Patriotism as a Return to Suprematism: the History of Television in Andrei Silvestrov's "The Ice Hole" and Vladimir Sorokin's "White Square"

Патриотизм как возвращение к супрематизму: история телевидения в фильме Андрея Сильвестрова «Прорубь» и рассказе Владимира Сорокина «Белый квадрат»

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The article discusses the mediology of Andrei Silvestrov's film *Prorub'* (2017), and of the story-play by Vladimir Sorokin *Belyi kvadrat* (2017). In both works, an important role is given to "suprematist" geometry, squares; TV is linked to Russian state and its symbols. The motif of infantile and hypnotic consciousness arises in connection with television viewership. Keeping in mind these motific complexes, the article, firstly, touches on key moments of plot development in Silvestrov and Sorokin; secondly, it shows how the shared context of early television and avant-garde art can become a sign of the immanence of the state in television technology; thirdly, drawing on Sorokin's early play *S Novym godom!* (1987/1998), the article considers the democratic mode of television in its dialectical connection with the telecracy of the 2010s; fourth, the focus lies on the "pharmacology" of Russian TV, which in Silvestrov and Sorokin acts as a medium of regression, similar to an infantilising drug.

MEDIOLOGY, PHARMACON, TELECRACY, RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE, EARLY TELEVISION, MEDIA ARCHEOLOGY, MOSCOW CONCEPTUALISM, "POETIC VERBATIM"

В статье разбирается связанная с телевидением медиология в фильме Андрея Сильвестрова *Прорубь* (2017) и рассказе-пьесе Владимира Сорокина *Белый квадрат* (2017). Для обоих произведений важны мотивы «супрематической» геометрии, квадратов, а также российского государства и его символов; телезрительство ассоциируется с инфантильностью и гипнотизацией. С учетом названных мотивных комплексов статья, во-первых, прослеживает фабульное развертывание мотивов ТВ у Сильвестрова и Сорокина. Во-вторых, показано, как общность контекстов раннего телевидения и авангардного искусства ложится в основу эстетического остранения имманентности государства технике телевидения. В-третьих, с привлечением ранней пьесы Сорокина *С Новым годом!* (1987/1998) рассматривается демократический модус телевидения в его диалектической связи с телекратией 2010-х гг. В-четвертых, речь идет о «фармакологии» российского ТВ, которое у Сильвестрова и Сорокина выступает как медиум регрессии, подобный инфантилизирующему наркотику.

МЕДИОЛОГИЯ, ФАРМАКОН, ТЕЛЕКРАТИЯ, РУССКИЙ АВАНГАРД, РАННЕЕ ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ, МЕДИААРХЕОЛОГИЯ, МОСКОВСКИЙ КОНЦЕПТУАЛИЗМ, «ПОЭТИЧЕСКИЙ ВЕРБАТИМ»

The appeal of literature and cinema to the motif of television is, on the whole characterised – voluntarily or involuntarily – by an analytical, mediological attitude: in artistic pragmatics, the effects associated with the televisual medium's spontaneity and affectivity, simulation and fleetness, as well as the intimisation and domestication of everything that constitutes a TV show are clearly explicated. This "research" aspect is especially pronounced in the Soviet situation, in which artistic narratives not only complement the theories of television, but, against the background of the ideologisation of special literature, become almost the only possible codification of, and way of observing the effects of, television. However, the post-Soviet aesthetic view of television also retains instructive value, and the insight of such analytics is, paradoxically, largely reinforced by its deep bias: reference to television means, for literature and cinema, opposition to its structurally-conditioned position of total (medial) power – the position of mediality, capable of conditionally relaying any medial-discursive sequences, often without needing to create something "of one's own" (cf.: Smirnov 2005: 76).[1] For literature and, more directly, for cinema, working with TV motifs means trying to replay the metonymic "game", to show television as *pars*, and not as *totum*.

With the wide spread of various different screens – shifting into phenomenology, one could talk about the "screen-sphere" (Sobchack 2016) – on the communication base of the internet, the "place of power" occupied by the television screen is being eroded; without completely surrendering its positions, television becomes, as it were, a media power of the old, archaic type. Perhaps such a "non-modernity" of the medium, whose structure-forming parameter has been given as "all-inclusive nowness" (McLuhan 1964: 335), also leads to the fact that aesthetic statements containing criticism of the Russian

1
Lorenz Engell believes that Marshall McLuhan's project to create a universal theory of media is, at its core, a theory of television alone; cf. Engell 2012: 28.

political telecracy simultaneously refer to the history and evolutionary specifics of television technology. At least, the tracing of diachronic mediology makes it possible to analyse, with a high degree of informativeness, artistic compositions drawn from broadcasting and television viewership in Russia during the "Crimean syndrome"[2] period.

Later in the text, I will talk about Andrei Sil'vestrov's film, *The Ice Hole* [Prorub'] (based on the play of the same name by Andrei Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepol'skaia), and about the story-play by Vladimir Sorokin *White Square* [Belyi kvadrat] – two works of 2017, completely centred around television. Both are characterised by, and largely structured around, the following three points:

- An important role is given to "suprematist" geometry, squares. In the film, squares appear both in visual filmic images and in verbal remarks; in the literary text, the polysemic image of the square is discursively involved at all narrative levels;[3] in some cases, the motif is supplemented by direct references to the avant-garde and *zaum'*.
- Through the themes of fictional TV programs, television is linked to Russia – with the Russian state and its symbols; the latter also include the attributes of Russian Orthodoxy.
- The motif of infantile consciousness arises in connection with television viewership, coinciding with its hallucinatory and hypnotising nature; this hypnosis is explicitly connoted as narcotic in a number of episodes.

The article will identify the mediological contexts in which the plot of television is aesthetically developed through these motific complexes. Firstly, I will touch on key moments of plot development using television motifs in Sil'vestrov and Sorokin; secondly, I will show

2
For public mobilisation after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, see, e.g.: Rogov 2015; for the new erosion of Russian public sentiment by 2018, see, e.g.: Dmitriev/Nikol'skaia 2019.

3
Interestingly, the text has been illustrated in detail twice – in each case, the artists concentrate not so much on television geometry as on the bodily and chromatic expression induced by TV: both the first publication of the story on the online portal lenta.ru (Sorokin 2017), and the publication of the German translation in a separate book (Sorokin 2018b, illustr. Ivan Razumov) are provided with grotesque, but quite figurative illustrations. The most "suprematist" version was chosen in the design of the cover of the first paper edition of the collection *White Square* (Sorokin 2018a), where a "glowing" white square is placed on a dark background with a slightly blurred outline, the right side of which coincides with the edge of the cover.

how the shared context of early television and avant-garde art can become a sign of the immanence of the state in television technology; thirdly, drawing on material from Sorokin's early play *Happy New Year!* [S Novym godom!] (1987/1998), I will consider the democratic mode of television in its dialectical connection with the telecratic configuration of the 2010s; fourth, I will focus on the "pharmacology" of Russian television, which in Sil'vestrov and Sorokin acts as a medium of regression, similar to an infantilising drug.

ON BOTH SIDES OF THE SCREEN: THREE SQUARES, FOLKLORE, CINEMA

Sil'vestrov's film, which some commentators are inclined to characterise as video art,[4] consists of two parallel sequences: fragments of television (news, series, talk show) and a gallery of viewers watching this broadcast; the leitmotif is Epiphany Bathing in an ice hole, which is shown as a black square (Fig. 1, 2) and is verbally declared a black square: "[...] Dzhigurda called the ice hole a black square, and himself a god who descended to earth" [[...] prorub' Dzhigurda nazval chernym kvadratom, a sebia – spustivshimsia na zemliu bogom] (Sil'vestrov: 11:45; Rodionov/ Troepol'skaia 2017: 111).[5] In the second half of the film, the identification of television with the ice hole is realised within the plot: the talk show "The Lower Depths" [Na dne] is held underwater; the viewers/swimmers watch this underwater program on an outdoor television screen, in parallel with their descent of the steps into the ice hole, whose contours mirror the screen, descending the steps and somnambulistically submerging themselves.

The entire text spoken in the film is metric and for the most part rhymed. In a report on the film *The Ice Hole* on the *Dozhd'* TV channel,[6] Rodionov

4
For example, Sergei Khachaturov points out that "this film is on the borderline of different genres, and here we can talk about video art, about performative practices, about even a purely pictorial picture" (Fanailova 2017).

5
Sil'vestrov, commenting on his film, readily confirms its connection with Malevich's *Black Square*; see, for example, an interview with Dmitrii Volchek in October 2017: Volchek 2017.

6
The Ice Hole, being a theatrical play, was originally written to be turned into a movie (cf., for example: Mrachnye veshchi; Koretskii 2017). Is it noteworthy that in the stage run of the play (Prorub' 2014), and in Sil'vestrov's film, the roles of TV presenter characters are performed by real moderators of *Dozhd'* – that is, representatives of "alternative", non-governmental and non-broadcast television.

