Television in the Laugh-Scape of YouTube

Телевидение в смеховом пространстве YouTube

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This article discusses the function of television and television paraphernalia in the comic videos of modern internet artists in the Russian segment of the online video platform YouTube. It argues that the culture of digital laughter, often deriving from television, represents the next iteration of a satirical resistance to 'high' culture, which recurs time and again in throughout history. The analysis is based on popular video blogs, music videos, video parodies and TV series made specifically for YouTube in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

YOUTUBE, TELEVISION, POP-MUSIC, VIDEOBLOG, SERIES, PARODY, CARNIVAL

Статья посвящена функции телевидения и телевизионной атрибутики в комических видеороликах русского сегмента видеохостинга YouTube. Утверждается, что смеховая дигитальная культура, наследуя, во-многом, телевидению, служит очередным витком в то и дело возвращающемся по ходу истории сатирическом сопротивлении «высокой» культуре. Материалом для анализа служат популярные видеоблоги, музыкальные видеоклипы, видеопародии и сериалы, снятые специально для YouTube в конце 2010-х – начале 2020-х годов.

YOU TUBE, ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ, ПОП-МУЗЫКА, ВИДЕОБЛОГ, СЕРИАЛ, ПАРОДИЯ, КАРНАВАЛ

Many of the genres flourishing on the video-sharing platform YouTube were born on television. Videos, broadcasting the private lives of videobloggers in real time, followed the principles of the reality show Big Brother, and online comedy programmes imitated their TV counterparts. In the Russophone segment of YouTube, television played a double role: on one hand, it became the basis on which the entire (comic) world of Runet[1] was built; on the other, the television became a meme[2] in the digital space, the use of which could give rise to various meanings, but for the most part symbolised enslavement for those authors who searched for freedom of expression on the World Wide Web.

Digital Russian-language humour of the 2010s grew out of other media and depended on television; as much Western as Russian. An increased attraction to the comic[3] began to spread through Russian TV in the mid-2000s, when the channel *TNT* began to show broadcasts of *Comedy Club* (from 2005), and then other shows like *Comedy Woman*, *Stand Up*, and *Comedy Battle*, whose names underscored their imitative character. To this humour borrowed from the West, the internet brought a new specificity and, among other things, a relative independence from censorship. Many television comedians, in parallel to their TV career, participated in alternative internet programmes on which they allowed themselves a freer style of (spoken) behaviour. In contrast to the 'Timid Giant',[4] dependent on editors, electronic laughtercraft opposed official culture by its use of uncensored profanity.

YouTube became the foundation for the so-called 'new Russian humour'[5] which blossomed in Russian popular culture in the 2010s with the advent of video blogs (vlogs), where the subject of ridicule was not so much a reality located beyond internet space, as internet culture

1
[Translator's note: The common term for the Russophone internet]

2
On memes on the Russophone internet, see Savitskaia.

3
The role of the comedy club/production company *KVN* in the formation of the comic genre in Russia has been covered in detail by Ilya Kalinin's and Konstantin Kaminsky's article in this publication.

4
As Edith Efron dubbed television in 1963, noting that the medium avoided 'hot [controversial] issues' even when free from censorship. Her term was adopted by Marshall McLuhan: 'An article by Edith Efron in TV Guide (May 18-24, 1963) labelled TV "The Timid Giant," because it is unsuited to hot issues and sharply defined controversial topics: "Despite official freedom from censorship, a self-imposed silence renders network documentaries almost mute on many great issues of the day."" (McLuhan: 309).

5
The term 'new Russian humour' was coined in Yuri Dud's eponymous YouTube programme, which the journalist →

itself, narcissistically focused on own production. The first Russian programme of this type was the weekly show *+100500*, which began in 2010 with the original premise of adding humorous commentary to videos found 'in the wild' online. Even in this first project, digital laughtercraft was distinguished by its opposition to 'high culture', expressed in particular by its extensive use of uncensored language and choice of obscene themes. Aggressive, obscene humour dominated a variety of programmes on Runet in the 2010s: *Have a Crack* (*Dai leshcha*, 2015), *Big Russian Boss Show* (2016), *Trash Lotto* (*Tresh loto*, 2016), *Scandalous Stories* (*Zashkvarnie istorii*, 2017), *Childish Trash Games* (*Detskie tresh igry*, 2017), *The League of Bad Jokes* (*Liga plokhikh shutok*, 2017), *Comment Out* (2018), *Click Clack Show* (*Klik klak shou*, 2019), and others.

Digital laughter acquired a special function in Russian-language television production in Ukraine in the second half of the 2010s: in the comedy series Servant of the People (*Sluga naroda*, 2015-2019), the plot is driven by a video with an obscene satirical statement uploaded to YouTube. Saturated with Russian *mat*[6], the monologue of history teacher Vasilii Petrovich Goloborod'ko about the contemporary socio-political situation garners millions of views, and the teacher goes on to win election to become president of Ukraine. The television programme, having adopted digital culture, became innovative and transgressed traditional genres, going beyond the framework of just entertaining content: the show's three series (51 episodes in total), which described in detail and with humour the steps of the president-reformer, served as the pre-election campaign of Volodymyr Zelensky, who played the main role.

The laugh-scape of the internet consists not only of conventional comic genres, but also contains so-called vlogs; video blogs dedicated to the everyday life of their authors, often presented in a humorous

→ assembled from fragments of interviews with three diverse contemporary comedians working on the internet: Ilya Sobolev, Ilya Shabelnikov and Alexander Gudkov (Dud 2018).

6 Profanity, coarse language

light. Researchers note that the vlogger tends to style themself as a jester.[7] At the same time, in the 2010s, there was a tendency for the most successful video bloggers to switch to a (quasi) television format: vlogs are increasingly losing their direct character and are approaching television broadcasts. Such vlogs differ from television documentations about 'a day in the life' of young people by their lengthy, unformed 'spontaneous' plot, hypertrophy of youth slang, use of anglicisms, numerous lexical, grammatical and syntactical errors, as well as low humour, replete with obscene expressions.

Aggressive online humour is comparable to the comic forms that existed in antiquity. In the nonconformist 'digital laughter'[8] of Russian stand-up comedians, rap musicians and video bloggers, one can recognise both traces of a folk carnival[9] and echoes of the satirical speeches of vulgar cynic philosophers who styled themselves as the dregs of society. As Peter Sloterdijk writes in his book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, with Diogen's coming into philosophy, 'taucht eine subversive Variante von niederer Theorie auf, die die praktische Verkörperung pantomimisch grotesk auf die Spitze treibt." /.../ So kreiert er /Diogen/, der letzte archaische Sophist und der erste in der Tradition der satirischen Resistance, eine grobianische Aufklärung. /.../ Die tödlichen Pfeile der Wahrheit schlagen ein, wo sich die Lügen hinter Autoritäten in Sicherheit wiegen. Die "niedere Theorie" schließt hier erstmals ihr Bündnis mit der Armut und Satire' (Sloterdijk: 205).

