A home from home: recursive nationhood, the 2015 STS television serial, Londongrad, and post-soviet stiob

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the mathematical concept of recursion as the repeated application of a single function to an initial element in a succession capable of indefinite extension, the article develops a recursive nationhood framework to capture the ongoing, mutual production of nationhood by the transnational, and nation by nation, in an extendable series of self-renewing repetitions which mirror and transform one another. Arguing that the framework has particular resonance for post-Soviet Russia, it explores one instance of recursive nationhood: the 2015 television serial, Londongrad, broadcast by Russia’s STS channel. It analyses how, in the serial, transculturally generated images of Englishness, Russianness and Russian émigré-ness are recursively reprocessed and re-projected through one another in a self-conscious but circular hall-of-mirrors effect. The article concludes by linking recursive nationhood in Londongrad to a post-Soviet version of stiob, the peculiarly Russian form of self-parodic discourse which arose at the end of the Soviet period.

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Introduction: recursive nationhood

This article forms an early part of a larger project that will apply a conceptual framework I call ‘recursive nationhood’ to a range of texts drawn from contemporary Russian visual culture. I develop the framework from a brief reference in Homi Bhabha’s writings on nationhood to a distinction between the impulse to represent a nation’s people as the fixed ‘historical objects of a nationalist pedagogy giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event’ and the competing process by which ‘the national life is… signified as a repeating and reproductive process’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 297). Bhabha terms this latter, continuous process the ‘repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative’ (1994). In developing his account of this performative aspect of nation-building, Bhabha invokes the work of Bakhtin (1982), whose insistence on the dialogism underlying all human communication clarifies that the recursive constitution of nations must also entail a mutual responsivity. Bakhtin’s account of the struggle of the monologic to prevail over the dialogic is homologous with the ‘fixing’ function of Bhabha’s ‘nationalist pedagogy’. The boundaries and values
of nations, national cultures and national identities, are within this framework, neither reified nor stable but rather porous, ever-shifting, pluri-accentual and multi-directional. The hitherto understudied recursive dimension to this, by now, familiar, transnationalising account of modern nationhood foregrounds the repetitious but productive logic of its dialogic component.

Recursion is invoked in mathematics, computer science, linguistics and art history. Common to these diverse contexts is the idea of the repeated application of a single function to an initial element in a succession capable of indefinite extension (an example from painting would be the recurrence of an image within an image which in turn appears within a similar, but never identical, image, ad infinitum; this is, of course, akin to the dizzying ‘hall-of-mirrors’ effect). In summary, what I term recursive nationhood overlays the principle of dialogic performativity with that of the ongoing, mutual production of nationhood by the transnational, and nation by nation, in an extendable series of self-renewing repetitions which both mirror and transform one another. The example from art history confirms that recursion in the dialogic mode in which I treat it can be applied to visual images, static and moving, as well as to language, texts and mathematical formulae. The audio-visual context offered by screen media such as film and television is particularly significant, in that it serves as a site for the recursive construction of nations that brings verbal and visual signs together in a productive interplay which both complicates and illuminates recursive logic.

Recursive nationhood is far from new, and far from exclusive to the Russian context, though the phenomenon gains momentum and specificity from the accelerated circulation of audio-visual meanings facilitated by the new media environment into which post-Soviet Russia was born. A recent example is blogger, Evgenii Zhurov’s, infamous ‘I am a Russian Occupant’ video released following Russia’s Ukraine intervention and tweeted by Russia’s deputy prime minister. In the explosion of reaction, the perspectives of sub-cultural nationalism, Western shock response, self-parodic counter-response, and the Kremlin line interact, reshaping one another in a dialogic process characteristic of the peripheries of official culture. The video, which defiantly, yet absurdly, lists in litany form Russia’s historical conquests (thus effectively exposing the aggressively imperialistic attitudes that official Kremlin discourse persistently sanitises and masks) ends with an ‘email’ from the occupier to U.S. President Obama warning that he loves peace, but knows how to fight better than anyone in the world. In a demonstration of the recursivity of the heavily mediatised environment in which the video emerged, it, a Ukrainian video with the same title soon emerged and achieved similarly viral status. The latter, however, whilst adopting the same structure as its original, dwells on the damage and oppression caused by Russian imperial aggression.

As Werner and Zimmermann’s (2006) work on the closely related notion of histoire croisée has shown, the criss-crossing transnational flows and global connectivities on which recursive nationhood relies, and the mutual constitution of nations by nation, and the national by the transnational, that it facilitates, are nonetheless not specific to the present phase of globalisation. Indeed, the emergence of modern nationhood at the end of the eighteenth century is contemporaneous with the advent of globalisation in its modern form and of the technological means of mass communication. Anderson’s (1983) seminal theory of the nation as ‘imagined community’ rests on this coincidence. Nonetheless, we cannot underestimate the importance of the step change in the communications environment that began with the arrival of the Internet, and led to the
radically networked world which Castells (2000) sees as qualitatively different from anything that preceded it. It is no coincidence that the fall of the Soviet Union, the creation of a post-Soviet Russia, and the very first posting to the Internet occurred in 1991 within weeks of one another. Post-Soviet nationhood and the new communications environment have emerged in step and in interaction with one another. It is not surprising, then, that the forms and modes of recursion I consider in this article are particularly salient to post-Soviet identity formation. Arguably, they play out, too, in a different way than in more established national contexts.