← FIG. 1

← FIG. 2

states, "I always work with the TV on"; about *The Ice Hole* he says: "It is such a poetic verbatim when the text does not change, words are simply rearranged, and poems are obtained" (Mrachnye veshchi: 03:30). In other words, it is a matter of setting up television speech for transformation with rhythm and rhyme, which allows us to talk simultaneously about the archaic movement of this speech towards the "primary"[7] oral language, preceding the invention of writing, and about the adaptation of speech for children's comprehension. This is also what the fabulous narrative level works for, in which Russian President Bulat Tsarev turns to Pike for help and advice on television: "a wise fish told me about the great future of the Russian Federation" [o velikom budushchem Rossiiskoi Federatsii povedala mne mudraia rybina] (Sil'vestrov: 10:25; Rodionov/ Troepol'skaia 2017: 110).[8] The representation of the Russian state and folklore, thus, merge into one within the framework of one TV show.

Sorokin's text *White Square*, preceded by a dedication to director Kirill Serebrennikov,[9] can be divided into a dramatic part depicting a television talk show and a narrative second half, thematising television viewing.

On the talk show, which, like the story itself, is called "White Square", a municipal employee, a theatre director, a military man and a businessman answer the host's question about what they think Russia is like; their lengthy answers boil down to the concepts of "song" [pesnia], "ice louse" [ledianaia vosh'], "cave" [peshchera] and "struggle" [bor'ba]. Then a song sounds in the studio: "The White Movement has come, there are squares without number!" [Prishla Dvizhukha Belaia, kvadratam net chisla!] (Sorokin 2018: 70). Nurses enter, who inject the show's participants with a "new product" [novyi produkt] called BD-4 (that is, presumably the fourth version of the "White Movement"

7
On distinguishing between primary and secondary (i.e. based on electricity-powered technical means) orality see: Ong 1982.

8
The motif of the future simultaneously activates the bond of fairytale archaism with avant-garde/futurism, which in turn is connected – as will be shown below – with television archaism.

9
The 2017 online publication is preceded by the following message: "The text is dedicated to Kirill Serebrennikov, who is currently under house arrest in connection with fraud charges" [Tekst posviashchen Kirillu Serebrennikovu, kotoryi v nastoiashchii moment nakhoditsia pod domashnim arestom v sviazi s obvineniiami v moshennichestve] (Sorokin 2017); this refers to the widely publicised criminal trial in the case of the Seventh Studio.

10
In the online publication, obscene morphemes are hidden by asterisks.

11
Both in terms of their pragmatic equivalence in many of Sorokin's texts, and in connection with the ritual function common to obscene →

[Belaia Dvizhukha]): the product, the presenter assures, should distinguish itself from BD-3, already loved by many Russians and approved by the minister. The speech of the guests becomes obscene, and the presenter demonstrates his ability to "bleep" [zapikivat'], or censor (72);[10] here it is worth remembering the familial closeness of vulgar language and the futuristic *zaum'*.[11] In the director's remarks, quite in the spirit of avant-garde anti-traditionalism, the leitmotif becomes the crushing of "junk" [rukhliad'] and the glorification of the "new" [novoe] (75). Then the presenter is crucified on the table, secured at the corners with straps and a twisted blouse; making incisions with a knife, they peel off his skin, which is stretched on the table. The municipal employee, Irina, masturbates and urinates on the table, her speech at the same time can be characterised as a combination of phonetic and morphological *zaum'* (this again calls to cubo-futurism). The guests leave the studio; a chemist, appearing alongside the channel's management, makes it clear that the tested product was actually called KD-1, that is, "Red Movement" [Krasnaia Dvizhukha], and that the dosage had been increased by half a millilitre.[12] The possibility is discussed of renaming the show to the "Red Square" [Krasnyi kvadrat]. It should be noted that, as a result, Sil'vestrov's film and Sorokin's text collectively refer to all three of Kazimir Malevich's painted squares – black, white, red.[13]

The skin on the table is rolled into a tube, bent into a ring, and secured with a gold tie-clip, which the TV director inadvertently drops out of a window. Further, through the mediation (identifiable, among other things, as fabulous) of a crow, a truck, a dog and a lame, unemployed man in the Yaroslavl wilderness, the ring ends up with "a big, overweight man" [bol'shoi gruznyi muzhik] (87) Sasha Losev. Losev earns his living by selling fake honey on the church-porch, jars of which

→ vocabulary and *zaum'*; cf, e.g.: Uspenskii 1994, Levkievskaia 1999.

12
[Translator's note:] Sorokin's chemist uses the word *polkvadrata* [half-square] here, a Suprematist reconfiguration of *polkubika* [half-cube], where *kubik* is a medical jargon term for a millilitre.

13
Black Suprematist Square [Chernyi suprematicheskii kvadrat] (1915), *Red Square* [Krasnyi kvadrat] (1915), *White on White (White Square)* [Beloe na belom (Belyi kvadrat)] (1918).

he places on a white, square shield. There is a possible morphological allusion to, then Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinskii (the *med* of Medinskii linking to *mëd*, meaning "honey"), who has repeatedly attracted attention in connection with falsification and deception scandals.[14] Sasha's wife adds the presenter's skin to a cabbage soup [shchi]; after eating the soup, the couple watch the talk show "White Square" on TV (indicated by the "red button" [krasnaia knopka] of the remote control, and "white square of the screen" [belyi kvadrat ėkrana] – 100), and the narrative loops.

It is noteworthy that, at the end of *The Ice Hole*, there is also a return to the beginning: the first frame of the film is the hero sleeping in a sitting position, the ending is his awakening in front of the TV broadcasting the "white noise" of missing signal (that is, also a kind of white square). This narrative frame has a twofold status: the whole film can be perceived as visions of the hero falling asleep in front of the TV; at the same time, the role of the hero is played by Andrei Rodionov, i.e. the author of the play *The Ice Hole*: a narrative metalepsis emerges.[15] According to the plot, Rodionov's character (variously referred to as Afanasy Kitin or Nikitin) is named as a cinematographer; in this capacity on a fictional television broadcast, he participates in a news "special report" [spetsial'nyi reportazh], a "comedy series" [komediinyi serial] and an underwater talk show – participation in which is connoted as suicide. That is, the distancing and defamiliarisation of television is internally tied to the instance of the playwright-writer and cinematographer.

The cinematographic profession is significant not only for *The Ice Hole*, but also for the *White Square* with its dedication to K. Serebrennikov. The "White Square" is also the name of the award for the best Russian cinematographer which has, over the years, been

14
Vladimir Medinskii served as the Minister of Culture of Russia from 2012 to 2020, and to this day retains the status of assistant to the President of the Russian Federation. For many years, Medinskii has been acting as an exposer of myths "denigrating" Russia (among other things, a series of TV shows and popular books *Myths about Russia* [Mify o Rossii]) and a fighter against "falsifications" of Russian history (cf., for example: Interfax 2016); this struggle itself is based on demonstrative contempt for any factuality in favour of patriotic evaluation. At the same time, in 2017 a scandal unfolded around the minister's higher doctoral dissertation, defended several years earlier, culminating in the recommendation of the VAK (Higher Attestation Commission) expert council on history to deprive Medinskii of his academic degree for non-compliance of his work with the criteria of scientific merit (cf.: Chernykh 2017); the presidium of the VAK refused to follow this recommendation. As Sergei Zenkin summarizes: "A propagandist who does not even have a concept of science, received a higher doctorate in historical sciences by deception and, contrary to the →

claimed by films worked on by Sorokin and Serebrennikov.[16] The award was presented twice at the Gogol Centre founded by Serebrennikov, including in 2017, when V. Medinskii participated in the ceremony.

If, for Sorokin's polysemic title, cinematography refers sooner to additional signifiers, then, at the moment of the televisual narrative-loop at the end of the text, there is a directly announced invasion of cinema: the action stops, and the heroes of Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Alex and his friends ("droogs" – 103), enter the studio. In the final scene, Alex gets to *Krasnaia ploshchad'* (i.e., for Alex, "Red Square"), where the May parade of convicts with wheelbarrows is taking place. On the podium of Lenin's mausoleum there are zoomorphs, onto the horn of one of which Alex throws a ring. Alex's act, thus fusing the flayed TV-host and the ruler-rhinoceros – the telecrat, – precedes his signal, upon which the columns begin to move, singing "Victory Day" [Den' Pobedy].

Accordingly, at the level of plot for both Sil'vestrov and Sorokin, cinema, a traditional competitor of television, becomes that medium which insists on its non-relation to television and television viewership. In this intrafabular and intertextual involvement of cinema, one can see the mediological building of a counterweight to television, which also belongs to the "screen-sphere" and is realised

→ general opinion of experts, continues to claim that he is a scientist" (Zenkin 2018: 303).

