Luminous Heroes for Dark Times: Transculturation, Cosmopolitanism, and the Go-Between as a Double Agent in Channel 'Russia-1' Minseries 'The Optimists'

Блестящие герои тёмных времён: транскультурация, космополитизм и двойной агент-посредник в мини-сериале телеканала "Россия-1" «Оптимисты»

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This article focuses on the Channel 'Russia-1' Miniseries 'The Optimists', shown in two seasons in 2017 and 2021. It analyses the miniseries to demonstrate how, even within the highly restricted authoritarian media environment that persists under Putin, television drama can play a subliminal political role in foregrounding modes of transculturation that bring Soviet and post-Soviet identities into productive dialogue with the Western Other against which they are habitually defined. This dialogue is conducted across several axes – temporal, spatial and representational – and navigates a complex and oscillating path between the value zones of diplomacy, patriotic/treacherous double agency, and cosmopolitan universalism. The framing context of the current war in Ukraine adds new relevance to the future potential of such phenomena to restore mutual engagement between Russia and a Western world from which it is presently alienated.

TRANSCULTURATION, OTHERNESS, DOUBLE AGENCY, ESPIONAGE, COSMOPOLITANISM, GO-BETWEENS, DIPLOMACY, TELEVISION DRAMA, MINISERIES, SOVIET UNION

Статья посвящена мини-сериалу *Оптимисты*, вышедшему в двух сезонах на телеканале Россия-1 в 2017 и 2021 гг. Анализ демонстрирует: даже в условиях авторитарной медиа-среды, сохраняющейся в период правления Путина, телевизионный драматический фильм может функционировать как подсознательный политический инструмент для актуализации процесса транскультурации, в результате которого выстраивается продуктивный диалог советской и постсоветской идентичностей с «другим» западной культуры, обычно им противопоставляемой. Диалог ведется по нескольким направляющим – временной, пространственной и репрезентационной и балансирует на сложной траектории между сферой дипломатических условностей, патриотической/предательской двойной агентностью и космополитическим универсализмом. Контекст продолжающейся войны в Украине придает сериалу дополнительную актуальность, раскрывая потенциал указанных феноменов на путях восстановления связей между Россией и западным миром, находящихся сегодня во взаимном отчуждении.

ТРАНСКУЛЬТУРАЦИЯ, ИНАКОВОСТЬ, ДВОЙНОЙ АГЕНТ, ШПИОНАЖ, КОСМОПОЛИТИЗМ, ПОСРЕДНИЧЕСТВО, ДИПЛОМАТИЯ, ДРАМАТИЧЕСКИЙ ФИЛЬМ, МИНИ-СЕРИАЛ, СОВЕТСКИЙ СОЮЗ

DARK TIMES

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 plunged Europe (and the western world) into something resembling (or, arguably, worse than) the darkest days of the Cold War. Then, democracies faced a repressive, totalitarian Soviet Union prepared to invade countries considered part of its 'zone of influence', justifying its actions to its own population with spurious propaganda narratives, and with the constant threat that such aggression might provoke a nuclear conflagration. Censorship, growing under Putin well before the assault on Ukraine, is now approaching Soviet levels (creating suspicions that restrictions introduced in the war context are permanent). Mutual acrimony between Russia and the West is, if anything, greater than at the height of the Cold War as evidenced by the Kremlin's stoking of a hitherto unprecedentedly visceral, civilizational anti-Westernism (Umland 2022).

Indeed, throughout the late Soviet period, ideological and military rivalry aside, the West was often regarded as an implicit economic and cultural, if not political, aspirational model. In the post-Stalin era, various diplomatic and cultural exchanges, along with a transforming global communications landscape, facilitated slow improvements in inter-bloc relations. Debates around the cause of the collapse of the USSR remain unresolved, but most scholars acknowledge the long-term impact of Soviet citizens' fascination with the artefacts and values of western culture played in undermining faith in Marxist-Leninist ideology (Evans 1993; Brown 2004); even late Soviet state television began to reflect the appeal that romanticized images of European lifestyles held with its audiences by producing several popular adaptations of foreign literary classics, including the legendary Sherlock Holmes and *Three Men on a Boat* mini-series (Hutchings and Vernitski 2005).

Thirty years after the dissolution of the USSR, amidst Russia's destructive conflict with Ukraine, and with a few brave exceptions, those Russian citizens who retain any lingering admiration for Western values have either fled or been cowed into submissive silence by Putin's ruthless propaganda machine. Access to alternative information sources is severely restricted, though in a digitally networked world of smartphones, VPNs and social media channels, the restrictions are not fully effective (Tsikhanenko 2022). Meanwhile, Russian outlets are unavailable in western media space and some of Russian cultural figureheads have been subject to controversial bans inspired by solidarity with Ukraine and the belief that responsibility for what has happened goes beyond the Putin regime (Ackerman 2022). Contact between Russia and the western alliance been reduced to a bare minimum on all levels, from official to unofficial.

The outcome of the war seems unpredictable and distant. Short of regime change in Moscow, normalization of relations will require more than the cessation of the conflict, the removal of economic sanctions and the reestablishment of diplomatic channels. Such is the mistrust between many ordinary Russians and their counterparts in Western countries whose values they have been taught to fear and loath in equal measure that it is difficult to imagine any future reconciliation for decades to come. Ultimately, it will take the patient rebuilding of cultural, business, and institutional ties below the level of the state for anything like normality to return. Here, the figure of the alternatively overlooked, mistrusted, and derided intercultural go-between will need to play a critical role. In the absence of any sign of the re-emergence of such figures for the Russian context, this article explores a related initiative belonging to the immediate pre-invasion phase in Russia's relationship with its Western other.

The project in question may seem ephemeral in the light of the epochal events of 2022. Yet the issues it raises, the historical events it references, the cultural processes it illustrates and the strategies it employs, all have resonant meaning for Russia's present situation, for its future relationships with its current adversaries, and its identity as a nation. My overarching conceptual framework centres on notions of the intercultural go-between as the primary agent of a transculturation process that differs both from intercultural dialogue (which presupposes exchanges between two or more discrete cultures) and cosmopolitan universalism (dependent on principles that apply without differentiation to all cultures), whilst drawing on both. I apply the go-between function both to the individual figure of Mikhail Idov, and to the audio-visual text, 'The Optimists', which he created, and which was shown in two parts on Russian state television in 2017 and 2021.[1]

"TRANSCULTURATION, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND THE PERILS OF GO-BETWEEN DIPLOMACY

Go-betweens play a vital role in enabling communication, shared understanding, and collaboration across human cultures with their infinite differences and mutual blind spots. Jobs and Mackenthun (2013, p.7) remind us that 'for thousands of years … communication between members of different cultural groups has depended on translators, diplomats, traders and other specialists with knowledge of both and sometimes more than two cultures.' As they clarify, 'the need for such go-betweens has … increased' in the modern age of globalization (ibid.). Rather than a contemporary world bearing the imprint of Western empires with their imperial/subaltern structures and centre-periphery relationships, they posit 'a brokered world full of contradictions

1
Series 1 of 'The Optimists', which featured a screenplay by Misha Shprits, was shown on Russian state television channel in 2017, outperforming all other programmes in its schedule time slot (Fry 2017). It was released on Amazon Prime with English subtitles in the same year. Series 2, shown on Rossiia in 2021 with the subtitle 'Caribbean Season' (referencing Cuba, the site at which a character from Series 1, Korneev, was blackmailed into becoming a CIA sleeper agent, was directed not by Idov, but by the film director, Aleksei Popogrebskii.)

and divisions' (ibid). It is go-betweens whose 'positions betwixt and between cultures, nations, states, or identities' have engineered this situation which enables them to 'overcome the notion of cultures as being separate and hermetic entities' (p. 14). Their brokering capacity amounts to more than assimilating the different and alien into what is familiar and 'same', since they enact change in each context: 'People living in-between cultures and constantly having to juggle their lives between different cultural codes could shape the character of these contact zones in carving out a space of agency that is also potentially a site of change' (ibid.).