**Londongrad: a serial for our time**

In the substantive part of this article, I explore one discrete, relatively ephemeral, instance of post-Soviet recursive nationhood in action selected from the recent output of the independent Russian television channel, STS: the 2015 serial *Londongrad*. I conclude by widening the discussion outwards in order to link recursive nationhood in *Londongrad* to a post-Soviet version of stio, the peculiarly Russian form of self-parodic discourse which first arose at the end of the Soviet period.

*Londongrad* generated a wave of intrigued public reaction in the British media (BBC, 2015; ITV, 2015; Parfitt, 2015; Walker, 2015) and in the U.S. elicited a long interview with the serial’s creator, Mikhail Idov (2016). It achieved phenomenal success on Russian television, becoming the most popular programme in its schedule slot, and helping STS leap to the head of the viewing figure table for all Russian channels in September 2015 (Amirdzhanian, Karmunin, Zav’ialova, & Serzhan, 2015). Before providing a rationale for this choice, a brief introduction to the programme itself and the context in which it was broadcast is in order. The serial, shown in a series of 28 50-minute episodes (a second series is planned for 2017), focuses on the life and adventures of a group of London-based Russians who have established an agency to provide, for a fee, help and assistance to Russian speakers who encounter problems of one kind and another (legal, commercial, socio-economic, marriage and relationship-associated, political and others, some frivolous, of an alarmingly serious nature). The main characters are Misha, who set the agency up after dropping out of Oxford University, Alisa, who joined him as one of his first clients when she sought to evade the clutches of an oligarch father insisting, against her will, that she register for an architecture degree in a prestigious London college, Stepan from Riazan’, the agency’s chauffeur, whose taxi is an old Soviet Lada that has seen better days, and Boris Brikman, a successful, but self-important, Jewish-Russian lawyer. As these characterisations imply, the serial has a strong comic element, but it is also a detective series, a crime thriller and a romantic melodrama.

Neither the ‘Londongrad’ concept, nor the name, is original. As revealed in a 2015 BBC 2 documentary entitled ‘Rich, Russian and Living in London’, an agency called ‘Londongrad’ exists in reality. Like its fictional counterpart, its purpose is to offer aid to London’s Russian speakers (though its activities relate mainly to the property market, and its clients are of a level of income well above that of many characters who feature in the fictional version). Its chauffeur also drives an old Soviet car, but an elegant, well-kept Volga rather than a beaten-up Lada. The premise of the STS serial, then, already constitutes a dialogic reaction to, as well as an imitative mirroring of, a particular mode of diasporic Russian self-representation, but also to the sinister associations that connect the name ‘Londongrad’ with the
British popular press perception that London is being overrun by an influx of Russian oligarchs with criminal backgrounds. The serial’s creator and lead writer, Mikhail Idov, is himself a Russian émigré journalist and novelist living in New York, and formerly editor of the Russian version of *GQ Magazine*, so the decision of STS, a television channel operating in Putin’s Russia, to commission his serial and film much of it in London was not without risk, the more so because it was broadcast when relations between the Russian and British states were at a historically low ebb, following Russia’s 2014 intervention in Ukraine. It was partly for this reason that the show attracted such attention in the U.K., as well as in Russia, and partly because of the growing fascination, not to mention negative publicity, surrounding the lives and activities of London’s super-rich Russian population, typified by Mark Hollingsworth’s sensationalist exposé of nefarious Russian oligarch activity in London, the first word of whose title is, appropriately enough, ‘Londongrad’ (Hollingsworth & Lansley, 2010). In an interview with ITV, Idov suggested that the rationale for the serial included an aspiration that it ‘would improve relations with the West by showing Britain in a positive light to his countrymen’ (2015).

Let me summarise my reasons for focusing on Londongrad and the trajectory of the analysis. Firstly, in its setting, narratives, representational strategies and performative orientation towards its audience, the series encapsulates the workings of recursive nationhood. In particular, by articulating Russian-ness via a persistent, three-way interplay of domestic, diasporic and global perspectives, each of which conditions, interrogates, aligns with and distances itself from, the other, it adds a layer of complexity which illuminates recursion’s capacity for indefinite expansion. Secondly, I wish to highlight the role in this process of visual landscapes of London, Moscow and St Petersburg (the narrative moves with ease between these urban settings), and of visual representations of Russians and Londoners in their intersection with issues of language. Thirdly, I attend to the manner in which the process dramatizes Russia’s encounter with two related aspects of globalisation: its prioritising of neoliberal commodification, and its cultivation of cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities. I then turn to the implications for this complex of issues of Londongrad’s approach to a tension inherent to the serial form: that between the discrete, self-contained storylines pursued in individual episodes and the overarching narrative which unfolds during the course of the serial in its entirety. Finally, I suggest that Londongrad resolves the tension by subordinating the play of recursions to a stabilising narrative which ends at one of Moscow’s iconic sites. It thereby submits to a version of the ‘nationalist pedagogy’ which is the reverse side of the coin of recursive nationhood. The ambivalent multivocality that the serial acquires as a consequence, however, links it to other puzzling phenomena at the peripheries of post-Soviet culture under Putin and this provides my conclusion.

### The play of prisms

The first 5–6 of the 28 instalments provide a comprehensive appreciation of Londongrad’s modes of signification, narrative and visual structures and approaches to identity. Indeed, much of what is required for an understanding of Londongrad is condensed into the initial seconds of the serial’s opening credit sequence, which, accompanied by a thumping, energetic and thriller-like soundtrack, depicts in a rapid montage sequence stereotypical images of London’s iconic sites: Tower Bridge, the Gherkin and London Eye, double-
decker red buses, black taxis and London Underground signs, combined with stylised animations of James Bond-like heroes bearing black revolvers. The sequence concludes with the superimposition on the London landscape of a classic London Underground sign carrying in Cyrillic script the name, Londongrad.