15
In the play itself, the frame is less explicit, but Afanasii also wakes up in front of the TV in the last scene. The possibility of recoding a TV-viewer character as an author generally corresponds to Rodionov's above-mentioned poetic practice of writing with the TV on. Speaking of metalepsis, it should also be noted that A. Sil'vestrov, the director of the film, plays one of the heroes – the Sea King [Morskoi tsar'], acting as the host of the talk show "The Lower Depths". At the same time, the devotion of this hero to television is by no means unconditional: he releases Kitin-Rodionov and his wife from the television ice-hole, having previously shown him a pseudo-advertisement of the underwater TV kingdom with the help of a *movie* projector (Sil'vestrov: 50:30).

16
The award has been presented since 2004. Nominated films include: 2009 – *St. George's Day* [Iur'ev den'] (directed by K. Serebrennikov), 2012 – *Target* [Mishen'] (based on the script by V. Sorokin), → 2017 – *The Pupil* [Uchenik] (directed by K. Serebrennikov); in addition, Serebrennikov was a member of the awarding jury in 2016 (cf.: Premiia "Belyi kvadrat". Istoriia). Less important contextually, but potentially of polygenetic significance, is the propaganda video studio "White Light" [Belyi svet] (headed by Robert Schlegel), which served the pro-Kremlin movement "Nashi" (also known as "Going Together" [Idushchie vmeste] until 2005). The movement carried out street actions against the "pornographer" Sorokin in 2002 and 2005, cf.: Strukov 2018, esp. 288-304; mentions of "White Light" in the media are found in biographical references about Schlegel; cf., for example: Kommersant 2012.

by showing (as opposed to literary storytelling), and therefore capable of showing television itself from the outside, bypassing semiotic mediation. If we use the aforementioned cinematography award as a reference, then we must understand the "white square" as the unfocused frame in the viewfinder; television is as if cancelled by the commencement of filmmaking.

AVANT-GARDE, EARLY TELEVISION AND THE POLITICAL REVERSAL OF TECHNOLOGY

The metaposition proposed by both works is not, however, limited to the cinematic defamiliarisation and "bleaching" of television (although more will be said about film motifs below). Squares in composition with *zaum'*-like and prosodic speech, as already noted, refer to the avant-garde, and in particular to the Suprematist art of Kazimir Malevich and the poetry of (cubo)futurism. At the same time, it is important to take into account that the texts of the avant-gardists themselves contain reflections and forecasts related to the techniques of transmitting sound and image to every home. In this regard, I will quote several passages from Velimir Khlebnikov's notorious extract *Radio of the Future* [Radio budushchego] (1921/1927), in which interruptions in radio operation are equated with loss of consciousness:

> *[...] today Radio is using its apparatus to transmit images in color, to allow every little town in the entire country to take part in an exhibit of paintings being held in the capital city. This exhibit is transmitted by means of light impulses repeated in thousands of mirrors at every Radio station. If Radio previously acted as the universal ear, now it has become a pair of eyes that annihilate distance. The main Radio signal*

> *tower emits its rays, and from Moscow an exhibit of the best painters bursts into flower on the readingwalls of every small town in this enormous country, on loan to every inhabited spot on the map (Khlebnikov 1987: 394).*

This differs somewhat in tone from Malevich in his text "Cinema, gramophone, radio and artistic culture" [Kino, grammofon, radio i khudozhestvennaia kul'tura] (1928):

> *The next great achievement of technology to be born in the mechanical future generation will make the society of the future rejoice, the two peerless mechanical phenomena: cinema and radio will merge and humanity will receive a surprising, already infinitely great dead infant which will satisfy the viewer both in the field of sound and sight, in the perception of the creative phenomena in the mechanical cinema (Malevich 1978: 164).*

Further, Malevich dwells on the, in his view, negative effect of the arrival of new technology in the house, into private space:[17] "The price of cheapness and comfort [udobstva] **at home** may prove to be very high for man outside his home" (173; emphasis here and henceforth is my own). At the same time, Malevich's text draws from this actual cheapness the following associations:

> *[...] people brought up on the anecdotic peredvizhnichestvo which in its essence, let it not offend anyone, was very far removed from art. The majority of peredvizhnichestvo perceived the world as everyday trash, i. e.* **through the prism of a political point of view, or an orthodox (religious) point of view** *(175).*

17
In explicit reference to TV, the way technology changes the state of affairs "at home" was analysed in the 1950s by Günther Anders (1956) with his arguments about "mass hermitage" [*der Typ des Massen-Eremiten*] (102) and about television as a "negative family table" [*der negative Familientisch*] (106).

Here are presented both "trash" [barakhlo], synonymous with the "junk" [rukhliad'] which is rejected in Sorokin's directorial remarks, and topics of politics/the state and Orthodoxy which are important for this analysis. The "ontoanarchist"[18] Malevich is generally characterised by rejection of both the utilitarian, "tavern" [kharchevoe] state (cf., e.g.: Malevich 2000: 87) and institutionalised religion; it is important that in the given text, criticism of these institutions turns out to be closely related to criticism of "comfortable" home appliances which are identifiable as related to television.[19]

No matter how much predictive speculation is found in discussions about radio and home cinema, such as the above, there is already a technical basis for the construction of such structures, and they correspond to the discourses of technology which, retrospectively and in the nomenclature adopted today, relate specifically to television. For example, the use of the term "radio" in connection with the transmission of images is not a consequence of any lack of words on the part of the avant-garde "futurologist". Television in early discourses was often discussed under the name "radio", and in the early years of broadcasting, presenters from the television screen addressed "radio viewers" [radiozriteli] (cf.: Pravda 1934; Muratov 2011). Sorokin also resurrects this layer when, for example, he uses the word "radio" in relation to devices for displaying images in the story *Blizzard* [Metel'] (2010) or the novels *Telluria* (2013) and *Dr. Garin* (2021).[20]

According to television historian Albert Abramson, against the background of a notable corpus of important patents, the first successful experiment in instantaneous image transmission should be considered G. Rignoux and A. Fournier's operative demonstration of their 1909 installation, which was based on a mosaic of square selenium elements with a mechanical switchboard, a total of 64 squares in one common

square, like a kind of chessboard[21] (Fig. 3). That is, in the first "telecast", square selenium cells, visible to the naked eye, determined both the image and the technique. The "mosaic" of "selenium squares", which was mentioned in 1880 in the *Electric Vision* project by D. Perry and W. Ayrton (Perry / Ayrton 1880), by 1909 formed the basis of an actual working device. At the same time, in order to clearly describe the televisual technology – both mechanical, traditionally modelled on the Nipkow[22] disk invented in 1884, and more advanced cathode technology – they also often resort to the shape of a square as the minimum unit of image transmitted over a distance using electric radio signals. This is despite the fact that, with both mechanical disks and electronic scanners, it is more correct to talk about scanning the image line by line.[23] Only a few years after Malevich's "television" text in the Soviet textbook for school teachers (Fig. 4) we find the following explanation:

> *By dividing an image into a series of horizontal (or vertical) stripes, and the latter in turn into squares […], we can reproduce this picture somewhere else if we connect the black and white squares in the same order (Ginzburg 1934: 38-39).*

That is, early on, television is described as radio, broadcasting white and black squares. In the spirit

18
That is, ontologising nothing; see: Smirnov 2013.

19
Within the framework of Malevich's own system, this affects the entire triad of religious, socio-economic and aesthetic areas of human activity, which are contrasted by being-nothingness [bytie-nichto] (cf. Smirnov 2013: 95-97) as a fourth element, identified with non-objective – unlike *peredvizhniki* – art.

20
For Sorokin's texts, primarily those relating to the 21st century, intensive reference to real and fictional technical objects allows us to talk about a kind of literary techno-ecology; at the same time, both well-known and fantastic devices are usually immersed in the context of the archaic.

21
The "content" of the transmission was static letters; see: Varigny 1909.

22
The Nipkow patent application also contains a definition, crucial to the philosophising of television, of an "electric telescope" as an instrument for observing in a given location an object located in some other place; cf.: Engell 2012: ➔ 26-28. For the technical, "engineering" history of TV, see, for example: Abramson 1987, Abramson 2003, Burns 1998, Urvalov/Pevzner 2015.

