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## Russian Performances

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## Borders Unpatrolled

### *Imaginary Geographies and the Spaces of Performance in Russian Viral Video*

ELIOT BORENSTEIN

In the prologue to Dmitri Kolodan's *Maskarad: Zerkala—1* (Masquerade: Mirrors—1, 2012), a novel in the best-selling young adult Ethnogenesis series, aspiring Russian actress Tomka Koshkina has just arrived in Venice, only to fall victim to a series of practical jokes at the hands of her new Italian acquaintances. Gepetto and Laura act as though they know Tomka, and they are shocked that she is unaware that she is an international celebrity:

“Well, you know,” said Gepetto carefully. “You’re that . . .”

“Crazy Russian Girl on Stilts,” Laura finished for him. “We’ve watched your clip on YouTube a thousand and one times.” (Kolodan 2012, prologue)

Without her knowledge, someone had uploaded a video of Tomka practicing for the upcoming Venice carnival, and now Tomka finds she is a hero of worldwide slapstick, with offers from the Cirque du Soleil. Tomka's Internet misadventures are only a minor incident in a sixty-volume saga spanning all space and time, but her inadvertent fame is instructive. After flying across a continent to arrive in Venice, she discovers that her own digital image has beat her to her destination, hobbling on stilts and pixels over borders and T1 lines. Reputation, it turns out, travels at light speed, while mere mortals must make do with more conventional transport.

Tomka's celebrity would be immediately legible to the Ethnogenesis fans who encounter it; only her ignorance comes off as disconcerting. After all, viral video has become an integral part of the Russian mediascape. If recent surveys are to be believed, 43 percent of all adults in the Russian Federation use the

Internet on a daily basis (RIA Novosti 2013). Moreover, unlike predigital examples of Russian popular performance (such as that of pop diva Alla Pugacheva), Russian viral video crosses geographic and cultural borders with unprecedented ease. Netizens in the West have mined Russia's on-line digital archives as a reliable source of the profoundly weird, from dashboard camera recordings of wayward trucks spilling cattle onto highways to the (re)discovery of Eduard Khil's unintentionally hilarious 1976 singing of "Vocalise" (*The Trololo Man*). Taken together, such viral videos create a virtual Russia that, while by no means co-extensive with the real country or even its culture, throws the landmarks of the discourse of Russia and Russianness into sharp relief.

Viral video is successful to the extent that it continually creates and recreates its audience. First, it negates context: stripped of whatever accompanying material might have contextualized it, the video is either entirely uncurated or completely recurated. Second, viral video establishes new contexts for itself as it circulates among overlapping niche audiences. Viral video that "escapes" Russia's boundaries via global consumption establishes a particular sense of the country that produces it (in the cases cited above, as the motherland of the cheesy and the absurd). By contrast, video that circulates primarily within Russia and among Russians abroad both furthers and undermines popular discourse about the nation and its others. In both cases, the discursive boundaries drift far from the intentions of politicians and public intellectuals. If these boundaries are patrolled at all, it is by the virtual units that, on the net, come to define them: the memes of popular Russian statehood and postimperial Soviet cultural nostalgia.

#### THE MEMETICS OF PERFORMANCE

Meme theory is particularly helpful for addressing questions of Russian viral video, performance, and audience, even though viral video is itself the phenomenon that has made such an important contribution to the popular misunderstanding of what exactly memes are. Memes, as coined by Richard Dawkins, are simply units of information that replicate themselves by passing from brain to brain via whatever media are available for facilitating the transfer. In the absence of telepathy, that means prose, music, film, advertising—all the ways in which humans communicate (Dawkins 2006, 196–97). This reproduction is thought to occur along Darwinian lines: only the "fittest" memes replicate successfully, and here fitness refers to what new media theorists call "stickiness"—a particular meme's capacity to draw attention and stick in one's brain.

In the popular consciousness, only a subset of memes are recognized as such, and these exist almost entirely on the Internet: LOLcats, familiar images

appropriated for the sake of humor, and so on. But memes are meant to be the basic unit of culture itself; if the theory is true, there is no information that is not a meme. Thus it is ironic that the meme “meme” has, as memes do, taken on a life of its own that no longer refers back to its original meaning. The very misunderstanding of memes can be seen as a persuasive argument for meme theory’s validity (Borenstein 2004).

Though memetics was first postulated before the onset of digital media hegemony, it appears tailor-made for examining cultural production in an environment of instantaneous, potentially unlimited transmission. By the same token, meme theory should, by rights, have an uneasy relationship with performance studies, given the widespread insistence that ephemerality is performance’s most distinctive trait. Watching a video of people sitting with Marina Abramović cannot be the same thing as sitting with her in the same room; that kind of performance is ontologically analog, rather than digital, depending on a metaphysics of presence.<sup>1</sup> Performance, whether or not it is mimetic, is decidedly antimimetic, erasing rather than propagating itself. We are left instead with the archives of performance, the remarkably lifelike corpse of what was once a vital body.