The image visually captures the dramatic-comic premise around which the subsequent action revolves: that of a group of Russians who, whilst thoroughly acclimatised to, and able to blend into, the London landscape, nonetheless superimpose upon it distinctively Russian sensibilities, values and lifestyles. This is confirmed in the show’s subtitle: ‘Znai nashikh!’ (which translates roughly as ‘This is what we Russians are!’) and in what became the advertising tagline for the serial, claimed to be one in which the Russian heroes ‘knock the whole of London off its perch’ (‘ves’ London na ushi postavit”). However, the pseudo-patriotic bravado of the subtitle and tagline, like the opening montage sequence, is of a highly stylised character. Their shared modality is one of a self-conscious mediation of London, and of the Russian impact upon it, through the prism of what the worldly young Russian audience at which the serial is targeted, will recognise as the standard ‘foreign stereotype’ of the city as an embodiment of quintessential Englishness.

The idealised London conveyed in the serial’s opening sequence is that of the older generation of Soviet-raised Russians who, deprived of the possibilities of overseas travel, or access to extensive photographic representations of world cities beyond the Iron Curtain, created such imaginary landscapes as objects of fascination and aspiration. This phenomenon finds expression in the character of the lawyer, Brikman, who, we learn, emigrated to Britain in the 1980s and, bemoaning the disappearance of the old English aristocracy of his Soviet imagination, recreated through his home and office decor the antiquated surroundings of the nineteenth century English gentleman as depicted in Igor Maslennikov’s legendary Sherlock Holmes adaptations for Soviet television.

It is also reflected in a number of the comic plot lines, including one featuring a company bidding to be providers of their upmarket brand of English tea to the royal family and securing the help of the Londongrad agency in their endeavours via Alisa’s new, equally upmarket, English boyfriend. Post-Soviet viewers of the serial are treated not to an unmediated representation of London, but to a representation of a representation of London: one filtered through the prism of a consciously stereotypical and idealised image belonging squarely within Soviet consciousness. Londongrad is as much a visualisation of post-Sovietness as it is of Englishness.

Stylisation pervades Londongrad at a number of levels. It is most overtly evident in the regular interruption of the thriller and detective storylines by set pieces delivered directly to camera by Misha who provides fast-paced, ironic accounts of the particular idiosyncratic feature of British/English culture featured in the action at that point. The tea-plot is punctuated by Misha’s to-camera homily about the role of tea-drinking rituals in British society.

A storyline about corruption at Oxford University is interrupted by a detailed, breathless account of the mystique of ‘Oxbridge’ and its place in Britain’s class-ridden system of social values. Each episode includes at least two such interruptions which foreground Misha’s dual status as lead character in the action and a mediatory, ‘tour guide’ figure, who serves up to Russian viewers a conveniently packaged introduction to English culture and society, at the same time challenging their ‘suspension of disbelief’ and drawing
attention to the conventionality of the narrative. When watching Londongrad, it is difficult
to forget that one is not viewing London, but rather London as seen and ‘packaged’ by the
Russian émigré community.

The interruption device calls attention to the émigré dimension itself. For what is on
offer in Londongrad is a depiction less of London, or even of Russians in London, but of
‘Londonised Russians’, and, conversely, a ‘Russified London’. The relationship between
the two is played out in complex game of recognition and misrecognition, de-familiarisa-
tion and re-familiarisation, sameness and difference, much of which is enacted at the inter-
section of image and language. This is apparent from the scenes with which the serial
opens in Episode 1, which begins with a shot of a naked Misha emerging from the bed
of a young English woman with whom he is conversing in fluent English, before being dis-
tracted from her caresses by a call on his flashing smartphone. Given that the English dia-
logue (which often takes up more than half of each serial) is loudly dubbed by a single
Russian voiceover track, there is a short delay before Russian viewers can identify Misha
as ‘Russian’. Episode 1 then shifts to Heathrow Airport where, from Misha’s viewpoint,
a steady stream of arriving plane passengers are observed – all of them dressed in smart,
fashionable casual clothes. It is only when two of them are faintly heard speaking
Russian that Misha is able to identify his client.

Such visual devices encourage viewers to hesitate between assimilating émigré Rus-
sians to a class of uniformly globalised, cosmopolitan, English-speaking nomads, or recog-
nising in them the tell-tale indicators of rooted Russian-ness. The oscillatory effect is
encapsulated in the spectrum that runs from Misha (fluent English-speaking, dressed for
each episode in a nationally indeterminate grey hoodie and jeans, and operating with
such confidence in the London context that he is often able to pass himself off as
English for the purposes of gaining access to valuable information), through Brikman
(who self-presents as a grotesque, stereotypical ideal image of Englishness, thereby reveal-
ing his ‘quintessential’ Russianness), to Stepan, who speaks no English, dresses according
to the stereotypical image of the uncouth Russian provincial and drives an old Lada. The
game of familiarisation and de-familiarisation, sameness and difference, is not restricted to
the visual depiction of the characters. Numerous aerial views of the cityscapes within
which the action unfold (Moscow and London) present identically gleaming rows of tall,
glass-fronted corporate skyscrapers and some of the characters (including, as the serial
progresses, Misha and Alisa) move between them so speedily and with such ease that
the viewer is at points in danger of losing track of what is happening where.