It seems that digital culture serves as another cycle in the recurrent "satirical resistance" to 'high culture'. Focusing on the Russophone context, we can say that digital laughter in the 'Russian world' is similar to the phenomenon that the philosopher Igor Smirnov described as 'Russian grassroots cynicism': 'Cynicism exposes not every truth, but only that which is involved with fallen matter - Thanatos and Eros,

7
On humoristic content in videoblogs, see Borovenkov: 122-128.

8
For an overview of different concepts of the so-called 'digital laughter' that exists in a virtual environment, see Semenova 2019: 47.

9
On the carnivalism of laugh culture on the Russophone segment of YouTube, see Grigorieva 2020. It should be emphasised that researchers of Runet have repeatedly noticed the similarity of the online space with the carnival square. See, e.g. Kostina: 26-31; Savenkova: 33-41; Semenova 2019: 43-64; Pianykh and others. It should be noted that researchers have often imposed restrictions on the applicability of the concept of carnival in relation to the internet, arguing in particular that 'digital humour' is aggressive, whereas carnival aimes to 'reduce intraspecific human aggression' (Semenova 2019a: 225).

being the opposite of a dream [...] Folk indecency is a fact of disappointment in the symbolic order, it is nihilistic not for the sake of changing it, but in a dead-end way, hopelessly' (Smirnov 2020: 155).

"Dead-end" cynicism characterises the entire laugh culture of Runet, including video blogs, comedy shows, stand-up recordings, comic series, video parodies of famous figures in politics and show business, as well as satirical video clips. In my article I try to show, using selected examples, how cynical comic videos on Runet treat the medium of television in general and television paraphernalia in particular.

CARNIVAL-CYNICAL NET VS. 'DOMESTIC' TELEVISION

The tradition of 'satirical opposition' to (high) culture can be found even before the Cynics, in the celebrations of various times and peoples. Among such celebratory rituals were certainly verbal excesses, including parody of authorities and the sacred. As the French thinker of the 1930s, Roger Caillois (239), wrote, '...in fact, the festival not only involves debauches of eating, drinking and sex, but also those of expression – words and gestures. Cries, ridicule, and insults, the give and take of crude pleasantries (obscene and sacrilegious) between the public and a procession that crosses through it (as on the second day of the Anthesteria, at the Lenean rites, at the Great Mysteries, at the carnival, or at the medieval Festival of Fools) /.../ constitute the major verbal excesses'. In contrast to collective rituals of mirth, Diogenes and the other Cynics played out their own individual performances, profaning politics and philosophy.

Musicians, parodists and stand-up comics of the 2010s stylised themselves as 'fuckers'[10] (*uiobki*), alcoholics, homosexuals, paedophiles and sexual maniacs, demonstrating their oppositional behaviour as the

10
An autonym of comedian Danila Poperechny, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfglFWjyTLo>

Cynics had. Their performances humiliated political satire, but in its degradation[11] one can recognise an eclectic mixture of traditions, reminiscent of the style of decadence.[12] In the internet series Nothing Funny (*Nichego smeshnogo*, 2019), Poperechny, who has returned from the headquarters of the United Russia party, lies across the bathtub and urinates on his own face. Here he is comically manifesting the well-known refrain from Yegor Letov's not-at-all comic protest song 'I don't give a shit about my face' (*Mne nasrat' na moe litso*, 1987), and at the same time resurrecting the tradition of the Cynics, who disregarded conventions and defiantly relieved themselves in response to the arguments of their opponents.[13]

However, the 'cynicism' of the internet is relative: online artists do not at all strive to style themselves as beggars and live in a barrel, like Diogenes. An individual cynical gesture is often combined with a carnival feast: both in comic shows, based on the poetics of laughter, and in comic music videos, often demonstrating in a comic form the excessive consumption of alcohol (Drinking in St Petersburg [*V Pitere pit'*], Pure Petersburg Bullshit [*Chisto piterskaia khujnia*], Convertible [*Kabriolet*] by the group *Leningrad*; *I'm Ok* by Ilya Prusikin (from *Little Big*)) and food (*Russian Style* by the group *The Hatters*, *Tacos* by the group *Little Big*).

It must be emphasised that the provocative strategies of electronic artists are commercialised - millions of views are monetised by YouTube and bring real income to those who upload popular videos. This situation makes the internet protest underground part of the entertainment industry. The consumerist orientation of the YouTube protest is often combined with political indifference. Despite YouTube's apparent opposition to official culture, it is sometimes very difficult to separate them. The 2011-2012 project *Thank You, Eva* (*Spasibo, Eva*) was

11
On the forms of degradation of political satire in Russia, see Smola: 172.

12
On decadence in popular culture, see Grigorieva 2018.

13
Cf. the phrase included in the video thumbnail for *Big Russian Boss Show* No. 59 with Ilya Sobolev: 'The Boss opened my eyes by pissing on my face.' Such a cynical gesture was characterized by Sloterdijk as 'gegen den idealistischen Wind pissen' (Sloterdijk: 208), - the German philosopher seemed to anticipate the digital actions of Runet comedians. We should not forget that back in the 1990s, the cynical gesture was characteristic of the so-called 'Moscow actionists': in the tradition of cynicism, one should consider, for example, the action of Alexander Brener, who had sex with his wife on the square near the monument to Pushkin, as well as the dog-man of Oleg Kulik, radicalising the image of the dog-man of Diogenes of Sinop.

created by young artists and musicians who were in poverty in St. Petersburg and, without realising it, had received funding from the Kremlin.[14]

It seems that one of the main differences between the YouTube comic genres and television comedy programs is carnivalisation, which on the internet is inseparable from informality and 'live' contact between authors and recipients. Despite the technical specifics, the digital laughter subculture to a certain extent gravitates towards the carnival type of actions described by Mikhail Bakhtin in the book *The Work of Francois Rabelais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. The internet audience is similar to a carnival crowd, and in number (multi-million views) it is comparable to the collective body of the people, choosing methods of entertainment that are alternative to the official ones.

