice—which can cause both displeasure and pleasure. The same dynamics is found among the US action heroes: “Stallone with a speech defect” and “Schwarzenegger with heavy accent.”⁴² The cross-border circulation, in turn, only intensifies the ‘badness’ of the action film orality and overall genre, endowing habitually poorly translated action movies where language seems unnecessary with the qualities of conflicting polyglotism, erroneousness, and partiality. For example, in pointing at the centrality of informal video networks for its circulation and low cultural prestige in formal distribution settings, Hong Kong action cinema, “refusing to translate ‘well,’” is typically characterized by “miswording, misspelling, mistiming” in subtitling, overlapping subtitles in different languages, and sloppy dubbing.⁴³ Simultaneously, in acknowledging the particular affective rather than mental power of action film language, translation is often elevated to a level of aesthetic device enhancing the high-budget action spectacles, as is evidenced today in the meticulous dubbing of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, Ang Lee) or innovative strategy in *Night Watch* (2004, Timur Bekmambetov) accompanied by subtitles that change colors and shape, dissolve, and move across the frame.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Dubin, *Slovo – pis'mo*, 235.

⁴² Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970 – 2006* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 162.

⁴³ Tessa Dwyer, “Straining to Hear (Deleuze),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (1997): 556–8. See also, Meaghan Morris, “Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema: Hong Kong and the Making of a Global Popular Culture,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, no. 2 (2004): 181–199.

⁴⁴ Dwyer, *Speaking in Subtitles*, 35; Carol O’Sullivan, *Translating Popular Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 149–50.

The postsocialist boevik was received and designed through translation that became a boevik affect itself and rearticulated not only the poor voices of action performances but also framed the geospatial, aesthetic, and experiential dynamics of this video culture. In echoing the boevik sensibilities, pirate brochures called (post-)Soviet video translators “fighters of the invisible front,”⁴⁵ while their voices—male, authoritative, emotionless, and simultaneously stuttering and distorted in the context of quick and copy-driven (post-)Soviet video distribution—matched the masculinity and ‘defective’ orality of the action screens. In the split voice-overs, translators and the boevik heroes they gave their voices to merged, being doubles for each other. And yet, the ‘auteurism’ of postsocialist video translation and the distinct sensations translators’ voices produced recalibrated the engagement with the action spectacles, triggering manifold intertextual connections and transgressive forms of identification, as we will see by looking at the boevik oeuvre of the most verbose and refined voice-over of the video era, Mikhalev. Meanwhile, before examining Mikhalev’s *boevik* translations, I will first outline the origins of ‘authorial’ video translation that allow to better understand why this practice had such a profound impact.

‘Fighters of the Invisible Front’: Video ‘Auteur’ Translators

The (post-)Soviet voice-over represents a practice rooted in a complex dynamic of visibility and invisibility, cultural continuity and disruption. It points to the erasure of the conventional division of labor in vocal distribution practices such as dubbing—the division into a language transfer made by a professional translator and a revoicing made by voice actors. In the ‘authorial translation,’ it is a single translator who operates as the only voice of screen speaking bodies. At

⁴⁵ Iuliia Perelomova, “‘Televizor plius vidak,’” *Irkutskii reporter*, Sept. 9, 2016.

the same time, this notion highlights the removal of the aura of the translator's anonymous absence characteristic of subtitling. Again, it is precisely the voice that endows a translator with the screen presence and 'auteur' artistic personality.

The emergence of the celebrated pleiad of auteur-translators in the late and post-Soviet media landscape is inextricably linked to the arrival of video, as smuggled videotapes, each accompanied by the voice-over of an individual translator, could be duplicated and widely distributed. That is to say, the production of a translator as an author whose voice became ubiquitous and recognizable across multiple television screens was concomitant with the mass reproduction video allowed for, and the copying unsurprisingly contributed to the rise of the translators' stardom. In video distribution, technology simultaneously influenced the dynamic of this 'stardom,' which was particularly true in the 1980s when large-scale traffic in foreign video equipment did not exist, and the format decoding engineering only started to develop. Translators who provided voice-overs for videotapes coded in PAL or local SECAM formats gained mass visibility. Meanwhile, voice-overs of those who translated NTSC video—video coming from the US spheres of influence and technically difficult to decode in the Soviet Union—circulated slowly and usually among the elite audiences. In Anglophone scholarship, the firm association between video and auteur translation manifests itself in the use of the "Gavrilov translation" concept as a way to refer to the specifically Soviet phenomenon of voice-over screen translation.⁴⁶ It is the name of Andrei Gavrilov, one of the most prolific and famous 'auteurs,' simultaneously associated with *boevik*, that gave rise to this term.

The notion of translation as a distinctively authorial—creative and discernible—mediation and this practice's origins are by no means straightforward, though. While the marker

⁴⁶ Eliana Franco, et al. *Voice-Over Translation: An Overview* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010), 24.

‘authorial translation’ has become the vernacular of post-Soviet video cultures, most video translators have an ambivalent relationship with such categorization. “Translation,” as one of them notes, “is a principally not authorial thing,” but also, he adds, “authorial translation is a type of language work when a translator [...] revoices films in his own style.”⁴⁷ Gavrilov, who insists on the instrumental role of translator, notes that his changes of screen dialogues result from his own “personal vision of what a director wants to say” and the natural differences in language norms and the broader socio-cultural disparities the translator must obey to. In highlighting the double subordination of the translator to both the text and cultural realities, albeit filtered through the translator’s interpretation, he emphasizes that the voice-over translators, in particular, must downplay their presence by not displaying “too many emotions,” and yet they must “deliver some intonations” as it is “impossible to stay completely detached.”⁴⁸

On the one hand, such a fluctuant attitude towards the screen translator’s agency and positionality derives from the delivery mode of monovocal voice-over as such. Contrary to dubbing, a regime of unity, this voice-over leaves foreign voices audible, accentuating the machinery of translation and the interference of the translator. In bringing the translator as a mediating agent to the forefront, this practice emphasizes the supreme power of one translating voice over the screen spectacle. In this regard, it represents a provocative challenge to what Lawrence Venuti calls the “translator’s invisibility,” the globally dominant cultural regime that requires the concealment of the fact of translation and deems translators as second-class citizens alienated from the product of their labor.⁴⁹ And yet, this exact vocal collision, emerging from the split voice-over, is a persistent reminder of the ‘original’ the translator obeys while dissolving

⁴⁷ Sviatoslav Biriuchin, “Khroniki vidika: legendy VHS epokhi. Pervaia chast” June 1, 2019, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLXtum_xY_Y.

⁴⁸ Gavrilov, “Poltora chasa.”

⁴⁹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8–10.

through the multitude of heard screen bodies that annihilate his integrity. This original vocal multitude paradoxically restricts and encourages the ‘auteur’ articulateness of the translator, who alone must balance a variety of audible emotional, gender, and socio-cultural vocalizations, including his own.

At the same time, the ambiguity about the notion and practical implementation of ‘auteur’ video translation can be attributed to the historically established status of screen translator and translation protocols, both universal and local, and their cultural effects in the Soviet context. Usually seen as an anarchic product of disordered and speedy (post-)socialist pirate circulation, “a symbol of the capitalist transition’s contradictions,”⁵⁰ ‘authorial’ video translation, which usually represents simultaneous interpreting, has a rich transnational and Soviet pedigree.

In evoking the practices of early cinema distribution, this translation extends back to the emergence of film narrators whose live commentary accompanied silent film screenings, whether, for instance, they were Japanese *benshi*, whose performances achieved the status of “a stand-alone commodity,”⁵¹ or Soviet film lecturers, who became essential agents of the socialist state’s efforts to facilitate “intellectual development” of the audiences. As a technology of formation of the film viewer, film lecturing played a paramount role in the context of the emerging socialist state.⁵² A legion of the trained “Red film narrators,” to borrow Valérie Pozner’s term, were tasked with a mission not only to engage the spectators by making the screening more legible to them but also to compensate for the audiences’ presumed cultural and political illiteracy with commentary, lectures, and even quizzes that accompanied these film

⁵⁰ Chistruga, Vladislav, and Jacob Svaneeng. “The Curious Tale of the Soviet Voice-Over.” *Jacobin*, 18 Jul. 2017, jacobinmag.com/2017/07/soviet-voice-over-cold-war-technology.

⁵¹ Abé Markus Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 110.

⁵² Aleksandr Kugel, “Kak ia byl lektorom v kino,” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 33 (1923): 12–3.

screenings.⁵³ However, officially promoted and ubiquitous across the early Soviet state, ‘film narration,’ was potentially problematic for both, the audiences and the authorities, albeit for different reasons. The former often rejected the didacticism: “U, beard, again he began to teach us!” the viewers screamed at the theater critic Aleksandr Kugel’, one of the Red film narrators, causing him to conclude that Soviet people, going to movies, “craved romance, not education,” and the intrusive narrator’s effort only caused them irritation.⁵⁴ For the state officials, on the other hand, live film narration formed a potentially suspicious terrain, ripe with the subversive possibility of “random people” playing a key role in the ideologically crucial sphere of film as political education resulting in its perception as a “primitive,” aesthetically depleting practice.⁵⁵

Also, video voice-over was born from the translation culture of official international communication. A source of Soviet pride and a revolutionary mechanism for building the global socialist community, simultaneous interpreting is believed to emerge as a stage translators’ performance at the 6th Congress of Communist International in Moscow in 1928,⁵⁶ or later, as a wired system of headphones and microphones, at the 15th International Congress of Physiology in Leningrad in 1935.⁵⁷ After the 1945–46 Nuremberg Trials, the wired system of interpreting, manufactured by IBM, gets adopted across the world formal settings. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, simultaneous interpreting—aurally non-intrusive and neutral—migrated from the places of international gatherings and courtrooms to film screenings at festivals, theaters governed by the state film archive Gosfilmofond (e.g., *Illiuzion* in Moscow), educational organizations, and

⁵³ Valérie Pozner, “Ot fil’ma k seansu,” in *Sovetskaia vlast’ i media*, ed. Kh. Giunter and S. Khensgen (Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 329–50; Valérie Pozner, “Le bonimenteur « rouge » Retour sur la question de l’oralité à propos du cas soviétique,” *Cinemas* 14, no. 2–3 (2004): 143–78.

⁵⁴ Kugel, “Kak ia byl lektorom,” 12–3.

⁵⁵ O. Lil’burg, “Obsluzhit’ zritelei soiuznykh respublik,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (1938): 42–5.

⁵⁶ Evgenii Gofman, “K istorii sinkhronnogo perevoda,” *Tetradi perevodchika*, no. 1 (1963): 20.

⁵⁷ Francesca Gaiba, *The Origins of Simultaneous Interpretation: The Nuremberg Trial* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998), 31.

private halls for state officials and censorial committees. Since the 1950s, the offhand speech of a translator speaking in a microphone from a booth proved, as Elena Razlogova demonstrates, “a key element of the foreign-film sound-track throughout the Soviet Union,”⁵⁸ while some film interpreters became “famous among spectators as artists in their own right,”⁵⁹ albeit expected to stay emotionally detached and neutral in accordance with the protocols of formal simultaneous interpreting. This exact detachment, however, could turn out to be disruptive of film experience and produce humorous effects. For example, as a viewer, attending the screening of French mystery film *J’ai épousé une ombre* (I Married a Shadow, 1983, Robin Davis) she described as “melodrama” recalls, people in movie theater could not stop laughing as the monovocal interpreting was “surprisingly monotonous and dispassionate,” which turned the film into a comedy.⁶⁰ And yet, as opposed to dubbing characteristic of mass Soviet film distribution, live interpreting inadvertently accentuated the exclusivity of distribution circuits, especially film festivals. In this regard, live film interpreting operated similarly to subtitling that marked the privileged and unique sites of film consumption. Among them were, for example, subtitled films distributed before the Second World War, or a significant number of the “trophy” films brought by the Soviet army from the Reichsfilmarchiv in Berlin after 1945—their subtitling forming a visible aspect of the “invisible” networks of film circulation for party officials and cultural workers in urban areas.⁶¹ In addition, to the delight of the Soviet audiences, the mode of live interpreting allowed for a unique opportunity to watch uncensored films, enabling and

⁵⁸ Elena Razlogova, “Listening to the Inaudible Foreign: Simultaneous Translators and Soviet Experience of Foreign Cinema,” in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, eds. Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 162. Also see Elena Razlogova, “The Liberation Politics of Live Translation: Global South Cinemas in Soviet Tashkent,” *JCMS* 59, no. 4 (2020): 183-188.