This account of is consistent with Malinowski's (1995, viii-lix) explanation of transculturation as 'a process in which both parts of the equation are modified … from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon'. It also complements Raj's (2016, 40) characterisation of go-betweens as 'cross-cultural brokers' who forge 'sustained exchange between different and disparate cultures', confirming the 'inextricably enmeshed nature of cultures across the world'.[2] Highlighting how go-betweens 'actively articulate relationships between disparate worlds by being able to translate between them' (44) and noting that a key sub-branch of go-betweens carry out their role by 'representing the other through texts, images or maps' (42), Raj stresses the 'performative character of these brokers' projects.' The two functions are important for our purposes, providing the context both for Idov's creative output, and for his tendency to inscribe his own biography into it. Raj's identification of the distrust go-betweens attract (p.45) is also relevant to Idov's situation.

There are affinities linking the go-between to the cosmopolitan, including their shared capacity to reside within and navigate multiple cultural contexts. The preferred version of cosmopolitanism in this

2
I adopt the term 'transculturation' rather than 'intercultural dialogue' or 'cultural mediation' because it better reflects Idov's efforts to accommodate his aesthetic to a globally hyper-networked world whose national boundaries are eroded by digitization – a project thoroughly inimical to the Sovereigntist spirit of Putinism.

article does not embrace a transcendent 'global culture' in which local specificities are traded for overarching, universalist principles. Echoing the concept of transculturation, cosmopolitanism 'refers to a mode of becoming that lacks singular origin, modifies its structure with each iteration, recognizes no boundary and abjures any prescribed direction' (Papastergiadis 2011, p. 10). Like transculturation, it does not envisage cosmopolitan practices as transcending specific contexts via universals to which only they have access, or oscillating between bounded entities to which, as go-betweens, they can never truly belong. Instead, it conceives of boundaries as 'semi-porous and flexible' (p. 2). When taking advantage of such porosity, cosmopolitans enter not an abstract realm of universals but a 'third culture – globality, world culture' which 'does not … exist as an overarching culture or global lingua franca, but … a medium of translation … embedded in local cultures' (p. 9). Far from adopting a meta-language (and meta-culture) allowing them to abandon the particularity of the lingua-cultures they are mediating to form a cosmopolitan 'community apart', go-betweens experience each of those lingua-cultures simultaneously from the inside and the outside (p.13), as a preface to renewing both.

Cosmopolitans and intercultural translators (including diplomats) recognize in one another kindred spirits with related identities, shared goals, and common milieus – those of the admired yet derided go-between. This alignment of missions oils the wheels of transculturation. Whilst in abstract (normative) theory cosmopolitanism is less transcendence than a hybrid of in-between-ness and both-otherness, in (descriptive) practice it functions precisely as a distinct grouping of go-betweens from different backgrounds who collectively inhabit an intersection of peripheries, in which difference is navigated and cultural transformation enacted. Thus, official inter-state diplomacy

hardens and institutionalises the fluid dynamism of transculturation in its authentic mode, with more informal forms of cultural diplomacy, and certain shared, cosmopolitan lifestyles, fulfilling a mediatory role. The permanent threat that such forms might merge into espionage, double agency, and national betrayal indicates their precarity, and the suspicion they attract.[3]

In 2017, a glossy new miniseries that offers remarkable insights into the complex processes outlined began showing on, of all places, Russian state television's Rossiia Channel: 'The Optimists' (*Optimisty*), created by Latvian-born Russian Jew, Mikhail Idov, who having grown up and worked in the United States, now resides in Germany. Idov has acted out the go-between role in deliberately self-conscious manner, fully integrating with the New York lifestyle, but spending extended spells in Russia, London and elsewhere; working for Russian state television, the Russian edition of *GQ* magazine, and the 'Snob' project aimed at the globalised Russophone elite (Hutchings 2022, pp. 123-45). The narrative settings, plots, and characters of his artistic output (he is a novelist, television producer, film director and feature writer) are deeply autobiographical, exhibiting the very cosmopolitan values and practices he adopts himself. His dramatic heroes flit between world metropolises, adapting culturally, aesthetically, and linguistically to each of them whilst confidently enriching the individual locales with their own manners and styles.

Prior to 'The Optimists', Idov's aesthetic was best represented by his 2015 miniseries 'Londongrad'. Centring on a fictional version of a real London agency established to offer advice to Russians visiting London, the drama centred on the fluent, English-speaking agency owner, Misha, who used his knowledge of the local context to resolve various conflicts and dilemmas encountered by his Russian clients Misha and

3
The link between diplomacy and espionage is a Cold War legacy, but it dates back further than this (Vagts 1956). It has been fictionalised extensively in the novels of John Le Carré among others.

his colleagues thus offered the show's domestic audiences a multi-levelled intercultural experience. They gain insights into London and its inhabitants at a time of heightened tension between Russia and the UK (the show aired a year after the annexation of Crimea); each episode featured a stylized direct-to-camera mini lecture from Misha on an aspect of English culture linked to the episode's specific plot – tea drinking; private education; Oxbridge; cricket – and chosen from the repertoire of English stereotypes, now filtered back to them via a 'tour guide' given by an acculturated compatriot. Conversely, in the character of Misha and his co-workers, those same audiences are offered an image of Russianness inflected with global style and metropolitan London manners.[4]

Transculturation of the sort epitomized by 'Londongrad', and by Idov's international lifestyle, has always attracted hostility, ranging from denigration of 'rootless cosmopolitans' and 'global elites', to suspicions of national treachery. Indeed, Idov was removed from the latter stages of 'Londongrad' for political reasons, as the overarching narrative pursued in the series acquired an increasingly 'patriotic', pro-Russian flavour; like the *telenovela* format it reflects, 'Londongrad' adopted a dual narrative structure in which each individual episode constituted a self-contained plot contributing to a single, continuous story concluded in the last episode (Hutchings 2017).

DIPLOMACY, GO-BETWEENS, AND THE THREE AXES OF TRANSCULTURATION

The role performed by Idov and his artistic activities partly intersect with that of informal, cultural, diplomacy. In representing a stylish, independent-minded, and enlightened image of Russianness on the

4
For a fuller analysis of Idov's 'Londongrad', see Hutchings 2017.

international stage (although not screened in the UK, 'Londongrad' attracted largely positive British media attention)[5], Idov's drama strove to ameliorate the highly negative views of the Russian state that have dominated British public discourse since the 2006 poisoning of Aleksandr Litvinenko (peripheral elements of whose story are reworked in one episode of 'Londongrad'). At the same time, the photogenic London backdrop to the high-paced action, and its sympathetic treatment of Londoners, mediated back to viewers a benign picture of Britain that belied overwhelming state media hostility to it.

The formal function of a diplomat is more unequivocally that of a servant of a single state than is the case with Idov's loose, transactional contract with Russian state-aligned television. Indeed, especially where Putin's Russia is concerned, the status of diplomat is often used as cover for espionage (which is why mutual expulsions of diplomats generally follow inter-state disputes). Nonetheless, as countless Cold War spy thrillers confirm, because of their need to assimilate to the local context, spies masquerading as diplomats are highly susceptible to defect to the enemy. The fact that their work, like that of the *bona fide* non-aligned go-between, demands ambiguity as to their ultimate allegiance provides cover not just for state espionage, but for multiple levels of agency – double, triple and beyond. Unsurprisingly, then, for his next major collaboration with Russian state television, Idov turned to the subject of diplomacy proper.