From a strictly performance studies perspective, viral video is just another kind of archive. But its brevity and ubiquity transform this archive into a set of easily digestible tropes that, taken together, can constitute an entire discursive structure. Memes are reconstituted (often inaccurately) by the particular subjective self encountering them; if performances can be broken down into small enough units to function as memes, then they require the subjective self to reperform them at every recollection or invocation. Moreover, if we see the meme as the basic unit of transmission in the viral video performance, we no longer need to make a strong distinction between word, image, or gesture: any of these elements, whether in isolation or combination, can constitute the primary “things” transmitted. Finally, and most important, in a world that has largely moved beyond face-to-face interactions, it is new media such as viral video that disseminate the performances whose visual and verbal tropes condition our understanding of phenomena whose scale has always transcended the possibilities of the intimate, live performance. Viral video breaches borders to create and perform national and cultural identities.

#### MEANWHILE, IN RUSSIA . . .

When it comes to the memetic transmission of content coded as “national” to the world at large, there is, of course, a selection bias: videos are shared because

they are shocking, inspirational, informative, or amusing.<sup>2</sup> Shocking or informative videos tend to rely on a preexisting interest in either the subject matter or the country itself. They depend entirely on relevance, rendering them short-lived. Viral no longer, they will revert to pure archive.

The category of interest here is video whose interest to consumers abroad would depend less on some prior cathexis to things Russian. The popular “Meanwhile, in . . .” meme, showcasing images and video from countries around the world, is particularly rich in Russian material.<sup>3</sup> In 2009 a thirty-three-year-old clip of Eduard Khil singing “Vocalise” became an Internet sensation, with over two million hits in a matter of weeks.<sup>4</sup> Exemplifying a kitschy (and vanishing) Soviet aesthetic, Khil’s forced, relentless cheer and stiff gestures reinforce a familiar image of Russia as a land of yokels. His performance is also perfect for export, in that it bypasses the language barrier entirely: though the first frame of the video informs us that the song is about “coming home,” Khil dispenses with words altogether. He speaks the international language of nonsense.

Most recently, the dashboard camera has become the vehicle for saving and transmitting both bizarre happenstance and spontaneous performance in the Russian Federation. Hugely popular in Russia for self-protection against traffic police corruption and liability scams, dashboard camera recordings came to prominence in the West on February 15, 2013, when a meteor hit Siberia. Since then, dashcam videos have become a staple of viral video (particularly after Jon Stewart aired a compilation just five days after the meteor strike). Here Stewart deliberately treats the freakish recorded events as if they were everyday occurrences: “They’ve long been accustomed to the fact that your average Russian car can easily be torn apart by your average Russian woman.” Two drivers confronting each other with a baseball bat is called a “typical roadside scene.” He concludes, “Russia is like a live-action version of *Grand Theft Auto*” (Stewart 2013). The point here is not to take Stewart to task for exaggeration (exaggeration is his stock-in-trade) but rather to note the way in which viral video is used to perform an idea of Russia that expands upon preexisting notions of national identity. Dashcam videos had been available on YouTube for years before Stewart’s compilation aired, but the meteor strike functioned as a dramatic “pointer” to the Russian Federation: now that an astronomical catastrophe has gotten our attention, let us see what else we can find in the neighborhood. The world’s attention returns to Russia when the nation’s airspace is disrupted by the celestial equivalent of a stray bullet; the dashcam recordings of the event in turn draw attention both to the dashcam phenomenon and the Russian roads themselves.

## MORE BETTER BLUES: SVETA FROM IVANOVO

On December 6, 2011, *Moscow News* correspondent Yevgeny Gladin stopped nineteen-year-old Svetlana Kuritsyna after a pro-Putin rally to ask her for an interview, neither of them having an inkling that the result would become a YouTube video with 2.5 million hits in two weeks (Snegirev 2012). With saucer-shaped eyes wide open, the young woman now best known as “Sveta from Ivanovo” gave the impromptu speech of a lifetime:

My name is Svetlana, from the city of Ivanovo. United Russia [Putin’s party] had made very many accomplishments: they’ve raised put the econo—economy, we’ve started to—dress more better, and there wasn’t what there is now—these are very big accomplishments! In agriculture everything’s good—there’s more—land—more, well,—I don’t know how to say it—more land sown—and, yeah, vegetables, rye—all of that. What else—since our country is multinational, we have lots of people in Moscow who help us a lot—from other cities—yes, it’s a big accomplishment! Very good, even! See, well—see, back in Ivanovo medicine has gotten good—uh, what else—the cities are well maintained—housing—no problems with that. People are helping very well.

