

**PUBLIC OFFERINGS: MMM AND THE  
MARKETING OF MELODRAMA**

Throughout the Russian Federation in the summer of 1994, people of all ages and backgrounds, from cynical schoolboys to bitter *babushki*, could be heard constantly invoking a certain three-letter word without any trace of shyness; this same word was seen on the walls of public buildings and subways, was prominently featured in national newspapers, and was repeated like a mantra on state-owned television. To those already inclined to believe that the country was going to hell in a handbasket, the word's ubiquity was a clear sign of the degradation of public taste. That word was "MMM." Sergei Mavrodi's MMM, a network of companies whose complexity and mystery have yet to be completely unraveled, was both producer and product of the most effective and unrelenting media campaign in the former Soviet Union since Mother Russia rallied her sons and daughters against the Nazi invaders.

Such an icon as Mother Russia, however, would be out of place in MMM's

advertisements, for that stern, maternal symbol exists outside of time: her depiction may vary somewhat depending on the artist, but the Mother Russia of World War II neither aged nor changed. A static figure rather than an episodic hero, she could not develop or be shown to learn. For the MMM advertisements, however, the passage of time would prove to be essential, as the viewers had to be convinced that investing in MMM always led to satisfying results. The act of investment had to be shown as a process, and so the makers of the MMM ads quickly learned the trick of conflating the product being hyped with the genre of entertainment that held its viewers' attention between commercials: the soap opera, probably the only genre named after its corporate sponsor. The success of MMM, a pyramid scheme that defrauded consumers by the millions, was due in large part to its brilliant exploitation of the possibilities inherent in the soap opera genre, a form of entertainment that has rapidly come to prominence in post-Soviet Russia. MMM's foray into soap opera allowed the company to blur the boundaries between production and marketing, fiction and nonfiction, and public and private, to the point where the ads themselves became the company's greatest product: Mavrodi's medium *was* his message.

MMM's use of soap opera was, according to Bakhyt Kilibaev, the ad campaign's director, a happy accident dictated by the nature of the product being sold.<sup>1</sup> Not only did its success surpass the wildest dreams of its creators, but MMM's artificial world rapidly took on a life of its own: its main character, Lenia Golubkov, became the stuff of jokes and urban folklore, burned in effigy by his enemies and emulated by his friends.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as events overtook Mavrodi, ultimately leading to his arrest, the soap opera of MMM soon became the soap opera *about* MMM. In one of the many bizarre circumstances that would surround the MMM crisis in 1994, news programs revealing damaging evidence of Mavrodi's fraudulent activity were punctuated by the inevitable commercials urging viewers to change their lives by investing in MMM stock. The MMM soap opera, which was intended from the beginning to inspire mimetic desire, spilled over throughout the media that first had carried it and then discussed it. For Russian television and newspapers, this was a melodrama in which the naive, post-Soviet media found themselves cast in the role of gullible heroine tempted by the rich, smooth-talking deceiver (MMM).<sup>3</sup> For MMM, it was the government that played the villain's role, while Mavrodi (and, by extension, his "partners"—the investors he convinced to put money into his scheme) was a martyr fighting against a jealous, authoritarian state. Both Mavrodi and the mass media tirelessly spun new narratives for popular con-

sumption: the pundits demonstratively wrung their hands over the sorry state of the media and exchanged accusations with rival journalists, while Mavrodi paid to have his frequent declarations from prison published in full-page ads in newspapers throughout Russia. Finally, Mavrodi's "partners" joined in the act with their "Letters to MMM," in which one ordinary citizen after the next recounted the tale of successful investments in terms already familiar from MMM's advertising.<sup>4</sup> Although television is often criticized for rendering the viewer passive, MMM's ad campaign had the opposite effect: not only did it prompt millions of Russian citizens to imitate Lenia Golubkov and his friends, and thus turn off their televisions at least long enough to buy shares, but as the crisis developed, MMM's diehard supporters progressed beyond viewers and actors, ultimately becoming the coauthors of MMM's grand narrative, reinscribing their own lives within its parameters and publishing the results in newspaper advertisements for all their fellow Russians to read. To a large extent, MMM's simulation of the stock market (which replaced actual investment with a semblance of entrepreneurial activity) ultimately became a self-perpetuating, all-encompassing master narrative in which MMM's "partners," viewers, and authors could live nearly full time.