23
The smallest element of a digital image, the pixel, already actually has the shape of a square (or rectangle; discussions about the shape of a pixel in connection with the development of standards for early digital television are mentioned, among others, by A. Abramson: 2003: 232). Interesting in the context of the distinguishability of the square pixel, is artist Hito Steyerl's video work *How not to be seen: a fucking didactic.MOV file*, where, as one of the strategies for avoiding video surveillance systems, it is ironically proposed that one "become smaller or equal to one pixel" (Steyerl: 00:06). This is clearly illustrated by the wearing of white and black cardboard cubes on human heads; the pixelated "squareness" renders a person as though tautological to video capture itself. This dialectic of human pixelation and pixel anthropomorphisation also falls into the gravity of Malevichan suprematism.

of McLuhan, one could come up with the – perhaps overly bold – thesis that Malevich painted his squares under the influence of nascent television, as an explication of the amplification of squares by a radio transmission installation (cf. Fig. 5). Characteristically for McLuhan (1964: 314) himself, the viewer engagement required by the "low definition" of television is associated with the fact that "the television image is a mosaic mesh of light and dark spots" and is still "a flat two-dimensional mosaic" (313).[24]

Based on the above, it is possible to fix at least the motific proximity of Sil'vestrov's/Rodionov's and Sorokin's constructions to television as it was known in the epoch of the avant-garde. Of course, Khlebnikov and Malevich are not surprising as likely inspirations for any post-avant-garde, or conceptualist, or post-conceptualist aesthetic quest. In addition, it is tempting to analyse these black and white squares, realising visionary objectlessness, in connection with the idea of the metaphysical emptiness of television.[25] The television screen in a Suprematist context should then be viewed analogously to a postmodern appropriation of the avant-garde form, which translates the liberating "white extracultural activity" [beloe vnekul'turnoe deistvie] (Malevich 2000: 240) into a state of empty simulation. However, to link the shape of the square precisely with the regression of technology to early-20th century levels, an important basis is provided by the same reality of Russian television in the 2010s, which is defamiliarised in *The Ice Hole* and *White Square*. Given through the factual context and introduced at the narrative level as intratelevisual, the theme of Russia becomes key here: Russian television is oversaturated by the Russian state. References to the avant-garde are references to the time of televisual archaisms; but the state, as I will explain below, has an archaising influence on television technology.

24
McLuhan's project of explaining culture through the media-paradigm concentrates on the initial era of now-widespread television; his descriptions of TV can also be considered archaic, although not as deeply as those of the Russian avant-gardists. Cf.: "If anybody were to ask whether all this would change if technology stepped up the character of the TV image to movie data level, one could only counter by inquiring: „Could we alter a cartoon by adding details of perspective and light and shade?" The answer is: „Yes," only it would then no longer be a cartoon. Nor would „improved" TV be television" (McLuhan 1964: 313).

25
In his analysis of the *White Square*, S. Mortensen, relying on the Derridean concept of "parergon", talks about the paradox in which the violence of framing in Sorokin is built around emptiness, represented by both (Putin's) television and Malevich's *White Square*; see: Mortensen 2020, special 165, 169. In the discussion of post-Soviet television by J. Murašov, the metaphysical emptiness of telemediality is contrasted with the verbal semantic completeness underlying Soviet culture; ➔

But first, it is useful to remember: for judgements about Putin's Russia with both a political and cultural emphasis, the common ground is the position on the contamination of television and the state, and the view of television as a constitutive element of the Russian political system.[26] Registering the gradual strengthening of competing TV platforms on the internet, sociological polling still confirms year after year that television is noticeably ahead of the internet in terms of social penetration. For respondents, the most popular commentators on political events, taking into account internet video bloggers, are the hosts of propaganda television talk shows, V. Solov'ev and O. Skabeeva.[27] National unity is realised in the community of viewers, the Russian government remains a "telecracy".

At the same time, if we turn back to Malevich, the state and technology can be considered as systems that counteract each other:[28]

> *[...] there is technology in every system of the State. This is something that has no boundaries in State systems, its invention is outside States, it is free. Were a whole community to spill over into invention, it would be freed from all boundaries, the leader of which is science, and the State itself as a political system would lose its meaning (Malevich 2000: 202).*

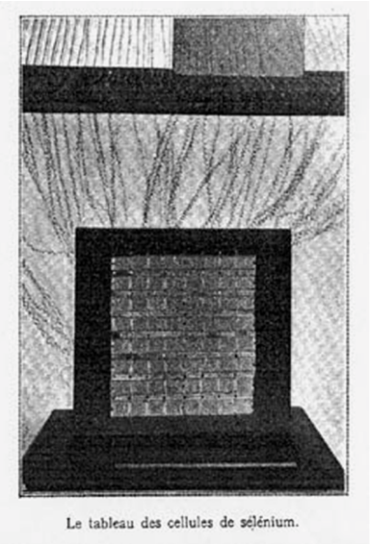
→ see: Murašov 2016: 293-294. At the same time, Malevich's *White Square* can reasonably be associated with a cinema screen; cf.: Smirnov 2009: 60-61.

26
Of specialist analyses, for example, we can cite: Burett 2011; chapters "Das dominante Medium Fernsehen" and "Die 'neue' Fernsehserie als Roman des 21. Jahrhunderts" in: Schmid 2015; and an article on the situation of the 2010s by Tolz/Teper 2018.

27
According to the Levada Center, as of April 2023, television remains the main source of news information for 64% of Russians (in April of the closing window of the "Crimean consensus" in 2018, this value was 85%); see: Levada-Tsentr 2023. At the same time, according to VTsIOM, among the media, television is the most trusted among Russians as of February 2023 (53%), while internet sites, the press and telegram channels do not exceed the boundaries of 35% according to this indicator: VTsIOM 2023; Levada's data on the same indicator for March 2023 gives television close to 50%, but any of the alternatives lags even further behind here (social networks account for 19%).

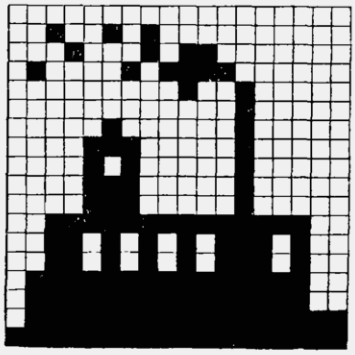
28
For the Russian "techno-anarchism" (as opposed to the ontoanarchism of Malevich himself), manifested most strongly by the brothers Abba and Wolf Gordin, see: Aladyshkin 2020, as well as Kuchinov 2019.

FIG. 3, 4 →



Le tableau des cellules de sélénium.

– белого цвета. Разбивая какое-либо изобр
жение на ряд горизонтальных (или верт
кальных) полос, а последние в свою очередь
на квадраты (черт. 1), мы можем где-ли
в другом месте воспроизвести эту карти



Черт 1

In such a perspective, it is in the interests of the state to impose restrictions on technology and, if this is the case, then the regression of technology may be precisely a sign of the "inclusion" of the state. And in the case of television, this thesis is realised quite specifically. As the whole history of mass broadcasting shows, (global) teletechnics cannot develop beyond (national) television institutions, which are reluctant and slow to raise visual standards; the absence, as in the case of the United States, of state-funded TV channels with a mass audience does not mean the absence of a national broadcasting standard.[29] On a more speculative level, this is also superimposed on Derrida's thoughts, expressed two years after the fall of the Soviet bloc and the Gulf War, about the permanent double movement accompanying television. At one pole is deterritorialisation-dislocation-expropriation-"democratisation" (the mode of technical acceleration); and at the other – the mode of political regression,

29
For the first steps aimed at the unification of television broadcasting in the United States by the NTSC (National Television Systems Committee) in 1940-1941, see, e.g. Abramson 1987: 257-272.

which is also codified as the search for singularities of the "at-home" and, ultimately, nationalism (Derrida/Stiegler 2002: 79-81). It is obvious that *The Ice Hole* and *White Square* reveal in Russian TV a television dominated by the second, regressive line.[30]

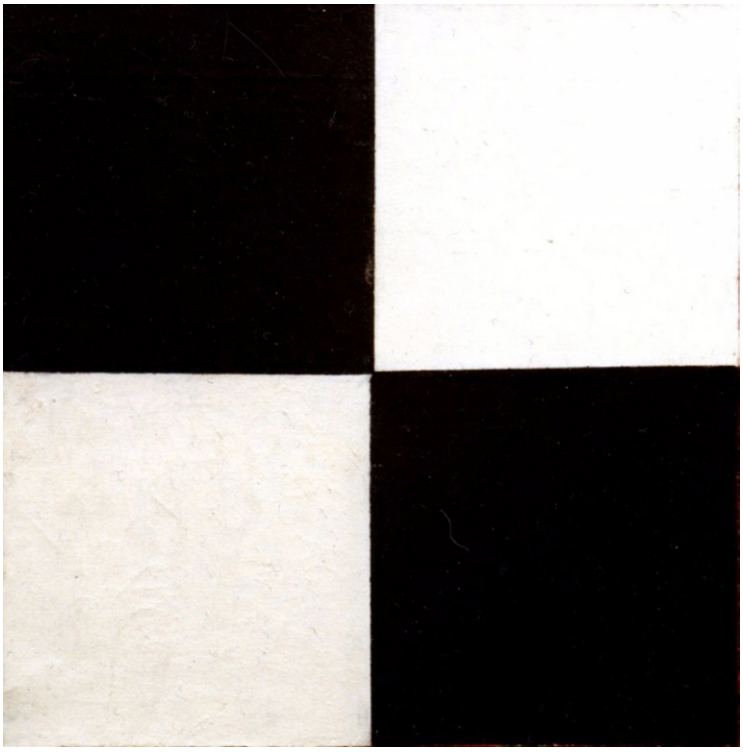
Hence, it is also clear how, in TV-plots from 2017, the positions associated with the opposition to deterritorialisation and "patriotism" correlate with the deceleration in development of television technology.[31] It is shown above that the square has historically acted as the minimum unit of a television image, which means that the dynamics of technical improvement of television can be discussed as a movement towards the ultimate indistinguishability of a square with an ever-increasing image resolution. And the growth of resolution is a movement whose speed is, for television, being held back by state/political institutions. In such pragmatics, aesthetic references to early, elementary forms of television operate to identify reterritorialising, pro-state trends. A square as a televisual pre-geometry is a sign of low resolution, i.e. a sign of regressivity, i.e. a sign of government interference in teletechnics. The same applies to the implicit reference to black and white television (black and white squares, rejection of the "Red Square" as the name of the program). And all other artistic moves, in which television is thrown back into its technological past or, say, acquires fictional archaic parameters, can also be considered as a rejection, not so much of television/teletechnics, as of the territorialisation of television and its contamination with the state.