Unlike 'Londongrad' which is set in a thoroughly modern, digitized present, 'The Optimists' seeks inspiration in the distant Soviet past. It is part of a more generalized re-valorization of the Thaw period on Russian television of the 2010s, having been preceded by the critically acclaimed Channel 1 series, 'The Thaw' (*Ottepel'*), directed by Valerii Todorovskii, which aired in 2013 and whose high-production

5 See, for example, ITV 2015.

value, nostalgic aesthetic also drew comparison with 'Mad Men' (Seitz 2016). It thereby adds a new temporal axis to its multiple transculturation functions: representing the Soviet past through the lens of the post-Soviet present and vice versa, as well as mediating across, and transforming geocultural spaces by hybridizing them. This in turn deepens the semiotic potency of both the action depicted in the series, and the series as a cultural phenomenon. One reason is the implicit parallels that it draws between earlier East-West tensions (it deals directly with, the 1961 Cuban Missile crisis) and Russia's new semi-Hot War with the West; the fact that 'The Optimists' aired 5 years before the invasion of Ukraine means that the geopolitical comparisons now assert themselves with greater force than at the time of screening. This process is enhanced by a third axis of transculturation present only notionally in the earlier drama: that of the fiction/reality relationship. Most episodes of 'The Optimists' revolve around a historical incident or event, retold with varying levels of fictional embellishment. This enables the drama to explore the interplay between audience fears (of the return of the real threats depicted) and desires (that the generally happy, fictional resolutions to these threats might be actualised).[6] The configuration of these three axes provides the core of my approach to the series.

6
The classic theoretical work exploring the structural relationship between fiction, desire, and deceit – a three-way articulation which defines Idov's 'The Optimists' – is Girard 1976.

THERE WAS AN OPTIMISTIC FUTURE, ONCE

Idov's 'The Optimists' centres on an experimental new unit established in Khrushchev's Ministry of Foreign Affairs at a time when the Soviet Union was emerging from the shadow of Stalinism into, on the one hand, a brief period of domestic reform and social change, and, on the other hand, a dangerous game of nuclear rivalry with a United

← **FIG. 1**
Ruta Karlovna Blaumane

States itself still tainted by McCarthyite paranoia. Staffed by talented young linguists with foreign backgrounds, the unit aims to gain a deeper understanding of the Soviet Union's Western rivals with the purpose of surpassing them in the Great Power games preoccupying both sides. It is headed by a glamorous young Latvian woman, Ruta Karlovna Blaumane, a committed communist who had returned to the Soviet Union from the United States where she had been living in emigration, and where she has left a son by another husband (she is now married to a Soviet Army officer) (Fig. 1).

As she puts it to her staff (Episode 1) 'We need a new diplomacy for a new global era. We need new, young specialists to teach our diplomats how the West thinks'. Nonetheless, her innovative techniques requiring emulation of and engagement with the Soviet Union's adversaries, attract suspicion within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

and she is soon replaced by a Kremlin traditionalist with KGB links, but someone with his own personal history of ambiguous relationships with Westerners (in his case, a German female journalist who is assisting a Soviet dissident writer).

The Khrushchev period invokes not only heightened tension with the West, but also the post-Stalin Thaw – a distant antecedent of, and inspiration for, Gorbachev's perestroika reforms. In one episode, a young employee of the experimental unit celebrates his acceptance into the Communist Party with an exuberant assertion that, untainted by Stalinism, his generation can look forward to building a promising, progressive, and enlightened future. 'To be a communist is to be an optimist' he declares (Episode 6). The series title thus signals its complex symbolic function in mediating temporally between the repressive Soviet past and the freedoms brought by the fall of communism, and between the repressions linked to communism and Putin's authoritarianism, but also, by extension, the hopes harboured of a post-Soviet future beyond Putin and based on engagement with, rather than paranoid fear of, the West. That function is performative in the sense that Idov is not merely drawing parallels between the optimisms of past and present, but actively *harnessing* the former in support of the latter.[7]

Apart from the Cuban missile crisis itself, individual episodes cover real events such as the shooting down over the Soviet Union of US pilot Gary Powers, the launching of the space capsule containing two Soviet dogs (Fig. 2), a coup plot against Khrushchev, a meeting involving Foreign Minister, Mikoyan, with a Chinese delegation to Moscow, the building of the Berlin Wall, as well as fictional incidents broadly consistent with the history of the period, including the smuggling out of the Soviet Union of a novel depicting life in Stalin's gulag, and the mooted defection to the West of a group of Soviet sailors rescued by the American navy.

7
Performativity originally refers to 'the power of language to effect change in the world … language does not simply describe the world but may … also function as a form of social action' (Cavanaugh 2015). I adapt the concept to capture how Idov's audio-visual 'description' of Thaw-period optimism is designed to 'act' on the present by infusing it with that same optimism.

← **FIG. 2**
Two Soviet dogs trained for launch into space

The chilling authenticity of such crises (and their parallels in Russia's present-day relations with its adversaries) activate the 'reality' axis of mediation and its link to 'fear'. Meanwhile, the engaging romantic encounters and sparkling, light-hearted dialogue of the protagonists activate the countervailing fiction axis with its links to 'desire'. In all cases, the action centres on behind-the-scenes initiatives taken based on the special unit's intimate understanding of Western practices to resolve the crises, mitigate, or defuse the threats they pose, and ensure that the Soviet Union gains maximum PR benefit from the outcomes.

FROM DIPLOMACY TO DOUBLE AGENCY

Far from challenging Kremlin power, and despite concerns raised among the Soviet security elite about its methods and its members, the

imaginary experimental unit is motivated by patriotic support for the Soviet Union. It is this that enables its informal, unconventional diplomacy to border on, or stray into, traditional espionage and, given the frequent need to dissimulate and hide their true intentions, forms of double agency. Early episodes conclude triumphantly with denouements celebrating, in the semi-humorous mode that is Idov's directorial trademark, the skills shown by the young diplomats in outwitting, distracting and sometimes deceiving their Western peers, ensuring that the Soviet Union emerges in a positive light (the Gary Powers incident, Episodes 2-3; the Soviet space dogs, Episode 7); achieves diplomatic success (Episode 3 focuses on an initiative to foster inter-state cooperation via a French-Russian film collaboration) or averts negative publicity (the sailor defection story, Episode 5; the Cuban Missile crisis, which overhangs Series 2).

Unsurprisingly, and in keeping with 'Londongrad''s political trajectory, when, following the success of Series 1 of 'The Optimists', a second series was shown, the focus shifted from experimental diplomacy to *bona fide* espionage, and double agency. From the beginning of Series 1, the Latvian émigrée, Blaumane, endures a tense relationship with Biriukov, the loyal Kremlin protégé who ousts her as head of the new unit. In a revealing statement (Episode 12) he asserts that 'Our department was created to make the US think we are like them. Now, we are about to show that we are different'. Prior to this, the activities of the Strategic Action Group (SAG) unit depart from diplomatic norms, often crossing over into outright deception and subterfuge; they enthusiastically agree to lie to the US press to deceive them into writing a denunciation of the KGB based on information received from the defecting Soviet sailors, only to humiliate the journalists by producing the sailors at a Soviet-organized press conference in which the

← **FIG. 3**
The young diplomats of the SAG unit, planning a new subterfuge

defection is revealed to be a hoax (Episode 5) (Fig. 3). Even here, all is not quite as it seems. Seen from the viewpoint of the drama's American audience, the exquisitely executed trickery of the US media highlights the deep flaws in conventional Cold War otherings of the Soviet foe, attributing to the enemy the panache and style of the American Self.