⁵⁹ Elena Razlogova, “On Soviet Spoken Cinema,” in *Remapping Cold War Media: Institutions, Infrastructures, Translations*, eds. Alice Lovejoy and Mari Pajala (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 163.

⁶⁰ “Iz pochty...” *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 19 (1984): 21.

⁶¹ Claire Knight, “Enemy Films on Soviet Screens: Trophy Films during the Early Cold War, 1947–52,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 1 (2017): 125–49.

foregrounding a sense of authenticity and informality. Among the officials, this practice, while pragmatically inevitable given the lack of time and resources to provide for other forms of translation for festival films, was nonetheless treated with caution due to its potential disruption of the more stable political and aesthetic protocols epitomized by dubbing.

The Soviet dubbing culture significantly influenced the rise of the figure of video ‘auteur.’ As discussed in Chapter 3, dubbing, and translation more generally, was envisioned as a creative, transformative industry, endowing translators with a high cultural status echoed in the VHS cultures. Soviet viewers developed intimate attachments to and fondness for the voices of dubbing actors, frequently believing that these voices, just like language transfer, embellished and enriched films. Nevertheless, dubbing was frequently a source of frustration. Soviet audiences were always keenly aware of something distorted and hidden beneath the dubbing layer. Contrary to the assumptions about Soviet dubbing’s function as a tool of censorship, that role, instead, was performed by the centralized selection and acquisition of foreign films and media under the supervision of Sovexportfilm. However, some of the textual modifications in the dubbing were indeed censorial—usually ones accompanying the romantic and modestly erotic scenes. And already in the 1960s, the situations when, in replacing ardent confessions of love onscreen, “a dubbing actor was forced to read a monologue about the proper distribution of fertilizers in the fields with the same passion” became an object of mockery in the press.⁶²

More than any such modifications, however, it was the “unprecise, unexpressive, and lifeless” language, low quality of translation from non-European, especially Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean, the “danger of intonational monotony and cliché,” and “wooden voices” in dubbing that formed a haunting concern in public discourse, as evident from the

⁶² B. Kordunov, “Tvorchestvo ili remeslo?” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1961): 83–4.

viewers' letters to popular film magazines.⁶³ Despite their overall admiration for voice actors, the Soviet viewers frequently expressed their discontent, for example, with the regular intrusion of recognizable Soviet film stars into dubbing. Their voice acting was perceived as distracting as it evoked "their faces in the audience's eyes"—therefore disturbing and disrupting the film's overall impression.⁶⁴ Another frequently voiced complaint had to do with translation practices in the much-appreciated foreign musicals: audiences repeatedly demanded subtitles rather than dubbing for the musical films, especially for the musical numbers. While Soviet film workers agreed with the viewer's arguments, they had to confess their technical incompetence, referring to the example of *West Side Story* (1961, Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins) whose subtitles took six months to make.⁶⁵

Among the Soviet dubbers themselves, complaints centered on poor technology and outdated equipment that resulted in distorting voices, along with a concern for a lack of maintenance of proper health safety even at the leading dubbing guilds.⁶⁶ In part, the 'poor' quality of technology and voices, increasingly affecting Soviet cinematic soundscapes, allowed for toleration of 'poor' video voice-overs similarly distorted in the context of fast video distribution and copying. There was also a significant discrepancy within the levels of recognition among the different aspects of the dubbing process. Sealing the respected status of dubbing personnel, the inclusion of names of dubbing studios, actors, directors, and "authors of screen text" (who were actually editors of the language translations) in the film credits became a

⁶³ S. Krasnova, "Otvetsvennyi uchastok kinematografii," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, no. 12 (1952): 3. B. Kordunov, "Tvorchestvo ili remeslo?" *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1961): 83–4. "Ne govorite dereviannymi golosami!" *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 9 (1962): 82–3.

⁶⁴ "Iz pochty..." *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 19 (1984): 21.

⁶⁵ "Smeialas' kak Monika Vitti." *Sovetskii ekran*, no. 16 (1985): 16; "Nemuzykal'nyi moment," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Dec. 1, 1982.

⁶⁶ Artem Karapetian, "Dublirovanie—internatsional'noe sblizhenie kinokul'tur," *Tekhnika kino i televideniia*, no. 4 (1989): 33.

norm of Soviet film distribution since the 1960s. All the while, the names of the actual translators remained anonymous, and dubbing sections proved to be the last resort for ‘politically unreliable’ film workers. After his expulsion from the Communist Party for failing to officially disclose the fact of having been in captivity during the Second World War, Vladimir Chebotarev, the director of the all-Soviet hit *Chelovek-amfibiia* (Amphibian Man, 1962), lost all opportunities to shoot at Mosfilm and was ‘demoted’ to dubbing director.⁶⁷ Similarly, despite having been rehabilitated after her imprisonment during the Stalinist repressions, actress Kira Andronikashvili was not able to return to acting, becoming instead a dubbing director at her native Georgian Film Studio in Tbilisi.⁶⁸ For the student of Sergei Eisenstein, Elena Arabova,⁶⁹ a daughter of Crimean Greek parents deported during the forced relocation of the Crimean Peoples in 1944, it was similarly impossible to find employment as a film director. She could only continue her film industry career in the field of translation, eventually as a leading dubbing director at the prestigious Gorky Film Studio.

In the 1970s, voice-over was adapted for television screens as a way to translate international news, commentary programs, and, unusually for most places in the world, television serials and, occasionally, movies, which, first and foremost, related to low cost and technological simplicity of such translation method. Even when not performed simultaneously, voice-overs stressed the immediacy, unscriptedness, and vibrant sensibilities of communal film sites, counterbalancing the carefully staged and static address of Soviet television. Transferred, as we saw in the previous chapters, to video salons as a live commentary and to videotapes as a recorded voice-over, authorial translation, thus, reproduced the long-lasting tradition of foreign

⁶⁷ Vladimir Chebotarev, *Ot ‘Cheloveka-amfibii’ do ‘Batal’ony prosiat ognia* (Rostov-na-Donu: Feniks, 2009), 163–70.

⁶⁸ “Kira iz ALZHIRA,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 7 (1993): 134–7.

⁶⁹ Iurii Arabov, *Legendy dubliazha*, April 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InPehUaQHco>.

media distribution that blended the standards of official simultaneous interpreting with media pleasure. This particular genealogy of the video voice-over points to the requirements of a highly controlled and restricted presence of the translator, on the one hand, and the liveness and authenticity of his persona that refuses suppression in simultaneous interpreting, especially for entertainment, on the other.

In attesting to the complicated present-but-absent nature of authorial video translation, this genealogy also foregrounds the unprecedented power of translators in Soviet screen cultures, extended to and intensified during the VHS era. A principal agent of Soviet state politics and ubiquitous intercultural mediator, a translator simultaneously becomes a central figure in providing much-desired knowledge in the face of censorship, lack of access, and actual or imaginary experiences of cultural lag, which elevated him to the status of a “moral hero,” especially when the video currents started crossing the Soviet borders.⁷⁰ Allegedly originating in the Soviet Union and marking the Eastern bloc media landscapes, this practice also exists in other media cultures. For example, the practice of film/video commentary as a manifestation of “the encounter between (nonmodern) oral practices and the appropriation of a cinematographic apparatus born out of a foreign culture” is typical of Congo.⁷¹ Kiswahili monovocal video narration in Tanzania, which itself, as Matthias Krings also points out, operates as a “reconfiguration of the video medium within a specific local media environment,” is not only present but also illustrates similar functioning of video translator as a ‘celebrity.’⁷²

⁷⁰ Susanna Witt, “Translating Inferno: Mikhail Lozinskii, Dante and the Soviet Myth of the Translator,” in *Translation Under Communism*, eds. Christopher Rundle, Anne Lange, and Daniele Monticelli (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 111–140.

⁷¹ Vincent Bouchard, “Commentary and Orality in African Film Reception,” in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, eds. Ralph A Austen and Mahir Saul (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), 106.

⁷² 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*, eds. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 307.

Nevertheless, ‘authorial translation’ was a vehicle of mass video distribution and still remains a ubiquitous practice predominantly in the former Soviet region. Although the common interpretation of this phenomenon as “nostalgic” is partially fair, the persistence of this practice on the ex-Soviet screens stems from a complex web of socio-economic and cultural reasons I will address in the conclusion of the dissertation.

The rise of video translator as an ‘auteur’ is equally the result of a confluence of multiple factors that range, as we have seen, from the fascination with foreign video to the economic model of local video distribution, technological reproduction, the affective power of voice-over delivery, and, of course, a personal agency of translators. While video translators provided voice-overs for the bulk of video productions distributors ordered and, as some translators note, did not have specialization in media genres,⁷³ voice-overs marked niches and screen sensibilities, serving as an essential orienteer for the video consumers in the seemingly disordered (post-)Soviet video vortex of screen geographies, formats, and styles.

Although most of them translated from Anglophone original soundtrack, dubs, or subtitles, there were translators working in particular language ‘zones.’ Hindi films, for instance, usually circulated in the voice-over of Iurii Korchagov, one of the most dedicated Soviet scholars and advocate of Indian cinema, who translated more than 300 movies distributed on videotapes in the late 1980s and 1990s and famously accompanied translations with short cultural commentaries.⁷⁴ Names of translators were indicators of quality of both translation and production they revoiced. With reference to the first generation of Soviet video translators whose voices dominated the 1980s video screens, the video viewers recall, “The last names of

⁷³ Sergei Mostovshechikov, “Piratskoe video – ne tol’ko kollektivnyi propagandist, no takkzhe i organizator,” *Izvestiia*, Feb. 15, 1992.

⁷⁴ Dmitrii Petrov and Oleg Shiskin, “Ob indiiskom kino: beseda s Iuriem Korchagovym.” *Radio Maiak*, Oct. 16, 2014, <https://smotrim.ru/video/971506>.

translators—Volodarskii, Mikhalev, Gorchakov, and Gavrilov—became something like a brand and were indicated on video cassettes next to the films’ titles.”⁷⁵ Gavrilov’s “low, masculine, serious voice” and “drive” were associated with American action cinema and specific films such as *Jaws*, The *Terminator* franchise, and particularly *Blood and Concrete* (1991, Jeffrey Reiner), the peripheral US crime comedy that became a shocking memory and hit among the Russophone viewers due to Gavrilov’s outbursts in obscene language.⁷⁶ Leonid Volodarskii, called both “the worst translator” and “guru of translation,”⁷⁷ was the iconic voice of the *Star Wars* film series, and his nasal and eerily mechanic beyond-the-human speech became a source of both laughter and terror, which contributed to his outstanding fame. In the meantime, the undisputed star among the Soviet and post-Soviet video translators was Aleksei Mikhalev whose role in mediation of popular video cultures, particularly *boevik* or action cinema, is the main object of analysis in this chapter.

A Case of Aleksei Mikhalev

Mikhalev—“Mozart,” “the King,” “number one in the art of synchronous translation”—was and is still considered the most prominent and beloved VHS translator admired by both critics and mass audiences.⁷⁸ Mikhalev’s voice had not only high aesthetic value but also commercial one, and videotapes with his translations, despite their wide availability, “were always sold separately from other video production at special price,”⁷⁹ which became particularly true after the translator’s untimely death in 1994 all major Russophone media lamented. A personal translator

⁷⁵ Aleksandr Borisov, “Kto sil’nei: Brius Li ili Rambo?” *Murmanskii vestnik*, April 22, 2020.

⁷⁶ Biriuchin, “Khroniki vidika: legendy VHS epokhi. Pervaia chast’”; Gavrilov, “Poltora chasa.”

⁷⁷ Vladimir Todorov, “Ubliudok, mat’ tvoiu, a nu idi siuda!” *Lenta.ru*, July 26, 2016, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/07/26/filmfilmfilm/>.

⁷⁸ Elena Kutlovskaiia, “Korol’ sinkhronnogo perevoda,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 15, 2005.

