



Scary Funny Television: “Call DiCaprio!” in Local and Global Contexts

Страшное смешное
телевидение: «Звоните
ДиКаприо!» в глобальном
и локальном контексте

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The paper examines the critically acclaimed 2018 limited series *Call DiCaprio!* directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov from two main perspectives: (1) how the series engages with contemporary Russian culture and the television industry in particular; and (2) how the series reflects current transnational trends in television, often dubbed as the new Golden Age of television. On the one hand, *Call DiCaprio!* fits the model of “complex TV” (Mittel 2006), joining the new global television aesthetics that emerged in the 2000s. On the other hand, *Call DiCaprio!* is also steeped in the contemporary Russian context of media production and consumption. It provides an unflattering look into the underbelly of the industry and crafts a very particular meta-referential cultural experience for its viewer through *mise en abyme* aesthetics and a complex network of references to classical Russian literature.

GLOBAL, LOCAL, LIMITED SERIES,
RUSSIAN TELEVISION, ZHORA
KRYZHOVNIKOV, CALL DICAPRIO!

Статья анализирует сериал Жоры Крыжовникова *Звоните ДиКаприо!*, получивший благосклонные отзывы критиков и выпущенный в 2018-ом году. Популярный у зрителей сериал рассматривается с двух основных позиций: (1) в аспекте отражения актуального российского культурного контекста, и особенно телевизионной культуры; (2) в аспекте транснациональных тенденций современного глобального телевидения, вступившего в так называемый «золотой век» в начале 2000-х. С одной стороны, *Звоните ДиКаприо!* вписывается в модель «сложного телевидения», предложенную Джейсоном Миттелем в 2006-ом году. С другой стороны, рассматриваемый сериал глубоко укоренен в современный российский культурный и медийный ландшафт. Сериал обнажает темные, неочевидные для непосвященного стороны кино- и теле-индустрии современности, а также погружает зрителя в мета-культурный контекст, созданный с помощью эстетических принципов мизанбима (*mise en abyme*) и сложной сети аллюзий к классическим текстам русской литературы.

ГЛОБАЛЬНОЕ, ЛОКАЛЬНОЕ, МИНИ-
СЕРИАЛ, РУССКОЕ ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЕ,
ЖОРА КРЫЖОВНИКОВ,
ЗВОНИТЕ ДИКАПРИО!

1
The direct quote in Russian is: “Если вам этот дубль не подходит, зовите Маковецкого”. Taken from VokrugTV internet post from 2018.

2
The notion of the “patriotic blockbuster” – a cinematic production that is bankrolled by the state, but also follows the prescribed ideological model of patriotically minded cinema. Extensively discussed by Stephen M. Norris in his 2012 book *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*.

The focus of this paper is the 2018 limited series *Call DiCaprio!* [Zvonite DiCaprio!], an eight-part series directed by acclaimed comedy filmmaker Zhora Kryzhovnikov (Andrei Pershin’s pseudonym), well-known for his popular comedies *Kiss!* [Gor’ko] (2014) and *Best Day Ever* [Samyi luchshii den’] (2016). *Call DiCaprio!* was released via the Russian online streaming platform TNT Premier, affiliated with the television network TNT, joining a growing list of television productions across the globe that are created and often configured to fit the online streaming format. The series’ curious title was inspired by a real-life anecdote, reported by Kryzhovnikov. Allegedly, Russian actor Dmitriy Nagiev used to joke about multiple takes: “If you don’t like my acting – call Makovetsky instead.”¹ This inside joke, elevated to the show’s title, points astutely to a larger narrative structure within the series that plays with film-within-a-film conventions while also satirizing the Russian television industry. In the opening of the first episode, we witness a surgery scene with the main character, Egor Rumiantsev (played by Aleksandr Petrov), a rising star of the fictional television show *Pervaya Gradskaya* – a hospital melodrama reminiscent of the American landmark television series *ER* (1994–2009). *Call DiCaprio!* starts off as a cringy comedy: Egor’s acting is quite terrible due to his hangover; or, perhaps, expectedly terrible, because *Pervaya Gradskaya* is a cheap derivative soap opera. Our protagonist finishes this first scene by asserting that one take is quite enough; otherwise, “they can call DiCaprio.”

Call DiCaprio! tells a story of two brothers from Nizhniy Novgorod who move to Moscow in search of better acting fortunes. The younger brother, Egor, has become a popular television actor. A B-list celebrity, and a well-known Moscow playboy, Egor tries unsuccessfully to make a career breakthrough into cinema by starring in a fictional “patriotic blockbuster”² *Syrian Sands* [Siriiskii pesok], which subsequently

tanked. Egor's older brother, Lev (played by Andrei Burkovsky), is a struggling actor employed by a home-renovation channel called *Ant* [Muravei]. With a pregnant wife, Marina (played by Yulia Alexandrova, a leading actress in Kryzhovnikov's previous films), and their two young daughters, Lev is in dire financial straits. The rivalry between the two brothers is set up early on as they clash over money and Egor's empty promises to introduce Lev to his producer. The brothers' fortunes will, predictably, be reversed as the narrative progresses. When the first episode nears the end, Egor finds out that he is HIV-positive. The virus becomes an agent of chaos in the show that sets the narrative of the series into motion, as reviewers like Anton Dolin for *Meduza* and Evgeny Tkachev for *The Art of Cinema* [Iskusstvo kino] point out in their reviews of the film. Over the course of the next few episodes, Egor's life and career unravel as he desperately tries to keep his diagnosis secret, while continuing to sleep around and act in all sorts of irresponsible ways. Eventually, Lev finds himself replacing Egor on the set of his television show. It is Lev now who is bestowed with fame, money, and sex: starting an affair with one of Egor's romantic interests, Katya (played by Anna Nevskaya), the producer of *Pervaya Gradsкая* and *Syrian Sands*. The coda of the story of the two brothers emphasizes its tragic allegorical underpinnings: as Cain murders Abel, Lev kills Egor upon learning he has become infected with HIV. The long-suffering Lev, who manages to betray his brother and his family over the course of the show, is the one responsible for fratricide. While Egor, the unsavory and undeserving character, dies as a martyr whose redemption arc briefly becomes possible in the last episode.