Likewise at the end of Series 1, a plotline that carries over into Series 2 is seeded in which the CIA plant 'sleeper agents' among the Soviet political elite and 'wake them' to acts of betrayal against the Soviet motherland. This is the reverse mirror image of Blaumane's arrival in the Soviet Union and an illustration of how bicultural/bilingual practices and heritages can mutate into either the reinvigoration of patriotic endeavours, or treacherous betrayal. In the fictional time-gap between Series 1 and 2, SAG has been rebranded as the unit 'responsible for communication with foreign powers', its original experimental

FIG. 4 →
Dmitrii Nesterov and his Russian-American lover, Alex, in New York

diplomacy function, transforming into one of propaganda and information warfare. Series 2 is a more conventional 'spy thriller' than Series 1, and one whose celebration of skilled, ethical Soviet espionage practices and whose denigration of scheming, duplicitous American (or US-sponsored) agents is more aligned with the 'patriotic' parameters imposed on Russian state television drama under Putin.[8]

Nonetheless, the ambivalence of double agency is retained in Series 2 of 'The Optimists', whose 'disguise' as a conventional pro-Soviet spy drama belies its continued subversion of official state Cold War narratives. Series 2 thus itself performs a covert, multi-layered act of 'double agency'. This is evident in individual subplots which contradict the main narrative thrust. One of these revolves around an original SAG employee blackmailed by the CIA over compromising acts he committed in Cuba during his youth into serving as a 'sleeper agent' and providing

8
As reported by the state-owned Mosfilm Studios in which Series 2 was filmed, during the shooting, the production team were visited by Mariia Zakharova, the hard-line official spokesperson of Putin's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Shemeleva 2019).

his American masters with top-secret information. The open betrayal connoted here, however, is contradicted by the main narrative which explores the complex, tense relationship between Dmitrii Nesterov, head of the new MID unit, and an American female art gallery owner of Russian origin, Alex, whom he loves (Fig. 4).

During a conversation with Nesterov, Alex asserts 'I don't like this country.' To Nesterov's response, 'It's a different country now', Alex's rebuttal – 'Are you sure about that?' – is accompanied by shots of KGB agents who are clearly following them (Series 2, Episode 3). Her question applies not just to conventional Soviet assumptions that the Stalinist stain on the country's past was erased by Khrushchev, but also to the idea that post-Soviet Russia has cast off the burden of the repressive Soviet surveillance state. By eroding the pre-Thaw/post-Thaw distinction, Alex's geopolitical intermediation (she is allied to the security apparatuses of both the US and the Soviet Union) performs a secondary temporal intermediation as she invites comparison between Khrushchev's Soviet Union and Putin's Russia.

Because it overarches multiple subplots promoting patriotic pro-Soviet perspectives on geopolitical conflict with the USA, Alex and Dmitrii's central narrative of transculturation as reconciliation effectively cancels the effect of the former. Both are go-betweens in their own right: Alex as a Russian émigrée living in America but frequently visiting Moscow; Nesterov as a high-ranking MID official in love with a foreigner, and an equally frequent visitor to New York, where the action in the second series begins. Despite constant tensions in their cross-national romance which seems to suffer a permanent breakdown when it emerges that Alex is working for the CIA, true 'love' combined with a shared commitment to international peace eventually prevail as Alex and Nesterov collaborate in a desperate (and successful) bid

to overcome the misunderstandings that have led their respective nations to the brink of nuclear war. The series which has, throughout, featured dialogue in both Russian and English, concludes with a soundtrack consisting of a medley of Russian and English songs, confirming the victory less of the Soviet Union, than of the very unconventional forms of diplomacy characterising the work of the now defunct SAG.

MARKETING DESIRE ACROSS BORDERS

The harmonic conclusion to Series 2, whilst in tension with the increasingly pro-state trajectory of Idov's project, dovetails with Idov's own optimistic belief in diplomacy as a mode of transculturation capable of enacting change to each of the cultures subject to the activities of the go-between. The parallels between the authorial and narrative planes (the title refers both to the plot of the series, and to the outlook of its creator) is characteristic of the hall-of-mirrors structures that permeate Idov's creative work, enabling him to imbue it with layers of symbolic meaning and thereby elude the constraints imposed by the political context of his go-between activities.

The bilingual medley closing the series serves another purpose: that of the dual marketing of the project to both Russian and anglophone (primarily American) audiences. Unusually for Russian television drama, 'The 'Optimists' received mainly positive publicity in the anglophone press when it was shown on Amazon Prime (Fry 2017; Roth 2017). Sold to markedly different audiences, the series was obliged, therefore, to appeal to divergent political sensibilities. An emphasis on the eventual achievement of inter-state harmony, the attribution of conflict to intercultural misunderstanding and the bilingual script

← FIG. 5
The nostalgic Mad Men aesthetic, transposed to Khrushchev's Soviet Union

and soundtrack all meet the goal. This phenomenon highlights a dilemma facing all go-betweens: the search for a common language capable of accommodating the different registers subject to transculturation. We will return to that dilemma.

For now, however, let us note a linked feature of 'The Optimists': its adoption of the 'Mad Men' aesthetic so popular with American television audiences. Nostalgia for 1960s Retro fashion was a phenomenon in the anglophone West before 'Mad Men' which, however, propelled it to new levels. Its glamorous cast spurred new enthusiasm for 1960s hairstyles, music, office attire, interior décor optimism, rapidly improving living standards and the general ambiance of hope associated with that era.[9] By meticulously recreating the realia, appearances, and styles of the Soviet generation of the same period, Idov is experimenting with a multi-layered form of cross-cultural desire: replicating Russian

9
For an overview of the Retro phenomenon, see Guffey 2006. For Mad Men Retro, see Baruah 2021.

nostalgia for the optimistic outlooks of Khrushchev's young diplomats but mediating that nostalgia through the Thaw generation's own modelling of their tastes on those of their US counterparts (Fig. 5). Thus, Biriukov is shown in Germany stealing a Vogue magazine for his wife and members of the Soviet political elite are depicted dancing to Western rock music (Episode 8).

The two nostalgias converge in the casting as the drama's leading character of an elegant Soviet communist of Western ethnicity; the signature credits of each episode consist of a wistfully familiar collage of Soviet-era paraphernalia. Desire across time (as nostalgia) is filtered through desire across space (as intercultural envy). Conversely, by transposing the now familiar glamorous 1960s retro look to America's former Cold War foes, Idov strives to stimulate in his US audiences a tabooed and therefore unusually pleasurable form of desire whose sharp, illicit edges are softened by the complementary pleasure of recognition: Khrushchev's young generation look and sound remarkably like Kennedy's, just as 'The Optimists' looks and sounds remarkably like 'Mad Men'.

PERFORMATIVE MIMICRY

By adopting the 'Mad Men' format, Idov marries a marketing imperative ('The Optimists' must be palatable, and sellable, to both Russian and American audiences) with a political motivation (it aspires to accomplish a modest act of diplomacy by bringing two mutually hostile publics into implicit dialogue and alignment). Idov is thus engaged in a form of transculturation as performative mimicry.