At the same time, it should also be borne in mind that before the distinct motivational convergence of the state and the regression of TV technology found in *White Square*, Sorokin's early work – above all, the play *Happy New Year!* [S Novym godom!] written in 1987 – focuses on aspects of the very duality of television which Derrida discusses.

30
Cf.: "The more powerful and violent the technological expropriation, the delocalization, the more powerful, naturally, the recourse to the at-home, the return toward home." (Derrida/Stiegler 2002: 80). Derrida, among other things under fresh influence from the fall of Soviet totalitarianism, sees in 1993, when this conversation with Stiegler was recorded, a chance to build "domestic" singularities that break away from the "old" paradigm of "soil and blood" and national states; in relation to this nuance, the Russian material from the 2010s demonstrates the dialectic of acceleration and "reterritorialisation" sooner in the spirit of the same old Malevichian model of state enslavement of technology.

31
Curiously, in France, it was a white square that served on TV as a sign of the state labelling of adult content from 1961 to 1996; cf.: Duccini 2003.

FIG. 5 →



I will focus on this material in detail, as far as the "short" diachrony will allow, in addition to the general medial predestination of the alliance of the state and TV, to trace also the movement towards patriotism at close-range, on the way from Gorbachev's democratisation to Putin's telecracy. Supported by both Sorokin texts, this will show why the victory of the telecracy requires not only the control of broadcasting by the state, but also such regulation of the potential of telemediality as to contribute to the immersion of the viewer in an extremely passive state.

FROM DEMOCRATISATION TO TELECRACY

The play *Happy New Year!*, entirely devoted to TV, explores the "democratic" vector of televisual mediality. Television itself belongs here to the late Soviet period and retransmits the Soviet word: over the course of the play, the TV transmits lines from the New Year's Eve edition of the program *Vremia* (Time), which according to the plot should be dated December 31, 1986. A lonely TV viewer by the name of Rogov mimics these lines throughout the play with obscene rhymes. In the end, five people enter the apartment (a policeman, a vigilante, a soldier, a locksmith and an obvious representative of the KGB), put Rogov on a workbench and dismember [raspilivaiut] him with two circular saws; the pieces of the body are then taken out in a black plastic bag. To a certain extent, what happens later in the *White Square* to the (instigator-)presenter happens here to the (rebel-)viewer.

The play dramatises the TV show as a reading of the stamps of official Soviet rhetoric. The transition from the formulas of the official Soviet language (or from imitations of various literary styles) to obscenity, physiology and violence is generally characteristic of Sorokin-as-conceptualist; describing such a technique, researchers talk about the desemantisation of linguistic signs (Grois 1997: 440-441) or desublimation as a reverse transformation of aesthetic activity into instincts (Hirt/Wonders 1995: 757). However, the story of television does not become a simple variation of this technique. With an emphasis on the pragmatics of defamiliarisation, the strategy of Moscow conceptualism is also formulated through the consideration that conceptualists deprive Soviet signs and images of their ideological charge, placing them in a new, unusual context. Understood in this way, the aesthetic affect directly coincides with the

medial effect of television, which also represents a dangerous and unreliable "context" for the Soviet ideologised word (cf.: Murašov 2016: 291-293). In addition, in the play, the basic situation is also distinguished by a model of everyday verisimilitude: the viewer at home "responds" to a talking TV; the deconstruction of Soviet speech is motivated by placing a lonely hero in front of an apparatus working in his private space, where it is in no way protected from the recipient's mockery.[32]

The "democracy" of this set design is determined, however, not by the obscene speech itself, but by its combination with the characteristics of home television equipment. The aspiration of television in 1986 towards the future, i.e. towards technical acceleration, is emphasised precisely through the technological parameters of television viewership: Rogov is watching the program *Vremia* on a large Japanese TV; to insert his lines, he repeatedly drowns out the voice of the Soviet announcer with a remote-control. Here is a clear exception to the Soviet state standard of television viewership – if not official regulations, then the average parameters of the equipment: the mass Soviet viewer does not know remote-controls.[33] Rogov's remote is useless for zapping, because *Vremia* must be broadcast on all the few operating frequencies without alternative, and yet it becomes an effective device for deconstructing Soviet discourses.[34]

At the same time, although Soviet official speech is read orally, it remains closer to written, newspaper formulas and even directly reproduces passages from the newspaper Pravda;[35] whereas the audience's obscene-parodic, affective "answers" can be attributed to the element of that oral speech, which at the turn of the 1980s and 90s penetrates, with the possible exception of vulgar language, *mat*, into real Russian TV airtime. That is, the media-evolutionary

32
A celebratory dinner alone with the TV once again brings to mind the "negative family table" of Günther Anders.

33
Wireless infrared remotes appeared in some Soviet TV sets in the 1980s (individual models of the 3USST series), but were not widely distributed; cf.: El'iashkevich 1990: 126-134.

34
In some way, Rogov himself is trying to act as an alternative television channel, he seems to achieve success in zapping from the remote control, switching between *Vremia* and himself.

35
In a private conversation, V. Sorokin told me that he constructed the speech from the TV, in combination with the newspaper *Pravda*, and this, for at least some remarks, is confirmed by certain passages from the editorial *Year of Perestroika, Year of Renewal* [God perestroiki, god obnovleniia] and a number of other notes in Pravda dated December 31, 1986 (Pravda 1986). I did not manage to familiarise myself with the broadcast of *Vremia* from 12/31/1986; Sorokin did, at least, notice the program of this evening's broadcasts →

status of perestroika television is manifested in the pragmatics of its relationship with the press, and from this angle, "cutting" [raspil] can be interpreted as an operation to separate the press from the oral telegenic word.[36] Soviet "newspaper" television and the new, spontaneously affective television, presented so far only on the viewer's side (and requiring a good TV), are split, as it were, by Rogov's remote-control. However, Rogov's dissident, anti-Soviet strategy condemns his own consciousness to dependence on Soviet – printed – references. Therefore, to translate television broadcasting into a new language in Sorokin's play, not only is the muting remote-control used, but also the "cutting" of Rogov himself – and this translation is clearly realised in the obscene final line, delivered by the television, i.e. no longer by the audience, in celebration of the new: "Happy New Year, dear fucking bastards!" [S Novym godom, dorogie ebanye gady!] (Sorokin 2007: 153).

The written-printed negative reference is confirmed by the form in which the physical dismemberment of the hero is announced: "Two large metre-long red letters R appear on a white wall" [Na beloi stene poiavliaiutsia dve bol'shie metrovye krasnye bukvy R] (150). In addition to the transcription given in the text (*raspil Rogova*, "Rogov's cut"), in these letters you can also see a direct connection with the program *Vremia*, broadcast at this moment without sound. It is enough to look at the logo of this show in the mid-1980s: the Cyrillic letter "B" [*V*] here has the shape of two horizontal Cyrillic "P" [*R*] (Fig. 6). Interestingly, this conceptualist move by Sorokin seems to insist on the irresistibly literal, linguistic dominance of Soviet television. The logo, it seems, turns the letter into a picture; Sorokin's text includes the possibility of this iconic transition (i.e., again the micro-position of print vs. television) into a motific complex

→ (printed on page 6 of the same issue of Pravda): in the play, as in the newspaper, *Vremia* is followed by a "variety circus performance" [èstradno-tsirkovoe predstavlenie] on the first channel. On the second channel was a "concert from the 'Russian Winter' art festival" [kontsert festivalia iskusstv "Russkaia zima"], which finds mention in Sorokin in the extracts from *Vremia*. It should also be noted that in Rogov's room, "with traces of unfinished repairs", "the floor is covered with paint-splattered newspapers," which supports both the newspaper subtext and the motif of "perestroika" and "renewal"; – [[…] komnata […] so sledami neokonchennogo remonta […] pol ustlan zabryzgannymi kraskoi gazetami], Sorokin 2007: 145.