Originating from the spirit of television shows, humour on Runet flourished in a special media environment comparable to the subcultural underground of the Soviet era of stagnation: the YouTube resource, which allowed any internet user to post videos, was minimally dependent on state censorship and borrowed heavily from English-language examples. At the same time, if the subcultures of stagnation were organized by relatively small underground communities, the internet underground pushed the number of 'initiates' to infinity, and

14 Among the future Internet stars who succumbed to the unknown order were unemployed 26-year-old musician Ilya Prusikin, and unemployed 20-year-old artist Danila Poperechny. As it turned out later, the project was financed with money allocated to Vasily Yakemenko for the development of the Russian segment of YouTube. (For a detailed history of the financing of the Russian segment of YouTube with government money, see the seven-episode series by journalist Andrei Loshak, *Kholivar: The Story of Runet* (*Kholivar: Istoriia Runeta*). But if the *Nashi* movement, supervised by Yakemenko, fought in a fascist manner against obscenities, drugs and gay people, then the guys from Runet were allowed this degenerate art, and perhaps it was encouraged, as the most promising for attracting a mass audience. At some point, the secret sources of funding behind *Thank You, Eva!* was eventually made public by a group of hackers and the project was closed. Bloggers, shocked by their own cooperation with the authorities, claimed that they did not want to get close to ➔ ➔ the state and declared their own opposition. Proof of this opposition was, again, swearing, sexism, and queer poetics. The evolution of *Little Big* has shown that the merging of internet nonconformism with 'official' culture is possible only to certain extents: although in 2020 the group was nominated by Russia for the Eurovision Song Contest, after the invasion of Russian troops in Ukraine, the musicians left the country in protest.

destroyed the boundaries between those who view 'content' and those who upload it. Millions of visitors 'enter' this virtual space every day, many of whom curate their own 'channels,' competing for the number of 'views' and 'likes.' It is symptomatic that one of the popular YouTube genres is the so-called 'reaction video', based on the recipient's narcissism and consisting of video recording oneself watching an internet video, uploaded to YouTube. A 'little window' with the face of the 'reactor' is suspended somewhere in the corner of the screen, so that the person viewing the 'reaction' sees not only the 'original' content, but also its reception, expressed, as a rule, in the form of facial expressions and individual exclamations, often with a *stiob*-like character.[15]

Just as 'carnival does not know the distinction between performers and spectators' (Bakhtin: 15), YouTube does not distinguish between those who upload videos and those who watch them, appearing not just as a platform for the realisation of the artistic inclinations of the masses, but as a 'square', open, as Bakhtin wrote, to the universe. In this case, the universe is represented by the empire of the internet, which has woven its web around the world.

As it expands, the YouTube universe simultaneously, paradoxically, gravitates toward tightness: rap battles and various forms of 'diss'[16] imply 'familiar-square contact between people that knows no distances' (Bakhtin: 25). This humour is also characterised by 'the predominance of the material-corporeal origin of life: images of the body itself, food, drink, faeces, sexual life. These images are given in an excessively exaggerated, hyperbolized form' (Bakhtin: 28). In the case of YouTube, such exaggeration can be interpreted as compensation for the incorporeality of online communication: digital satirists seem to be forced to constantly confirm their materiality to themselves and others. At the same time, there is typically an appeal to the 'collective, ancestral body'

15
Stiob is a form of mocking the subject, usually in his/her presence.

16
From 'disrespect', this in modern rap culture denotes an insult, the humiliation of an opponent in a song or a lyrical competition,demanding a reciprocal display of disrespect.

in the most seemingly intimate plots: when the opposition stand-up comedian and YouTuber Danila Poperechny at his show in the Ice Palace (later broadcast on YouTube) tells the story of excrement stuck in his anus, he firstly addresses the audience: 'Some of you will understand me,' and secondly, he presents his 'shit joke' as an allegory of the current situation in Russia (Poperechny).

However, the carnivalesque nature of Runet is deceptive because, ultimately, we are not talking about the desire to merge with the 'ancestral body,' but about attempts at individualisation and self-expression of individual artists on the basis of public confession of sins, confessions of political nonconformism, foul language, etc. It is significant that the use of carnival elements is combined on the internet with the revival and revaluation of the ancient tradition of cynicism. Pop singers and participants in comic shows implicitly compete in the amount of profanity and references to the lower parts of the body, strive to overthrow cultural and political authorities, and 're-mint' values, like their ancient predecessors.

An example is the internet programme *Scandalous Stories*, which appeared on the YouTube channel of the creative association *Klik-Klak*, including Ilya Prusikin (leader of the band *Little Big*[17]), Eldara Dzharakhova and Yuri Muzychenko. In some episodes of this programme, swearing makes up more than 50 percent of the text, despite the fact that it is removed from the traditions of the carnival, focusing instead on confession: a group of comedians sits at a table and plays a kind of petit-jeu, based on a confessional presentation of obscene stories from their personal lives.[18] The 'petit-jeux' of *Scandalous Stories* not only serially reproduce, profanely, the famous story from the novel The Idiot by F.M. Dostoevsky, but also parody two fixations of the television medium. Firstly, watching programs at home: the characters are sitting,

17
On the place of this group in the 'metamodernist' cultural landscape of contemporary Russia, see Engstrem.

18
The 'true story' in new Russian humour is becoming in its own way a replacement of the anecdote (*anekdot*).

as it were, in the kitchen, there is a refrigerator in the corner of the room and a small spread on the table. Secondly, dependence on the calendar: releases of *Scandalous Stories* (*Zashkvarnie istorii*) in recent years are timed to coincide with the New Year[19] celebration. The 'homely' New Year's program (Fig. 1) turns out to be desecrated[20] with obscene monologues on the topics 'how I shat myself', 'how I pissed myself', etc.

The total reduction of a person to the level of the lower body here 'desecrates' the one who watches another's video confession; and there are millions of them, judging by the 'number of views'. It can be said that such conversations are revolutionising psychotherapy, abolishing psychoanalysis with its symbolism, and offering instead 'real' confession, aimed at saying what is rarely talked about even with close friends. In a certain sense, in *Scandalous Stories* and other confessional genres[21] of online humour there is a cynicism, whose representatives were typified by 'social and philosophical exhibitionism' (Nakhov: 178). However, the forum humour in TV-like YouTube shows is inseparable from a particular kind of domesticity. The similarity to a television program adds a touch of nostalgia to aggressive and profane internet humour: perhaps this is why the obscene *Scandalous Stories* gradually turned into a New Year's YouTube programme.