In this essay I am interested in examining *Call DiCaprio!* from two perspectives: (1) how the series engages with the context of contemporary Russian culture and the television industry in particular;

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See, for example, his interview to Iaroslav Zabaluev here: <https://dzen.ru/a/XBDiFMiTwgCpQCma>

and (2) how the series reflect more recent transnational trends in television (since 2000), often dubbed as the new Golden Age of television. In short, I hope to examine both the local and the global tendencies that are reflected in *Call DiCaprio!* On the one hand, *Call DiCaprio!* fits the model of “complex TV” as conceptualized by Jason Mittel (2006), joining the new global television aesthetics that emerged in 2000s. The subgenre of mini-series or limited series, which seems to be ubiquitous today, is particularly well-suited to examine the changes that television underwent in recent decades, including the prevalence of internet streaming that has replaced traditional cable TV. On the other hand, *Call DiCaprio!* is also steeped in a specifically Russian context of contemporary media production and consumption, providing an unflattering look into the underbelly of the industry, and crafting a very particular meta-referential cultural experience for its viewer. Just like in his previous films, Kryzhovnikov creates a gallery of archetypes and engages in social diagnostics that embrace the citationality of visual media and hark back to foundational narratives of Russian classical literature, namely works by the naturalist school, Gogol, and Chekhov. Kryzhovnikov in his interviews often mentions the importance of Russian classical literature for his filmmaking, specifically Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Ostrovsky, as well as his fondness for the narratives about the “little people” including the celebrated Chekhov film adaptation by Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1977).³

It is the productive tension between the global and the local that makes *Call DiCaprio!* such an intriguing case study. The success of international TV on streaming platforms often comes when the junction of global and local is explored. One need go no further than the most popular show of all time on Netflix, *Squid Game* (2021) – a Korean series that introduces international viewers to the very specific late capitalist

context of onerous debt in contemporary South Korea, while also telling a gripping story of haves and have nots that resonates with global audiences. The Korean series reference various international blockbusters such as *Hunger Games*, while also boasting cinematic visual polish, dynamic action sequences, and complex character development. Similar points can be made about *Call DiCaprio!* Even though the series did not reach international audiences, I believe it is a harbinger of Russian television entering the international stage. In what follows I will delineate the local and global connections in *Call DiCaprio!* through examination of the role of social satire and meta-referentiality with regards to Russian literary classics; the mise en abyme narrative of film-within-a-film; the narrative structure of tragedy; and the concept of “complex TV” as applicable to the show in a global televisual context.

HUMAN COMEDY IN CALL DICAPRIO!

Virtually all reviewers of *Call DiCaprio!* series agree on its effective, acerbic dissection of the television industry, the Russian urban bourgeoisie and its decadent mores detached from the struggles of ordinary Russians. It is no coincidence that the principal characters in the show are graduates of a provincial theatre college seeking “fame and fortune” in Moscow. Comparisons to both Chekhov and Gogol are practically begging to be made. In line with his previous feature comedies, *Kiss!* and *The Best Day Ever*, Kryzhovnikov creates a gallery of archetypes: Gogolian in their malice, greed, and ignorance, Chekhovian in their idiosyncratic desire to belong and inability to do so. The film masterfully lampoons Moscow’s nouveaux riches represented by the television establishment (Egor and Katya in particular), and the aspiring petty bourgeois strife of Lev and his family. In both worlds everyone,

4 Interestingly, this derogatory term also exists elsewhere in global popular culture. Compare to the Korean stereotype of the mom-roach which was made prominent via the best-selling novel and film *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2016) by Cho Nam-joo.

naturally, is obsessed with money and claws their way to survival, often indifferent to the wellbeing of others. The early episodes of the show, as we get exposition of the characters and their milieu, are especially telling in this regard. Within the first episode we get acquainted with all principal characters and are exposed to their cringe-worthy behavior. *Call DiCaprio!* relies on unlikeable, fallible characters, whose moral failures are clear to everyone but them – that’s where the punch of the joke resides. This is a common formula for the dramedy genre, which exposes viewers to uncomfortable “cringy” emotions through various socially awkward situations.

In the first episode of *Call DiCaprio!* we are introduced to Lev and his wife Marina, who is portrayed ungenerously as a misogynist iteration of the “hysterical woman.” Routinely Marina blackmails and manipulates people around her with terrifying self-righteousness and impenetrable prejudice. For example, when Lev fails to bring home enough money, she tells her girls that it is time for them to be surrendered to an orphanage; in another scene she teaches her young children to curse the landlady so she will not demand rent. Eventually it is Marina who sets in motion the unraveling of Egor’s life and career because she firmly believes HIV is equivalent to the Bubonic Plague. From the outset Marina is expertly portrayed by Yulia Aleksandrova as a vicious yet ridiculous stereotype of an entitled parent whose appalling behavior is self-justified via the symbolic capital of motherhood. In Russian popular culture, especially online, the hashtag #яжемасть⁴ (roughly translated as #iammotherafterall) encapsulates this phenomenon.