36
The saw which so frightens Rogov in the television program itself, appears symptomatically in a circus performance which distances itself from book speech; on the motif and intertexts of the saw in the play, see: Zhukova 2014.

FIG. 6 ↑

of cutting, but only for emphasis: while the book/Soviet press remains in power, cutting results in new linguistic graphemes. However, this means defeat not for television (moving into a new phase), but for the anti-Soviet Rogov, who, of course, turns out to be the herald of a new televisual speech, but still does not receive from the author Sorokin a chance for final emancipation – the transition to independent, non-reactive speech generation. As a result, Rogov, dependent on the Soviet text, acts as an avatar of the grapheme and is doomed to perish.

The "sawn" logo of *Vremia*, which lights up on the wall in the form of two Cyrillic "P"s [*R*'s], continues with another division, when at the end of the play the television leaves the TV and the wall itself "flashes with a bright image of a television screen" [vsia belaia stena vspykhivaet iarkim izobrazheniem televizionnogo ėkrana] (153). A completely legitimate view of the matter could here be in association with cinematography, if we assume that the image does not arise *from* the wall, but is projected *onto* the wall. In this case, cinema (as a less explicit motif than later in the *White Square*) also serves here as an indication of a metaposition, an instance, capable of viewing television from the outside.[37] However, taking into account the abusive remarks of the announcers already pronounced from the wall, the liberation of the TV picture most likely supports the logic of deterritorialisation/acceleration/democratisation as it relates to strictly televisual evolution, and in the play is, as it were, a hypertrophy or radicalisation of a leap beyond the limits of state telemediality – anarchic, breaking away from television standards.[38]

The media-archaeological sensitisation of the interpreter makes it tempting to find in the play *Happy New Year!* the same traces of the history of teletechnics as in the *White Square*: a circular saw may

37
It is also possible to pick up the tradition of Soviet television presentations, when almost the entire household situation is reduced to a TV device playing out its competition with print in a private space, devoid of signs of habitation – just this happens in a ten-minute scene from Marlen Khutsiev's *Ilyich's Gate* [Zastava Il'icha] (1965/1988), where a TV, showing a broadcast of children performing musical numbers, sits in the middle of a renovated room covered with newspapers (Khutsiev: 01:30:40); at the same time – like in Sorokin – a phone is used; the characters drink; one of the last phrases of the dialogue is here: "I've known people who didn't succeed – they turned into nothing, slush" [Ia znal liudei, u kotorykh nichego ne poluchilos', ne vyshlo – oni prevratilis' v nichto, v sliakot'] (01:40:00).

38
As an act of desemantisation, staged in front of an "absolutely white" [absoliutno belaia] (145), as it were, Suprematist wall, →

be associated with mechanical television; Rogov's apartment number – 64 – makes one think about a chessboard, an exemplary analogy for understanding television technology; the "absolutely white" [absolutno belaia] (145) end wall, in front of which stands a TV, addresses the entire set of implications of a white square. But if in the examples from 2017, media archaeological signs serve as signs of binding to the past, then for the plots of the 1980s aimed at a "democratic" future, individual elements of telemediality function as a kind of undeveloped constructor with its components on display. The evolution of some of them logically ends in the *White Square*; the works thus turn into a kind of (dialectical) dilogy.

Where *Happy New Year!* reveals the deficiency of Soviet television programs, resulting from the capabilities of televisual technology and from the requests of the viewer using this technology, the *White Square* presents the elimination of the deficit. For example, a remote-control from an early play, suitable only for sound control, is already used in the later text to "flick channels" [poshchelkat' programmy] (Sorokin 2018a: 100). The result of this zapping is only the variability of patriotic affects (the choice between exposures of "ukrofascism" (101) and a talk show about Russia, "White Square"), however, the absence of a direct tautology is enough for the appearance of consumer selectivity[39], which reduces the likelihood of critical, distanced perception. Rogov's commentary acts, among other things, as an elementary compensation for what, from the perspective of the viewer, is missing in the studio, that is, the perceived inferiority of television. From this angle, in the *White Square* and *The Ice Hole*, television appears to be medially fully-fledged. This is reflected in the choice of paradigmatic TV genres: if the official news program is key to Soviet TV, then the 2010s are exemplified

→ such a leap beyond the "televisual grapheme cutting" at this step meets with the asemantic (cf. Smirnov 2013: 110) attitude of Malevich's ontoanarchism: "[...] the word as explaining how to transfer one's condition to another is a naive work of the alphabet. The work that created the alphabet is the same as the work that created the saw; the first thinks to explain everything through his work, the second to saw with, but the non-objective world cannot be explained, nor sawn through" (Malevich 2000: 323).

39
For television and remote control as a "selection machine" that builds the logic of consumption, see: Engell 2003: 64.

by the talk show[40]. The receptive situation is now building itself in such a way that all possible audience "answers" and reactions are contained within the program itself.[41]

Rogov, as already mentioned, builds his speech on rhyming mimicry – often obscene – of the text of a TV show, for example:

> **TV**: *What has been achieved today does not mean that the outgoing year 1986 does not leave us with unresolved problems. They exist in industry and in farming…*
>
> **Rogov**: *And our shit-eating behaviour is fucking alarming…*
>
> **ТВ**: *Достигнутое сегодня отнюдь не означает, что уходящий 1986-й не оставляет нам нерешенных проблем. Они есть в промышленности и в сельском хозяйстве…*
>
> **Рогов**: *И в нашем говноедстве и в распиздяйстве…*
> *(Sorokin 2007: 147)*

Obscene rhymes also appear in the *White Square* – but, crucially, now this speech is not in front of the TV, but in the studio:

> **Anton**. *Because I'm sick of it.*
>
> **Yuri**. *Because it's fucking shit!*
>
> **Irina**. *I'm retching, near puking…*
>
> **Pavel**. *It's bullshit! It's dull, rotten bullshit!*

40
The talk show genre, which is important for post-Soviet TV, at first loses its importance on television in the Putin period with its characteristic reduction of live broadcasts. But with the beginning of Putin's third presidential term in 2012 – that is, when entering the period most relevant in connection with the *White Square* and *The Ice Hole* – talk shows become one of the main elements of "agitainment", i.e. propaganda broadcast in entertainment formats; for more on this, see: Tolz/Teper 2018; about talk shows and the role of "star" presenters: 218-223.

41
A telecratic scene that is not affected by internet comment practices. The iPhone (*White Square*) or "social networks" [sotsial'nye seti] (*The Ice Hole*) mentioned in the 2017 plots do not compete in these works with television consumption.

> **Антон**. *Потому что надоело.*
>
> **Юрий**. *Потому что заебало!*
>
> **Ирина**. *До рвоты, до блевоты…*
>
> **Павел**. *Остопиздело! Тускло и тухло остопиздело!*
> *(Sorokin 2018a: 72)*

Or:

> **Yuri**. *Well? Lurking or jerking off? It's time to know, warriors: honour and roughness are better than honour and revenge. Than honour and flattery. Than honour and news. Than honour and nothingness. And you don't have to go fucking anywhere, ever, under any circumstances! If it's a government matter. Is that clear? Everything is under control, guys! You're free!*

> **Юрий**. *Ну? Молчишь – хуй дрочишь? Пора знать, воины: честь и жесть лучше, чем честь и месть. Чем честь и лесть. Чем честь и весть. Чем честь и несть. И никуда, никогда, ни при каких обстоятельствах ни хуя не надо лезть! Если это государственное дело. Ясно? Всё под контролем, парни! Свободны! (74-75)*

Rodionov/Sil'vestrov's writing is dominated by prosodic speech, and it also entirely comprises rhymes with the TV; Anna Mongait, as an announcer, begins the broadcast with words that determine the construction of all further remarks:

> *allow me now to make a declaration*
> *that today the yard hosts Epiphany celebrations*
> *let this bright day of God's prognostication*
> *bring us love and reconciliation*

> *позвольте сделать извещение*
> *о том, что нынче на дворе Крещение*
> *пусть светлый праздник Божьего знамения*
> *нам принесет любовь и примирение (Sil'vestrov: 4:15; Rodionov/Troepol'skaia 2017: 107)*

At the same time, the audience makes only slow-motion grunts throughout the film. That is if, for Sorokin's Rogov, rhyme is mockery as a response to the television, then in the 2017 texts it is more a formula for immersing a silent passive viewer into a trance-like state (I will focus on the state of the viewer in more detail in the final section). If, in this configuration, the state is directly identified as a speech instance with speaking on TV, then the described situation can also be seen as follows: the book-state (the USSR, "weak", and near to collapse) affectively does not adequately "fill" the TV and requires the deficit to be addressed by the rhymer-viewer; the television state, the telecracy (the "strong" Russian Federation, which has "risen from its knees") is itself capable of a sufficient (on-screen) simulation of dialogue. Moreover, this simulation implies that the telecracy itself does not have a reliable external position in relation to the TV – the state is also a viewer. In Sorokin, this is emphasised by throwing the skin of a TV presenter on the horn of a zoomorphic ruler; in Sil'vestrov, one of the heroes is a viewer identified as a high official, passing by the Kremlin in a limousine to the sounds of slow-motion chimes, merging

with the voices of TV presenters (Sil'vestrov: 23:50). In addition, when Russian President Bulat Tsarev, speaking in verse, is looking for answers to his fateful questions from Pike (29:00), one can see, among other things, a search for truth at the bottom of the ice hole, which again means within a metaphorical TV.