⁷⁹ Kutlovskaiia, “Korol’.”

of Leonid Brezhnev and simultaneous interpreter at the Soviet embassies in Iran and Afghanistan, a literary translator of Iranian writer Gholām-Hossein Sā'edi and American writers William Faulkner and John Steinbeck, among many other Anglophone authors, and regular translator at the international film festivals, Mikhalev was the embodiment of professionalism and the translator of about 1,500 films on video.⁸⁰

In generic terms, the “Mikhalev space,” as the acoustic field created by the translator’s voice was called, is firmly associated with musicals, animation, and comedy. A musicals fan, Muslim Magomaev, the legendary Azerbaijani 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.⁸¹ This collection, copied and distributed across video networks, solidified the indestructible link between the translator’s voice and the genre of musical Mikhalev continued actively translate till his death. In the mid-1990s, in implicitly pointing to Mikhalev’s voice as the residue of the past that did not exist anymore, Magomaev noted, “We have lost the habit of such voices Mikhalev had. It was highly cultured [intelligentnyi] voice. He had a wonderful diction and wonderful knowledge of Russian language.”⁸²

Beyond the musical genre, the “optimistic” voice of the translator, “the best friend of every child of the 1990s,” was seen as an essential accompaniment of children’s media. And the Disney animation, particularly *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Aladdin* (1992), are remembered by Russophone video viewers primarily in Mikhalev’s translations.⁸³ A

⁸⁰ Aleksei Mikhalev, “‘Ia teper’ ochen’ znamenit,” interview by Iurii Minzianov and Sergei Kudriavtsev, *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2 (2002): 84.

⁸¹ Aleksei Mikhalev, “Ikh ne znali v litso, 1992,” interview by Aleksandr Frumin, *Megamiks*, Oct. 11, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx7WjafDZAo>; Kutlovskaiia, Korol’.

⁸² “Aleksei Mikhalev,” Abzats, October 8, 2021, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjMB69iULgw>.

⁸³ Aliia Khusnutdinova, “Legendarnye perevodchiki 90-kh,” *Lingua Contact*, June 6, 2022, <https://translator-school.com/blog/perevodchiki-90-x-spisok-lyudej-kotorym-prinadlezhat-golosa-nashego-detstva>.

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.⁸⁴ Among the films the translator allegedly 'saved' is, for example, the British pastiche horror *Theatre of Blood* (1973, Douglas Hickox), 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 Shakespearian tragedies.⁸⁵ Thus, *Theatre of Blood*, the campy classic of British trash cinema from a cult studio Amicus that specialized in the satirical horrors about "the random and fundamentally meaningless terrors of modern everyday life,"⁸⁶ 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 high-low 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

⁸⁴ Andrei Plakhov, "Liubov' k sovershenstvu," *Videogid*, no. 4 (1990): 11.

⁸⁵ A. Loevskii, "Golosa za kadrom," kinofond.ru, accessed November 7, 2020, <http://www.kinofond.narod.ru/perevod.html>.

⁸⁶ Ian Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 43.

“crap” and “was squeamish about bad films.”⁸⁷ As a slippage of the tongue, in implicitly comparing the work of translator as such to prostitution, Mikhalev himself joked about his pedantic translation and attentive approach to films, “I am the prostitute that wants to get both money and pleasure.”⁸⁸ The media, accompanied by Mikhalev’s voice, 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.

Having this particular ‘auteur’ mythology in mind, it seems not surprising that allegedly the most intellectual and sophisticated voice of the (post-)Soviet video screens explicitly distanced himself from one particular area of video distribution: popular action cinema, or what is called *boevik* in the Russophone context. Despite the rapid integration of this genre epitomized by the stars of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger into the core of (post-)Soviet video cultures, Mikhalev emphasized his disdain for the “blood and gore bang-bangs” as opposed to “decent cinema.”⁸⁹ However, closer attention to the translator’s oeuvre reveals the ubiquitous presence of films labeled as *boevik* by the press, video distributors, and viewers, both past and present, albeit *boevik* of a particular kind, as we will see further. The high cultural prestige of video translations by Mikhalev and of the media he translated reveal unique aspects of the local lives of action cinema, and the figure of the translator and associated aesthetics of vocal and language performance adds a further twist, refracting and simultaneously mirroring the (post-)Soviet experiences of popular action film and the popular more broadly.

‘Bad’ and ‘Beautiful’ *Boevik*

⁸⁷ Plakhov, “Liubov’,” 11.

⁸⁸ “Aleksei Mikhalev,” Abzats, video.

⁸⁹ Mikhalev, “Ia teper’ ochen’ znamenit,”

At first glance, the 1980s and 1990s (post-)socialist boevik video culture indeed seems to be epitomized by the US action blockbusters with Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis—the highest-paid actors in the world at that time⁹⁰—at the forefront. A privileged ‘negative’ fetish of the 1980s official Soviet discourses that unwittingly became a key driving force of the promotion of the US action films, this triumvirate freely pervaded much of local screens, both small and big, magazine covers, and narratives of popular culture by the late 1980s. Stallone, a denounced “idol of the most devoted anti-Soviets,”⁹¹ turned into a “romantic” known for his “subtle acting” in the 1990s, and his biography, now integrated into the local screen cultures, appeared in the major film magazines next to the biography of the all-Soviet favorite, French comedy actor, Louis de Funès.⁹² Schwarzenegger masqueraded as a Soviet police officer in *Red Heat* (1988, Walter Hill), while, in the rumors about viewers in Georgia protesting against the film’s representation of Georgian drug narcotrafficker, such a backlash appeared to be a bewildering misunderstanding, and the film was claimed to be a “revelation,” despite such “costs” as “anti-Sovietism and racism.”⁹³ Legitimizing Schwarzenegger’s triumphant entry into the local screen culture, *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991, James Cameron), which Sovexportfilm acquired along with *Die Hard* (1988, John McTiernan) starring Willis, was dubbed and released in the still Soviet movie theaters at the end of 1991 right before the official end of the Soviet Union.⁹⁴

While the 1990s Russophone media sealed the idea of the US action cinema and its A-stars as an emblem of boevik screens and postsocialist culture more broadly, any deviation from the newly established pantheon and canons of the popular could be silenced or met with

⁹⁰ Ronald V. Bettig and Jeanne Lynn Hall, *Big Media, Big Money: Cultural Texts and Political Economics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 109.

⁹¹ “Chto govoriat,” *Rovesnik*, no. 5 (1986): 23.

⁹² “Dossier,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 10 (1992): 173.

⁹³ “Fil’mny chempiony-89: Krasnaia zhara,” *Video Ace*, no. 1 (1990): 32–3.

⁹⁴ “O, Terminator!” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 6 (1992): 146–7.

downright hostility. In 1996, *Russian Newspaper*, an official newspaper of the Government of Russia, discussed the results of the public questionnaire on favorite actors among Russian respondents. In his response to the questionnaire, the reviewer perplexedly exclaimed, “Paré took place between Schwarzenegger and Stallone!”, referring to the unexpected intrusion of the American hero of B-grade action cinema, Michael Paré. In trying to answer why this little-known, “mediocre” B-actor, inferior in muscle size to his more famous counterparts, gained such popularity in Russia, he referred to a comment from a female viewer who explained that, unlike other actors, Paré was “a pretty cutie.” Blaming such absent-minded viewers, obviously women, for their superficial tastes, the author paradoxically concluded that this inexperienced audience’s craving for beauty allowed Russian video piracy to blossom and flood the market with such cheap productions as films with Paré and from India.⁹⁵

Both American action B-movies and Indian films, increasingly identified not only as melodramas, as it was typical throughout the Soviet era, but also as boevik since the 1979 Soviet theatrical release of *Sholay* (1975, Ramesh Sippy), were disruptive of the neat narratives of what constitutes the popular film culture and boevik screens in particular. *Sholay*, “action-oriented, containing scenes of great energy and spectacle,” was emblematic of the 1970s shifts in Hindi popular cinema actively integrating the action genre aesthetics, including blustering fight scenes and chases that even could now compete with the canonical song and dance sequences.⁹⁶ In the late 1980s, the Soviet press confusingly discussed the crowds gathering to see Indian “boevik” *Jagir* (1984, Pramod Chakravorty),⁹⁷ and Indian boevik, seen as the phenomenon at the intersection between local film tradition, Hollywood action, and Hong Kong martial arts cinema,

⁹⁵ Andrei Shcherbakov, “Sdelajte nam krasivo! I deshevo,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Sept. 13, 1996.

⁹⁶ Andrew Willis, “Locating Bollywood: Notes on the Hindi Blockbuster, 1975 to Present,” in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 260.

⁹⁷ Iurii Mikhail'tsev, “Gruziia Fil'm: uspekh bez sekretov,” *Ogonek*, no. 12 (1987): 5.

attracted the attention of Soviet critics, such as Korchagov (mentioned above as a VHS translator of Hindi cinema), trying to explain the popularity of the genre and its key figure, a “real man” Amitabh Bachchan.⁹⁸ Following the tremendous Soviet success of *Disco Dancer* also identified as boevik, another Indian male actor, Mithun Chakraborty, enjoyed mass popularity. His action-filled films such as tellingly titled *Commando* (1988), *Rukhsat* (Farewell, 1988, Simi Garewal), *Mujrim* (Criminal, 1989, Umesh Mehra), and many others continued circulating across the movie theaters in the post-Soviet region, and they were instrumental in the survival of those big screens that were possible to save in the 1990s. Simultaneously, Indian cinema was one of the most vibrant sites of local video and represented another terrain of boevik culture ignored in the public discourses due to this cinema’s continuing association exclusively with melodrama, femininity, and B-grade ghetto, seemingly the opposites of genuine *boevik*.

Taken together as a locus of piracy and low taste, either American or Indian ‘bad’ action cinemas were persistently framed as a site of female cultures, incompatible with the very idea of boevik emerging as a male territory and frequently dismissed as an aberration. Despite their wide popularity among all viewers, the press depicted such American B-stars of action cinema, predominantly martial arts films, as Steven Seagal as an “icon of female audiences,”⁹⁹ and the name of Jean-Claude Van Damme went hand in hand with humorous wordplays such as “Van Damme is favorite for dames [liubimets dam Van Dam].”¹⁰⁰ Associated with the pre-1991 perestroika video cultures, “handsome” Paré compared by the Russian press to James Dean, whom an average (post-)Soviet viewer knew nothing about, represented a type of hero that provided an alternative to the dominant US action figures: masculine but vulnerable,

⁹⁸ Iurii Korchagov, “Amitabh Bachchan,” *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 2 (1987): 115–20.

⁹⁹ “Legenda dlia legavogo,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Jan. 5 (1997).

¹⁰⁰ Sergei Anashkin, “Parad dikovin,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1999): 122.

melancholic, and romantic. And the public post-1991 framing of Paré as a charmer, good cook, or potential fiancé of a Russian female pop singer did not match the protocols governing the representation of typical boevik stars integrated into political life, business, and international relations as authoritative and influential agents. In the meantime, it was not only Paré's acting or cultivated public charisma the female audiences were supposedly enchanted by and targeted through: "the specific monotonous, nasal voice-over" was what "gave a special charm to the adventures of Paré's characters, who, now and then demonstrating a naked pumped-up torso, defeated enemies both on Earth and in Space and did not forget to break the hearts of blond and dark-haired beauties."¹⁰¹

Throughout the 1990s, typically of the large-scale mass video distribution of American productions, the Paré films circulated in voice-overs produced by various translators, including those whose voices, for example, Gavrilov's manly and emotionally austere voice, commonly stood for an emblem of the US-centered boevik video culture. Nevertheless, the early and most memorable Paré films—*The Philadelphia Experiment* (1984, Stewart Raffill) and *Streets of Fire* (1984, Walter Hill)—were primarily available on the late 1980s video market in the voice-over of the artist-translator Mikhalev. *The Philadelphia Experiment*, a time travel action film that had John Carpenter among screenwriters and producers, came to the Soviet Union officially and was released as *The Secret Experiment* in movie theaters after being dubbed at Lenfilm studio. In the US criticism, the film was just "an average, uninspired motion picture [...] to spend two hours on a dull evening," and its ridiculous special effects seemed to be reminiscent of "the time-travelling special effects of the low-budget BBC TV series *Doctor Who*."¹⁰² In the Soviet

¹⁰¹ Oksana Soltanova, "Kulinar vremen perestroiki," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, August 26, 2005.