In comparison to his off-putting wife, Lev seems like a meek and reasonable family man, who is trying his best to make his flailing career work. However, *Call DiCaprio!* quickly disabuses us of any sympathy as we watch Lev take the last dime meant for his family to hire

a masseuse, producing a humiliating madcap scene in which Marina throws a tantrum at the massage parlor. This, of course, will not be the only moral transgression on Lev's part. If anything, the most consequential betrayals in the show are his. It is Lev who jumps at the opportunity to replace Egor on the set of *Pervaya Gradskaya*. It is Lev who triggers the downfall of Egor's career by telling the television cast that he is HIV-positive in a moment of petty jealousy. This relentless self-centered logic of betrayal takes Lev to the ultimate act of murder. "Calling Leo (DiCaprio)" literally brings death to the series protagonist – an inside joke turns into tragedy. It is no coincidence that Kryzhovnikov, in his interview with Rodion Chemonin for the TVKino-Radio online platform in 2018, described the series as operating on both the level of the "scary" and the "funny" [strashno i smeshno]⁵. By the end of the series, Lev is a truly revolting character: his self-interest and ruthlessness are only matched by his faux piety. For example, after telling everyone that Egor has HIV, despite knowing of the catastrophic outcome of his actions, Lev tries to save face by claiming it was a joke. Lev's character reminds us of the vile, self-righteous characters that populate Gogol's writing and that of other masters of naturalist satire, like Saltykov-Schedrin's Iudushka Golovlev from *The Golovlev Family* [Gospoda Golovlevy] (1880).

In addition to the main conflict between the two brothers the series introduce us to various comic relief side characters. One is an old college friend Vasya (played by Anton Vasil'ev). He is introduced as the alcoholic owner of a karaoke bar "Cries and Whispers" (yes, this is an allusion to Ingmar Bergman); later we find out that he owes the mafia a lot of Egor's money. Vasya's story line includes embarking on multi-day drinking binges; trying to get sober (unsuccessfully); and feuding with his fiancée, Polina (played by Aleksandra Revenko).

5
See the interview here:
<https://tvkinoradio.ru/article/article14582-mne-vsegda-hotelos-porabotat-v-zhanre-gde-i-smeshno-i-strashno>

6

Direct quote from the series: «Перетрахались все между собой ... А презервативы между прочим в 17-ом веке изобрели» [peretrakhalis' vse mezhdu soboj ... A prezervativy mezhdu prochim v 17-om veke izobreli].

Vasya's one distinguishing quality is his morally impenetrable entitlement to treat everyone around him with sadism, either for laughs or out of drunken rage. For example, when Lev comes to ask for a supply manager job in Vasya's company, Vasya makes him do a humiliating motivational routine. The way Vasya treats his fiancée is likewise gratuitously sadistic.

Despite these harrowing qualities, Vasya and Polina provide the most comic relief in the series. Like the secondary characters in *Inspector General* [Revizor] by Gogol (1835), *Call DiCaprio!*'s secondary characters appear incapable of any rational thought or action beyond naked self-interest and context-dependent sycophancy. Whenever they are present in the story, mayhem ensues. Polina, in particular, is an interesting character: a model and a vlogger, she exemplifies the vacuousness of the Moscow establishment. Yet her earnest and incredibly primitive understanding of morality, gender relations, public health policy, (the list goes on...) provides an interesting counterpoint to cynicism of the likes of Egor and Katya. It is Polina who helps Egor when he is down, but also cheats on Vasya with Egor and contracts HIV; she is the one who stands by Vasya regardless of how badly he treats her. Polina is portrayed masterfully as so inept and detached from reality, it is as though her cluelessness were a superpower. To counterbalance the madcap insanity of the Polina and Vasya plotline, Polina's best friend Yana (played by Yana Koshkina), is featured as the show's impartial observer, the side character to the side character, who can discern the truth. It is Yana who delivers the final verdict on the "HIV as plague" drama of the film – the equivalent of the revelation that the "emperor is naked." An exasperated Yana marvels at the characters' apocalyptic struggles, observing that, factually speaking, all that is happening is a bunch of grown-ups sleeping around without protection.⁶

HIV STIGMA AND SOCIAL SATIRE

Majority of reviews of *Call Di Caprio!* stress the importance of HIV as one of the series' chief satirical impulses, directed at the ongoing stigma of HIV in today's Russia.⁷ HIV looms large over the narrative and characters' choices, becoming a chief plot device that propels the narrative forward. HIV stigma is a real thing in Russian society, despite efforts to de-stigmatize and de-mystify the illness in recent decades, particularly with the advancement of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis medications that prevent the spread of the virus. *Call Di Caprio!* showcases a society that essentializes HIV carriers as agents of death, subject to extreme social ostracism. When Egor pays his first visit to the lab to find out his diagnosis, it is presented through the lens of fear and shame. Egor cannot master the courage to ask about his diagnosis and later collapses on the street in panic. He also immediately finds himself vulnerable to violence: on every visit to the clinic Egor is verbally and physically assaulted by a homophobic hospital guard, culminating with a physical fight. Repeated abusive rhetoric ending in physical violence quickly becomes normalized for Egor, whose body grows more and more fragile and violated as the series progresses, culminating in his suicide attempt (Ill 1).

It is worth noting that scientific information about living with HIV does make it through in the series: Yana, whose pronouncement about protection I cited earlier, gives Polina and Egor a well-informed lecture on living with HIV/AIDS, as do a few other characters in the show. The show, in short, is aware that its world is populated by needlessly cruel and clueless characters. There is a perfect Russian word to describe how HIV is treated in the series: *mrakobesie*. The Russian word denotes a mixture of bigotry, obscurantism, and violence, especially in contrast

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These include reviews by Anton Dolin for *Meduza*, Maksim Sukhoguzov for *Afisha*, Anna Golubeva for *Colta* and others, including English language digests like *Teller Report*.

FIG. 1 →
 Zhora Kryzhovnikov.
Call DiCaprio!
 Episode 4. 00:47:25.



to European enlightenment values such as reliance on empirical science and upholding rationality and reason as superior human qualities. In the world of *Call Di Caprio!* obscurantism is the modus operandi: the characters sleep with each other like they have never heard of condoms; they have archaic stifling views on morality, family, and friendship; they contract HIV with Biblical efficiency – as if it is some sort of divine punishment. Through the lens of the characters’ worldview, HIV is presented as an uncontainable, monstrous plague through which everything turns to ruin.