The project has other performative aspects. For example, its high production values, seductive narratives centring on dilemmas created

when career success is traded for romantic fulfilment, and sharp-paced editing all characterised 'Mad Men'. For its primary, Russian audience, this self-conscious emulation is both homage and subversion, navigating between acknowledging the universal appeal of 1960s Retro Culture which 'Mad Men' captured, and signalling, according to Lotman's model of intercultural dialogue, that the Russian version is not only *superior* but implicitly *anterior* to its US model.[10] Indeed, the fact that 'The Optimists' mutates from a drama about diplomacy to a classic spy thriller does more than reflect a political progression from audacious cross-cultural experimentation to flag-waving patriotism. The Cold War spy thriller was a staple of popular culture both in the Soviet Union and the USA. The same cannot be said of a glossy period drama set in an advertising agency and replete with knowing winks to an audience familiar with the self-referential innovations of 'The Sopranos' and 'Six Feet Under'.[11] As we shall see, for Russian audiences of a certain age, 'The Optimists' owed as much to the legendary, Brezhnev-era classic, 'Seventeen Moments of Spring', as to 'Mad Men'.[12]

The plot twists of 'The Optimists' (from sudden revelations about true allegiances, through the elaborate acts of dissimulation, betrayal, and sacrifice, to the moral ambivalence of outcomes, political and personal) are those of the classic spy thriller. The project generates nostalgia through its adopted narrative genre as well as via its settings, realia, styles, and cultural reference points. However, like other aspects of the series, the nostalgia is double-edged. Rather than merely re-invoking the anti-American sentiment associated with the Cuban Missile Crisis, 'The Optimists' pays homage to 'Mad Men', as well as to certain US strategies and techniques (in Series 2 (Episode 1), SAG members are invited to participate in a US-style 'brainstorm' session to solve a diplomatic dilemma). This, along with the romances across ideological

10
At Stage 3 of Lotman's 5-stage model of intercultural dialogue, an 'importing culture' begins seeing its own texts as more authentic than those of the 'exporting culture' whose texts inspired it: "The idea takes hold that "over there" these ideas were realized in an "untrue", confused or distorted, form and that "here", in the heart of the receiving culture they will find their true, "natural" heartland (Lotman 1990, p. 147).

11
For the self-reflexive aspects of 'Mad Men' and other HBO-sponsored dramas, see Leverette et al (200)

12
For 'Seventeen Moments of Spring' and its cultural and political significance in Brezhnev's Soviet Union, see de Keghel 2018.

lines, the foreign backgrounds of many key Soviet protagonists and, at times, the camaraderie between US and Soviet diplomats, ensures that Idov's project also invites viewers to re-assess official hostility to traditional Western foes, but through the prism of a form of patriotic culture familiar to late-Putin era Russia.

On every level – authorial role; narrative development; character profile; aesthetic style; setting; genre – 'The Optimists' performs multi-layered and often contradictory forms of transculturation.

COSMOPOLITAN (HEROES) OF OUR TIME

We have discussed transculturation's structural function across three axes: here/there; now/then; fiction/reality. It can also be treated in an everyday vernacular sense as the core function of diplomacy, whose practitioners use intercultural skills to represent their nation's interests to others, and the interests of others back to their nation (Spies 2019). In more advanced cases representation and translation adopt the mutual remodelling function of transculturation proper, as the diplomatic ability to mediate across two linguacultural contexts facilitates the active renewal and/or transformation of one or both. In Series 1, this is the working strategy of the SAG unit which, under Blaumane's innovative, Western-inspired leadership, enables Soviet diplomacy to remould itself from a bureaucratized Stalin-era security apparatus into an effective, wily modern operation capable of outwitting rival powers precisely by internalizing their methods and simultaneously contributing to the creation of a more progressive and outward looking Soviet Union. In Series 2, bi-aspectual transformation is the implied outcome of the narrative as, bathed in the dual harmony of Soviet and American songs, the plot concludes with Nesterov and

Alex collaborating to ensure that each side in the Cuban Missile crisis makes the concessions needed to ensure not only the end of the stand-off, but a new thaw in Soviet-US relations.

Go-betweens of various categories – actors uniquely capable of operating in the 'grey' domain between cultures, moving with ease across them whilst remaining acceptable to both – forge the intermediate lexicon and values needed for transculturation. This is what we mean in international relations contexts by 'the language of diplomacy' which must be spoken by all professional diplomats regardless of national affiliation and which, as Constantinou (2013) argues, highlights the universalist humanism implicit in diplomacy. In non-official contexts, the shared tastes, rituals, and habitus of self-identifying 'cosmopolitans' perform a similar role. With their sophisticated ways, appreciation of difference and distinctive, worldly identities, cosmopolitans set themselves apart from their national peers yet through their ability to engage with fellow cosmopolitans of different origin, act to overcome that difference and accomplish change within and across national lines, often at the expense of the trust of their compatriots, and of their own affiliations. Safer (1997) has this in mind when referring to the diplomat as 'a stranger to others and estranged from himself' (p. 179). Idov has himself described his sense of feeling 'other' wherever he is living at working at any moment (Smagarinskaia 2018).

Indeed, his globetrotting lifestyle, association with transnational projects (for example, *Snob*) and ability to operate in societies as different as the USA, Latvia, the UK, and Russia make him the ideal person to undertake cosmopolitan initiatives like 'The Optimists' and 'Londongrad'. He openly promoted the latter as the platform from which a thaw in UK-Russia relations could be initiated (ITV 2015), but it was his international media contacts and fluency in English and Russian

which facilitated its implementation. The lead characters in both 'Londongrad' and 'The Optimists' reflect Idov's own biographical experience (Blaumane, for example, mirrors his Latvian origin, and periods of US and Russian residence, as well as his international tastes and progressive outlook). In 'Londongrad', the characters rely on these attributes to engage Londoners in their business affairs (much of the dialogue is in English with Russian subtitles). In 'The Optimists', the cross-national interaction is less frequent, but more significant plotwise. It is the ability of the young SAG diplomats to socialize with their American counterparts which allows them to navigate the delicate inter-state issues confronting both groups, to de-escalate them, to guarantee Soviet supremacy and, sometimes, to counteract US machinations.

Cosmopolitanism permeates the ethos, narrative and look of 'The Optimists' (even the 1960s retro looks characterising its sets, acting modes and filming techniques are associated with a universal trend which swept the Western world after the millennium). But the examples cited confirm the importance of distinguishing between cosmopolitanism as (a) an identity; (b) a normative value system; and (c) a set of practices.[13] The temperaments of, and behavioural paradigms adopted by, the SAG team, including their tastes and their forward-oriented, outward-looking mindsets, all point to a shared identity. The performative celebration of the active cross-national collaboration enabling Nesterov and Alex to resolve the misunderstandings behind the Cuban Missile crisis signals that Idov promotes cosmopolitanism as a political and moral value system. Yet, Nesterov and his colleagues, including Blaumane, are perfectly capable of utilising their linguistic aptitudes and intercultural nous to outwit their ideological opponents on behalf of the state they serve. They can separate cosmopolitan values

13
For the different varieties and meanings of cosmopolitanism, see Vertovec and Cohen 2011.

and identities from cosmopolitan practices, instrumentalising the latter for 'parochial' purposes, converting transculturation into support for a higher, internationalist version of patriotism in which the Soviet Union prevails precisely by adopting the behaviour of its adversaries. Those same values, behaviours, and identities shape the covert, deceptive dishonesty of double agents. Like diplomacy, cosmopolitanism bleeds into treachery as well as patriotism,[14] just as the latter can both accommodate and negate universalism.[15] Transculturation is an elusive activity, its go-between practitioners at permanent risk.