¹⁰² John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland and Company, 2005), 223.

context, though the local press described it as a “typical” American film,¹⁰³ *The Philadelphia Experiment* became one of the hits of movie distribution in 1986 and was voted by the viewers as the second-best foreign film of that year.¹⁰⁴ Beyond major theatrical networks, it was shown in one of the most prestigious movie theaters, Soviet ‘art-house’ temple Gosfilmfond’s Illiuzion in Moscow, and later rare video copies of the film circulated in the voice-over made by the key Illiuzion’s figure: film programmer, synchronous interpreter, and researcher Grigorii Libergal. Mikhalev, along with Libergal, was the face of the movie theatre, where he often synchronously translated films for the audience, also providing his voice-overs for the video circulation of the films Illiuzion screened, including *The Philadelphia Experiment*.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, *Streets of Fire*, an odd hybrid between an action film and rock n’ roll musical, was immediately distributed on video in the voice-over of Mikhalev, famous for his love for and mastery in the musicals translation. A commercial and critical flop upon its release in the US distribution, *Streets of Fire* later became an object of the Anglophone cult fandom and was repackaged under the ‘cult’ label for VHS and DVD distribution.¹⁰⁶ In the Soviet Union, where the cult film reading protocol strictly speaking did not exist, the assimilation of this Paré film, along with *The Philadelphia Experiment*, into the sphere of high cultural consumption and aesthetic practices, such as Mikhalev’s voice-over, prompted their standing as prestigious video commodities. Echoed in the 1996 questionnaire that demonstrated the enduring appeal of Paré, the mass popularity of these B-rate action films was a shameful reminder of what was seen in the postsocialist context as a byproduct of Soviet cultural provinciality that allowed for the

¹⁰³ Tatiana Moskvina and Sergei Sholokhov, “V ostrosiuzhetnom tupike,” *Ogonek*, no. 4, 1987.

¹⁰⁴ Aleksandr Fedorov in *Luchshie i khudshie fil'my sovetskogo prokata: mneniia chitatelei zhurnala 'Sovetskii ekran' (1958—1991)* (Moscow: OD Informatsiia dlia vsekh, 2022), 299.

¹⁰⁵ Libergal in Margarita Savinova “Trudnosti perevoda”

¹⁰⁶ I.Q. Hunter, *Cult Film as a Guide to Life: Fandom, Adaptation, and Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3.

absorption and cultural upgrading of ‘junk’ from around the world, whether it was low-budget American cinema or Indian films. Frequently debunked and effeminized in the dominant public discourses in the 1990s, canons and tastes of socialist popular screen cultures a priori did not match the new masculine and vigorous boevik constructed as a domain of American big stars, big budgets, and big action spectacles. Popular film attachments and preferences were similarly often objects of Soviet critics’ attack that, however, was didactically directed against the audiences’ desire for entertainment and lack of cultural and political discipline. The 1990s criticism blamed the (ex-)Soviet viewers for their desire for ‘wrong’ entertainment, now obsolete and trashy.

Positioned against the boevik culture, the figure of translator Mikhalev is paradoxical and simultaneously illustrative of the inherent tension constitutive of this paramount domain of video distribution and consumption—the tension between socialist legacies and the post-1991 engineering of cultural worth. This tension produced two major overlapping but distinct boevik cultures. On the one hand, it was the US ‘gun’ action blockbuster culture and local (post-)Soviet action films that emerged in dialogue with it, the privileged object of boevik discourses. On the other hand, it was the low-budget, often transnational, ‘fist’ action cinema epitomized by martial arts film with ‘Asia’ as a central geocultural orienteer, an artificially marginalized but genuinely popular site of (post)socialist boevik video cultures and also intensive local boevik production often made for the video market. In fact, contrary to the emphasis on the US action blockbuster as the principal source of local postsocialist boevik, a closer look at (post-)Soviet boevik films rather reveals the dominance of martial arts aesthetics as a vessel of action sensibilities. Seen through the lens of translation practices, particularly Mikhalev’s translation as a living

embodiment of the contradictory fate of postsocialist boevik, these two action modes reveal the realm of curious cultural effects and experiences characteristic of postsocialist video screens.

Mikhalev's voice-over, one of the most ubiquitous, commercially valuable, and aesthetically praised voices of the VHS era, was strikingly absent at the core of boevik video circulation associated with the US prestigious triumphant action stars and blockbusters. The lack of involvement of Mikhalev in the video circulation of these films seems to resonate with the 'muteness' of boevik: the video translator had neither room for applying his talent for masterful localization of the linguistically sophisticated cinema nor opportunities to 'fix' these movies via his aesthetically elevating and transformative approach. Yet, the hegemonic US 'hard bodies' occasionally spoke in Mikhalev's voice-over, but only if they allowed for their cinematic self-annihilation and comical de-masculinization as in the case of Stallone in *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot* (1992, Roger Spottiswoode), Willis in *Death Becomes Her* (1992, Robert Zemeckis), or Schwarzenegger in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990, Ivan Reitman), compared by the local press to the Soviet hit comedy *Usatyi nian* ' (Mustached Nanny, 1977, Vladimir Grammatikov), or *Junior* (1994, Ivan Reitman), centered on male pregnancy.

Mikhalev made only one exception for the heroic screen performance of Schwarzenegger by translating *Conan the Barbarian* (1982, John Milius). Belonging to the 'low' sword and sorcery genre that extols epic adventures of an individual warrior in quasi-historical fantasy worlds, the film, nevertheless, seemed to represent educational value in the view of some Soviet reviewers and contribute to the popularization of Scandinavian folklore.¹⁰⁷ Also often labeled as boevik in the (post-)Soviet video circulation, the US and Italian sword and sorcery films, encapsulating the 1980s "neoliberalist" imaginaries of individual heroism, profit, and heightened

¹⁰⁷ A. Tishinin, "Tvorets 'Konana-varvara,'" *Novosti video*, no. 5 (1990): 1.

lawless deregulation,¹⁰⁸ accompanied the growing visibility of high fantasy fandom, particularly around J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (first translated in the Soviet Union in 1982), and formation of the local mass literature market of Slavic fantasy emerged in the 1990s. The Mikhalev's boevik oeuvre occasionally included sword and sorcery films, such as the *Deathstalker* tetralogy, the 1980s direct-to-video "shlockbuster" series of co-productions between the US, Argentina, and Mexico, that was one of the projects of the "King of B movies" Roger Corman with Latin America as an affordable double of medieval fantasy Europe at the centre.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, while the *Deathstalker* series circulated on video almost exclusively in Mikhalev's translations, the low fantasy genre rarely appears in the translator's output.

Martial Arts *Boevik* in Soviet Translations

Simultaneously, Mikhalev proved to be one of the major voices of martial arts cinema, and Soviet viewers were first introduced to this action film genre primarily through his translations. Martial arts films as Anglophone dubs of kung fu and karate cinema from East and South East Asia, English-language international co-productions, and the US-produced films first associated with Chuck Norris in the Soviet region constituted Mikhalev's boevik body of translations. It is noteworthy that the corpus of films translated by Mikhalev and labeled as 'boevik' in the Russophone video distribution includes a wide variety of films from the adventure epic such as *Ivanhoe* (1953, Richard Thorpe) and animation *Astérix le Gaulois* (1967, Ray Goossens) to zombie horror *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, George A. Romero) and space opera *Dune* (1984, David

¹⁰⁸ Kevin M. Flanagan, "'Civilization...Ancient and Wicked': Historicizing the Ideological Field of 1980s Sword and Sorcery Films," in *Of Muscles and Men: Essays on the Sword and Sandal Film*, ed. Michael Cornelius (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 90.

¹⁰⁹ Tamara L. Falicov, "U.S.-Argentine Co-productions, 1982-1990: Roger Corman, Aries Productions, 'Schlockbuster' Movies, and the International Market," *Film and History* 34, no. 1 (2004): 31-8.

Lynch), along with the James Bond spy series and the New Hollywood 1970s crime and court dramas. This labeling reflects the continuing Soviet routine to classify hit films and garish spectacles as boevik, transferred to video distribution as a handy marketing hook and manifestation of the persistent instability and breadth of the popular and the spectacular in the postsocialist context. In the meantime, it is not difficult to notice among Mikhalev-translated films the presence of the emerging ‘pure’ boevik as an action-packed extravaganza with kung fu and karate fighters speaking in the graceful voice-over of the translator and on par with knights, princesses, spies, femme fatales, detectives and other numerous inhabitants of Mikhalev’s video.

Among these translations are such boevik hits that dominated the global and local video action screens as the US-Hong Kong co-production *Enter the Dragon* (1973, Robert Clouse), Bruce Lee’s last film, and three films starring Norris, such as *Good Guys Wear Black* (1978, Ted Post) and Steve Carver-directed *An Eye for an Eye* (1981) and *Lone Wolf McQuade* (1983). Symbols of the emerging Soviet video market, these films appear among the early 1980s translations made by Mikhalev, whose voice was not associated with particular aesthetic quality and generic styles at that moment and merely circulated across the bulk of available videotapes. At the beginning of his path as a video translator, Mikhalev worked for the distributor supplying videotapes coded in NTSC standard¹¹⁰—the encoding television system of such principal producers of martial arts genre as, for example, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the US. Thus, rather than conscious aesthetic choices commonly ascribed to Mikhalev-translated media, the material conditions of video circulation shaped the emergence of the link between the translator’s voice-over and martial arts cinema.

¹¹⁰ Pavlov, “Videodrom.”

Except for the Hong Kong films starring Bruce Lee, which we will return to later, Mikhalev never publicly commented on martial arts cinema, and, given his unusually exhausted and disinterested voice-overs sometimes accompanying these productions, it is safe to suggest that many of these translations are a product of the conveyor-like operation of video distribution in the region. Nevertheless, contrary to the strong-gunmen action blockbusters, Mikhalev did not distance himself from martial arts films. And in the early 1990s, when his reputation as the translator working on localization of high-quality cinema was firm, he lent his voice to the B-grade martial arts movies starring Seagal, seemingly the least anticipated action hero for the “soft and most cultured voice” of the (post-)Soviet video. No matter how accidental or intentional the inclusion of martial arts films as the only ‘pure’ boevik in Mikhalev’s niche is, it points to the complex dynamics characterizing the aesthetic sensibilities and production of value around both films and mythologized translations in (post-)Soviet video cultures, where attachment to certain video voices automatically dignified media they accompanied and vice versa.

Examples of Mikhalev’s martial arts translations also include Taiwanese *Tian Long Di Hu* (1974, Yu Kuan-Jen) arrived as an English dub *The Bamboo Brotherhood* accompanied by Dutch subtitles, the US-Filipino co-production *Firecracker* (1981, Cirio H. Santiago), and the samurai and ninja films either co-produced by the US and Japan, such as *The Challenge* (1982, John Frankenheimer), or made in the US with the involvement of diasporic Japanese and Chinese actors, such as the Cannon Films’ 1980s *Ninja* Trilogy starring Sho Kosugi. Martial-arts-oriented films circulating in Mikhalev’s voice-over included high-profile international releases like the French-Italian-Spanish *Red Sun* (1971) successfully distributed in Europe and

Japan despite critics' dismissal.¹¹¹ Directed by the key contributor to the James Bond film series, Terence Young, *Red Sun* represents a combination of a spaghetti western and chambara, samurai martial arts genre, and co-stars American action hero Charles Bronson, Akira Kurosawa's favorite sword-wielding warrior Toshirō Mifune (also played in Frankenheimer's *The Challenge*), and malleable Alen Delon as a villain bandit. Nevertheless, the translator's martial arts output relies on the video currents that bypass such high-value production/distribution networks and cosmopolitan icons—the currents originating from the 'Free World' Asian Pacific coast. Albeit often mediated via the US cinematic imaginaries and economies, which reflected the effects of the postcolonial and Cold War realities in the region, the 'Free World' East/South East Asia was a token of martial arts cinema and vice versa for an average (post-)Soviet video viewer. This association was so strong that video distributors could mark any film from the region as a martial arts film, and even Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994) circulated in the mid-1990s with the label "boevik-karate" on the video box covers.¹¹²

The region, "a Westernized version of Cold War Asia"¹¹³ dominated by Japanese and Hong Kong film industries and by the US exerting a crucial influence on the local socio-economic and everyday lives, remained the largely unknown cultural world for the Soviets. Japan, as a state increasingly independent from the US since the 1950s, represented an exception, and Japanese cinema—from leftist social realist films by Tadashi Imai to auteurs such as Yasujirō Ozu and animation—had a selective but conspicuous presence in the Soviet Union. It was Japan that the first martial arts film came from to the Soviet theatrical screens. Japanese

¹¹¹ Lawrence Ellsworth, *Cinema of Swords: A Popular Guide to Movies about Knights, Pirates, Barbarians, and Vikings (and Samurai and Musketeers and Gladiators and Outlaw Heroes)* (Lanham, MD: the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2023), 214.

¹¹² Sergei Kuznetsov, "Epokha kul'tovogo kino v Moskve." *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 10 (1998): 90.

¹¹³ Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, "The Desire for a Poly-Asian Continental Film Movement," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*, eds. Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, Gina Marchetti, and See Kam Tan (New York: Palgrave, 2018), 24.