HIV, GREEK FATE, AND FORMULA FOR TRAGEDY

HIV diagnosis in the show functions as a narrative device known in the television and cinema industry as an “inciting incident,” a term defined

by the German playwright and scholar of drama, Gustav Freytag. Freytag's findings follow Aristotle's *Poetics* and look at the narrative formula used in five-act classical tragedies. Freytag's book *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863) is the base for what is known as Freytag's pyramid: a structure of dramatic story widely adopted in creative writing and screenwriting education, and ubiquitous in global popular film and television. In Freytag's framework, the HIV diagnosis in *Call DiCaprio!* is an "inciting incident" [erregendes Moment] – an action or occurrence that sets in motion the entire plot.

Call DiCaprio! fits Freytag's structure seamlessly: starting with the exposition of the characters, who show us exactly who they are in the very first episode; it moves to the HIV diagnosis as the catalyst for the unraveling of Egor's life and career in episodes two and three (this is known as the "rising action" in Freytag's terminology). By the end of the fourth episode, Egor's television doppelgänger is dead. Egor attempts suicide by the end of Episode Five when all bridges between him and his former life are burnt, thanks to Lev. The reversal of fortunes, or "falling action" in Freytag's terms, the Aristotelian *peripeteia*, happens in the last three episodes of the series: Egor for the first time seems to grasp the scale of his troubles as well as the true dynamics of his inner circle. This realization of an irrevocable reversal of one's fortune due to a fatal mistake is known in ancient Greek tragedy as *anagnorisis* (see Aristotle's *Poetics*). In the last two episodes we see a home run towards a "catastrophe" in Freytag's terms: Egor non-fatally stabs Lev at a family gathering; Marina finds out about Lev's affair with Katya and burns their apartment down; Lev fatally strangles Egor when he finds out that Katya too has HIV.

The tragic denouement in the series culminates with fratricide. The last episode teases us with a potential redemption arc for Egor,

8
See Tkachev's review
in the Art of Cinema
Journal here: <https://kinoart.ru/reviews/better-call-dicaprio>

who is desperately trying to escape his circumstances and make a life for himself and his most serious romantic partner throughout the series, Daria (played by Yuliya Khlynina). Daria reminds us of Polina in her blind devotion, yet she is a lot more sympathetic. Despite being deceived, left alone with a child, and infected with HIV by Egor, she cannot resist the promise of a loving relationship and a happy ending. The turn-about of Egor's fortunes for a short while seems to produce a real change in character, but ultimately serves as a red herring redemption arc. We do wish Egor escapes and has a happy life with Daria in Goa, of all places. Interestingly, Goa in the show is simultaneously a trendy place where Moscow urban elites go to detox, and a mythical place where one runs away from Moscow. Goa is a lot like Chekhov's Africa – a land so far away and unimaginable that it presents an appealing blank slate to characters in *Uncle Vanya* and *Call DiCaprio!* alike. A cinematic predecessor to the contemporary Goa trope and a clear nod to Chekhovian Africa is Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (1986). In the film the character of the family doctor fantasizes about escaping to Africa. His fantasy is a poignant counterpoint to the “end of the world” occurring in the film, reminding us that the escape fantasy is always and necessarily impossible.

Effectively, *Call DiCaprio!* embeds tropes and themes familiar to the viewer from classical Russian literature into a rigorous dramatic formula that connects the series to a variety of successful international shows, which also follow the classical pattern exemplified by Freytag's pyramid. In his review Tkachev (2018) notes the precise dramatic pacing of the series and compares it to other successful television productions like the *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2015).⁸ I would add that international television trends have continued in this direction: more recently, the American series *Succession* (2018-present) comes to mind, the German

sci-fi series *Dark* (2017-2020), or the Italian *Gomorrah* (2014-2021). *Call DiCaprio!* easily fits the model of “complex TV,” giving us useful tools for analysis within the framework of contemporary television aesthetics.

9
As supported
by reviews
by Dolin, Tkachev, and
Golubeva, as well as in-
depth study by M.F.
Kaziuchits (2019).

MISE EN ABYME AND “COMPLEX TV” IN *CALL DICAPRIO!*

Call DiCaprio! represents a complex meta-narrative that contains the structure of a tragedy; a mise en abyme satire of the film and television industry; a human comedy that takes viewers through a gallery of archetypes drawn from classical Russian literature. In addition, the show also boasts an intricate web of allusions to various artefacts of Russian and Soviet literary and cinematic heritage, engaging cultural knowledge and symbolic capital in a dialogue with the viewer. As such *Call DiCaprio!* is a great example of “complex TV” – a term coined by Jason Mittell for a new global television aesthetic that propels television programs to international fame and generates critical response similar to cinema, which until recently held the ground as a more “high culture” form. Tellingly, in Russian criticism *Call DiCaprio!* is consistently praised for being like a “film” and aligning itself with art house cinematic aesthetics.⁹ Complex television, especially in the limited series format, often draws comparison to cinema in terms of visual aesthetics and narrative strategies that transpose independent or art cinema techniques onto television. One of these comparisons, in a very similar vein to the Russian critical reaction to *Call DiCaprio!*, ascribes a stronger authorial signature to new television productions. Examples are numerous, especially given the steady cross-over of cinematic auteurs and well-known stars from cinema to television. Recent groundbreaking television hits like *Fleabag* (2016-2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020) both owe their popularity to the authorship of Phoebe Waller-Bridge and

Michaela Coel respectively. It is worth noting that David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) pioneered that kind of cross-pollination back in the 1990s, and that contemporary television has not materialized out of thin air as a new kind of practice. In fact, complex TV is by no means television becoming cinema, but rather adopting a hybrid approach that includes television and cinematic elements while also being uniquely attuned to the globalized digital realities of television production and consumption today.