TIME AS (COSMOPOLITAN) HERO

If cosmopolitanism functions in 'The Optimists' as a conceptual (anti) hero alongside the flesh-and-blood characters who display it, a similar role is performed by time, and specifically the mutual projection of past and present onto one another. Indeed, by engendering the drawing of multiple implicit parallels between the contemporary and Soviet periods, 'The Optimists' establishes time itself as a journeying cosmopolitan go-between capable of achieving transculturation. Idov's choice of the Thaw as his drama's setting enables him to infuse it with complex allegorical meanings involving reading forward from the Soviet past to the post-Soviet present, and projecting back from it onto the Soviet past, and to identify multiple parallels and contrasts, proleptical pre-figurations and apparent analepses.

The Thaw was simultaneously a period of post-Stalinist transition, a false dawn (given the reversion to the stolidly conservative Brezhnev) and the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union, and of its gradual assimilation into the 'civilized' Western world. All three interpretations are referenced in 'The Optimists', with individual episodes highlighting

14
What Sofer (2011: 181-2) says of diplomacy, applies to cosmopolitanism: 'From its … beginnings, diplomacy was surrounded by suspicion and divided loyalties … the wandering diplomat is criticized for becoming alien to his society, for losing touch with his own country'. Cosmopolitanism's association with treachery extends beyond Stalinist manifestations. As the 2022 ITV drama about Kim Philby's defection from Britain to the Soviet Union, 'A Spy Among Friends', shows, cosmopolitanism in the form of world communism conspired with the collective guilt of an elite social class to inspire the 1930s Cambridge spy ring.

15
For progressive patriotism, see Whittaker 2020.

FIG. 6 →
Young American and Soviet diplomats relax together

the remnants of Stalin's Gulag regime; Khrushchev's anti-religion campaign (Biriukov's daughter is shown being taught by a domestic cleaner surreptitiously to cross herself when passing a church in Episode 6); an attempted coup against Khrushchev foiled by the SAG; the accelerated acquisition of Western mores and lifestyles; and growing levels of Soviet-US engagement (Episode 9 features an informal trust-building barbecue involving young US and Soviet diplomats (Fig. 6)).

Each interpretation can legitimately be applied to Putin's Russia, but in contrasting modes, and with different meanings. Thus, readings of present conditions in Russia could project events depicted in Idov's series proleptically ahead to a brighter future after Putin, or wistfully and pessimistically backwards to the now distant optimism of the Gorbachev and Yel'tsyn periods, highlighting the naivety of the hope expressed by the young heroes. An extreme example confirming

the allegorical readings to which the temporality of 'The Optimists' lends itself came with a denunciation of Idov during the Ukraine war (which he condemned outright) in the state-aligned publication, *Argumenty i fakty*. The article was provocatively entitled 'The "Sleeper Agent" Idov: How to Hate Russia and Shoot Films at its Expense' (Sidorchik 2022).

Meanwhile, the forward-looking cosmopolitan lifestyles, transcultural liaisons and universalist values of the SAG diplomats serve as a model to inspire those keen to challenge the anti-Western xenophobia that Putin was fostering well before the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Idov's carefully staged reminders of the residues of Stalin's terror, however, are also timely cautions against the Kremlin's current over-indulgence in nostalgia for the Soviet past.[16] At the trust-building party attended by US and Soviet diplomats, a Hungarian translator berates Soviet loyalist, Biriukov, for the USSR's suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, predicting ominously (and accurately) that the Soviet Union, too, would ultimately fall to popular revolt. Biriukov's own political inclinations fluctuate. Having aligned with conservative forces within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he changes allegiance when the son of a close KGB acquaintance (and rival) is killed by those same forces, heading off the 'old guard' planning to oust Khrushchev – a fictional plot which is proleptically anticipatory of the actual 1964 coup that ended Khrushchev's leadership and which is set against the backdrop of the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 (Episode 12). Identities in 'The Optimist' are mutable at all moments and across time. In the turmoil surrounding the Berlin Wall, Blaumane, under constant suspicion of double agency owing to her former US citizenship and non-Russian background, accuses pseudo-Stalinist Biriukov of state treachery against the Soviet Union. The alternations between opposing

16
In an interview Idov cautioned readers not to take the superficial 'glamorization' of the Soviet 1960s at face value, pointing out that a viewer who watches 'The Optimist' to the end will recognise his efforts to reveal the dark truth about the era, and about the repressive 'Soviet mentality'. See https://jewish.ru/ru/interviews/articles/179860/

identities, and of fearful despair with soaring hope, that punctuate 'The Optimists' intra-textually pre-figure its transcendent, extra-textual meanings.

Time's capacity to migrate from text to meaning operates at multiple levels. The linear pattern traced by the series can be attributed to authorial design or to the political dynamic that eventually quelled Idov's boundary-pushing audacity and forced him from the 'Londongrad' production team. This pattern becomes a figure first for the slow erosion of Thaw-era optimism by the stultifying stagnation of the Brezhnev period, and then for the repression and antagonistic anti-Westernism under Putin. As the SAG mutates from bold, autonomous soft power experimenter to traditional, state-directed counter-espionage outfit, and as the lexicon of diplomatic dialogue is displaced by the anachronistically invoked notion of 'information war' and treachery, so the image of the American presence mutates from novelty and intrigue to Putin-era deceit, hubris and, menace.[17] The pattern is replicated in microcosm through the replacement as SAG director of the 'naively' enlightened Baumane by the hard-headed Stalinist, Biryukov, by Alex's progression from intercultural love interest to CIA double agent and Korneev's from amiable SAG colleague to involuntary sleeper agent dreading the next treacherous act to be demanded of him.

THE FLUID, REVERSIBLE SELF

The fungibility of temporal planes is linked to the light-hearted irony pervading the narrative. Rather than a superficial element of 'style', this feature captures the semiotic ambiguity pervading Idov's work. Those characters in 'The Optimists' with cross-cultural backgrounds, including Blaumane, Alex and Muratov, move constantly between their

17
A reference to the Soviet Union's need to 'win the information war with America' is made in Episode 1 of Series 2. The origins of the term 'information war' are traceable to 1970s US military texts, adopted by Soviet and post-Soviet Russian actors. See Barabash et al (2019).

Soviet and pre- or post-Soviet identities and experiences, and it is the uncertainties, but also the opportunities, that this oscillation generates which provides the mainstay of the plot intrigues. Muratov's cultural connections allow him to establish a relationship with a French film director which helps the Soviet Union acquire an ally at a four-sided international summit (Episode 3). The oscillation extends to other contexts. It is security *apparatchik* Biriukov's secret romantic liaison with a West German journalist which prompted him to read the dissident novel she had asked him to smuggle out of the Soviet Union, and to question his ideology. Nesterov's fierce Soviet patriotism is not only compromised by his affair with Alex, the ethnically half-Russian CIA agent, it is transmuted into the cosmopolitan universalism which saves the two states from annihilation.

Less dramatically, Golub's hybrid, open personality, eclectic tastes, and linguistic erudition enables him to move from wily diplomat capable of using his knowledge of Chinese language and culture to the USSR's advantage in negotiations with a Beijing delegation (Episode 8), to naïve lover of a working-class girl from a very different background to his own (Episodes 6-8), to subversive collaborator striving to facilitate the defection of a Soviet scientist (Episode 10). But, in another instance of semiotic principles migrating between textual levels, the fluidity, eclecticism and intercultural adeptness characterising his heroes also drives Idov to ensure that 'The Optimists' appeals to both Russian and American media industries, and their respective audiences. He, too, oscillates between satisfying Putin-inspired patriotic nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and retaining the interest of American audiences keen both for new insights into their former ideological foes, and for reassuring indicators signalling that they are being treated to a Mad Men sequel, albeit transposed to an alien context.