Onna hissatsuken (Sister Street Fighter, 1974, Kazuhiko Yamaguchi) was shown as *Lady Karate* at the 1975 Moscow International Film Festival along with the Soviet-Japanese co-production *Dersu Uzala* (1975, Akira Kurosawa) and police crime drama *Suna no utsuwa* (Castle of Sand, 1974, Yoshitarō Nomura). Before the screenings of *Lady Karate*, Soviet viewers had been familiar with screen martial arts primarily via such Japanese drama about jiu-jitsu and judo mastery as *Sugata Sanshirō* (Judo Saga, 1965, Seiichirō Uchikawa) that was distributed across the Soviet cinemas since 1966.¹¹⁴ A highly successful film about a young village man learning the art of judo, *Sugata Sanshirō* is a film that, contrary to martial arts movies, does not foreground the body spectacle but focuses on the spiritual journey of a martial artist. Nevertheless, the film, along with *The Sandpit Generals* (1971, Hall Bartlett), the US adaptation of Brazilian Jorge Amado's eponymous novel about the gang of homeless youth and film showcasing the elements of Afro-Brazilian capoeira, triggered mass fascination with martial arts, especially among teenage boys, and the emergence of the army of imitators in the 1970s Soviet Union. Meanwhile, for instance, in Ukraine, this was met with the anxiety of the local militia that, as Sergei Zhuk shows, blamed the rise of crime and violence on these two films leading to "karate mania" synonymous with "hooliganism," which was typical of militia and press across the country till the 1990s.¹¹⁵

The early 1970s film fandoms and formation of Soviet improvised martial arts schools and communities, whose members note they used the martial arts to "give some spiritual essence" to their lives,¹¹⁶ created a fertile ground for the success of *Lady Karate*. Starring

¹¹⁴ "Filmografiia," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1966): 137; "Otovsiudu," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 4 (1967): 102.

¹¹⁵ Sergei I. Zhuk, "Détente and Western Cultural Products in Soviet Ukraine during the 1970s," in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. William Jay Risch (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 137, 150.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Terry Smith, "Soviet Karate's Fight For Survival," *Black Belt* 28, no. 9 (1990): 43.

Etsuko Shihomi, it was the first film from the trilogy centered on the adventures and battles of angelic but indestructible female martial artist Lǐ Hóng-Lóng. And the Soviet viewers were ready to exchange three and more movie tickets for the opportunity to see the film that rapidly became a sensation.¹¹⁷ *Lady Karate* was a starting point of the Soviet martial arts boevik culture that emerged around a female action hero, which also contributed to the occasional tendency to frame martial arts film audiences as feminine, in addition to such interrelated factors as the symbolic de-masculinization of Soviet and non-Western popular cultures and assumptions of ‘bad’ tastes associated with martial arts cinema as women’s



Figure 4.3. “Genius of Karate,” *Eralash*. Screen grabs.

tastes as discussed above. In popular culture, the ‘femininity’ of a karate artist was replayed in one of the 1980 episodes of the children’s sketch TV show *Eralash* (Figure 4.3). In the episode “Genius of karate,” after the diligent do-it-yourself karate training, a boy trying to impress the

¹¹⁷ Vladimir Golubev, “Zapiski kinomana,” *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, no. 64, 2003.

anticipating kids and break a brick with his bare hand ends in a fiasco. Meanwhile, a girl, first modestly standing on the side with her dolls, shrugs her shoulders and imperturbably breaks the brick to the shock of the unfortunate karateka, who is now the one with the dolls on the side. *Eralash* is one of the most emblematic Soviet children's programs that still lasts on Russian television and represents the genuine barometer of local childhood politics, albeit not uncontroversial, and cultural and everyday processes since its emergence in 1974. The inclusion of the episode into the show in 1980 signaled that karate had already become a mass and recognizable phenomenon even among the youngest Soviets by that time. The 1980 release and unprecedented success of *Piraty XX veka* (Pirates of the 20th Century, Boris Durov) as the most viewed film in the history of Soviet movie-going, and the first Soviet boevik that, in turn, significantly borrowed from the aesthetics of martial arts cinema and was discussed by Soviet critics along with *Lady Karate*,¹¹⁸ confirmed the local triumph of the cinematic genre and combat arts as such.

Ironically, already in 1981, after the issue of state decrees prohibiting 'illegal' forms of karate training and not specifying the criteria of this 'illegality,' karate proved to be virtually out of the law. Some of the reasons for these measures are the crisis of the Soviet-Japanese diplomatic relationship in the context of the erupted Soviet-Afghan war in 1979 and the suspicion of the local institutions about the highly organized and disciplined karate communities.¹¹⁹ The growing anxiety about the popularity of karate in everyday life was accompanied by a critique of karate and ninja films seen as "violence in exotic package,"¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Vl. Ishimov, "Posle uspekha," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 7 (1981): 74.

¹¹⁹ Stanislav Panin, "Astral Karate as a Phenomenon of Late-Soviet Esoteric Underground," *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 411. Other reasons commonly discussed in the press are the rise of criminal activity with karate fighters at the centre, drastic decline of other (Olympic sports) martial arts in popularity, etc.

¹²⁰ A. Budennyi, "Chto ostalos' on nindzia," *Sovetskaiia kul'tura*, Sept. 17, 1985.

including those Mikhalev translated for video distribution. Even academic journals such as *Issues of the Far East* commented on this Japanese “gift” as a cheap stultifying entertainment in the late 1970s, and yet, after the removal of the karate ban in 1989, the same journal just like many popular magazines published articles on karate training and cultures and martial arts more broadly.¹²¹ In 1989, foreign martial arts cinema officially returned, and the North Korean Hong Kil-dong, mentioned in the previous chapter, became one of the most successful and viewed films that year.

The beginning of the Soviet martial arts film craze with *Lady Karate* is distinct as the film represented one of the Japanese adaptations of Hong Kong kung fu genre and Lee’s *Enter the Dragon* in particular.¹²² While Hong Kong martial arts cinema popularized via Lee’s films after his death in 1973 conquered the Japanese and other markets around the globe, it crossed the border of the Soviet Union via the female Japanese reincarnation of the Hong Kong ‘Dragon.’ A sphere of the US influence, Hong Kong and particularly Taiwan as the fortress of anti-communism in Asia remained one of the most forbidden Cold War territories for the Soviet Union. Their cinemas and cultural landscapes were inaccessible and rarely publicly discussed till the mid-1970s. The existent discussions, meanwhile, frequently portrayed them as sites of political, moral, and sexual deviation, on the one hand, and conveyors of cultural surrogate imitating the US productions, on the other. The mid-1970s Soviet press portrayed Hong Kong kung fu films—films of “inconceivable cruelty and perverted violence transcending human understanding”—as a homogenous Shaw Brothers enterprise and an ugly product of recycling

¹²¹ Iu. V. Bugaev, “Shkola karate,” *Problemy Dal’nego Vostoka*, no. 1 (1991): 211–3. See also Aleksei Maslov, “Iz plena legend,” *Tekhnika–molodezhi*, no. 11 (1991): 46; “Chelovek v chernom—Professor de Kubik rasskazyvaet o voynakh-prizrakakh–nindzia,” *Iunyi tekhnika*, no. 6 (1990): 10–2.

¹²² Kinnia Yau Shuk-ting, “Interactions Between Japanese and Hong Kong Action Cinemas,” in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, eds. Meaghan Morris, et. al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 45.

the low genres and plots from American mass culture such as, for instance, the porn film *Deep Throat* (1972, Gerard Damiano).¹²³ If Hong Kong epitomized corrupt capitalist expansion and moral decay, Taiwan (sometimes along with the PRC in the context of the post-1961 Sino-Soviet split) was also seen as a source of appalling distortion of the socialist values and cultural legacy, including, for example, the memory of Chinese left cinema of the 1930s and 1940s.¹²⁴ In the late 1980s, the film critics started gradually introduce the Soviets to such phenomena as the Taiwan New Cinema complemented for “lyricism” and “high visual culture and technical level.”¹²⁵ Yet, the rhetoric that foregrounded popular culture—“the records of Hong Kong rock bands and Taiwanese videotapes about kung-fu masters”—as factor of “the crisis of spirit” in East Asia along with crime and prostitution still existed.¹²⁶

Another player on the martial arts film market, the Philippines, enjoyed a better representation since the Soviet-Filipino relations recovered in the early 1970s, followed by a series of reciprocal art exhibitions, exchanges in children’s literature, and particularly active tours of music performers with musicians from Central Asia as principal Soviet agents. The names of Filipino chess grandmasters Rosendo Balinas Jr. and Eugene Torre were well known and respected. And in the cinematic context, the Philippines was associated with Augusto Buenaventura’s films—particularly, crime action *Kill The Pushers* (1972) and *Diligin mo ng hamog ang uhaw na lupa* (1975) praised by Soviet reviewers of the First Metro Manila Film Festival as an outstanding film on the Filipino land struggle, a film, in critics’ opinion, demonstrating the growing independence of the local cinema from the US dominance.¹²⁷

¹²³ R. Sobolev, “Fi’mi ‘kun-fu’. Posledniia sensatsiia,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 7 (1976): 144–52.

¹²⁴ S. Toroptsev, “Nisprovergateli kinematografii kitaiskogo naroda,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 8 (1974): 146–55.

¹²⁵ L. Zakrzhevskaiia, “Avanti, Pezaro!” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1989): 128–31.

¹²⁶ Iurii Tavrovskii, “Kitai: Dukhovnye korni krizisa,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, July 5, 1989.

¹²⁷ V. Ozerov, “Napoi zhazhdushcuiu zemliu,” *Pravda*, Feb. 15, 1976.

Nevertheless, the Filipino martial arts films were neither an object of public debates nor part of broad theatrical distribution in the country. The Soviet viewers encountered these films, simultaneously the first Filipino films, via Mikhalev's translations of movies directed by Cirio H. Santiago, who adopted Roger Corman's model of low-budget B-entertainment productions. In the early 1990s, Santiago's films, such as military and martial arts action *Fast Gun* (1988), appeared on the pages of the 'high-brow' Russian film journal *Iskusstvo kino* along with the emblem of Soviet VHS era *Emmanuelle*.¹²⁸

Arrived via informal video networks in the 1980s, martial arts films, usually of low production value, became the ground for the first mass Soviet encounters with the East and Southeast Asian screenscapes. Bearing the traces of the multilayered colonial experiences, Cold War politics, and intraregional connections and tensions, these screenscapes represented the 'transworld' boevik spectacles of turbulent deterritorialization and hybridity, evoking the 'bad' rootless capitalist cosmopolitanism as opposed to 'good' socialist internationalism if seen from the official Soviet side, yet extremely resonant with the 1980s Soviet realities. Such Mikhalev-translated films as *The Bamboo Brotherhood*, starring Taiwanese 'Bruce Lee,' Yao Tien-lung, provided a panorama of Bruceploitation doppelgängers, where the division between the originals and the copies was obscure, which resulted in the never-ending arguments among the Soviet viewers about how many, for example, ten or eighty, films with Lee they saw.¹²⁹ The "neo-colonial film text," Santiago's *Firecracker*, centered on a highly eroticized US female karate instructor fighting the American-Filipino crime network on the streets of Olongapo, pointed at the screen world that suggests the "fantasy that affirms white US power but simultaneously provides a fantasy which subverts it" and establishes the destabilizing "dual position of the

¹²⁸ "Fil'mografiia," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 12 (1993): 169.

¹²⁹ V. Lipatov, "Introduction," *Rovesnik*, no. 6 (1989): 27.

spectator as colonizer/colonized.”¹³⁰ And the crossovers like *The Challenge*, featuring an American boxer in the Japanese samurai world, or American ninja film productions are rooted in the pervasive sensibility of disjunctive temporalities and displacement characteristic of both the imaginary ‘US’ and ‘Japan’ this cinema constructed and circulated, which broadly manifests in the American martial arts films, including those starring Norris and Seagal and popular in the 1980s and 1990s across the (post-)Soviet region. Blend with the persistent revenge motif and eroticism, these films’ geocultural, socio-political, and aesthetic ambiguity culminates into the eclectic mishmash of corporeal martial arts choreographies from Chinese kung-fu to Japanese karate and swordplay. These films both shaped and matched the vertigo processes of cultural and socio-political disintegration and deregulation intensifying in the Soviet world in the 1980s and exploding in the 1990s. Paradoxically, once one of the most unknown and publicly rejected sites of global culture and filmmaking proved to be one of the most intimately connected with the legacies and experiences of the crash of Soviet modernity.