Mittel also defines “complex TV” as television that defies the established ground rules of seriality in favor of more complex narrative structures and character development. For example, complex TV can have multiplying narrative arcs that engage the viewer in complex world building that can have end points rather than always aim for repetition and continuation (this strategy became popular after the first season of the *Game of Thrones*, 2011-2019). *Call DiCaprio!* fits all these descriptions very well. The main narrative is embellished by complex side stories, usually involving secondary characters like Vasya or Polina, and often foregoing the main characters entirely. Such side stories include Lev's saga of seeking work outside of acting, and Vasya and Polina's tumultuous relationship, among others. It introduces a more cinematic vision into the series, building a believable world, even if it is a bleak one straight out of Russian celebrated art house dramas. Character development in the series, despite its archetypal, satirical impulses, also tends to gradually reveal various facets of characters' personalities and relationships. Polina, a laughable and shallow character in the beginning, is revealed to be more of a “holy fool” character in the end, empathetic to others' troubles and willing to stick with what she believes is right. Egor himself undergoes the biggest transformation, and we really root for him at the very end. Marina, probably one of the most loathsome

characters, gradually grows from a caricature of #iammotherafterall [#яжемать] to a woman trapped in the patriarchal structures.

Complex TV engages the audience in transmedial dynamics through the rise of multimodal platforms: examples of that trend would showcase a TV show as connected to other media, such as videogame franchises. Television products now exist transmedially in memes, fanfic (fan fiction), and other digitally generated content, consumed and distributed within online communities of users. Add to this the surge of reflexive processing of television content online: the episode recaps and reviews that are ubiquitous in contemporary television. They often help buttress the cult status and critical buzz about shows, regardless of actual viewer ratings, as Mittel points out, while creating a virtual community of devoted fans. Contemporary television, particularly global iterations of it, are empowered by digital trends and new modes of consumption across international streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, HBO Max or Amazon Prime Video. In the case of Russia, there are also local factors that seem to be at play. Artem Prokhorov (2021) in his analysis of the Russian web series notes that in the case of *Call DiCaprio!* and other Russian television series launched via digital platforms, the choice of an online service offers significantly more freedom and fewer restrictions for filmmakers who would otherwise face scrutiny from official television channels.¹⁰

In my opinion, one of the most important points in Mittel's theorizing of complex TV for *Call DiCaprio!* is about the precedence of creative mechanics over serialized repetitive content, or what the author calls "narrative special effect." Mittel writes:

...narratively complex programs offer another mode of attractions: the narrative special effect. These moments push the operational aesthetic

10 Prokhorov writes: "Starting around 2014, Russian television channels introduced new restrictions on the content that they procured and broadcasted: stories involving sex, drugs, terrorism, ethnic and religious conflicts, LGBT community and Russian foreign and domestic policies became almost forbidden... Despite the fact that most of these restrictions were not reflected in official documents (only in words and informal instructions), they were successfully applied in practice. Combined with the previous serious limitations on format, genre and heroes' types that each channel has set for itself, this has put television screenwriters in a situation where it is extremely difficult to tell a relevant and sharp story. The internet, however, has remained an environment where everything can be talked about freely and continued to attract new authors and directors." (28)

to the foreground, calling attention to the constructed nature of the narration and asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off; often these instances forgo realism in exchange for a formally aware baroque quality in which we watch the process of narration as a machine rather than engaging in its diegesis. (35)

Call DiCaprio! best exemplifies this marker of complex TV through its meta-narrational quality, creating television that is aware of its artifice and engaged in an extra-diegetic dialogue with its viewer. The viewer is, in turn, primed to recognize allusions to other cultural products and wink-and-nod references within the TV show itself, demonstrating a transmedial investment in the TV production and expanding the viewing experience to include an interactive, self-referential community. *Call DiCaprio!* gives us a lot of meta-referential complexity, fusing together allusions, citations, and doubles with an impressive range.

Take, for example, the ending sequence of *Call DiCaprio!* After we have been primed for a potentially redemptive resolution, we see Egor successfully borrow money from Lev and make his way to the train station through the autumnal countryside. Egor is jubilant and starts yelling out loud a famous Pushkin poem *Winter Morning* [Zimnee utro] (1829) that carries a rather ambiguous connotation in the scene. It seems incongruous in the circumstances, being a romantic poem about winter morning, and rings as a hackneyed cliché. The poem is a staple of school education in Russia and could be considered one of the ossified classics, the meaning of which is firmly tied to discipline and coercion. It is unclear if Egor is truly celebrating or reciting the poem with the kind of sarcasm we are used to throughout the series.

To top this, Egor mimics a pivotal scene from an iconic Soviet film *Unfinished Piece for the Player Piano* [Neokonchennaia p'iesa dlia

mekhanicheskogo pianino] directed by Nikita Mikhalkov in 1977. An adaptation of Chekhov, the film is known for adopting the anxieties and frustrations of Chekhovian characters, stuck in their circumstances and environment, to Soviet intelligentsia sensibilities of the Stagnation era under the rule of Leonid Brezhnev. Similarities between the film and *Call DiCaprio!* are noted by other reviewers like Anna Golubeva (2018)¹¹. In fact, the film gets cited twice in the show. The first citation occurs early in the series when the famous phrase “I am 35 years old! Everything is ruined! I am a zero, a nothing... I have not done a thing in this damn life” is uttered. And the second one at the very end when the entire cathartic sequence from the ending of the *Player Piano* is reproduced. In *Call DiCaprio!* the melodramatic yet hopeful denouement of the 1970s film is replaced by the shocking fratricide of the series, which unfolds in silence with solemn baroque music in the background, in contrast to the verbose midlife crisis in *Player Piano*. In the film, unlike in *Call DiCaprio!*, Chekhovian characters are deeply sympathetic in their misery and confusion.