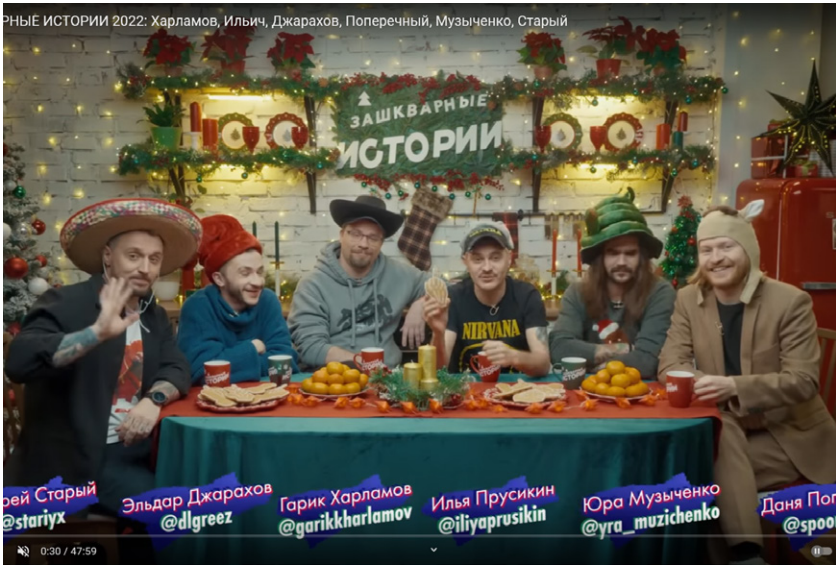
THE MOTIF OF TELEVISION IN LAUGHTER INTERNET VIDEOS

Humorous music videos on YouTube use the image of the TV in different ways: for example, the TV can signal self-reflection by acting as a screen that duplicates the video already being watched by the viewer. At the same time, the TV is often labelled in internet clips as outdated, obsolete or lost in value. So, in the video of the punk-rave band *Little Big*, *Skibidi* (2018, dir. Alina Pyazok, 694 million views

19
To some degree, the technique of timing the cynical television discourse to New Year's Eve inherits the traditions of the literature of Moscow conceptualism: in Vladimir Sorokin's play Happy New Year (1987), on the New Year's Eve, 'official Soviet television turns into the main producer of senseless blasphemy' (Zhukova: 355).

20
Zashkvar in criminal jargon means desecration.

21
On the increase in subjectivity and confession in stand-up comedy and rap texts, see Domansky: 302-312.


РНЫЕ ИСТОРИИ 2022: Харламов, Ильич, Джарахов, Поперечный, Музыченко, Старый
ЗАШКВАРНЫЕ ИСТОРИИ
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рей Старый
@stariyx
Эльдар Джарахов
@dlgreez
Гарик Харламов
@garikkharlamov
Илья Прусикин
@iliyaprusikin
Юра Музыченко
@yra_muzichenko
0:30 / 47:59

← FIG. 1


LITTLE BIG – SKIBIDI (official music video)
SALE
0:31 / 3:12

← FIG. 2

on YouTube), the soloist Ilyich (Ilya Prusikin) moves along a street where old TVs are being sold. The TV screens display the same thing - members of the *Little Big* group dancing the *Skibidi* dance (Fig. 2).

The TV in this video embodies the technical reproducibility of a work of art, reducing its meaning to a parody. The self-irony of the clip is that the members of the group performing *Skibidi*, in a sense, repeat the principles of the 'viral' music video 'Gangnam Style' by Korean artist Psy - similar to how the TV screen reproduces their own movements. The 'Sale' sign means here not only the underpricing of television in the age of the internet, but also a moment of self-criticism by YouTubers parodying something that is no longer news: the Gangnam Style video 'blew up' YouTube back in 2012.[22]

Another use of the TV motif can be found in humorous music videos for songs by the band *Leningrad*. In the video *Candidate* (*Kandidat*, 2017, dir. Anna Parmas. 33 million views on YouTube), the TV marks the ecstatic 'people's element' (*narodnaia stikhiia*) and symbolizes the carnival 'dialogue' of power structures and the national 'grassroots.' A box containing a new TV is the main prize of a raffle held at folk festival organized by the government of the city of Mukhino. At the festival, a merry crowd is waiting for the mayor of the city, but he does not arrive, as he has been put in jail, and a heavily intoxicated person climbs onto the stage instead of the mayor (Alexander Adolfovich "Puzo" Popov):

> ***Puzo:*** *Well, /.../ is everybody gathered? Want a TV?*
>
> ***Everyone:*** *Yes!*
>
> ***Puzo:*** *Well, you'll have a TV!*

22
On the structure of 'viral' videos on YouTube in general, and Psy's *Gangnam Style* in particular, see Allocca.

Having made contact with the audience, and now dancing ecstatically, Puzo performs an incendiary song about the self-styled presidential candidate. At the peak of the communal ecstasy, Puzo releases the promised prize into the crowd; the boxed television, along with the festival manager still clinging to it (Fig. 3).

The fall of the TV marks the transformation of national holiday into orgy: the drunken police squad, falling one by one out of their patrol car onto the road; sexual intercourse in a portable toilet which, due to the intensity of its occupants' passion, rocks and falls to the ground; stabbing a sacrificial animal (cat) for shashliks, etc.

The video for the *Leningrad* song *Monkey and Eagle* (*Obez'iana i orel*, 2016, dir. Andrey Krapivny, 30 million views on YouTube) reveals the connection between television and total surveillance of the personal lives of citizens, spilling into the control of their actions. At the centre of the plot is the television talk show *Blood and Love* (*Krov' i liubov'*), which is hosted by the lead singer of the band, Sergey Shnurov.[23] The main character of the show is Alexander Puzo again, this time playing a husband dissatisfied with family life; the studio has organised a confrontation between him, his wife (Vasilisa Starshova) and his mistress (Florida Chanturia). At the end of the TV program, a mass brawl begins between the show's participants, the studio panel, and the audience. However, the destructive influence of the TV talk show extends beyond the studio, reaching those who are dozing in front of their screens: the parallel storyline of the video clip is the reaction of a viewer who is sitting at home watching TV (Fig. 4), and sees Puzo beating his wife with a Kefal frying pan. At the moment of impact, a TV advertisement appears: a young woman advertises the versatility of Kefal pans. It is this moment that turns out to be the tipping point for the recipient of the broadcast. At the end of the clip, the viewer

23
The show is a satire on the Channel One (*Pervij kanal*) show, *About Love* (*Pro Liubov'*), on which Shnurov had been a presenter.