With the arrival of video, the (post-)Soviet culture of martial arts films was significantly shaped by US-inflected cinemas and channels of distribution, which is partially due to the Cold War erosion of Soviet connections with East and East South Asia. For instance, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Hong Kong action cinema, widely distributed across the world, was still sporadic in the (ex-)Soviet region. *Enter the Dragon* and such successful hits as *Project A* (1983) starring and directed by Jackie Chun remained Mikhalev’s most famous translations. Hong Kong films experienced genuine visibility on the post-Soviet home screens only after the mid-1990s, following the US “reissue ‘boom’.”¹³¹ In the context of fierce competition and transitioning

¹³⁰ Gina Marchetti, “*Firecracker*: Contest and Contradiction,” *Jump Cut*, no. 32 (1987): 44–6, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC32folder/firecracker.html>.

¹³¹ Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 67.

from pirate to ‘civilized’ economies, the post-Soviet video distributors were actively acquiring East Asian, usually pre-translated into English, action films that were valuable entertainment among the local viewers and simultaneously low-cost commodity on the legal transnational video market.¹³² Thus, videotapes with Hong Kong action cinema, including the classical 1970s Lo Wei productions, flooded the local markets much later than in other global contexts. Slowly emerging in the 1980s, vocal differentiation became visible in the 1990s video circulation, as distribution companies started specializing in genres and geographies and hiring translators whose voices would mark their offerings. Grouped under the shared sonic regime, martial arts films were widely available in translations of a few male translators, whose voices became one of the most indispensable features of media originating from East and South East Asia in the second half of the 1990s.

‘Apparition’ of Bruce Lee

Until the mid-1990s, epitomized by Bruce Lee, the martial arts boevik star pantheon was limited but deeply integrated into the (post-)Soviet cultural imaginary, perhaps exceeding the influence of the A-stars of action cinema dominating the press rather than the local cultural participation and production. Contrary to the US action heroes, including martial arts actors like Norris, who were first uncompromisingly depicted by the official Soviet press as vehicles of “the far-right ideological agenda of imperialist propaganda,”¹³³ the name of the global icon of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, Lee, rarely caused disapproval. While Hong Kong kung fu films attracted political and ethical criticism, Lee, mistakenly associated with the Shaw Brothers Studio and compared to James Dean (just like Paré), emerged in the same criticism as a tragic victim of

¹³² Sergei Anashkin, “Parad dikovin,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 3 (1999): 122–3.

¹³³ Nikolai Savitskii, “Kontur triady,” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 8 (1986): 113.

capitalist exploitation and racism, and his death was blamed on the greedy producers striving to capitalize on Lee's legacy. By the late 1980s, the attempts of the Azerbaijani militia to confiscate the "Brusli Studio Japan" films from local video parlors for "narrating the horror" were publicly ridiculed as ignorant,¹³⁴ and the advice on how to maintain inner strength and resilience à la Bruce Lee appeared on the pages of all-state newspapers.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, the actor's figure was barely present in the official discourses, as probably his 'Asianness' uncomfortably undermined the late Soviet attack on boevik screens as a reactionary Western phenomenon in the context of the US action film video boom. This silence sharply contrasted with Lee's mass popularity culminating in the rise of the local star of Viktor Tsoi, a cult Soviet rock musician and actor of Russian-Korean origin. While Tsoi was not another double among imitators emerging across the world after Lee's death, his stage and film performances, particularly in Soviet Kazakh film hit *Igla* (The Needle, 1988, Rashid Nugmanov), were indisputably influenced by Lee and translated into Lee's stardom model. With Tsoi as a traveling action romantic hero at the centre, *The Needle*, cutting across multi-ethnic Soviet imaginaries and inter-Asian identifications, represented a strikingly multi-generic phenomenon: "simultaneously potentially tragic and light-hearted" film that begged the question "where could it have come from?"¹³⁶ Refracted through the late Soviet popular culture and Tsoi's star persona, Lee emerges here one more time as "a 'mosaic,' everywhere and nowhere, a mobile transnational signifier"—the condition encapsulated by *Enter the Dragon* initially

¹³⁴ Valerii Kichin, "'Povestvuiushchie uzhas'?" *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, March 18, 1989.

¹³⁵ Il'ia Gul'ev, "Esli vy ne Brius Li," *Izvestiia*, April 20, 1991.

¹³⁶ Angelina Karpovich, "(In)Action Film: Genre and Identity in Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle*," in *Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches*, eds. Angelina Karpovich, Felicia Chan, and Xin Zhang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 168.

condemned as “inauthentic, neither one thing nor the other—too cheap and tacky for Hollywood, too cynical and prepackaged for Hong Kong.”¹³⁷

In 1992, after translating *Enter the Dragon*, only Lee’s film Mikhalev lent his voice to, the translator, echoing this sensation of inauthenticity, noted about the actor the following: “an interesting cine-kitsch made with a serious face. In the reality, there is a little of seriousness. Lee is always about some pseudo-romanticism and some Macho complex.”¹³⁸ While the translator demonstrated the familiarity of a late Soviet intellectual with the idea of kitsch sensibilities frequently ascribed to martial arts spectacles as naïve and unnatural in their bodily and melodramatic expression in the Western settings, neither the translator nor the (ex-)Soviet viewers seemed to express any camp attitudes that accompany the reception of this kung fu kitsch in the Western cult and mass film reception. The late Soviet popular magazines’ narratives, targeting fans, occasionally acknowledged the ‘badness’ of Lee’s acting and his films but simultaneously, contrary to the assumptions about kitsch artificiality, valorized it as an authentic manifestation of human nature. As a local critic wrote, “He was not a great actor and great fighter. He was himself. He was sincere. And, therefore, his posthumous glory is not inferior to his lifetime glory.”¹³⁹

As already glimpsed in this conclusion, the reception of Lee itself could turn out to be ‘kitschy’: sentimental and affectionate. Even the ‘professional’ Soviet film criticism, as mentioned before, turned Lee into a martyr and his life and death into a tragedy, and this sentimentality expressed in a highly poetic inverse idiom persisted across the popular magazines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In these popular narratives sacralizing Lee, he was

¹³⁷ Leon Hunt, “Han’s Island Revisited: *Enter the Dragon* as Transnational Cult Film,” in *The Cult Film Reader*, eds. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 307, 302.

¹³⁸ Mikhalev, “Kazhetsia, ia ochen’ znamenit.”

¹³⁹ A. Grigor’ev, “Velikolepnyi Brius,” *Novosti video*, no. 5 (1990): 1.

simultaneously depicted as follows: “Not tall in height, modest in appearance, always smiling, a cheerful boy with the manners of a villager—he was ‘svoi,’ ‘a guy from the crowd.’ [...] miracles were performed by a person who looked like us.”¹⁴⁰ Here, the word *svoi* [ours] reveals a strikingly intimate relationship with the figure of Lee, as *svoi*, in the late Soviet context, referred to “a kind of sociality that differed from those represented in authoritative discourse as the ‘Soviet people,’ ‘Soviet toilers,’ and so forth.”¹⁴¹ *Svoi* named a collectivity that transcended the state official norms and protocols of the self and social being and, at the same time, did not align with dissidents and anti-Soviets still fixated and linked to the state apparatus. This collectivity was imagined as a co-existence of authentic people living by truth rather than by artificially constructed models under socialism that disenfranchised and erased them, and Lee was symbolically included in this circle not only as a member but an empowering hero.

The Western camp reception of Hong Kong kung fu cinema, including Lee’s films, as comical and celebrated ‘trash,’ was deeply rooted in the English-language dubbing. The dominant way to internationally circulate Hong Kong films, this practice, both reinforced the ‘badness’ of these movies and was “part of the charm” of martial arts action¹⁴². A “sonorous cocoon,” dubbing became a distribution strategy allowing to overcome the alienness of kung fu movies for Western audiences and secure unhindered attention on the screen action, and yet, performed quickly and poorly, destructed the accepted audiovisual contract of lip synchronization, which the overseas viewers embraced as “comedian campiness.”¹⁴³ The poor dubbing resulted from low-quality equipment and cost minimization economies and could

¹⁴⁰ Andre Kokarev, “Zhizn’ posle smerti,” *Sobesednik*, no. 47 (1988): 15.

¹⁴¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything*, 103.

¹⁴² Man-Fung Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 177.

¹⁴³ Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, “Dubbese Fu: The Kung Fu Wave and The Aesthetics of Imperfect Lip Synchronization,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 12, no. 3 (2018): 228, 230.

become a consequence of the producers' intentions, as evident from the case of *Enter the Dragon*. As Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park tells, in deliberate attempting to embarrass Lee, the film's director and screenwriter forced the actor to recite the English words that were difficult to pronounce for a Chinese speaker, which became part of the film and source of Lee's discouragement.¹⁴⁴ It was this English-dubbed version of *Enter the Dragon* that Mikhalev's voice-over accompanied for distribution on the Soviet video market.

While dubbing itself, historically pitted against subtitling, a device of 'art' film circulation, was a marker of low-value media in the Anglophone context, this association never existed in the Soviet context, where dubbing constituted a norm. Moreover, Soviet dubbing was seen as a site of creative artistry even though asynchrony was ubiquitous and poor equipment distorted the voices of dubbing actors, who often needed to speak quietly to avoid breaking the microphones or to yell to guarantee vocal clarity. The English-language dub soundtrack heard through video voice-over, thus, did not point to the 'low' cultural consumption, and the 'accented' Lee's English-language lines could be unlikely registered by the viewers. Instead, the monovocal simultaneous voice-over associated, as discussed above, with formal settings of international communication, on the one hand, and spontaneity, liveness, and unscriptedness, on the other, ascribed the solemnity and authenticity to the screen action, which evokes the fan narratives around Lee. The awe-inspiring membrane of voice-over was an integral part of the spectacular, particularly in the realm of video: a screen surface decoration that, as symptomatic of *boevik* in the Soviet sense, diverts attention from the content and constitutes a valuable aspect of spectatorial pleasure. In the meantime, being linguistic and carrying within it the traces of an auteur, unique and recognizable in his delivery, video voice-over endowed the *boevik* spectacle

¹⁴⁴ Magnan-Park, "Dubbesse Fu," 232.

with the qualities of a literary text or, rather, oral storytelling and recuperated the depth and content, neutralizing the surface/depth binary as such. Contrary to a literary author, “the individual in his isolation,” a video translator, speaking through a multitude of audible screen bodies, is a storyteller who, in Walter Benjamin’s famous reflection, “takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others.”¹⁴⁵ If, for Benjamin, with the rise of modern literary, information, and screen production, the art of storytelling is in decay, and “the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears,”¹⁴⁶ a Soviet video translator contributes to the rehabilitation of listening as a register of cultural experience and excitement. In the (post-)Soviet settings, the video viewers re-emerge as video listeners, the tendency evident in the role dubbing plays in the reception of Hong Kong cinema in the Anglophone context, in which listening becomes a source of comical relief. For the (post-)Soviet video listeners, voice-over, in turn, is rather a source of wonder and, at the same time, storytelling-incited relaxation and boredom that go hand in hand with the monotony of monovocal repetitive and stuttering translation, increasingly ubiquitous and mundane. Characteristic of the (post-)Soviet video culture as such, auteur voice-over underpins and recalibrates the boevik spectacle anew beyond the visual sensibilities and screen diegesis, foregrounding the extra-cinematic layer of simultaneous voice-over, and continues to reshape it depending on which auteur/storyteller speaks and how.

While the dubbing of *Enter the Dragon* is ‘defective,’ Mikhalev’s voice-over may seem ‘too perfect’ as it operates in a way that occasionally borders on poetic declamation, which parallels the Soviet Lee-centered fan narratives. The film opens with the translator’s ceremonial

¹⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 146.

¹⁴⁶ Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 149.

announcement of the title as “iavlenie drakona,” where iavlenie, translation of “enter,” refers to ‘apparition’ and elicits numerous religious associations such as the ‘apparition of Christ’ in the first place. Throughout the film, the translation remains figurative and deploys colorful literary expressions mixed with vernacular speech, which does not cement the action within the theatricality and high oral traditions. The translator’s voice slightly changes intonations from character to character and appends pronounced calamity, quietness, and tenderness to Lee’s hero. In following the Soviet cultural imperatives suggesting that translation must aesthetically elevate the original, the translator ‘beautifies’ the film, which echoes the 1990s criticism of a local critic condemning the strive for beauty as a green light to circulating cinematic debris like Indian cinema and B-grade action films, albeit here we see another but related form the desire for beauty can take.