Office interiors are similarly homogenised, including that of the Londongrad agency,
with its high-rise views across London, and its combination of futuristic, corporate
desks, casual chairs and sofas and flickering computer monitors. The highly self-conscious
choice of visual décor – a reproduction of the iconic Petrov-Vodkin painting of a boy on a
horse; a framed black-and-white portrait of Princess Diana – serves, however, to ground
the office within the culture and perceived mind set of the ‘global Russian’, a phrase
coined by the founders of the controversial Russian Snob magazine.3

The painting points to an intellectual sophistication and pride in the Russian artistic
heritage with which ‘global Russians’ would identify (one episode of the serial centres
on a faking scandal at the heart of the international art marker). The photograph,
thoroughly anachronistic if placed in a native English setting, points to the same, nostal-
glichally idealised vision of Englishness that shapes the consciousness of Brikman, and still
inhabits the imagination of many Russians. So, the portrayal of the émigré Russians is likewise tongue-in-cheek, semi-conventionalised and mediated, their image filtered through a picture of the contemporary Russian immigrant in London whose imaginary status is repeatedly foregrounded.

The Russian-speaking types who populate Londongrad recall the archetypes through which the Western press views the Russian presence in London, many of them familiar as the result of stories to have hit the world headlines. The plots of a selection of individual episodes revolve around a violent, jealousy-related dispute at the heart of the Bolshoi ballet company; a dissident Russian scientist being pursued by the FSB; the secretive transportation from Moscow to London of an illegal substance concealed in a metal tube; the failing Oxford student whose desperate father is prepared to use bribery to ensure his son’s success; corruption at the heart of Russian preparations for the World Cup in 2018; a successful Russian writer seeking a deal for film adaptation rights to his novels; a sinister criminal type blackmailing Misha for regular payments of money. Even Alisa and Sasha (a late-joining member of Londongrad, and a computer geek capable of fantastical feats of online hacking at implausible speeds) correspond to the imaginary post-Soviet Russia that inhabits the Western popular imagination.

In order to solve the problems confronting the gallery of post-Soviet archetypes, the Londongrad agents often resort to acts of dissembling – ‘playing up’ to or acting out roles enabling them to blend with the milieus into whose midst they penetrate in order to gain the information they need. Alisa dresses in tight, provocative clothing to conform to the image of an escort girl to enable her to visit a seedy nightclub run by a tyrannical and corrupt Russian businesswoman. Misha temporarily reassumes the demeanour of a brilliant Russian Oxford maths student to help a client see his own less-than-committed son through his exams.

Most episodes involve dissembling, much of it revolving around Alisa and Misha, whether they are passing themselves off as English, or adopting the mask of a familiar, post-Soviet Russian archetype. The denouements to the plot lines often undercut these archetypes; the scientist pursued by the FSB turns out to be suffering from memory loss, confusing the FSB with the KGB; the sinister tube transported from Moscow to London contains a rare medical treatment rather than a destructive poison; the exam cheating scandal at Oxford leads to a chain of corruption involving an English don; even Stepan’s image as the hapless provincial Russian taxi-driver is complicated when it emerges that he has come to London not in search of money, but in order to find his estranged daughter, hoping that he will spot her one day at Heathrow, on her way home.

Such revelations reinforce the sense that, just as London is depicted self-consciously through the eyes of Russian notions of England (in the final episode, Misha associates Alisa’s name, and the entire serial, with Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland), so the heroes and heroines are filtered through Western imaginations of Russian diaspora ‘types’. The fact that many of these types coincide with their domestic internalisations (the image of the oligarch football club owner desperate to secure footballing success for his non-compliant son, for example, boasts international currency) – that they are ‘globally’ articulated – enriches a three-way filtering prism in which transculturally generated images of Englishness, Russian-ness and Russian émigré-ness are recursively reflected, reprocessed and re-projected through one another in a circular hall-of-mirrors effect. Idov, Londongrad’s co-creator, is himself an American Russian émigré, observing
London through the dual lens of his own experience as a New York Russian émigré and, America’s own idealised imaginations of England, further expanding the recursive series.

Recursive articulations of shifting Russian identities are a common feature of post-Soviet and late Soviet, visual culture. In 2016, the Rossiia channel broadcasts a made-for-television film called *Soul of a Spy* (*Dusha shpiona*), a high-production value, Le Carrier-like espionage thriller, much of it set in London and spoken in dubbed English. It features a Russian double agent with complete mastery of English, and an English fiancée, working simultaneously for MI6, and for the FSB, to whom he ultimately reports, although the final revelation is that his FSB spymaster is himself a traitor. The prototype for these recursive re-imaginings of Russian-ness is Stirliz, star of the classic 1970s *17 Moments of Spring* (*17 momentov vesny*) serial, in which the fluent German-speaking Stirliz penetrates the SS High Command during World War II and feeds valuable military intelligence to his Soviet masters.4

At its half-way point, *Londongrad*, however, takes the play of recursive prisms in a new direction. A storyline stretched over two episodes is filmed almost entirely on location in St Petersburg, where Misha must return to rescue his brother from the clutches of a criminal gang connected to the world of online gaming, to which he owes large amounts of money, and which is keeping him hostage. The serial's entire visual idiom shifts dramatically for the duration of these episodes, shedding its stylised conventionality, ironic tone and three-way recursive interplay. The semi-idealised fantasies of fast-moving London settings, glamorous young heroes, stylish office interiors and their Moscow equivalents are replaced by grey, dismal landscapes of snow-swept Petersburg streets, forbidding Soviet-era tower blocks, poorly stocked food shops, curt shop assistants and the dark, dilapidated interiors of unkempt apartment entrances and stairways, shrouded in sinister shadows.