In connection with the dynamics between the texts, the "national question" within the framework of Rogov's dissident speech strategy is also significant; here, too, one can see the original Soviet configuration in relation to (aesthetically defamiliarised) Russian television in 2017. Rogov expresses overt sympathy for the opponents of the USSR in the international arena – he speaks with equal approval of the increase in military spending by the United States and Japan, and supports China, which is criticised in the broadcast (see: Sorokin 2007: 149). On the contrary, the political allies of "the Sovs" [Sova][42], for example, the Angolan troops fighting off UNITA, or the "envoys" [poslantsy] from the GDR (ibid.) come under fire from Rogov. Dissatisfaction with his own drinking comes into contact with the same agenda: Rogov characterises the rum consumed as "Cuban shit" [govno kubinskoe] (ibid.).[43] But at the same time, Rogov's anti-Soviet line reveals ready-made elements of Russian nationalist discourse in its great-power version:

> **TV**: *[...] Here, on New Year's Eve, residents evacuated from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant hazard zone eight months ago are returning. [...] Here on New Year's Eve...*
>
> **Rogov**: *They brought a two-headed freak! Ha, ha, ha! The two-headed topknot [khokhol][44]. The new coat of arms of the Ukrainian SSR, fuck. [...]*

42
Sova – here Soviets.

43
The latter circumstance is also interesting in a more general way: there is a parallel between food consumption and television viewing in the *White Square* but there, food, like television itself, is no longer subject to criticism by consumers/recipients; this will be discussed below.

44
[Translator's note:] This term is sometimes used, with implications of Russian chauvinism, to refer to Ukrainians.

TV: *[...] In 1987, the collective committed to increase brown coal extraction...*

Rogov: *To the size of a Georgian's erection! [...]*

ТВ: *[...] Сюда в канун Нового года вернулись жители, восемь месяцев назад эвакуированные из опасной зоны Чернобыльской АЭС. [...] Сюда в канун Нового года...*

Рогов: *Привезли двуглавого урода! Ха, ха, ха! Хохла двуглавого. Новый герб Украинской ССР, бля. [...]*

ТВ: *[...] На 1987 год коллектив принял обязательство увеличить добычу бурого угля...*

Рогов: *До размеров грузинского хуя! [...] (146)*

In Rogov's pragmatics, these remarks most likely work only as mockery, and the consistent translation into an oral element, of printed Soviet discourses, in this case about the friendship of peoples. However, by the time when, according to ethnogeographic attributions, the hostility which Rogov channels moves "inside" the TV,[45] this type of anti-Sovietism turns into a pro-Russian, pro-state xenophobic message ("ukrofascism" from *White Square*); the game of text and anti-text is usurped by triggers of affective unity of the viewer community, centred on belonging to their borders, to "soil and blood".

This replacement of (ridiculed) internationalism with (quite serious) nationalism is another aspect of the "fullness" of Russian television which, in the TV dialectic of deterritorialisation and patriotism,

45
For the largely eclectic and incoherent aspects of the formation of national issues on Russian TV in the early 2010s (main body: 2010-2012), see: Hutchings/Tolz 2015. In his analysis of TV coverage of the annexation of Crimea, Y. Teper discovers the predominance of ethnolinguistic nationalism (the parameter of "Russianness") over state or imperial connotations (which, however, are also present); however, he makes a key observation about the state monopoly on televisual ethnic nationalism (Teper 2016: 391).

is overtly dominated by the latter, also attaching to itself an explicitly religious, Orthodox affect. In *The Ice Hole* the entire televisual narrative corresponds to Epiphany bathing; in *White Square*, one of the contextual metaphors of TV is a white shield with jars of fake "Orthodox honey" on the church porch. The synonymy of the Russian, Orthodox religious community and the community of viewers[46] that arises here only strengthens the boundaries of the territory that is determined by the coverage of state-standardised television broadcasting.

46
On the media history of the appeal of post-Soviet television culture to Orthodox depiction, see: Murašov 2016: 297-303; on the increasing trend towards (televisual) mutual identification of the state and the Russian Orthodox Church against the background of the scandal surrounding the Pussy Riot punk prayer and the 2012 presidential elections, see Chapter 8 in: Hutchings/Tolz 2015: 194-220.

TELEVISION AS A DRUG FOR MINORS

As shown above, the placement of prosodic speech and folklore motifs inside "full-fledged" TV in the 2010s, firstly, supports on a discursive level archaising, regressive connotations of technology; and, secondly, it implies a regressed, infantile recipient, a child-like viewer. At the same time, neither Sorokin's nor, especially, Sil'vestrov's case is limited to the implication of infantilism by the nature of address – viewers who listen to rhymed and rhythmised speech are purposefully depicted as being in an inhibited, as if hypnotised state. As a result, the motif of television as a hypnotising poison and a generator of hallucinations in the consciousness of a passive, immobilised viewer becomes an important aspect of the defamiliarisation of the Russian telecracy, complementing the regression of technology.

At the dawn of the television era, avant-gardists also talked about technology as a hypnotic poison or medicine. Technosceptic Malevich repeatedly correlates the technique (connoting it as "psychotechnics" [psikhotekhnika]: Malevich 2003: 202, 213) – with hallucinations:

> *[...] to run through technology is to run as a somnolent person who runs in a dream while staying in bed; that is, the matter that makes up the body has not moved anywhere; technical, mechanical hallucinations are moving, and even those move at one point of the brain, not going anywhere beyond the skull (203).*

The TV enthusiast Khlebnikov writes in the previously-quoted fragment:[47]

> *Finally, we will have learned to transmit the sense of taste – and every simple, plain but healthy meal can be transformed by means of taste-dreams carried by Radio rays, creating the illusion of a totally different taste sensation.*
>
> *People will drink water, and imagine it to be wine. A simple, ample meal will wear the guise of a luxurious feast. And, thus, will Radio acquire an even greater power over the minds of the nation. In the future, even odours will obey the will of Radio: in the dead of winter the honey scent of linden trees will mingle with the odour of snow, a true gift of Radio to the nation.*
>
> *Doctors today can treat patients long-distance, through hypnotic suggestion. Radio in the future will be able to act also as a doctor, healing patients without medicine (Khlebnikov 1987: 395).*

Now in the 21st-century, television's claim to a healing effect, in its own way, worries the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who has developed the topic of technology as a pharmacon,[48] that is, structurally acting on the principle of poison and medicine at the same time. The television pharmacon is linked by him to infantilism,[49] in the aspect of both

47
Malevich's negative connotation of hypnosis also has a polemical address to Khlebnikov, who is credited with an unfounded belief in hallucinations: "The poet longingly strives in their hallucinatory dream to achieve the object as perfect, on the one hand, and on the other [they have] a desire to dissolve themself in it. In pursuit of the hallucinated subject in their performances and theory of numerical calculation [a person] breaks themself, drowns, explodes, suffocates" (Malevich 2000: 74). According to Alexandra Shatskikh, who comments on *The World as Objectlessness* [Mir kak bespredmetnost'], Malevich here contrasts "his picture of the universe with Velimir Khlebnikov and his 'theories of numerical calculations'" (355).

48
In 1968, Derrida introduced this concept into the newest philosophical turn, deconstructing the criticism of writing in Plato; see primarily: Derrida 1972.