In performing this juggling act, Idov imparts to the drama a subversively ironic mode which obscures the ideological perspective from which it is narrated, inverting and confusing (Soviet/Russian) Self and (US) Other relations to the point of entanglement.[18] Thus, the episode recounting the story of the spiriting to America of a dissident Soviet novel (a classic Cold War trope of the heroic battle against totalitarian repression) descends into farce when it transpires that the manuscript has been substituted by a vulgar Soviet hack's obscene verses which are declaimed to great audience amusement in a New York beatnik café (Episode 8). Conventional narratives associated with each side in the Cold War are confounded by this outcome which, however, offers transculturating potential: a critical rethinking of the respective narratives and their associated antagonisms.

There is a limit to the fluidity an individual can accommodate without sacrificing his/her selfhood. Nearly all characters are at some point on the threshold of 'betraying' their own side and colluding with, or assisting, their Cold War 'enemy'. This applies as much to the hard-line Biriukov and the ultra-patriotic Nesterov (both of whom are led astray by romance) as it does to cross-cultural sophisticates like Blaumane and Muratov whose non-Soviet background experiences are a unique asset to their diplomatic role and their country, yet also the traits most likely to lead to their downfall. Just as cosmopolitanism lies perilously close to treachery and diplomacy is always a hairsbreadth from double agency, so fluid selves are reversible selves.

In parallel, Russian audiences must beware succumbing to the pleasure derived from seeing their young, Khrushchev-era compatriots outsmarting their ideological adversaries. It could, after all, lead to over-identification with those compatriots' suave, Westernized manners and to seduction by the glossy production values of a non-Russian

18 For 'the ironic mode', see Frye (2000).

director whose own allegiances belong elsewhere. Conversely, American audiences must temper their satisfaction in seeing their own values, practices, and lifestyles mirrored in the surfaces of the Russian heroes of a television series shown on the main television channel of a hostile state, the more so since its Soviet predecessor – the setting for the action depicted in the series – was the ideological nemesis of the USA of their parents' generation. In this context, the series title – 'The Optimists' – is cunningly subversive.[19] Optimism defines the American national narrative and to attribute it to representatives of the dour, grey communist past of America's sworn foe is as bold as is the accordance of the status of ambivalently patriotic Russian heroine to cultural cross-dressers like Blaumane and Alex, whose name is appropriately indeterminate, ethnically and gender-wise.

19
In an interview, Idov revealed the title's subversiveness for his Russian audiences, emphasising that, far from wallowing in Soviet nostalgia, the optimism of his characters brings them 'to a moment of moral choice, when their optimism in the Soviet system and future, and their ability to improve it within, comes into conflict with what the system does to them and their loved ones' (quoted in Muchnik 2017).

MODALIZED TRUTHS

The fluidity of the characters in 'The Optimists', its director and audience, and its plotlines transposes to the oscillating modality in which those plotlines are narrated. The fulcrum of modulation here is that of the fiction-reality axis. Like all historical dramas, 'The Optimists' is grounded in the facts and events of a specific era whose *Zeitgeist* it strives to capture, whilst drawing on its artistic licence to deviate from documented reality, whether to indulge in speculation around the undocumented background to events, to elaborate on the human relationships involved in order to 'bring those events to life', to deviate from historical truth to capture its 'essence', or to creatively distort it in the interests of increasing its 'entertainment value', or illuminating non-historical themes, concerns and issues, dear to the work's director and intended audiences.

Idov exploits his licence to the maximum, using the fiction/reality axis as the basis on which to switch the modality of his narrative repeatedly and sometimes unpredictably, from the *optative* (desire oriented to the future), through the *phobic* (reanimated fear of an otherness formerly consigned to the past), to the *melancholic* (regretful desire for a non-recoverable, idealised past), the *minatory/vatic* (premonitions of potential threats that might recur) and the *auto-reflexive and ironic* (tongue-in-cheek reminders that we are witnessing a fictional re-enactment of a past whose multiple parallels and contrasts with the present must not be taken seriously).[20]

Both the historical material across which these modalities oscillate, and the present and future phenomena which that material anticipates, provide signals capable of being appropriated within single or multiple modalities. Blaumane's enlightened patriotism, her young team's cosmopolitan stylishness, future-oriented embrace of change and willingness to learn from others signal both more positive prospects for present-day Russia beyond Putin, and a melancholic longing for a more optimistic past now, forever beyond reach. Similarly, Korneev's forced acts of betrayal function as premonitions of the Western-induced 'Fifth Column' treachery[21] that continues to threaten Russia's future in the present, or as auto-reflexive parodies of the stereotypical paranoid 'sleeper agent' narrative familiar to viewers of state television drama. Conversely, Nesterov's CIA-inspired seduction by Alex corroborates nationalist phobias about Russia's untrustworthy émigré population but given the ultimately benign outcome of the relationship, optatively projects the possibility of reconciliation between Russia and its current adversaries.

The light tone, tastefully 'retro' sets, and witty dialogue function on two levels. In narrative terms, they point to the rose-tinted

20
These modalities are adapted from Jakobson's (1960) six linguistic functions: referential, emotive, phatic, conative, poetic, and metalinguistic.

21
Fears of a Western-sponsored 'Fifth Column' inside Russia attained their apotheosis in Putin's infamous Crimea annexation speech (Dreyfuss 2014).

idealization of a now distant, but much longed-for past when the Soviet Union was equal to its Cold War rival on the international stage and swiftly catching it in the areas of consumer production and free expression.[22] Metatextually, the self-aware adoption of this familiar, globalized aesthetic (that of 'Madmen') acts in hortatory mode to encourage viewers to find common 'cosmopolitan' cause with consumers inhabiting Russia's latter-day rival states. But the deliberately hyperbolized plot lines with their *faux* patriotic triumphs and comically farfetched twists also engender a contrast between the factual events and settings that form the backdrop to the series, and the hyper-creative treatment they receive. The consciously fictional modality overrides the modalities that recast (Soviet) history's relationship with (Russian) current affairs, providing Idov with a 'loophole' freeing him from the ideological burden of needing to state his allegiance: whether to his new American homeland, that of his state television sponsors, or his Soviet past;[23] ultimately, nothing should be read over-literally as this would contravene the laws of fictional discourse and the creative licence accorded to artists, especially those specialising in semi-escapist drama.

22
For Khrushchev's drive to improve Soviet consumer goods production, see Prybyla 1961.

23
Bakhtin (1984) uses the concept of 'loophole' (lazeika) to capture the 'unfinalizable' freedom of the subject to escape finalizing description from without (p. 207).

CONCLUSION: TRANSCULTURATION AND THE LUMINOSITY OF THE CONTINGENT OTHER

Until the war in Ukraine, Idov had used the fluid ambivalences of his cosmopolitan, go-between identity to project outsider perspectives on cultures to which, like that of his Russian audience, he simultaneously does and does not belong. In his own accounts of his work with Russian state television, he expresses surprise at how he, a cultural and political intruder within an authoritarian system whose values he repudiates, had nonetheless penetrated, uninhibited, to its very heart

(Idov 2016). He explains how he used this privileged, precarious position to perform valuable acts of transculturation: smuggling, Trojan horse-style, into one of the key engines of the Kremlin propaganda machine audaciously subversive narratives about Russia under Putin (usually through an updated version of the time-honoured Russian tradition of 'Aesopian fable'), or tantalizingly appealing portrayals of a Western world subject to demonization elsewhere on Russian state television.[24]

Through dramas designed to be shown both in Russia and the West like 'The Optimists', but also his globally distributed feature film, 'The Humourist', Idov strives to ameliorate Western hostility to, and suspicion of, Russia. Idov described wanting all his life to 'build a bridge' between Russia and the West, declaring, 'All my Russian film and TV work was dedicated to one crushingly simple idea: Russia is part of the world' (Idov 2022). This gesture works on referential and performative levels. 'The Optimists' presents sympathetic views of Soviet Russian and American diplomatic and intelligence elites to their respective rivals, bringing unusually positive images of Russians into American living rooms, and of Americans into their Russian equivalents. For Idov's Russian audience, however, he himself acts as an Other who, by appealing simultaneously to nostalgic patriotism for Soviet Great Power status, and to contemporary fascination with US popular culture (the 'Madmen' cult), has penetrated the walls separating him from the Russian selfhood from which he has yet to sever himself. It is thus indicative that the drama aired on 'Russia-1', the channel most directly linked to the Russian state.[25] There is no clearer example of the political role that television drama can play even within a restricted authoritarian media environment. Its distance from the political arena and oblique modes of expression accords it an audacity unavailable to news and current affairs genres (Hutchings and Tolz 2015).