FIG. 3 →

FIG. 4 →

is choosing a frying pan in the *Catharsis* (*Katarsis*) supermarket and, testing its properties, swings it at an invisible enemy.

The work of television in this clip is inseparable from the work of hidden cameras, which observe not only the everyday life of the married couple chosen for the show, but also the lives of citizens in general. Hidden cameras filmed Puzo beating his wife with a frying pan, his sexual intercourse with his mistress in a restaurant toilet, and the choice of a frying pan by a TV viewer in 'Catharsis.' Thus, the space of a television show is expanded to its limit: the viewer himself is under the sights of video surveillance and, perhaps, will serve as material for the next television showdown.

The clip also shows those who control the countless cameras, reflecting both filming in private apartments and what is happening in the studio. The *Blood and Love* program is directed by a lady sitting in a chair, about as inertly as the TV viewer who has experienced 'catharsis'; both are equally corpulent and sedentary. If, however, in front of the viewer there is only the screen of his home TV, then in front of the director there are several dozen videos broadcasting all the loci that passed before the eyes of the person watching the video for *Monkey and Eagle* (Fig. 5). The woman sitting at the console in front of the monitors gives instructions to the mindlessly obeying crowds in the studio: "Well, bitches, react! Repeat: "u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u-u" (Fig. 6). And the crowd obediently sings in unison.

TV AND THE CLONING OF THE ONLINE PARODIC SPACE

Humour in the parallel world of YouTube almost always exists in duplicate: for every noticeable humorous internet phenomenon, the web creates a parody which 'hangs' in digital space, emphasising the

FIG. 5 →

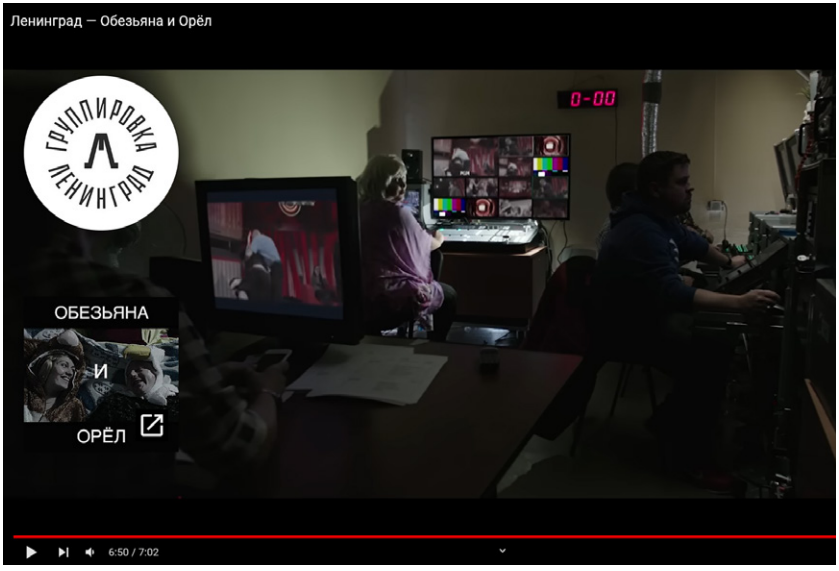

Ленинград — Обезьяна и Орёл
ГРУППИРОВКА ЛЕНИНГРАД
ОБЕЗЬЯНА
И
ОРЁЛ
0-00
6:50 / 7:02

FIG. 6 →


Ленинград — Обезьяна и Орёл
3:50 / 7:02

original. So, the World Wide Web caricatures itself, as if creating a backup copy, and the parody becomes a kind of selfie, strengthening the precarious existence of virtual reality. The obsessive propagation of motifs associated with (negative) narcissism is one of the hallmarks of such autoparodies, signalling the auto-consumerist orientation of online pop culture.

These clips are often critical of TV culture. As an example, consider the parody videos of YouTuber Ilya Shabel'nikov, who took the stage name Satyr: he debuted in 2017 with his own video channel, with the main artistic task of producing costumed online parodies of online and television characters. The bulk of the roles in the parodies are played by Satyr himself, while his task seems to be not just to present a given character of modern culture in a comic light, subjecting individual traits to ridicule, but to 'inhabit' them and create their most accurate copy - a clone, a sort of a deep fake.

In a YouTube parody of the comic music videos of *Leningrad* (Parody #27), Shnurov (performed by Satyr) first appears on a TV screen installed at home, in the kitchen. It can be assumed that the TV motif here hints both at the fact that Shnurov collaborates with television, and at the fact that the band *Leningrad*, although they exhibit their work in the YouTube space, are in fact not spawned of the internet, having originated in the era of the 1990s. In the parody, Satyr plays the roles of both Sergei Shnurov and Vovchik, the IT company employee who hates him. Vovchik's stepfather watches the *News of the Week* (*Vesti nedeli*) program on TV (the 'Cultural Page' segment), changes the channel with the words 'What the hell is going on' and stumbles upon 'normal music' (*normal'noe muzlo*): a new (and fictional) hit by *Leningrad* '*ChZPKhB*' is being broadcast on TV (vocals: Satyr, Sonya Tayurskaya).

Further, according to the plot of the video, all media equally express the people's will by broadcasting super-popular 'muzlo:'[24] passengers dance on the bus to music flowing from smartphones, employees of an IT company dance on tables to a song coming from laptops, the author of the hit himself - a clone of Shnurov - sits in the car and listens to his own song on the radio. Television accompanies the theme of cloning here: one medium clones another (TV screen / smartphone / laptop / radio), a parody personality clones a real one (if the clone Shnurov is similar to the real Shnurov, then the rapper ST performed by Georgy Bolonev is indistinguishable from the original).[25]

Parody #37 of the popular YouTube program *What Happened Next* (Chto bylo dal'she), made by comedians working on the TNT channel, mocks the poorly hidden TV orientation of imaginary YouTubers. The video ridicules the amalgam of TV and YouTube, demonstrating its impossibility. All the comedians participating in the show are played, or rather, cloned by Satyr:[26] a clone of satirist Nurlan Saburov kisses the foot of a cleaning lady from the TNT channel because she cleans the office of producer Vyacheslav Dusmukhametov every day; a clone of satirist Alexei Shcherbakov holds a drawing depicting a heart with the inscription TNT (Fig. 7.) to his chest.

In collection of parodies, Satyr unsuccessfully competes with the *Channel One* (*Pervij kanal'*) comedy show, *Evening Urgant* (*Vechernij Urgant*), which posted its regular TV episodes on YouTube almost every day until February 21, 2022. The futile rivalry with *Channel One* gave rise to the desire to symbolically destroy their rival: in Parody #25 (2018), Urgant is fired from *Channel One*, goes crazy and ends up under psychiatric supervision. The mainstream television journalist is shown as a narcissist, pathologically prone

24
[Translator's note: Similar in a sense to 'muzak;' a colloquial and somewhat derogatory synonym for music.]