This ‘good’ translation, however, simultaneously undoes itself, revealing artificiality and defeat of its intensions and authenticity of the live unscriptedness and imperfectness. Typically of (post-)Soviet video, the translator’s voice clumsily stumbles during the dramatic monologues, tries to catch up with uttered lines when heroes are already in a dramatic fight, and brings profound bodily and gender ambivalence among characters all speaking in the same voice. As such, the periodically grandiloquent translation style may seem incongruous with the body short-spoken genre of martial arts cinema, highlighting, in fact, the translator’s excessive presence and clumsy helplessness of being out of place. *Enter the Dragon* sets the stage for the translator’s authoritative rise and yet failure. Merging with the fighters’ bodies, including the body of Lee, the translator’s voice forcefully masters a martial warrior. And yet, mediated via the Soviet aesthetic rituals of translation, which Mikhalev, the translator of “impeccable taste,”¹⁴⁷ reenacts

¹⁴⁷ Ekaterina Novikova, “Fenomen Alekseia Mikhaleva,” last modified December 10, 2020, <https://syg.ma/@iekatierina-novikova-1/fienomien-alieksieia-mikhaliiova-mnogphotochiie>.

in the context of fast and cheap video circulation, this voice becomes distorted and clumsy and turns out to be soft, harmless, and cute but, again, received as a manifestation of authenticity in the local context.

The refined and genteel Mikhalev's voice-overs, voice-overs linked to cartoons, musicals, and comedies, became the ultimate cute commodities of the (post-)Soviet video market, sharply displaying their cuteness, by contrast, in the realm of *boevik*—the virile and masculine realm of the action spectacularity. In singling out the cute, the notion Soviet cultural vocabulary lacks, as an indispensable sensibility of modern mass culture, Sianne Ngai defines it as “an aesthetic encounter with an exaggerated difference in power,” an encounter with the deformed.¹⁴⁸ Bearing the traces of the Soviet ‘high’ culture and its values gradually displaced during the 1980s, Mikhalev's translations reflect the discrepancy and deformation of these cultural standards in the process of their integration into the emerging postsocialist popular culture, which Magomaev, as mentioned above, referred to by noting that the translator's voice was already beyond the social habit. These translations could not match the A-class American blockbusters, the symbols of new postsocialist modernity, realigning only with the de-masculinized performances of the ‘cutified’ big men who were equally subjected to some ‘distortion’ like the pregnant Schwarzenegger in *Junior*. And they could find the room in martial arts cinema that was barely seen but fantasized about since the 1970s—the cinema that seemed to be irrelevant and ridiculous in the dominant discourses of the 1990s as a remnant of the Soviet popular tastes and practices but poeticized and reenacted by mass population disempowered by both the socialist state and the process of postsocialist liberalization and finding ground in these films for identification and self-affirmation. Martial arts heroes Mikhalev translated were the

¹⁴⁸ Novikova, “Fenomen Alekseia Mikhaleva.”

fluid bodies ‘deformed’ within the physicality of martial arts combat and the geoculturally hybrid Orientalized screenscapes they inhabited. Opening the pleiad of the popular video martial artists, Lee’s heroes epitomized the transcultural displacement and gender ambivalence of “a working-class model of manhood,”¹⁴⁹ which resonated not only with the disenfranchised Soviet masculinities. Globally popular, martial arts films and cultures “take on a utopian tone as a possible techne for social liberation” across the world among racial minorities and feminists and became “the popular manifestation of the Third World political alliances” more broadly.¹⁵⁰

In the post-Soviet context of particularly aggressive postsocialist liberalization and lack of strong ties with the Asian Pacific screen industries, though, martial arts video screens were the screens of cross-border diffusions among screen representations, styles, and capital with the US as a ubiquitous agent of such amalgamations. After 1991, feeding into Lee’s further hybridization, the Russophone press, compensating for the lack of knowledge about the Hong Kong film industry, will persistently portray Lee through translations of Western popular magazine articles and in connection with his “close friend” Norris,¹⁵¹ a US screen fighter trained in martial arts in Korea and appearing in Lee’s Hong Kong films. Norris himself, another body for Mikhalev in the action genre, represented one of the most hybrid and indistinct video imports. In the US context, Norris’s “second-rate” stardom, “never achieving widespread fame beyond the home video market,”¹⁵² is typically framed as situated at the intersection of diverse American masculinities. An actor of mixed Cherokee descent, playing an all-American hero with an appeal to conservative white male audiences, Norris was simultaneously seen as an amalgam

¹⁴⁹ Jachinson W. Chan, “Bruce Lee’s Fictional Models of Masculinity,” *Men and Masculinities*, no. 2 (2000): 380.

¹⁵⁰ Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 199. See also May Joseph, “Kung Fu and Frugality,” in *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 49–68.

¹⁵¹ “Put’ drakona,” *Rovesnik*, no. 6 (1989), 27–9.

¹⁵² David West, *Chasing Dragons: An Introduction to the Martial Arts Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 217.

of the on-screen US male iconographies: “the styles of Clint Eastwood and Steve McQueen, martial arts, and the embodiment of twentieth-century masculinity within the conventional persona of John Wayne.”¹⁵³

The Soviet mass audiences, however, were not fully aware of these off-screen and on-screen contexts, given the traditionally fragmentary and censored encounters with the US cinema and, more generally, reception of video as a zone of media having little to do with their previous cinematic and cultural experiences. And yet, although it was possible to register the broader generic mix of Norris’s films combining oriental martial arts with American military and cop action, it was Norris’s kung fu and karate performances that Soviet recognition and identification occurred through. The local press valorized Norris through his ties with Lee, and, by contrast with the earlier official Soviet discourses, the late 1980s popular narratives, occasionally appearing in children’s magazines, depicted Norris as, first and foremost, a martial arts sportsman and the style of his martial arts films as “distinguished by some simplicity, lack of mysticism, and humanness.”¹⁵⁴

Symptomatically, while *Enter the Dragon* in Mikhalev’s translation was solemn and sublime in the intention, Norris’s films, such as, for instance, *Lone Wolf McQuade*, are where, in the video viewers’ memories, the translator “took the liberty of making jokes ‘on the verge’ and yet never slipped into outright poshlost’ [vulgarity, bad taste, banality].”¹⁵⁵ Such a description of balancing humor emerging from the translator’s voice-over is evocative of stio, an effect possible to see as characteristic of the (post-)Soviet video voice-overs as such, and distinct from

¹⁵³ Tony Williams, “The Strange Case of Carlos Ray Norris: Reactionary Masculinity and Its Imaginary Discontents,” in *A Companion to the Action Film*, ed. James Kendrick (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 270.

¹⁵⁴ Sergei Skuliabin, “Chak Norris,” *Ekran – detiam*, no. 11 (1990): 10. Also in I. Germanova, “Kumiry, sotvorivshie sebia. Chak Norris,” *Video Digest*, no. 2 (1989): 51–3; “Sekret vnutrennei sily,” *Rovesnik*, no. 11 (1989): 29–31.

¹⁵⁵ Novikova, “Fenomen Alekseia Mikhaleva.”

camp humor we find in the reception of martial arts cinema in the Western context. Camp humor locating value in ‘badness’ and weaponizing it, as Jack Babuscio defines, “results from an identification of a strong incongruity between an object, person, or situation and its context” and is based on detachment from and outward challenge to the suggested conditions.¹⁵⁶ Stioob, meanwhile, is a type of humor that implies, in Aleksei Yurchak’s words, a “degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which this stioob was directed” so that it is impossible to discern whether it is “a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”¹⁵⁷ Mikhalev’s humor intervening in Norris’s films is remembered as risky and yet is in equilibrium with the protocols of ‘good taste’ that must accompany translation and screen experience, revealing subordination to and identification of the translator with the suggested standards and contexts. In general, Mikhalev’s humor is typically described as one that can be parodic but, as typical of stioob based on the affinity with the object, enriching and “makes film to play with new colors and meanings,”¹⁵⁸ erasing the boundary between mockery of and care for the translated text.

Mocked of or cared for, later, martial arts, Japanese aikido in particular, as a post-Soviet popular assemblage point, similarly shaped the local fascination with Steven Seagal, whose screen characters and B-grade star persona represented a locus of “a potpourri of imagined Asian cultures, political and environmental concerns, and an affinity for Buddhism.”¹⁵⁹ Arrived on video, Seagal’s early films *Above the Law* (1988, Andrew Davis), *Marked for Death* (1990, Dwight H. Little), and *Out for Justice* (1991, John Flynn) proved to be among Mikhalev’s

¹⁵⁶ Jack Babuscio, “Camp and Gay Sensibility,” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 26.

¹⁵⁷ Yurchak, *Everything*, 250.

¹⁵⁸ Novikova, “Fenomen.”

¹⁵⁹ Dietmar Meinel, “Cultural Studies and the Un/Popular: How the Ass-Kicking Work of Steven Seagal May Wrist-Break Our Paradigms of Culture,” *Unpopular Culture*, eds. Martin Lüthe and Sascha Pöhlmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 248.

translations. The actor, who, as the Russophone press wrote “does not have Lee’s catlike plasticity, Norris’s charm, or the beauty of Van Damme,”¹⁶⁰ and his bulky, brute, and indestructible characters poorly matched an action hero speaking in Mikhalev’s voice. By the early 1990s, other action movies such as *Top Gun* (1986, Tony Scott) or *Heat* (1986, Dick Richards and Jerry Jameson) appeared on local video market in Mikhalev’s translations. Although these films were expensive Hollywood productions, as opposed to low-budget action Mikhalev translated, their leading stars, Tom Cruise and Burt Reynolds correspondingly, reflected the two major models of action persona the translator’s voice oscillated between—models glimpsed in Lee and Norris. They were hypomasculine and juvenile heroes, on the one hand, and mature, often aging, protagonists replicating the masculinities of the outdated Western or noir film, on the other. Seagal’s seeming hyper-masculinity usually operating in the US law enforcement universe deviated from these action appearances and yet displayed the eccentricities of a culturally displaced character whose attire, spirituality, martial arts mastery, and broken language matched Mikhalev’s boevik domain.

Triggering the orientalist fantasy, all these martial arts action heroes simultaneously provided a context to negotiate the uncertainties of the Soviet project falling apart, increasing Westernization, and formation of cross-regional identities for the audiences across the country, whether it was ethnic minorities of Caucasian Chechnya, where Lee and Norris were religiously copied by teenagers,¹⁶¹ Southern Kalmykia and Siberian Buryatia, where Seagal’s Buddhism and alleged Siberian indigenous ancestry along with such films as *On Deadly Ground* (1994), circulating as a cam rip,¹⁶² put him among the local cultural icons,¹⁶³ or Central Asian,

¹⁶⁰ I. Zvegintseva, “Inkognito v chernom poiase,” *Video Ace Premiere*, no. 22 (1994): 80–1.

¹⁶¹ Said Esambaev and Aleksandr Poliakov, “Ia polzhizni provel na voine...” *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 3 (2016): 252.

¹⁶² Valerii Dubinin, “Kogda original ne luchshe kopii,” *Video Ace Premiere*, no. 22 (1994): 81.

¹⁶³ Tamara Erendzhenova, “Stiven Sigal rodom iz Buriatii?” *Izvestiia Kalmykii*, Nov. 20, 2007.