For several key points in the drama, Misha is absent from the screen, the action depicted from his first-person viewpoint with a shaky, hand-held camera. The contrast with surrounding episodes momentarily establishes this as the authentic, unmediated background against which the remainder of the action is set – the suppressed ‘real’ of a post-Soviet Russia of which the ‘Soviet’ element is to the fore, and for which the vivid and fast-paced London (and Moscow) of that remainder supplies the ‘imaginary’ counterpart. Until, that is, it dawns on viewers that this St Petersburg may be no more than an intentionally hyperbolised mediation of the drearily sinister Leningrad of popular memory (Western and post-Soviet) which adds another twist to the recursive spiral. It reminds us that the serial is a complex visual rendition of Russian nationhood filtered through a transcultural imaginary, not an idealised representation of Russians afloat in a sea of quaint Englishness.

**Audio-visual narratives of commodification and cosmopolitanism**

Television is an audio-visual medium which unfolds through time, and in which the narrative element is key. *Londongrad* belongs to the ‘serial’ format, which is unfamiliar to British television, and in which, overarch ing the multiple individual, self-contained plotlines, resolved over one or two episodes, are a set of longer narrative lines stretching the length of the entire serial. There is a contrast, too, between the generic formats of individual episodes, and those of the longer serial. If the former adopt the attributes of the crime
thriller and the modern detective series, with an admixture of situation comedy, the latter resemble the romantic melodrama narratives of the Latin American serial which is the progenitor of the post-Soviet variant. The central storyline spanning all 28 episodes is that of the implicit sexual tension between Misha and Alisa, and the question of whether their suppressed feelings of attraction will ever lead anywhere. Secondary narrative lines which also run the length of the serial include Stepan’s efforts to find his daughter, Alisa’s own conflict with her oligarch father, Misha’s efforts to rescue his brother, Brikman’s marital troubles and the semi-autistic, computer-obsessed Sasha’s reluctance to acknowledge her feelings for the head chef in a Russian restaurant (Vadim). In working through the conflict between Londongrad’s overarching melodramatic plot lines and the self-contained thriller/detective narratives of its discrete episodes the serial realises its status as an audio-visual articulation of Russian nationhood which expresses the underlying ideological meanings of the recursive interplay through a word-image tension.

Let us first consider the Misha–Alisa relationship, which begins inauspiciously. Misha is unimpressed by what Alisa claims she has to offer the agency, and agrees to her insistent demands to work for it on a trial basis initially. He is less impressed still when, in Episode 3, she tries to persuade him to take on the case of a young Russian girl in love with an Irish boy, whose Traveller community have identified a gypsy bride for him. The girl has no money to pay the Londongrad fee and when Alisa nonetheless pleads with Misha to offer the agency’s help, he retorts angrily that it is not a charity and will fail unless it charges market prices. In common with most of the episodes, parallel stories, corresponding to parallel cases, are followed. As the stubborn Alisa preoccupies herself with the Irish Travellers, Misha busies himself with the far more lucrative case of helping an eminent Russian writer sell the film rights to his latest crime thriller novel. The tension between the two persists throughout most of the serial, with Alisa complaining of Misha’s hard-nosed commercialism, and he of her soft-headed and impractical charitability.

Episode 3 is the serial’s ideological fulcrum. The eminent writer appeals to British film companies because he claims connections to Russia’s criminal class and a prison spell. He is seen, therefore, as offering British audiences an authentic slice of the post-Soviet underworld. The fact that these attributes are spurious emerges when the writer, hearing of Alisa’s case, decides to help her by ingratiating himself with the Irish Travellers and misrepresenting himself as a hardened Russian gypsy. The ruse is soon exposed. The Travellers take him captive, causing him disastrously to miss the signing of his film rights contract. Undeterred, he begins to take ‘selfies’ with members of the Traveller encampment, convinced that its grim, authentic realities offer rich material for his public image and his next novel. Both British film company and Russian writer engage in a form of commodification: packaging the object of their attentions into a saleable image of what it represents, ensuring that British viewers of the yet-to-be-made film are treated to an image of criminal Russia that conforms to their expectations and appeals to their sensibilities, and readers of the Russian writer’s next novel are able to align their notions of Irish Traveller authenticity with that of their imagination, and as presented to them in one of Misha’s romanticised sepia-toned homilies to camera. It is no coincidence that the ‘gypsy serial’, whose plot normally revolves around illicit love across the gypsy/non-gypsy boundary, is one of the most popular formats on Russian television (Hutchings, 2013), nor that mafia criminality is now the staple of British popular cultural imaginations of the post-Soviet world.
Whilst Misha complies with the mutual commodification process, Alisa resists it. In this contrast lies the conflict at the heart of the serial. Misha’s stylised, cameo presentations of London, and the serial’s own mediation of conventionalised images of Englishness and Russian-ness in both domestic and diasporic variants, are commodified packages, filtered through one another. England (London) is viewed through the prism of pre-packaged notions in the mind of Russians diaspora members, who in turn oscillate between semi-ironized conformity to Western images of ‘the Russian abroad’ commodified in many a post-1991 Western crime thriller, and alignment with national self-images popular in Russia, itself portrayed in multiple modes: that of the fast-paced, high-rise global city of international thriller movies, and that of the grey, forbidding Soviet city, dilapidated and snow-bound, of Episodes 15–16.