Such allusions to classical poetry and iconic films in *Call DiCaprio!* are fairly on the nose and obvious for the native viewer, presuming a certain age and class upbringing. Take for instance the inclusion of *Syrian Sands*, the unfortunate blockbuster Egor stars in. This fictional film is an ironic take on the “Prisoner of the Caucasus” – a classical meta-text of romanticized colonial conquest that harkens back to Imperial Russia. The original corpus of the “Prisoner of the Caucasus” meta-text includes poems by Pushkin and Lermontov, a short story by Leo Tolstoy, in addition to various Soviet and post-Soviet literary and cinematic iterations of the narrative, from slapstick comic spoofing of the narrative in *Prisoner of the Caucasus* [Kavkazskaia plennitsa] (Gaidai, 1967) to *Prisoner of the Mountains* [Kavkazskii plennik] (Bordrov Sr, 1996)

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See Golubeva's review here: <https://www.colta.ru/articles/media/19910-zvonite-kryzhovnikovu>

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There is a significant body of scholarly literature on the subject: from books such as Paul M. Austin's *The Exotic Prisoner in Russian Romanticism* (1998) to numerous articles such as "The Good Russian Prisoner: Naturalizing Violence in the Caucasus Mountains" by Bruce Grant (2005).

that situates the classic imperial narrative in the context of the first Chechen war¹². In *Call DiCaprio!*, instead of the Caucasus, we have Syria. The show clearly lampoons the classical narrative: the only footage from *Syrian Sands* we see is a melodramatic end sequence. It shows the disfigured Russian soldier, played by Egor, in an idyllic country setting with scythe in hand, just to underscore his authentic Russianness. His Syrian bride runs across the fields, while removing her hijab. This is just one of the many references and allusions to classical Russian meta-texts in the show, which seems to be acutely aware of the high culture status of these foundational texts and aims to subvert them.

I argue that these allusions occupy an ambiguous position that entails more than just being markers of shared cultural baggage, a wink and a nod that molds together a pattern of recognition, a certain type of communion between the viewer and the film. It is those citations that pave the way to a senseless act of murder and the protracted silent march that Lev is forced to make at the very end of the series (Ills. 2 and 3). Lev, after strangling Egor, mounts his dead body onto his back and walks, sobbing, down the country road. This sequence itself is a manifestation of something that was said earlier in the show: Katya tells Lev that "his brother is like a hump, it is impossible to get rid of him." In the end, now-dead Egor is a hump that Lev carries until the credits roll. What comes true as the coda of the show is the realization of a callous, selfish calculation. Clearly extraneous to the story of the two brothers in that moment are the lofty allusions to Pushkin, or Chekhov, or the Stagnation-era take on Chekhov. The series creates a rich, polyvalent environment characteristic of what we know globally as "complex TV," but this shared knowledge does not inspire

Instead *Call DiCaprio!* gives us an unflinching dismantling of all sorts of essentialist cultural inscriptions: from HIV stigma, to the



← **FIG. 2**
Zhora Kryzhovnikov.
Call DiCaprio!
Episode 8. 00:48:34



← **FIG. 3**
Zhora Kryzhovnikov.
Call DiCaprio!
Episode 8. 00:48:38

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One of the key soundtrack pieces that is also featured in the end of *Call DiCaprio!* is Henry Purcell's *Funeral Sentences and Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary* (1695).

potency of a shared cultural lingua franca, to the strength of family bonds. What is left in *Call DiCaprio!* is a devastating social critique and a certain void of culturally inscribed meaning to hold on to. This void of meaning is underscored throughout the series by a beautiful Baroque soundtrack: a signifier that resonates precisely because it has no connection and no claim to the reality of what we see on screen. As Lev struggles to walk with his dead brother on his back a Baroque march overpowers the screen in lieu of any other articulation of what happened. The baroque music seems like a faint recollection of something that, perhaps, once was, but became lost in time; it is, in fact, a tribute to 17th-century British Queen.¹³ In other words, *Call DiCaprio!* treats its own embeddedness in the cultural smorgasbord of Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet cultural legacies with suspicion. I argue that this suspicion is characteristic of Soviet and post-Soviet performance art, such as the late-Soviet art of the Moscow conceptualist school or the Leningrad necrorealist film movement. What *Call DiCaprio!* performs with its allusions to celebrated works of Soviet and Russian culture is essentially *stiob*.

**CULTURAL HERITAGE, MISE EN ABYME
AND STIOB IN CALL DICAPRIO!**

Alexei Yurchak in his seminal *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* (2006) examines *stiob* as an ironic aesthetic response from the underground arts to Soviet ideological domination. Interestingly, Yurchak and co-author Dominic Boyer explore the possibilities of *stiob* in today's American pop culture, zeroing in on parody news casts in television, such as *The Daily Show*, as the inheritors of *stiob* aesthetics. *Stiob* is defined the following way:

Stiob “differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor” in that it “required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two” (2006: 250). One of the key characteristics of stiob irony was that it was a “straight,” deep caricature that did not often signal its own ironic purpose. (9)

One of the main sources of relentless stiob irony in *Call DiCaprio!* is Egor’s character speech patterns throughout the series. In fact, nothing he says can be taken too seriously. He often speaks in blatant clichés and revels in disdain for them, giving us a hint of ironic distance through tone and gesture. In the very first episode we see Egor doing an interview for some international documentary project that is supposed to be about trauma and vulnerability. After acting up a whole childhood trauma scene, Egor informs Katya that he made it all up, shrugging it off as a professional thing – he knew what the producers wanted. Egor seems to be acutely aware that his persona as a high rolling Moscow playboy and a television celebrity is already a pre-determined performance of speech and behavior patterns, sins, and virtues. Very much the way *stiob* targets the most hackneyed, emptied clichés of Socialist Realism, *Call DiCaprio!* targets the most well-trodden and oft-appropriated texts from Russian cultural heritage alongside today’s vapid celebrity culture. The vacuousness of Egor’s persona manifests through constant ironic speech peppered with platitudes which all Russian children learn in school. In his moment of *anagnorisis*, his critical revelation, Egor is, in contrast, mute and catatonic. And then, all he can muster to say to his inner circle is that they are all “fake;” then stab his brother for sleeping with Katya. Like the

symbolism of HIV in the film, Egor's identity as a performer, an actor, and a celebrity, reveals a heart of emptiness, onto which all sorts of meaning could be projected. It is no coincidence that the poster for the show features Egor's face cracking up like a clay mask with nothing underneath it (Ill. 4).