Transcaucasian, and Slavic republics of the (former) Soviet Union. Martial arts film aesthetics was an integral part of local *boevik* media production as evident from the above examples of such hit films as *Pirates of XX century* or *Needle* starring a Tatar-Uzbek actor and martial artist Talgat Nigmatulin and Tsoi correspondingly, both colloquially called ‘Soviet Bruce Lee.’ Among the most famous (post-)Soviet martial arts *boevik* films, usually low-budget and distributed on television and video, are *Nepobedimyi* (Invincible, 1983, Iurii Boretskii) centered around *kurash*, Central Asian martial style; karate films *Fanat* (Fan, 1989, Vladimir Feoktistov) and *Chelovek v zelenom kimono* (Man in Green Komono, 1991) produced with the involvement of Odesa Film Studio in Ukraine and transnational Soviet cast and television hit series *Russkii tranzit* (Russian Transit, 1994, Viktor Titov); ...*Po prozvishchu zver’* (His Nickname Is Beast, 1990, Aleksandr Muratov) about the Soviet-Afghanistan war participant whose main weapon is a mix of martial arts; and a USSR-North Korean martial arts co-production *Bereg spaseniia* (The Shore of Salvation, 1990) directed by Soviet Buryat filmmaker Ar’ia Dashiev and North Korean director Ryu Ho Son, the film that, in the view of producers, was supposed to offer Soviet boys an alternative to “American supermen.”¹⁶⁴

Obscured in the contemporary US-centered accounts and memories of the (post-)Soviet *boevik* cultures and VHS era, B-grade action and martial arts cinema with the (re-)discovered and (re-)imagined East and South East Asia at the center, thus, was a principal cultural reference and identification point for the (post-)Soviet public. (Post-)Soviet *boevik* offers a provocative challenge to our ideas about what constitutes both grandeur of blockbusters and the dullness and numbness of B-grade (action) screens. Deeply embedded into shabby and do-it-yourself video informalities, which is not unusual for global video cultures, ‘trashy’ action cinema

¹⁶⁴ “Avans dlia supermena,” *Video Ace*, no. 4 (1991): 27.

simultaneously entered the orbit of ‘auteur’ sensibilities and translation performances associated with near-high culture in the (post-)Soviet small-screen context. Later, Russian critics will attribute such aesthetic ‘reversals,’ ubiquitous and persistent under late and post-socialism, to “poor education” and “atrophied culture of visual consumption” among (post-)Soviet “video-boom generation.” It is the fact that this generation was unfamiliar with the conventional aesthetic segmentation characteristic of Western media cultures, such as the age rating system, A- and B-grade films, or cult and art cinema, that became a reason for such assessment of local popular video attachments, values, and practices—all frequently seeing as the burdensome legacy of ‘provincializing’ state socialism. ‘Authorial translation’ in Mikhalev’s voice aimed to beautify and elevate has been an essential part of this legacy. It reflected the imperatives of the Soviet project to engage with the world through re-appropriation and re-creation to make it supposedly better rather than maintain authenticity and fidelity. Operating in the realm of such popular media as *boevik*, this translation re-articulated the conditions of engagement with what could be seen as ‘low’ and worthless. Yet, the ‘auteur’ translator’s refining voice was simultaneously self-dismantling and seemingly aberrant in the vortex of unregulated and vertiginous global video flows and with the cracking socialist order in the background. Echoing the large-scale displacement of (post-)Soviet viewers attempting to find joy and ground themselves through such *boevik* icons as Bruce Lee, Mikhalev’s voice also already appeared out of place in the emerging post-Soviet world. And this is exactly why this voice, as a counterpoint to the disorientation and disconnection, proved among the most cherished memories of the VHS era for the out-of-place audiences: the phenomenon that is whimsically being refracted in today’s screen cultures of the former Soviet region as I will address in conclusion to this dissertation.

Conclusion

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. 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.¹ Yet, it became a massive hit with the viewers across the ex-Soviet region due to its distribution on poor-quality VHS tapes that flooded local street markets, circulated through countless video salons, and aired on official television channels without copyright permission in the 1990s.

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 derailing 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, the company Volga Film, 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 renowned 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 Russian-language simultaneous

¹ “Terminator 2: Judgment Day 3D,” [boxofficemojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasigroup/gr324620805/), accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasigroup/gr324620805/>.

single-voice translation. Sitting in a projector booth, Leonid Volodarskii, another legendary voice of the VHS era, 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 towards the booth, away from the screen.

The legacy of the (post-)Soviet VHS cultures is tangible. Beyond the case of *Terminator 2*, it is particularly evident online, where the viewers continue watching digitized films translated by VHS translators, creating online fan groups around their voices. Also, some video translators still have a presence in contemporary media culture, providing their on-demand voice-overs for the newly arrived movies circulating across the largest and most respectable pirate communities, such as *RuTracker*, which gathers users from across the post-Soviet region. Not merely an object of niche fandom, imperfect monovocal voice-overs are at the heart of the digital screen circulation on the Runet (the Russophone internet). Cheap and quick, they can usually be found in the vast sector of distribution of minority and non-Western media that are in demand among the audiences but not present in official distribution. Here, amateurs, often teenagers and women, translate for free queer media, religious sermons, and particularly visible global soap operas from as diverse places as Mexico and Turkey or India and South Korea, otherwise unavailable for the viewers.

Epitomized but certainly not limited to translation, the (post-)socialist analog video cultures and their remnants can be glimpsed in today's video production and distribution even more immediately. For instance, one of the central media events of the last years on the Runet was the 2019 video series of comedy sketches by actor Anton Lapenko, followed by the production of the web series *Inside Lapenko* (2019–2021) based on these immensely popular videos. Deploying the VHS effect, each sketch centered on the main recognizable protagonists of

the 1980s and 1990s (post-)Soviet cultural mythology and media, all played by one actor: a punk musician, mafia boss, sensationalist TV journalist, and others, with an engineer from Soviet NII (Scientific-Research Institute) as the favorite among quite young audiences. The short monologues of clumsy and poor engineer, humbly showcasing his useless and not working “technological developments,” were among the sketches the viewers admired, laughed about, and commented on the most (Figure C.1). ‘Bad’ and imperfect technologies and futile scientific work of the 1980s Soviet engineer simultaneously depicted through poor analog images proved to be one of the pivotal assemblage points for the audiences.

While many former 1980s and 1990s video distributors and vendors migrated



Figure C.1. ‘Technologies’ by the 1980s Soviet Engineer. Screen grab. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME2sPiKJ26E>. Uploaded by Lapenko, July 2019.

online, there are still places across the ex-Soviet region where one can see them on the streets. During my fieldwork in Saint Petersburg in 2018, I visited Iunona, another legendary 1990s media bazaar that played similar role as Gorbushka in Moscow. An outdoor market, today offering food, old mobile phones, and car equipment, seemed to have no more relations to its former fame. Yet, one can discover a small shabby media kiosk, selling DVDs, CDs, and videotapes, with a vendor staying on the Iunona bazaar since the late 1980s. While I was browsing through the kiosk’s collection, where each box cover had a hand-written label clarifying the genre and ‘value’ of a music album or films on video, visitors, all men, were

entering and, after long conversations about new media releases, leaving, sometimes without buying anything (Figure C.2). “Old clients,” the vendor explained after. Surprised by my (very affordable) VHS purchases, he exclaimed, “Why to waist money! It is all for the elderlies or migrants who have no computers. I can download for you all these movies for free.” The seller was even more surprised after I explained my interest in such an ‘obsolete’ phenomenon as analog video and asked him to tell about his media ‘business’—the enterprise he was so quick to undermine himself by dissuading me



Figure C.2. Iunona Media Kiosk, Saint Petersburg, 2018, photo made by the author.

from buying the tapes. The story of the kiosk and Iunona the vendor told was not dissimilar from the one of Gorbushka, while his explanation for staying on the market stressed such factors as “people” and “hobby.”

I heard very similar explanations from the founder of video salon “Disc” that is still open as a videotheque in the center of Tashkent in Uzbekistan. The videotheque turns to be about communal life organized around the mutual interest in film. Now led by a “curator,” Tatiana Krestinina, the legendary “Disc” has survived through the digital transitions from the arrival of DVD to the Internet and remains an important cultural hub in Tashkent, providing a financial support for the VideoArt.Uz Festival and amateur video makers. Today, the videotheque operates by accepting orders from the visitors and uploading the pirated films from torrents to their flashcards. While its founders and workers acknowledge their involvement in pirate economies, they do not find this activity to be wrong. On the contrary, given the long history of

the videotheque that has participated in organizing the cultural life of Tashkent for more than twenty years, it is a source of pride. Far from being a profitable business, the videotheque helps the viewers navigate both the chaos of digital video circulation and excessive dizzy media flows by giving recommendations and providing a context for films and other screen productions.

In January 2021, the acclaimed Russian documentary filmmaker Vitalii Manskii came to Tashkent to present a series of special documentaries screenings, and local organizers wanted to show him the videotheque, one of the most precious sightseeing in the city for them. Manskii recorded his visit and circulated video online. Pointing at “the different cultural priorities in

Uzbekistan where, after the [post-Soviet] independence, nobody explained those people anything,” he linked the videotheque to a “theft” and “destruction of art.” The objections from Timur Karpov, a son of the founder of “Disc,” that “there



Figure C.3. The still from Vitalii Manskii’s video blog. Manskii (on the left) and Tatiana (on the right) discuss pirating of his film *Under the Sun* (2015) by Tashkent’s videotheque. 2021.

has been a serious curatorial work behind the videotheque for already thirty years” or by “curator” Tatiana who noted “We are looking for diamonds for people” did not produce any effect on Manskii (Figure C.3).

Both Iunona’s vendor and Tashkent’s videotheque stand in contrast with the dominant attitudes characteristic of many former video entrepreneurs from other ex-Soviet republics. Today, often belonging to either political and business or cultural elites, those entrepreneurs, such as Iuliia Timoshenko, a former Prime Minister of Ukraine, who was one of the first video salon organizers in the country in the late 1980s, or Aleksei Bazhin, today a creator of art film

distribution project Inoekino in Russia, rather prefer not to be associated with informal video business of the 1980s and 1990s. “The VHS era was romantic time,” Bazhin, who opened a short-lived video salon in his student’s dormitory and worked in the pirate rental store in the 1990s, said to me, “but now such a pirate activity is shameful and boorish.”²

All these echoes of the VHS era, ranging from the theatrical distribution of *Terminator 2* to the use of voice-overs in digital circulation, amateur video-making, and survival of some kiosks and videotheques, point to the questions I explored throughout the dissertation. What was it about the video cultures of the (former) Soviet Union which still makes it possible to relate to them and ascribe value to their habits some thirty years later, despite anti-piracy rhetorics officially adopted after 1991? 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 lines between the local and global, collective and individual, formal and informal, and quality and ‘trash’ as constitutive of media circulation and consumption?

The common explanation among rare critics who pay attention at the persistent relevance of the VHS(-inspired) voice-overs for contemporary audiences in the ex-Soviet countries is “nostalgic affection.”³ Similarly, the comedy sketches by Lapenko, for instance, were described as “a nostalgic metamodern trip into your, our, and no one else’s past.”⁴ However, the examples above, refracting and reproducing the 1980s and 1990s video experiences, reveal much more complex ways in which analog video and its associated practices are remembered, understood,

² Aleksei Bazhin, in conversation with the author, July 18 2018.

³ Darina Polikarpova, “Odnokii golos perevodchika,” *Seans*, July 4, 2022, <https://seance.ru/articles/voice-over/>.

⁴ Valeriia Karpova, “Vnutri Lapenko: Fenomen novoi komedii,” *Kinoteksty*, February 9, 2020, <https://cinetexts.ru/lapenko>.

and played out today. Possible to be described as what Shannon Lee Dawdy calls “modern ruins,” the mentioned phenomena “signify the failures and impermanency of [digital] capitalism and the necessary poverty it engenders temporally or spatially, in contrast to its promises of ever-expanding flow and possibilities of social uplift.”⁵ Reflective of the disparities, inequalities, and fatigue integral to today’s digital economies and cultures, analog ‘ruins,’ here simultaneously are areas allowing to carve out a space for subjectivities, agency, social intimacies, and aesthetic experiences obscured within the dominant global technocultural and economic regimes.

As this dissertation aimed to demonstrate, videotape plays an outstanding role in the (post-)socialist histories, and vice versa. Seen through the lenses of (post-)Soviet culture, videotape immediately surfaces as constitutive of global competition, segmentation, and asymmetry, as evident from supposedly imperfect machines, mistranslations, erasures, and misinterpretations. Characteristic of many other media histories, the ‘mis-uses’ of video seem to be particularly significant and pronounced under (post-)socialism and illustrative of the 1980s and 1990s clash between diverse spatio-temporal and societal systems with the new rise of liberal globalization. At the same time, it was a videotape that became a playground for developing mechanisms to cope with this clash. These coping mechanisms were diverse and deeply rooted in socialist culture. Amateur engineering allowed to decode and re-code incompatible machines and formats, while failures of the Soviet VCRs could easily turn into advantages, as the story of the handy mechanical ejection mechanism ‘protecting’ his users against the police pointed to. The system of Soviet institutions, from Houses of Culture to youth organizations and state directory bodies like Videofilm, integrated video, an expensive commodity, as a ‘collective’ medium and public form of culture, which was simultaneously an

⁵ Shannon Lee Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity,” *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 6 (2010): 772.

effect of the pre-1980s tele-video history. And finally, voice-overs, having a long tradition, regardless of how imperfect they were, offered not only an opportunity to comprehend and negotiate the newly discovered imagery. These voice-over translations—ubiquitous, performed by the same people, and recognizable by mass audiences—allowed to reassemble the intimacy of social connections and shared experiences shattered by the crisis, reformation, and collapse of state socialism. Videotape was one of the principal means to learn about and adjust to the new reality for the (ex-)Soviets. And today, being more than a relic of the past or source of nostalgic sentiments, the 1980s and 1990s video practices and sensibilities provide models for screen economies and engagements, simultaneously shedding light on how the world we live in today has been forged.

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