Misha’s extra-diegetic ‘tour guide’ interruptions of the action meta-textually link the recursive interplay via which both Russia and London are represented in the serial, and the logic of commodification that it interrogates. Alisa’s line of resistance counter-poses commodification to the values of charity, and a sentimental attachment to the overriding precedence of family ties. Here, the plot lines overarching the discrete narratives of individual episodes become significant. Of these, the most striking is that of Stepan, whose search to find his long-lost daughter extends the full length of the serial, but finally ends in success resulting in a family idyll complete with happily married daughter, cute grandson and doting grandfather. Sentimental melodrama is a staple of the Russian serial format whose hybrid generic influences are acutely evident in Londongrad. Alisa’s own reconciliation with her father, and Misha’s commitment to his autistic brother, even Brikman’s reunion with the wife who abandons him to pursue her dreams of a career on the stage, all help establish the central contradiction running through the serial as that generated by post-Soviet Russia’s hesitant accommodation with globalised neoliberal commodification and its associated subjectivities. This is the ideological motor for the recursive interplay through which Londongrad conveys the complexities and instabilities of Russian nationhood.

Related to the commodification theme is that of the cosmopolitan lifestyles and identities and the status of the ‘global Russian’, of which Misha and Alisa in particular, are exemplars. Viewers witness a vast gallery of characters, often depicted initially within London’s crowded hustle-bustle of streets, shops and offices. Most episodes feature an early ‘moment of recognition’, when the tell-tale sound of the Russian language identifies a subset of the crowd as ‘compatriots’. When, as is several cases, much of the subsequent dialogue is conducted in fluent English (albeit heavily dubbed), cognitive dissonance threatens, as audiences must self-identify with compatriots who look, sound and behave like ‘globalised cosmopolitans’ in a distinctly non-native environment. The younger leads (Misha, Alisa, Sasha) remain attached to their tell-tale global technical aids (the ubiquitous iPhone, forever vibrating to draw their attention from the action). Misha openly expresses a sense of distance from his compatriots and never abandons his standard grey hoodie, pale sweatshirt, jeans and trainers. The characters jet with exaggerated ease between London and Moscow (the authenticating tedium of airport checks, and of the flights themselves, are always edited out); the same character shown in a British taxi may in the next shot be depicted reclining in a Moscow corporate office that could equally be in New York. (Soul of a Spy, too, features seamless travel between Moscow, London, Paris, Geneva, Cairo and other ‘global’ cities.) Several Londongrad plotlines derive, as we have seen, from the global news landscape.
Even Alisa’s father’s efforts to locate his wayward daughter lead his search team across the world, and eventually to Thailand.

The false trail that Alisa lays is indicative of the comic acts of dissembling which define the behaviour of ‘global Russians’ operating in Londongrad’s cosmopolitan spaces. The serial appropriates features of the picaresque novel, characterised by comic tales of roguery, deception and adventurism linked loosely by the first-person perspective of the hero, who must deceive up to, but not beyond, the borders of legality to survive in a world of corruption and treachery. Londongrad positions the acts of dissembling that drive its narratives on the boundary between (i) deceit in order to assimilate to the cosmopolitan spaces that it depicts and (ii) dissembling aimed at appropriating those spaces for the reassertion of native values and behaviour models celebrating the tongue-in-cheek ‘Znai nashikh’ tagline and Alisa’s ‘charitable’ counterpoint to Misha’s hardnosed business sense. The dominance of English gradually recedes. In the episode concerning jealous rivalries at the heart of the Bolshoi ballet, the dialogue is entirely in Russian and London is a mere silent backdrop to an intrigue which could have unfolded in any global city. The episode concludes with the entire Londongrad cast picking up the mournful refrains of the traditional folksong ‘Not for me’ (‘Ne dlia menia’) in a sentimentalised expression of nostalgic longing for the culture they have abandoned. Across its 28 episodes, the serial works through a contradictory, incomplete response to the questions of what it means to be a ‘global Russian’, and how to negotiate the cosmopolitan spaces and lifestyles of a disorienting world in which the neoliberal logic of commodification holds sway over traditional values of community and charity. It exploits its audio-visual form by associating the disorienting, recursive interplay of Englishness, Russian-ness (diasporic and native) and cosmopolitanism with globalised imagery, and the reassuringly native with linear narrative and the realm of the ‘word’.6

Native resolutions and iconic space: recursive nationhood in retreat

As Jesus Martin-Barbero’s seminal work on the telenovela as a media form suggests, one of the genre’s unique features is that the very length of its narrative arc enables it to mutate as it unfolds, to recalibrate its themes, ‘look’, characterisations and discourses in light of audience responses and other pressures, and to change the outcomes of its multiple plot lines. Martin-Barbero (1992) also claims that the telenovela’s characteristic melodramatic mode enables it to explore controversial social and ideological tensions, whilst ultimately resolving them and restoring the status quo. Both insights are relevant to Londongrad’s recursive treatment of Russian nationhood.