Stiob as an aesthetic and political practice called attention to the dangerous emptiness of ideological clichés. It showcased the usurpation of the real by ideological discourse through language decoupled from reality to prop a mirror world instead, where “socialism has been achieved” and Soviet Union is for “peace in the whole world.” Similarly, *Call DiCaprio!* engages in a constant game of doubles. From two brothers pursuing the same dream, to the two women Egor oscillates between, there is a framework of *mise en abyme*, or mirroring at play throughout the series. Often, we as viewers are not sure whether we are in the diegetic world of *Call DiCaprio!* or *Pervaya Gradskaya*. The lines between the television world and the real world are constantly blurred. Aleksandr Petrov plays Egor in a vein that matches his own ascending celebrity reputation: a hot young actor, conquering Moscow from the provinces, is suddenly bestowed with fame, fortune, and a messy love life. Even the first names of various supporting actors in the film match their characters' names: for example, this is true for the cast of *Pervaya Gradskaya*. The doubling gets particularly salient in the show-within-a-show segments. Egor's doppelganger, his *Pervaya Gradskaya* character, dies just before Egor attempts to take his own life. Lev enters *Pervaya Gradskaya* as the brother of Egor's character. At some point the brothers have a scripted exchange in the show-within-a-show that rings true to their relationship in the *Call DiCaprio!* world. It only stands to reason that Lev eventually replaces Egor in the fictional world of the medical show, and then, physically eliminates him from the real world. Lucien

Dallenbach in his classic text on *mise en abyme*, *The Mirror and the Text* (1989), delineates three types of *mise en abyme* as an artistic device: “simple” (a single duplicating reference), “infinite” (Russian-doll-like infinite mirroring), and “paradoxical” *mise en abyme*, a work that encapsulates itself in circular self-referentiality. It is the last type that best describes *Call DiCaprio!* – the effect of the “paradoxical” doubling *mise en abyme* results in inability to differentiate between the self and the double, the reflection and the frame, the “text within text” and the actual text (Ill. 5).

Call DiCaprio! undoubtedly presents an acerbic and scathing satire of the television industry and subversively *stiobs* the viewer with a hackneyed version of Russian culture that is just as alienating as the constant consumerist drive of the Moscow establishment within the show. The show demonstrates a clear disdain towards the cultural fads of today: Polina’s vlogging attempts are downright hilarious, so is the unexpected proliferation of *Star Wars* memorabilia in Katya’s otherwise streamlined, Scandinavian-design, country house. In other words, *Call DiCaprio!* creates an elaborate cultural context to present satire that propels us to agree with its harsh social diagnosis. Satire as a narrative form often uses the “emperor’s new clothes” trope¹⁴: we, the viewers, are “in” on the knowledge that the emperor really has no clothes, and we know how truly despicable the characters are. In fact, there is a *schadenfreude* in this recognition, no matter how enraging and painful. Viewers emerge as savants of human folly and misery in the end. *Call DiCaprio!* presents a farcical cavalcade of self-indulgent and delusional social types whose cluelessness and egotism are the butt of the joke, meant to horrify but also entertain us.

The problem with *Call DiCaprio!* is that viewers are unlikely to feel any sense of rewarding resolution, much like in the Russian art house

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Originally a title of a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, the expression has become associated with hypocrisy, deception and sycophancy that is found morally objectionable and in need to be exposed for what it is.

FIG. 4 →
Zhora Kryzhovnikov.
Call DiCaprio! Official
Poster.



FIG. 5 →
Zhora Kryzhovnikov.
Call DiCaprio!
Episode 7. 00:00:22.



social dramas to which the show has been compared. Dolin, Tkachev and Golubeva all comment on this bleakness – the lack of cathartic resolution, or of a final note that would make us, viewers, feel marginally better. Instead in *Call DiCaprio!* we feel “stuck” together with the characters and recoil at the destruction they have wrought – there is no moment of deliverance from the stifling world they inhabit. Here HIV functions a sort of black hole at the center of the film world: everyone gets AIDS, AIDS defines everything, nobody seems to know what AIDS is. It’s easy to imagine anything else taking place of the ruinous virus, as long as it could destroy lives in the name of prejudice and *mrakobesie* (for example, if Egor was actually a queer subject). Egor’s character himself functions like a vacant spot, a ready assemblage of expected behaviors and flaws. He might as well be the doctor from *Pervaya Gradskaya* – what is the difference between him and his character, what is the difference between Egor and Lev? Egor lies, cheats, and does a terrible job, and so does Lev. There is a pronounced emptiness at the core of the show. It is a frighteningly exact portrayal of today’s neoliberal societies that shape our culture and entertainment in terms of endless replicability and dispensability of objects and subjects. It is no surprise that one of the most frequently used words in the show is “money.” Everyone is in a constant Darwinist struggle for money, and then, more money. Consuming *Star Wars* memorabilia and reciting Pushkin seems to exist on the same plane of hollowed out existence.