24
'Of social satire', Idov writes of 'Londongrad', 'we sneaked in plenty' (Idov 2016).

25
'Russia-1' is Russia's only state-owned national television channel, though the others are run by Kremlin allies and are subject to state control. However, because Channel 1 is watched by Russophone audiences outside of Russia, it had, until the invasion of Ukraine, a less propagandistic stance than Rossiia, which targets domestic audiences. The airing of 'The Optimists' on 'Russia-1' rather than Channel 1 is therefore significant.

Idov's Otherness is spatially and temporally contingent, depending on the time when, and the perspective from which, the relationship is described. He is a former Soviet citizen, now a naturalized American, who has lived and worked in Russia; from the viewpoint of US audiences, his *bona fide* Russian-ness gives him unique insights into the lives of their former political adversaries; from that of his Russian television audiences, the reverse function is fulfilled by his intimate familiarity with American mores. The contingency of Idov's go-between function has an ideological dimension. We saw this in the evolving narrative trajectory of 'The Optimists' and 'Londongrad' – from audacious (if oblique) critique to a conservative adherence to official patriotism which, in the case of the earlier series, led to Idov's ejection from the production. The change forced on his career practices and cosmopolitan values forced on him by Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine brings this contingency into sharp focus. Idov has strongly condemned the invasion, stating that he will no longer work in Russia, or even write in Russian (Idov 2022). In the current paranoid climate prevailing under Putin, Idov would anyway be subject to the repressive new 'foreign agent' legislation designed to isolate Russians from contact with ideas and people, capable of 'contaminating' them with 'Russophobia'. Putin's Russia is no place for go-betweens.[26]

There is currently no end in sight of the war, or the regime that launched it, nor any prospect of Mikhail Idov reprising his transculturating activities. Yet, however the war concludes, the damage it has done to Russia's image throughout the Western world vastly exceeds the military, information, and economic conflict itself. It will last many years, fomenting enduring popular antipathy across national lines. Idov's transculturation talents will be at a premium far more than the official channels of diplomacy if this situation is to be ameliorated.

26
For the new 'foreign agent' legislation introduced after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, see https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents.

As Ang et al (2015) explain in their radical decentralizing of cultural diplomacy, it should urgently be rethought as 'a testing ground for … the politics of recognition between and beyond nations …not as a top-down target … but as a generative mechanism … for overcoming exclusionary notions of the nation in favour of more relational and open understandings' (378-379). Idov's intermediation instincts are tailor-made for this testing ground. The shifting contours of his cosmopolitan identity, its ambivalent links to double agency, and the elusive, fluid representation practices in which he specialises are geared to serve the 'generative mechanism' Ang et al describe, to expose the contingency of both patriotism and what, or who, is Other to it. We must hope that Idov's most recent go-between project is not his last, and that the luminosity characterising his treatment of the Soviet Union's most optimistic generations might eventually shine through the darkness now enveloping Russia.

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Резюме

Статья посвящена мини-сериалу Оптимисты, премьера которого состоялась на телеканале Россия-1 в 2017 (Первый сезон) и 2021 (Второй сезон) гг. Цель анализа состоит в том, чтобы продемонстрировать: даже в условиях авторитарной медиа-среды, которая сохраняется в период правления Путина, телевизионный драматический фильм может принимать на себя роль подсознательного политического инструмента для актуализации процесса транскультурации, в результате которого выстраивается продуктивный диалог советской и постсоветской идентичностей с «другим» западной культуры, которой они обычно противопоставляются. Этот диалог осуществляется по нескольким направляющим – временной, пространственной и репрезентационной и балансирует по сложной траектории между сферой дипломатических условностей, патриотической/предательской двойной агентностью и космополитическим универсализмом. Контекст продолжающейся войны в Украине придает сериалу дополнительную актуальность, раскрывая потенциал указанных феноменов на путях восстановления взаимных связей между Россией и западным миром, которые в настоящей момент находятся в стоянии отчуждения.

Анализ строится на прояснении конфигурации трех направляющих, по которым разворачивается транскультурация в мини-сериале. Во-первых, сериал демонстрирует, как в «Оптимистах» темпоральность советского прошлого представлена через призму постсоветского настоящего и наоборот, а также, как происходит взаимное посредничество, трансформирующее геокультурные пространства посредством их гибридизации. Это, в свою очередь, усиливает семиотическую насыщенность и самого действия,

изображаемого в сериале, и сериала как культурного феномена. Одно из соображений, нашедшее отражение в статье, касается очевидных параллелей, которые мини-сериал выявляет между предшествующей напряженностью Востока и Запада (речь идет о Карибском кризисе 1962-го года) и новой российской ‚полу-горячей' войной с Западом; тот факт, что «Оптимисты» были показаны за пять лет до полномасштабного вторжения в Украину, означает, что геополитическое сравнение на данный момент еще более актуально, чем в момент премьерного показа. Данный процесс усиливается за счет третьей направляющей транскультурации, отражающей взаимодействие между фикцией и реальностью. Большинство эпизодов в «Оптимистах» вращается вокруг исторических ситуаций или событий, пересказываемых с разным уровнем художественного преувеличения. Это позволяет драме исследовать взаимодействие между страхами аудитории (перед возвращением тех реальных угроз, которые показаны) и ее желаниями (связанными с тем, что, в целом, счастливое избавление от этих угроз может быть достигнуто).

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Stephen Hutching is Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester and Fellow of the UK's Academy of Social Sciences. He has held 8 large research grants with the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council since 2000 and is currently leading a major new funded project on disinformation as a translingual dynamic. He has frequently advised government departments, media monitoring organizations and journalists on aspects of Russian state communications strategy. He was President of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies from 2010-2013. Stephen has research interests in Russian cultural and media studies, Russian and Soviet television and film, Russian and Soviet literature and literary/cultural theory. He is author of Projecting Russia in a Mediatized World: Recursive Nationhood *(New York: Routledge, 2021), co-author (with Vera Tolz, Precious Chatterje-Doody, Rhys Crilley and Marie Gillespie) of* Russia, Disinformation and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah *(Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 2024), with Christopher Flood et al of* Islam, Security and Television News *(London: Palgrave, 2012) and (with Natalia Rulyova) of* Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: RemoteControl *(London: Routledge, 2009), and author of* Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age: The Word as Image *(London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004);* Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday *(Cambridge: CUP, 1997);* A Semiotic Analysis of the Short Stories of Leonid Andreev, 1900-1909 *(London: MHRA, 1990). He is editor of* Russia and its Others on Film: Screening Intercultural Dialogue *(London: Palgrave, 2008), and co-editor of* The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals *(London: Routledge, 2009).*