25
The clip on the whole serves as an advert for the band Little Big: the clone of rapper ST (a real-life collaborator of *Leningrad*) advertises a Little Big concert, and the quasi-*Leningrad* song is performed by Tayurskaya, Little Big's vocalist.

26
The theme of cloning is also emphasised in the advertising integrated into the video: comedian from *What Happened Next*, Rustam Reptiloid, must identify the 'real' comedian, Tambi Masayev, from a pair of identical people, one of whom is a clone (all three are played by Shabel'nikov).

to auto-communication: in the story he interviews himself. He also embodies television according to Efron/McLuhan, as the video plays up the fear with which the 'timid giant' treats controversial topics: the Urgant clone throws knives at the Urgant clone, and stuck to the knives are pieces of paper with 'hot' topics from the political life of Russia. However, the victim skilfully dodges these 'hot topics.'[27]

Parody #39 (2020) mocks the star of the modern Russian pop scene, YouTuber Alisher Morgenstern, who has made it a rule to shock the public with an exaggerated passion for money,[28] and in his videos he actively uses offensive language and aggressive obscene gestures aimed at the viewer. Morgenstern's video clips have multi-million views on Russophone YouTube, but the parody shows him in an unexpected capacity - as a television star: according to the plot of the video, Morgenstern performs a song on the New Year's program *Blue Light on the Shabolovka* (*Goluboj ogoniok na Shabolovke*) and at the same time, as stated in the description, 'restarts the career of the country's main media personality.' Morgenstern, as well as being the country's main media personality, is played by Shabelnikov. In the corner of each frame flickers the cloned logo of the *Russia 1* (*Rossiya odin'*) TV channel.

Satyr's videos are parodies of a new quality, revealing the diversity of the comic potential of internet fake-culture and demonstrating the mystifying principle of acting, when a satirist does not just parody individual, outstanding features of their character, but seeks to impersonate them such that an inexperienced viewer can seriously conclude, watching these clips, that they are faced with the real Shnurov, Urgant or Morgenstern. 'Fake' is a new quality introduced into the humour of online culture: the creation of a copy, at first glance, indistinguishable from the original, but in fact a reproduction with a shift, 'inverting' its value.

27
It should be noted that Ivan Urgant indirectly responded to this parody by inviting a colleague of Shabelnikov's, YouTube comedian Danila Poperechniy, to his program (episode #1184, 2019) and arranging a hot-sauce tasting competition with him: after testing each sauce, he had to immediately deliver a 'sharp' political joke with a burning mouth.

28
Researchers characterise Morgenstern's aesthetics as 'an avant-garde challenge to the public on behalf of a capitalist' (Fedotkin), comparing and contrasting the pop singer and blogger with, in particular, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergei Eisenstein and Dadaists.

FIG. 7 →

THE TELEVISION IN RETROTOPIA:[29] THE YOUTUBE SHOW *INSIDE LAPENKO* (*VNUTRI LAPENKO*)

Political futurism, that is, reforming the order of the past and designing the future, determined the composition of the television series *Servant of the People*, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. Researchers have noted parallels between the Ukrainian series and television series from Russian producers,[30] but the influence of *Servant of the People* on the Russian YouTube laughter culture has not been analysed. Here the fundamental difference between Ukrainian laugh pop-culture of the second half of the 2010s and Russian laugh internet-culture of the same period is striking: Ukrainian futurism, programming the future, albeit within the framework of comedy, is opposed to retrotopia in the Russian YouTube space in the late 2010s. The most striking

29
The term 'retrotopia' was introduced in the book of the same name by Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (see Bauman). On retrotopia in the context of Russian culture, see Starovoytenko: 125-135.

30
See the contribution of Ilya Kalinin and Konstantin Kaminsky to this publication.

example here is the comic YouTube series *Inside Lapenko* (2019–2020), which corresponds in some details to the television series *Servant of the People*; however, unlike the Kyivan example, it does not program the future but plunges into the past, into a fantastic retrotopia.

As in *Servant of the People*, the TV motif plays one of the central functions in the plot of *Inside Lapenko*, but, again unlike the Ukrainian series, the tool of media propaganda is fantastic and nostalgic, inheriting not an agenda, but images of art and memory. The series is designed in the style of amateur filming of the 1980s and parodically resurrects the memory of the culture of this era.[31] All the main characters of the series are played by Anton Lapenko, an actor from the troupe of the Moscow *Stanislavsky* digital theatre. Initially, he filmed short humorous video sketches about characters from the 1980s and 1990s on a smartphone camera and uploaded them to Instagram, and after these videos gained popularity, he brought his characters together into a single series. The narcissistic encapsulation of the plot, centred on a single actor, corresponds to the stoppage and regression of time, which does not move forward, but slides into retrotopia.

The symbol of the parodic resurrection of the past in the series is the television. The series is oversaturated with fantastic television programs,[32] parodying television of the era of perestroika: Channel Nine Information News, the *Expire or Die* (*Sdokhni ili umri*) program about survival in extreme situations, the *Mystery of the Hole* (*Zagadka dyry*) program, parodying Leonid Parfenov's[33] *Recently* (*Namedni*) program, and television advertising that flows into modern internet advertising (of the Aviasales website or voice assistant 'Alisa' from Yandex). The characters are divided into those who make television and those who consume television content, but the boundary between these categories is blurred, and the consumer can appear on the screen

31
For detail on the resurrection of the memory of 1980s-1990s culture in *Inside Lapenko*, see my article: Grigorieva 2022.

32
Perhaps the 'television' poetics of the YouTube series *Inside Lapenko* is due to the fact that this series was produced by a representative of the TNT television channel, Vyacheslav Dusmukhametov, who is actively involved in capturing the Russophone segment of YouTube. Under the auspices of Dusmukhametov, such comic programs as *What Happened Next*, *Shucking Awesome Fow* (*Oshuitel'noe Khou*), and others are flourishing on Runet.

33
Lapenko speaks of this in an interview on Yuri Dud's show. Having recognised the parody, Parfenov interviews the actor-YouTuber himself, while trying to reproduce the caricature of himself (*Namedni*: PS series).