Idov’s account of work on the serial refers to the parlous state of U.K.–Russia relations and resultant political criticisms that the broadcasting of Londongrad elicited in the Russian press. He cites additional financial pressures and together, these factors provide an empirical explanation of the growing number of episodes focused on, and shot in, Russia, and of the increasingly peripheral attention given to British characters, and to locating the action in identifiable English settings (Idov, 2016). They also contextualise the de-accentuation of the play of recursions and of the corresponding tensions which, within the long serial format, are capable of subtly reorienting a narrative’s ideological direction. Eventually, Idov was unceremoniously sacked from the project and will make no contribution to the second series.7
The central melodramatic line in the classic telenovela invariably revolves around the developing romance between the hero and heroine (Martin-Barbero, 1992). Londongrad represents a hybrid genre combining elements of the series (each episode following a discrete plot line, involving a central cast of characters, but resolved with the confines of that episode) and the telenovela (in which the same cast act out a single narrative over the course of multiple episodes). It follows the melodramatic format in broad outline, with the 28 episodes providing a series of obstacles, delays and set-backs in the heroine’s quest to gain her lover’s affections. In the Latin American telenovela, the obstacles take the form of influential rogues and villains intent on thwarting the ambitions of or seducing the heroine, typically a poor provincial girl in the employ of a rich, handsome young man (her love interest). Londongrad’s Alisa is hardly poor, nor is she explicitly seeking love, but her role in the agency begins as that of Misha’s junior partner, in a bid to escape the grasping clutches of a powerful, possessive father.

The main obstacle hindering any romance between Alisa and Misha is the seeming chasm in their philosophical visions for the agency. However, the chasm shrinks when Alisa is made aware that Misha has secretly been transferring agency profits to the Russian gang holding Misha’s autistic, but brilliant, brother captive in St Petersburg, in order to ‘buy back’ his brother’s debt. This, it turns out, was the primary motivation for the establishment of the agency, re-aligning Misha’s apparent neoliberal greed with the traditional virtues of charity and family loyalty. In a role reversal spanning the final episodes, Misha drops the business of the agency to assist Alisa retrieve one of her kidneys, apparently excised from her body whilst she was deliberately drugged as part of an international criminal vendetta against her father in Moscow. It later turns out that the kidney had not been removed but hidden from X-ray vision by a new technique of medical deception, but the episode finally brings Misha and Alisa together in passionate embrace. Over the same period, Stepan is reconciled with his lost daughter and the serial indulges in a sequence of sentimental idylls featuring Stepan in the comforts of his daughter’s nice suburban family home, entertaining his newfound grandson by playing a ‘Star Wars’ game with him in miraculously improved English:

In a second reconciliation, Alisa is reunited with her oligarch father who, it is revealed, has, rather than perpetrating corruption, and despite the photo of Putin we are now shown hanging in his office, been the victim of a high-level French conspiracy in relation to Russia’s 2018 World Cup preparations (appropriately, his daughter’s agency rescues him from disaster). At the same time, Sasha finally acknowledges her feelings for Vadim, and Brikman’s wayward wife returns to him. The ideological significance of the reconciliations barely needs highlighting. Unambiguously traditional values, tinged with the tones of official patriotism, displace the disruptive effects of the performat, recursive interplay of domestic, diaspora and non-Russian perspectives, each itself inflected with transcultural meanings and distancing, ironic modalities. Bhabha’s ‘pedagogical’ nationalism prevails, which is unsurprising given Idov’s loss of prominence, and the growing constraints on filming in London.

Londongrad plays out the contradictions at the heart of post-Soviet Russian nation-building in an increasingly networked world in which neoliberal commodification and cosmopolitan universalism both collude and conflict with one another, and of a Russian media landscape in which, despite the Kremlin’s best efforts, it struggles fully to suppress competing voices. The audio-visual enactment of these dynamics, and in particular the
role accorded to visions of an imaginary London, lend them a multivocal complexity that remains obscured in other contexts. It is fitting, then, that the final scenes of Episode 28 are shot not in London, but at one of Moscow’s most iconic visual settings: the park whose backdrop is the gigantic main building of Moscow State University. It is here that Alisa finds Misha waiting for her after their final escapade, and here that they declare their mutual affection. The sight is soaked in the history of Russia’s Soviet past, now seemingly displaced by the liberated, globe-trotting lifestyles of its youth, but it also conveys the permanence and sheer spatial immensity pervading the mythology of post-Soviet Russian nationhood. Idov’s sacking is all too appropriate if the disruptive tide of recursions has already been stemmed. But perhaps, reflected in the sheer implausibility of the scene and the preceding action, combined with the subsequent soft-focus, stereotypical shots of the happy couple romping in bed, there lurks a faint glint of a self-consciously optative modality which detaches the serial from its own ideological core and restarts the recursion process anew.

Conclusion: Londongrad, post-soviet recursive nationhood and stiob

Londongrad’s multivocal complexity – the sense that it is somehow not identical to itself and is subjected to an ambivalent form of self-objectivication – aligns it with a growing number of puzzling phenomena occurring at the peripheries of official Kremlin visual culture: the early mentioned viral, self-parodic pro-Putin videos (Fedor & Fredheim, 2017); the 40% state funding of Zviagintsev’s Oscar-nominated expose of Russian state corruption, Leviathan; the RT presenter (Abby Martin) permitted an on-air attack on Russia’s imperialist annexation of Crimea (Hutchings, Gillespie, Yablokov, Lvov, & Voss, 2015). The recursive nationhood paradigm which helps to explain these phenomena is, as we have stressed throughout, far from specific to the contemporary Russian context. It does, however, acquire a certain national specificity when the same phenomena are viewed through the lens of stiob and it is by widening the discussion in order to situate Londongrad at the margins of this context that I conclude.