Sveta from Ivanovo became an overnight celebrity. The object of parody, hate mail, Internet trolling, and even admiration, Sveta parlayed her newfound fame into television and web appearances, culminating in her own talk/variety/reality show on state-owned NTV, *Luch sveta* (A ray of light), punning on her first name. Given that her career began with a random, two-minute “woman-on-the-street” interview (a randomness that she chalks up to “fate”), Sveta has shown surprising staying power. What is the nature of her appeal?

Part of the original video’s power comes from her appearance and affect: the round face, wide-open eyes, and naive facial expressions reinforce received notions of provincial simplicity (if not stupidity). But to watch her speak is to observe the naive, politically loyal subject grapple with the difference between political affect and political discourse. She is convinced United Russia has accomplished a great deal, and now she has to put those accomplishments into words. She knows that the economy is crucial, so she emphasizes it. But when she has to get more specific, she reverts to Soviet era clichés about agriculture and “our multinational country.” Agriculture becomes simply a list of farm words, while the multinational question leads her into a dead end. She makes claims no official could make with a straight face (“housing—no problems with that”).

The key words for her are “accomplishments,” “good,” and “better.” With the few intellectual and verbal tools available to her, Sveta from Ivanova attempts to articulate Putinism on the spot.

Putinism is a difficult tongue to master. Sveta fails at Putinism because it is so difficult to perform; unlike Bolshevism, Putinism has little in the way of theory or explicit ideology (as least before Putin’s 2013 declaration that Russia was the caretaker of “conservative values”). Or, to put it differently, the few memes that offer themselves up as features of Putinism rarely add up to anything coherent. Putinism is an ever-moving target. Viewers who enjoyed the clip ironically could identify the failure of Putinism to be spoken as another instance of the failure in Putinism itself: by throwing together clichés about strength, multinationalism, agriculture, and the economy, Sveta from Ivanovo inadvertently exposes the bricolage behind Putin’s program; without an already authoritative voice to express it, Putinism proves itself a contradictory hodgepodge.

The crowning moment of her tongue-tied monologue comes early with the phrase that will forever be associated with Sveta from Ivanovo: “We’ve started to dress more better [*bolee luchshe*].” Not only is success defined in the crassest of consumer terms, it is defined with terrible grammar. If anti-Putinist intellectuals suspected that United Russia’s followers were subliterate dupes, Sveta was all the confirmation they needed. Khil’s (largely external) success in *The Trololo Man* comes at the avoidance of language, while Sveta’s (primarily internal) fame results from using it wrong. Each is a triumph of style over content; in Sveta’s case, it is the affirmation of style *as* content. What is important is to assume the stance of fealty.

#### WHERE DOES BOLLYWOOD BEGIN? TAJIK JIMMY

Where Sveta became a cultural sensation for her garbled words, her predecessor in viral video fame was a hit precisely because his words were unintelligible: Tajik Jimmy. The 2009 viral video sensation *Tajik Jimmy* (Baimurat Allaberiyeu) serves as an ideal site for a number of values that are contested throughout the culture and that take on surprising forms thanks to Internet celebrity. Jimmy (who is not an ethnic Tajik and not named Jimmy) is a Central Asian migrant whose note-perfect performance of Soviet era Bollywood hits was caught on cellphone video, rocketing him to stardom. Allaberiyeu was an unlikely candidate for celebrity: at a time when Central Asians (including Allaberiyeu himself) were subject to routine verbal and physical abuse on the streets of Moscow, Tajik Jimmy became the face of a peculiar nostalgia. Singing in a language neither he nor his listeners understand, Jimmy uses the Internet as a transnational

forum that recreates a common Soviet (cyber)space. Both he and his audience negotiate a delicate dance of authenticity and irony, celebrating a falsified ethnography that is in stark contrast to the strong emphasis on borders and sovereignty elsewhere in the culture.

Allaberiyeu, an ethnic Uzbek born in Tajikistan, was an illegal warehouse worker in the provincial town of Kolomna, where he entertained his coworkers with song. Allaberiyeu's performance of "Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy Aaja" from the 1982 Bollywood movie *Disco Dancer*, recorded in the warehouse during a break, catapulted him to fame, leading to concerts, a recording contract, and international media attention (including a write-up in the *New York Times*). Jimmy's fandom shares some features with that of Sveta from Ivanovo (and even, to an extent, Eduard Khil): his virtuoso performance evokes an admiration somewhere in a gray zone between sincerity and irony. As "Tajik" Jimmy, Allaberiyeu is the embodiment of the most abject of non-Russian others who have migrated to Russia in search of work. His front teeth are missing because (long before he became a star) some Russian thugs knocked them out. Normally, the best a man like him can hope for is invisibility, but Allaberiyeu's peculiar array of talents have put him in the spotlight.