FIG. 8 →

FIG. 9 →

← FIG. 10

← FIG. 11

at any moment, and vice versa: the director of the television channel quits and becomes a school teacher, whose classroom has a TV. As the plot develops, almost all the heroes in one way or another claim to seize political power in this fantasy world.

For the most part, the plots intertwined within this parody series are related to television: thus, at the centre of the film narrative is the conflict between the director of the television channel, Richard Sapogov, who is focused on making money through TV advertising (Fig. 8), and the TV journalist Yuri Grachevich, hungry for exposure (Fig.9). The struggle between these two parodic TV-personalities carries into the romantic sphere, in which they both lay claim to 'the beauty' Tatiana Vosmiglazova (Fig. 10), who cannot communicate in human languages and can only make strange, birdlike sounds.

The television in the series *Inside Lapenko* turns out to be a fantastic object of nostalgic Soviet furnishings: sometimes it can only be turned on with pliers (Fig. 11). However, when people are far away, the televisions in the series have the ability to turn themselves on. For example, when the Engineer leaves the room, the invisible camera he was just talking to remains in front of the TV, which turns on to display the show *Mystery of the Hole*. The main character, called the Engineer, is Christ-like in that he is naive and sinless, considers all people good, including bandits, and blurts out that he is already 'saved.' While giving a tour of his apartment in the second episode, he introduces the invisible camera operators to his television; it is showing messages from 'presidential candidates,' prompting the Engineer to comment:

> *I don't know, they show these candidates all the time. Their faces look as if they were made into photocopies… Country, country… We will save the country… Why save us? Why save the country? Why, in general,*

> *are you, candidates, here on this earth, well, walking around our, well, country, at least showing up in our country when… well. We live well, we have carpets, we installed a sofa, and they still want to save us? Why save us? I am saved.*

The Engineer's apartment is similar to that of the teacher Goloborodko from *Servant of the People*: the same carpets, wardrobes, curtains on the windows, TV… In Episode 6 of Season 1, Goloborodko's drunken father gives a tour of the apartment for a potential buyer, which is almost repeated in *Inside Lapenko* by the Engineer. Both the Engineer and the Teacher are so-called 'little people' of low social origin. The difference is that if Goloborodko is waiting for change, and from the very first minutes of the first episode he calls for reforming his country, then the Engineer is not ready for this for a long time, calling instead for humility.

Aggression lurks in the Engineer's unconscious: preaching non-violence, the Engineer shoots the leader of the Iron Sleeves gang, leaving him in a wheelchair. In addition, the Engineer works at a research institute, where he invents a 'dangerous mutagen' that turns rats into people and back. It is no coincidence that the Engineer's face appears on the TV screen, which stands in the basement of the Iron Sleeves gang next to a fragmentation grenade (Fig. 12), and with his beret the Soviet hero caricatures the revolutionary Che Guevara (Fig. 13).

In more recent episodes, it turns out that the Engineer has a double - the authoritarian ruler of a Russian town called Podbolotsk. The Dictator, like the Engineer, is similar to Che Guevara (Fig. 14). This similarity, among other things, again recalls the television series *Servant of the People*, in the sixth episode of which, Che Guevara appears to Goloborodko in the form of a hallucination and seduces him into

FIG. 12 →

FIG. 13 →

radical changes to the state apparatus (Fig. 15). The political struggle in the internet series *Inside Lapenko* turns in on itself, stalling in an absurd narcissistic digital retrotopia. The television performs an essential function in this fruitless struggle: without the television, the actors cannot keep abreast of events. It plays the role of a kind of social network; it is on television that the bandits learn the latest news, and the policeman draws up-to-date information from the 'box.' A sign of extreme poverty in the series is the moment when there is only one TV left in the room: TV journalist Yuri Grachevich, who hosts the program *Mystery of the Hole* and has cancelled advertising on his TV channel, eats 'branch soup' directly from the pan, looking at the TV (Fig. 16).

All the characters in the series are unfinished, having the capacity for endless transformation, including the television journalist who headed Channel Nine in place of Richard Sapogov, who is not true to his principles: Sapogov cancels the program *Mystery of the Hole* and turns Channel Nine into the Ninth Children's Channel after he finds out that his mistress Tatyana Vosmiglazova is expecting a child. The girl is born in the final, 8th episode of season 3. At the very end of the series, it turns out that the 'significant other' (*osoba*) that the Engineer loved was a figment of his imagination. This suggests that the rest of the characters were also hallucinations. In the opening credits of each episode, a fictitious recording date is indicated: 'rec. date - 1 September 1986.' If we consider that September 1, 1986 is the day when Anton Lapenko was born, then we can interpret everything that happens on the screen either as a comic reconstruction of the prenatal memories of the author-actor, or as the endless process of his birth, encapsulated in one day.

Nostalgia for the past is compared in the series with nostalgia for television technology: while watching the multiple series of *Inside*

FIG. 14 →

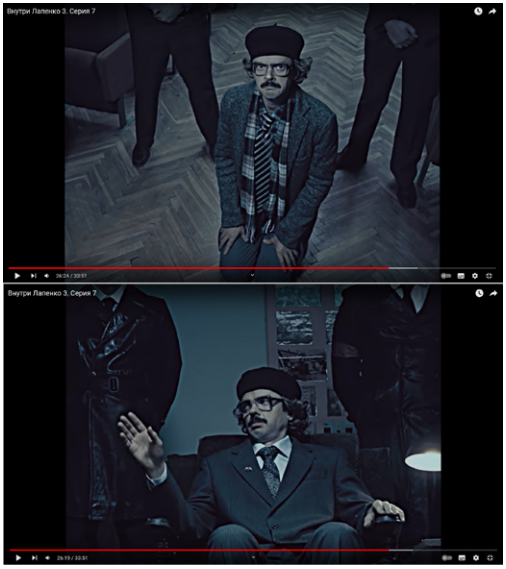


FIG. 15 →

Lapenko, the viewer sees a whole gallery of antique television devices, even fantastic ones, but the more outdated the device seems, the more details of modernity shine through in it: here is the *Sapfir* (Sapphire) TV , showing Richard Sapogov playing computer games (Fig. 17), and there is even a home-made device which receives internet television streaming from the Megafon company (Fig. 18).