Stiob can be characterised as official patriotic discourse knowingly developed to an absurd, comic extreme from within a consciousness which is distinguishable from that discourse but belongs within its parameters, ambivalently endorsing it by over-identifying with it. According to Alexei Yurchak, stiob emerged in late Soviet culture, differing from parodic satire in that it required such a degree of over-identification with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two. (2006, p. 250)

Often (wrongly) equated entirely to self-parodic satire, stiob should rather be considered as a form of double-voiced, or even triple-voiced, discourse in which official culture is both endorsed from within and objectified from without, either to assert a modicum of parodic intent, and/or to undermine that intent precisely by mimicking it, displaying knowledge of it, and thus generating a means of escaping its satirical effects. It is in this form, deeply recursive. Acknowledging that ‘parody in some form and to some extent will always be in a stiob utterance or gesture’, Mark Yoffe characterises the phenomenon as falling ‘under the category of double-voiced utterances’ and a speech act which ‘becomes a
battlefield of opposing intentions’, thus rendering the direction and status of the parodic element ambiguous (2013, p. 211).

The post-Soviet Russian-speaking online world is awash with examples of stiob of all shades. Much of it is generated from sources either within, or aligned with, official patriotic consciousness. As Julie Fedor’s and Rolf Fredheim’s article on the activities of the patriotic, grassroots video-maker, Iurii Degtiarev, acknowledges, whether such activity is ‘state commissioned’ from above or spontaneous and ‘from below’ is sometimes hard to determine; there are examples of both (2017, p. 18). The ‘I am a Russian Occupier’ (la russkii okkupant) video cited at the beginning of this article falls into a similar category. Another example of the multi-voiced stiob culture dominating the vast nether-region of online space between officially commissioned/approved Kremlin discourse and a popular patriotism often tinged with self-parodic intent is the ‘Niash-miash’ video celebrating in Japanese comic-book form the patriotism and beauty of the new young female Crimean Prosecutor General, Natalia Poklonskaia, appointed by the Russian authorities in the aftermath of the annexation.8 The origin of the term ‘niash-miash’ was a statement from Poklonskaia herself, stating her refusal to tolerate any ‘niasha-miashas’ – a request precisely not to be made the object of affection, expressed in a phrase of Japanese pop-cultural provenance (Suslov, 2014, p. 602). The clip is a heavily edited mash-up combining footage of Poklonskaia delivering harsh, anti-Kiev homilies, with her words converted into a simple song, and comic-book style sequences depicting a blond, big-eyed Poklonskaia wielding a sword against dark forces of evil. The song’s recurring chorus is the rhyming couplet ‘Vlast’, ‘Krov’, niash-miash/Krov’ Vlast’, Krym – nash’ (‘Power, Blood, Niash-Miash/Blood Power, The Crimea is ours’), as Poklonskaia is made to ventriloquise the patriotic mantra that came to define popular Russian discourse.

Again, it is important to view the ‘over-identification’ which defines the Poklonskaia clip as stiob neither as mono-vocal nationalistic triumphalism, nor as mocking self-parody. Rather, it is a form of triumphalism which at once signals recognition of its own absurdity, and the unreasonableness of the claims that underpin it, but, through that very signal, identifies a variant on what in his dialogistic interpretation of the discourse of Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, Bakhtin terms a ‘loophole’ (lazeika) enabling it to evade the mocking contempt of those who would condemn it:

A loophole is a retention for oneself of the possibility to alter the final, ultimate sense of one’s word. … In condemning himself, he wants and demands that the other refute his self-definition, but he leaves himself a loophole for the eventuality that the other person will agree with his … self-definition. (1973, pp. 195–196)

The stiob effect is epitomised in the good-mannered (non)-occupation of Crimea by polite green men who both are, and are not, Russian troops. The synchronicity of the effect is expanded in the form of diachronic sequences formed of denials, and then acknowledgements of ‘the truth’, of defiant defences of the indefensible followed by (self-mocking) counter-defences against the inevitable accusations of falsehood. The phenomenon can be interpreted as an act of recursive nation building based around the construction of an ‘in-group’ of compatriots (including sympathetic and unsympathetic Russian-speaking Ukrainians) able to ‘appreciate’ the double- and triple-voiced humour. It is recursive both because it re-enacts the key relationships around which Russian national identity-building has revolved: Russia and the West; Russia and the former Soviet Union, and because it does
so on an ongoing, responsive basis: each counter-assault from pro-Kiev or Western media sources is incorporated in turn into new articulations which recognise and rebut that assault.

There is a chasm of difference between Putin’s polite green men and Idov’s Londongrad. However, the latter’s complex layers of identification, de-identification and re-identification rely on the same deeply recursive logic that drives multiple aspects of official culture under Putin. Given the current state of the relationship between Russia and the West, the benefits gained from an understanding of that curious logic, its reach and its ramifications – political and cultural – become all the greater.

Notes

1. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6SSwzHAbes
2. See http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/im-russian-occupant-ukrainian-parody-video-celebrating-kremlin-imperialism-goes-viral-1491312
3. According to Timon Afinskii, the magazine’s UK director, ‘this group of members is united not by political views or by any other views but by their globalness, creativeness and openness to the whole world’ (quoted in Billings, 2009).
4. For an analysis of how 17 Moments enabled 1970s viewers to re-experience Soviet identity through the eyes of the German other, see Prokhorova (2003).
5. An analysis of post-Soviet Russian visual culture’s adaptation to the logic of neo-liberal commodification is to be found in Khalikova and Fish (2016).
6. For the role of word-image tensions as a locus of fundamental ideological conflict, see Mitchell (1986).
7. For an account of the sacking, see (Life, 2015).
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4l1VP1M3Lw

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