Call DiCaprio! does not offer us a glimmer of hope, nor an alternative vision for its bleak diagnosis of Russian society, the television industry, or public health policy around HIV. The cherished cultural heritage that is supposed to address “accursed questions” and provide us with validation and authenticity turns out to be yet another void of meaningless rhetoric. *Call DiCaprio!* pushes the boundaries

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See Zinaida Pronchenko review of *Chiki* in *The Art of Cinema Journal*: <https://kinoart.ru/opinions/rossiya-protiv-interpretatsii-zinaida-pronchenko-o-tom-chto-vidyat-chiki-kogda-otkryvayut-glaza>

of satire as a traditional criticism of social structures towards a more complicated perspective that implicates us as viewers together with the characters in a much darker and cynical vision of today's world. Underneath this vision throbs a heart of emptiness, a sense of bitter bewilderment at the world and the subject's place in it. *Call DiCaprio!* undoubtedly falls into an interesting new pattern for Russian television of the late 2010s, evident in other productions like *Chiki* (2020) and *Kidney* [Pochka] (2021). This new trend is marked by the deep cynicism characteristic of global popular cultural trends. It is also informed by cinematic visual referentiality, exemplified by complex TV, and foregrounded in the local and the global enmeshment (see, for example, comparison of *Chiki* to the Coen brothers' films).¹⁵ It fuses Russian art house sensibilities of social drama with deconstruction of cultural heritage as a reliable source of cultural meaning and social inscription typical of the Soviet underground. All the while creating a mise en abyme text that decenters a dizzying array of cultural milestones from 19th-century literature to Soviet cinema to Western popular culture. *Call DiCaprio!* still privileges male characters and male points of view, reducing female characters mostly to caricatures. I believe that its deconstructive work signals that the future of the trend lies in exploration of stories that defy dominant optics of popular culture defined by metropolitan settings, patriotic themes, and patriarchal gaze. It is no coincidence that *Chiki* is set in the provinces, features female ensemble, and a feminist message, and *Kidney* (along with *Ordinary Woman* [Obyknovennaya zhenshchina] (2018)) exemplifies the anti-heroine trope. In light of recent full scale military invasion of Ukraine by Russia, that shocked the world and created an unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe in Europe since WWII, it is unclear what venues remain for Russian television to continue

exploring these trends, especially with regards to the potential politics of decolonization.

Any cursory glance at television offerings on any of the streaming services available in most corners of the world will yield many shows that demonstrate an analogously bleak view of humanity, often via apocalyptic or dystopian narratives. From the Korean *Squid Game* to the American *Succession* or *Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present) to the British *Black Mirror* (2011-2019) to the Brazilian *Reality Z* (2020) to the Russian *To The Lake* (2019), the examples are too numerous not to notice a pronounced shift in global sensibilities towards anxiety about the future of humanity, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. What all these television productions have in common is a recognition of the uneasy fluidity and uncertainty of culturally inscribed meanings, of the way things should be. But things got irrevocably upended by rapid disintegration of our collective reality under the strain of the pandemic. The themes of these global dystopian shows range from environmental disasters and public health crises (*Reality Z*, *To the Lake*); to political oppression (*Handmaid's Tale*); technological disasters (*Black Mirror*); to the neoliberal inequities of globalization (*Squid Game*, *Succession*). And these shows are just a small sample of the global production of anxiety-inducing cultural texts that see nothing but death and destruction ahead of human civilization.

Just like with *Call DiCaprio!* it is very clear viewers, what the didactic elements of this trend are: be it critique of social mores, late capitalism or imagining of an environmental catastrophe. As Fredric Jameson suggests in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), the proliferation of future-oriented dystopian narratives provides a critique and a “window” to the present. We can safely assume that bleak narratives in popular culture today are a reaction to today's challenges, inequities,

and conflicts across the globe. While *Call DiCaprio!* presents us with a realistic yet dystopian present, it is in line with global television trends that promote prescriptive narratives about the fate of society or moral order, but also project mistrust of cultural values that might offer an alternative to the anxieties of today. *Call DiCaprio!* sets the stage for television that is attuned both to local and global cultural currents, questioning familiar truths, yet finding that no answer, no didactic prescription can provide sure footing in the shifting cultural, social and political landscape in a globalized, uncertain world. ♡

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FIG. 3: Zhora Kryzhovnikov. *Call DiCaprio!*. 2018. Episode 8. 00:48:38

FIG. 4: Zhora Kryzhovnikov. *Call DiCaprio!* Official Poster

FIG. 5: Zhora Kryzhovnikov. *Call DiCaprio!*. 2018. Episode 7. 00:00:22

Резюме

В данной работе анализируется популярный среди зрителей и критиков мини-сериал Жоры Крыжовникова (псевдоним Андрея Першина) *Звоните ДиКаприо!* (2018). Сериал рассматривается в локальном и глобальном контекстах. Глобальный контекст сериала осмысливается с опорой на понятие «умного» или «сложного» (Джейсон Миттел 2006) телевидения (complex TV), которое инновационно отличается от предыдущих сериальных форм многогранностью нарративных стратегий, выборочным использованием киноэстетики, формированием виртуальных сообществ и трансмедийных платформ вокруг мира сериала, и особенным вниманием к мета-референциальным возможностям сериальной формы, погруженной в культурный, кинематографический и, собственно, сериальный контекст. Что касается локальной специфики, то сериал *Звоните ДиКаприо!* рассматривается как сатирическое произведение, пародирующее современную российскую кино- и телеиндустрию. Автор выделяет художественные приёмы мизанабима, двойничества и отражения как ключевые для понимания сатирической составляющей сериала. Особое значение приобретает вирус ВИЧ, который выступает как нарративный приём, подчиняющийся законам трагедии. Также анализируются связи типажных персонажей *Звоните ДиКаприо!* с героями классических произведений Гоголя и Чехова и проблематизируется роль мета-нарративов русской культуры, фигурирующих в сериале, с точки зрения понимания сатиры как стёба (следуя определению Алексея Юрчака).

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