One of the ideas constituting this retrotopia is, apparently, that all forms of media are interchangeable and, although, as they go out of fashion and are consigned to the storehouse of history, they serve one purpose – the creation of a single (networked) information space, the embodiment of which is in this case the universal actor Lapenko.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: THE SUNSET OF PERSONAL AUTONOMY

The television is a symbol of private space. It is capable of 'domesticating' even authoritative discourse, broadcast daily in news programmes like *Time* (*Vremya*). In a sense, the television 'domesticates' time, reflecting it in the movement of events in which a viewer can participate without leaving their seat.[34] This comfort of broadcast time, softening the hopelessness of its flow, was subtly captured by Moscow Conceptualist Erik Bulatov, in his 1984 work *Programma 'Vremya'*, depicting an elderly woman sitting in an armchair in front of the television (Fig. 19). The show *Inside Lapenko* reproduces this scene in the fourth episode of the second series (Fig. 20), introducing a third person to the idyll of the 'woman and time,' the Engineer, attesting to the benefits of being at home:

When I go outside, there's always something happening… One thing, then another… There are always adventures of some kind… That's it, I've had enough for sure. I'm done, I'm [staying] home. And another

34
Gunther Anders (1956) wrote in this regard about the formation of a type of mass hermit ('The mass-produced hermit came into being' – Anders: 15), which at home is supplied not only with gas, electricity and works of art, but also with real events: 'The consumer goods by means of which such a transformation of human nature is achieved are brought into our homes, just as is gas or electricity. The deliveries are not confined to artistic products, such as music or radio dramas; they also include actual events, at least: those events which are selected and processed to represent "reality" or to serve as substitutes for it.' (Anders: 19).

FIG. 16 →

significant other came to me… There she is, sitting… So you keep it down, she's watching TV there, all sorts of interesting programs.

The television (as with the radio) replaces the clock; you can check the time by it, because the course of programmes is subject to the calendar and the day/night rhythm. On the internet, on the contrary, time disappears: social networks, blogs and internet shows work without a schedule, so you can't miss your favourite programme in them, which, when uploaded to virtual eternity, remains there forever until it ends up in the archive.

YouTube, unlike TV, takes the subject outside, into the network space, even if they communicate with only selected 'friends.' The internet is a symbol of triumphant publicity, total disclosure of everything and everyone even at the moment of private correspondence (for example, tracking users with 'cookies'). The abundance of pop-ups continually

proliferating on the screen makes communication with the internet unpredictable, unlike television communication, where everything goes according to a pre-planned schematic. The television dictates the daily routine, acting as a forerunner of electronic gadgets that 'help' a person to solve everyday problems, including programming their calendars. But the TV does this not according to the will of the consumer, but to the will of the producer, who determines the sequence of programmes.[35]

No matter how different TV and YouTube seem in this comparison, their intertwined development in recent years testifies to the same socio-cultural process: the collapse of personal autonomy. The individual no longer has a shelter; trapped in a network, they are viewed from all sides, and, as the experience of fighting the pandemic has shown, even in their own home: in the bedroom, in the living room, in the toilet… The means of covert surveillance, once placed by secret service agents in the apartments of political dissidents, are becoming mandatory for existence in human society, where every person is a potential dissident. TV and YouTube are two regulators; if the first regulates from the outside the rhythm of life and fears of one part of the population, then the second lures another part of humanity into the trap of imaginary freedom, turning life into a video exhibition of worldwide 'views.' The only weapon that could be used in resisting this video aggression was, in all likelihood, laughter. However, this tool was also taken away from the population: after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, humorous programs on both TV and YouTube either ceased to exist[36] or lost their comic meaning.

Translated from Russian by Thomas Drew,
funded by Dr. August und Annelies Karst Stiftung.

35
On the power of television to 'keep society within its framework, and reshape it', see Smirnov 2009: 264.

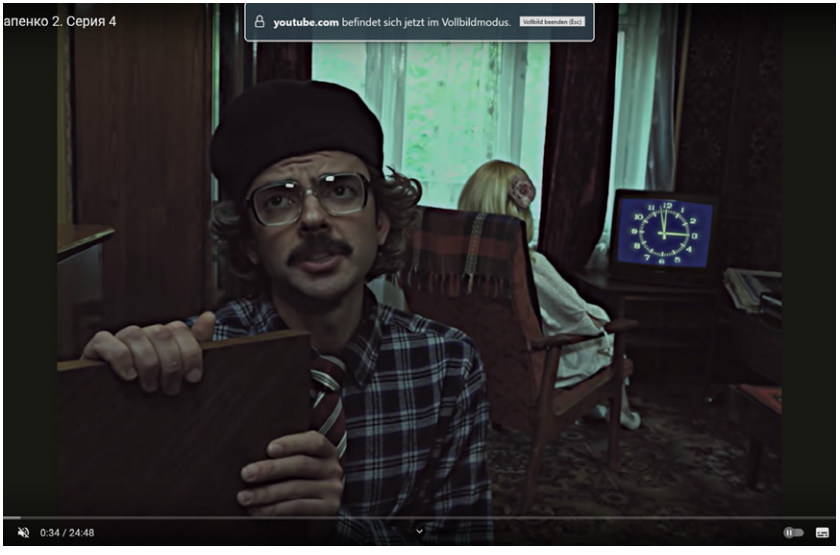
36
As an example, the cancellation of the show *Evening Urgant*, first aired in 2012, and the mass exodus from Russia of political stand-ups and bloggers.

FIG. 17 →

FIG. 18 →


ПРОГРАММА
ВРЕМЯ

← FIG. 19


апенко 2. Серия 4
youtube.com befindet sich jetzt im Vollbildmodus.
Vollbild beenden (Esc)
0:34 / 24:48

← FIG. 20

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Резюме

Эпидемия смеха начала распространяться на русскоязычном телевидении в середине 2000-х годов, когда на ТНТ появилась программа *Comedy Club* (с 2005 года), за которой последовали другие шоу - *Comedy Woman*, *Stand Up* и *Comedy баттл*, которые своими названиями подчеркивали подражательный характер. Русскоязычный интернет привнес в юмор, заимствованный с Запада, новую специфику и, помимо прочего, относительную независимость от цензуры. Многие телевизионные комики одновременно участвовали в альтернативных интернет-программах, где позволяли себе более свободный стиль (речевого) поведения. Одно из главных отличий смеховых жанров YouTube от телевизионных юмористических программ - карнавализация, которая в сети неотделима от нонконформизма и "живого" контакта между автором и аудиторией. Какими бы разными ни казались телевидение и YouTube, они оба стремятся регулировать общество: телевидение манипулирует желаниями и страхами одной части населения, а интернет соблазняет сообщество мнимой свободой - свободой превратить индивидуальную жизнь в видеоинсталляцию, выставленную в мировой паутине "просмотров". Эпидемия смеха противостояла этой тотальной видеоагрессии, высмеивая ее тем или иным способом, вплоть до начала 2020-х годов.

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