49
Compare G. Anders' similar intuition about the infantilism of any TV viewer: Anders 1956: 107-110.

a child, defenceless in the face of television, and the infantilising effect of television on an adult. The TV audience is subject to what Stiegler designates as a "generational inversion", in which:

> *the segment designated "minors" becomes prescriptive of the consumption habits of the segment that is ostensibly adult – but is in fact infantilized: adults become decreasingly responsible for their children's behavior, and for their own. Structurally speaking, adults thus become minors, the result being that adulthood as such, judicial as well as democratic, appears to have vanished (Stiegler 2010: 3).*

There occurs an "organized mass regression" (12). Stiegler traces the attention-grabbing mechanism of television to archaic practices, relevant, among other things, in connection with Sorokin and Sil'vestrov: "capturing children's attention began long before such efforts with adults. Since ancient times, these techniques have been applied in early childhood as lullabies, counting rhymes, fairy tales, oral storytelling [...]" (36). At the same time, the skill of prolonged attention, necessary for the primary social identification of an individual capable of criticism and self-criticism, is under direct threat from "telecracy of industrial populism, which constantly attempts to insinuate itself as a new process of referential individuation intrinsically archaistic and gregarious [...]" (60-61).[50]

Arguing in this way about modern psychotechnological infantilisation, Stiegler produces a pharmacological transcoding of Kant's essay on Enlightenment. For Kant, a person who has emerged from a state of minority is distinguished by the ability "to make use of one's own understanding" (Kant 1999: 17); the realisation of such a skill is the public use of one's mind in the form of (written) compositions ("durch

50 Stiegler considers the pharmacological effects of TV in connection with the drives of new capitalist consumption primarily in France, i.e. without taking into account the tasks of authoritarian political acclamation important for Russian television. However, the aspect of medially-conditioned irrational address to "short", pleasure-based attention is equally relevant for understanding TV both in Stiegler's philosophical analysis and in the aesthetic constructions of Sil'vestrov and Sorokin. And in this perspective, it would hardly be informative to distinguish politics and commerce, to divide the TV audience into citizens and consumers, cf.: Ang 1991, special. the section "Audience-as-market and audience-as-public" (21-26).

FIG. 7 →

FIG. 8 →

Schriften" – Kant 1784: 485).[51] If the pharmacon of writing has a poisonous side ("mind's fatal *poison*" – Stiegler 2010: 21), rejected by Plato as a weakening of memory and a temptation towards sophistry,[52] then Kant's maturity is for Stiegler "the *pharmaka*'s proper end" (21). At the same time, the public use of writing, according to Stiegler's reading of Kant, ensures the development of an adult's "critical form of attention" (24), which in fact is directly opposite to the effect of television. In connection with the works discussed here, these provisions correspond to some extent with the medial dynamics in the play *Happy New Year!*, where maintaining a connection with written speech leaves a platform for the viewer to achieve a critical distance in relation to television, albeit one largely reduced to ridicule. For the aesthetic examples from 2017, TV's instantaneous attention-grabbing, which leaves no chance for criticism, and its intuitive pharmacological attribution, seem to converge in the scenographies of spectator trance, psychoactive injections and food intake.

In Sil'vestrov, the hypnopharmacological line in relation to the main character is associated with alcohol, but the work as a whole is dominated by the demonstration of viewers (including children: Fig. 7, 8) who were hypnotised, inhibited, *from the beginning*. Medicamental and digestive connotations also arise at the 35th minute, as the children watch an advertisement for the "best domestic eye remedy 'Ice Hole'", [luchshee otechestvennoe sredstvo dlia glaz "Prorub'"] in which a human eye is shown across the entire screen, as if cured by the screen itself (Sil'vestrov: 34:23). But the eye, apparently, connects to the intestines: the video is framed by a demonstration of naked buttocks, releasing an advertising screensaver like a bowel movement. In Sorokin, after narcotic injections in the studio, it is no less pharmacogenic to liken television viewing to eating (patriotic) cabbage soup, shchi,

51
See also: "But by the public use of one's own reason I understand that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*" (Kant 1999: 18).

52
Cf.: "[...] maturity and immaturity are two possibilities of *the same pharmakon*: of that *hypomnēsia* Plato confronted, faced with the sophistic minoritization of Greek citizenry" (Stiegler 2010: 24).

with the skin of a TV presenter, i.e. (in Malevich's "tavern") assimilation of television occurs with the utmost denial of reflection. Cinema is getting closer to the articulation and distancing of this position. In Stiegler's "pharmacology", television belongs to the class of "temporal objects" (84), which are on the side of toxicity because, among other things, they subjugate the consciousness of time and thereby shorten attention – unlike "spatial" texts, which receive temporality at the expense of their perceiver/generator's own sense of time, and therefore stimulate deep, "long-term" attention. At the same time, within the framework of a tendency towards toxicity, the temporal audiovisuality of cinema, capable of aesthetically transcending its own temporality, approaches that of texts and can be, as it were, an antidote to television: "[...] by all evidence the cinema is indeed an art and [...] like all art it solicits and constructs deep attention and is thereby both poison and remedy" (85).

Sil'vestrov's cinematographer Kitin falls into the TV (and to the bottom of the ice hole) as he falls into alcoholism. In the final scene, the sobered/resurrected hero becomes the only viewer in the film whose attention is not captured by television: transmitting "white noise", the white television screen of the kinescopic TV-"box" is archaic against the background of the other TV-sets shown in the film, marking the ability of the cinematographer (in the person of the hero-operator, but also the entire film *The Ice Hole*) to critically distance, to neutralise TV. Sorokin's agents of cinema, Kubrick's Alex and friends, call the white square of the studio table, on which the presenter was crucified, "moloko vellocet" – in the film,[53] this designation is used for a drug allowed for use by children. The loyal remark addressed to Alex: "You are our droog and leader" [Ty nash droog* i leader*] (Sorokin 2018a: 103) also seems to be a reference to the topic of drugs (in an anagrammatic

53
Sorokin explicitly refers here specifically to cinema; the same motif is found in the novel of the same name (1962) by Anthony Burgess, upon which the film is based. In the final segment of the *White Square*, TV's claim to the assimilation of cinema is also played (the remark about "ukrofascism" is pronounced as a comment on a fragment shown on television from Boris Barnet's film *Secret Agent* [Podvig razvedchika] (1947)); however, the final turn of the narrative returns the cinema to its autonomous status.

connection with the "drug dealer"). Alex from the outside, from outside Russia and from outside television, defamiliarises the very mechanism of distribution of children's/infantilising drugs by the Russian telecracy. In Kubrick's film, during therapy against sadistic tendencies, Alex is physically forced to pay attention, deprived of the opportunity to close his eyes in front of a movie screen – coercion is alien to television, the attention it captures is directly built into (infantile) metabolism.

The technical pharmacon in its televisual formula, which is considered to be losing its influence in the late 2010s, is still useful to study with Russian material. For Kant, adult adolescence is an unforgivable condition, which in Stiegler's retelling receives the status of a "crime".[54] It seems that the aesthetic view does not here differ from the philosophical one: in *White Square*, an infantile TV viewer who has taken moloko-vellocet deserves to be on Red Square under the gaze of zoomorphs, in a padded jacket, with a wheelbarrow. It is noteworthy that radio equipment is loaded into some of the barrows; technological purification/rejection of "radio viewership" is not expected here either.

54
"The condition of adult immaturity, Kant writes, is a kind of crime [...]" (Stiegler 2010: 23); Stiegler, following Kant, repeatedly names laziness and cowardice among the results of television's psychotechnological influence (cf., e.g. 20, 51; Kant 1999: 17).

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Резюме

В статье выявляются связанные с телевидением медиологические контексты в фильме Андрея Сильвестрова *Прорубь* (по одноименной пьесе Андрея Родионова и Екатерины Троепольской; 2017) и в рассказе-пьесе Владимира Сорокина *Белый квадрат* (2017). На мотивном уровне для обоих произведений структурообразующи следующие моменты:

- Важная роль отводится «супрематической» геометрии, квадратам. В фильме квадраты появляются как в визуальных кинообразах, так и в словесных репликах; в литературном тексте полисемичный образ квадрата дискурсивно задействован на всех повествовательных уровнях; в некоторых случаях мотив дополняется прямыми отсылками к авангарду и заумью.
- Через темы вымышленных телепрограмм телевидение увязывается с Россией – с российским государством и его символами; к последним относимы и атрибуты православия.
- В связи с телезрительством возникает мотив инфантильности сознания, совпадающей с его галлюцинаторностью и загипнотизированностью; этот гипноз в ряде эпизодов эксплицитно коннотируется как наркотический.

Отталкиваясь от названных мотивных комплексов, статья, во-первых, останавливается на ключевых моментах фабульного развертывания телевизионных мотивов у Сильвестрова и Сорокина. При этом, в частности, обсуждается внутрисюжетная функция кино, наделяемого способностью противостоять телевидению. Во-вторых, показано, как общность контекстов раннего телевидения и авангардного искусства может быть плодотворно задействована для эстетического остранения имманентности

государства технике телевидения. Регулирование государством телевидения означает для последнего в том числе технологическую архаизацию, то есть регресс к более низкому разрешению картинки вплоть до видимости составляющей ее мозаики из (подобных супрематическим) белых и черных квадратов. Квадраты в такой прагматике могут становиться знаком телекратии. В-третьих, с привлечением материала ранней пьесы Сорокина *С Новым годом!* (1987/1998) рассматривается демократический модус телевидения в его диалектической связи с телекратической конфигурацией 2010-х гг. В-четвертых, речь идет о «фармакологии» российского телевидения, которое у Сильвестрова и Сорокина выступает как медиум регрессии, подобный инфантилизирующему наркотику.

Innokentij Urupin

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