Allaberiyeu sings all the parts in "Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy Aaja," switching to a falsetto to match the women's voices, bringing the gaudy glamour of Bollywood to his desolate warehouse. With fame came "real" gigs, replacing the virtual space of viral video with actual stages in concert halls, restaurants, and nightclubs. Many of these performances of course have been captured on film and uploaded to YouTube, closing the circle from real-time performance to viral video. Allaberiyeu's costumes get better, of course, and he has performed other music occasionally, but his video repertoire largely amounts to repeat performances of "Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy Aaja" in different settings. Here the boundary between the real-time performance and viral archive becomes further blurred in that Allaberiyeu never varies his rendition of his trademark song. He is not lip-synching, but he may as well be. The whole point of his performance is that it strikes its post-Soviet audience as an exact reproduction of the song as they know it from the film.<sup>5</sup> Variation might demonstrate a broader vocal or interpretive talent on Allaberiyeu's part, but it would only get in the way of his listeners' pleasure.

In the case of Tajik Jimmy, Allaberiyeu's note-perfect reproduction of the male and female parts, as well as all the instruments, is all the more astonishing when one considers that he doesn't understand a word that he is singing. But then, neither do his listeners. The voice both is and is not "Jimmy's," just as



Allaberiyeu is and is not “Jimmy” and is and is not “Tajik.” Here, communication is out of the question, replaced by a kind of phatic communion. Allaberiyeu does not perform in the language of his Russian “hosts,” and he does not adopt English, simultaneously the lingua franca of world pop and the bogeyman to all those fearful of American cultural domination. Nor are the Russians enjoying a stylized performance of his quaint ethnic traditions, something Soviet audiences patiently endured throughout decades of official multicultural functions. Tajik Jimmy’s novelty act performs a nostalgic restoration of a time when none of the borders mattered and the entire brotherhood of peoples could be united in their enjoyment of imported kitsch in a language foreign to all. Outside the Indian diaspora, Bollywood is the international language that nobody understands.

#### VIRAL AND VIRTUAL RUSSIA

None of the actors in any of the videos discussed here were likely to think of themselves as “performing Russia” for either a domestic or an international audience. YouTube abounds with self-conscious, blatantly ideological stagings of an infinite variety of national identities (Russian identities included). Such videos cannot rival the memetic effectiveness of Sveta, Jimmy, or the numerous Russian dashcam videos because they are simply not entertaining. Moreover, the messages that can be obtained from a deliberately patriotic (or, for that matter, Russophobic) video are usually patently obvious. Any Russian child could recognize the standard contours of the Russian Federation as depicted on a map, while that child’s parents and grandparents can perform similarly unimpressive feats with the topographical borders of the now-defunct USSR. The viral videos examined in this chapter tell a more complicated story: the ones that are memetically successful in the West form and reinforce ideas about the people Russia contains (at a safe distance from the viewer), while the videos that have spread among Russophone audiences repeatedly reconfigure the imaginary geographies of Russia and a familiar set of others: its former “little brother” nations and geopolitical rivals and its own provincial backwaters.

If, as suggested at the beginning of this essay, viral videos represent a hybrid of performance and archive (as well as an illustration of Philip Auslander’s thesis about the follies of fetishizing “liveness”), they also bear witness to two other productive tensions: between performance and articulation, and performance and curation. The daredevils and buffoons of Russian viral video may not be making a conscious or explicit statement about their nation, but the videos’ presentation for Western audiences often includes a context that articulates just

such a message. Jimmy's performance in a language foreign to all his viewers cannot explicitly articulate anything; rather, the sheer fact of transnational Bollywood nostalgia as filtered through his voice makes a point of its own. Sveta from Ivanovo inadvertently gives a career-making performance precisely *because* of her inability to articulate the very specific messages one might expect from a participant in a political rally. Viral video confounds borders while depending heavily on frames. When Pushkin first spoke of Russia's "window to the West," he could never have imagined how small and ubiquitous such windows could be.

#### NOTES

1. In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* ([1999] 2008), Philip Auslander questions emphasis on presence or "liveness," suggesting that fetishizing the "live" in performance risks an overly narrow approach to performance studies.

2. The circulation of Internet memes within Russia for Russian consumption is another matter entirely. Darya Rodchenko (2013) argues that fan communities use particular sets of memes to facilitate the affiliative bonds of fandom.

3. For a fascinating examination of Russian memes on Buzzfeed, see Rann (2013).

4. The original upload (<https://youtu.be/oavMtUWDBTM>) had over 25 million hits as of February 21, 2017. This does not include the numerous reposts and "sing-along" versions, with millions of views of their own.

5. Listeners in India and the Indian diaspora will have different reactions, since only some of the words he speaks are recognizable as Hindi (Tejaswini Ganti, personal communication with Eliot Borenstein, 2014).