To dismiss MMM as simply one in the long list of pyramid schemes that have sprouted up throughout the former Warsaw Pact nations would be to treat the company as merely an economic or political phenomenon. Such a conclusion would be possible only by ignoring the source of MMM's success: its advertising campaign.<sup>5</sup> Although the substance of MMM was, of course, economic (money was made and lost at a staggering rate), the television advertisements focused far more on the achievement of happiness in everyday life. What makes the MMM ad campaign so compelling a case study, however, is the manner in which the "everyday life" depicted so rapidly expanded: by the summer of 1994, there was no aspect of life that could not somehow be subsumed within the omnivorous rhetoric of MMM. MMM had even appropriated the trappings of national executive power, becoming a "hologram state" that flirted with the idea of appropriating supreme governmental authority. Economically, MMM was a classic pyramid scheme (that is, an investment plan in which earlier investors are paid dividends from the money contributed by later investors), distinguished from the more common chain letter only by its scope. But MMM as a cultural phenomenon applied the principles of the pyramid scheme to both advertising and public discussion of the scheme itself: the rhetoric of MMM expanded along with its money, finally reaching a point at

which the company's critics came to see it as a symbol of everything that was wrong with post-Soviet Russian life, while its advocates looked on it as the only institution offering a viable alternative to these very same problems.

### Initial Mystery

To understand the MMM phenomenon, a few words about the nature and history of the company are in order. MMM was founded by Sergei Mavrodi as a cooperative in 1988. A 1979 graduate of the Moscow Institute of Electronic Machine Building, Mavrodi's involvement in "business" dates back to 1981, years before Gorbachev's reforms would render such activity legal. Over the years, Mavrodi slowly climbed the black-market ladder, selling first jeans and records, then eventually computers and other expensive consumer goods.<sup>6</sup> According to the newspaper *Moskovskie novosti*, Mavrodi spent most of the 1980s registered as an elevator attendant, janitor, and night watchman in order to avoid prosecution for "parasitism" (lack of an official job) while developing his black-market career.<sup>7</sup> For the first few years of its existence, MMM kept a low profile in both the markets and the media; in the late 1980s it was the Alisa company, with its ubiquitous barking dog, that dominated the airwaves. As MMM expanded, its troubles with the law also grew, most notably over the question of taxes. In January 1992, MMM's accountants were arrested for non-payment of taxes and for presenting false balance sheets. In April of the following year, Makhaon, an MMM subsidiary, was prosecuted for hiding one billion rubles. MMM-Bank, another affiliate, was closed in the fall of 1993, but its money disappeared before unpaid taxes could be collected. Soon MMM's run-ins with the law took a burlesque turn that strained credibility even more than its ad campaign: in May 1994, a Toyota carrying important documents relating to eighteen divisions of MMM was mysteriously hijacked on its way to the offices of the tax police; the car was later found, but the documents had vanished for good.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the beginning of MMM's troubled relationship with the authorities roughly coincided with the company's rise to prominence in the public consciousness (1992–94). If the government was intrigued by MMM's activity, ordinary Russians were no less so. From the very beginning, MMM was a creature of Moscow's equivalent of Madison Avenue, a set of mysterious initials and enigmatic advertisements that seemed designed to arouse the public's curiosity. In the early 1990s, MMM lavished money on exquisitely pro-

duced billboards displayed in metro stations throughout the country's major cities: one would have had to be blind not to recognize MMM's ever-present butterfly symbol, often accompanied by the enigmatic slogan "из тени в свет перелетая" (Flying out of the dark into the light). Perhaps these words were an announcement that MMM would indeed finally "come to light" and reveal its true nature, but its early television advertisements only increased the mystery, even as they emphasized the company's widespread name recognition.<sup>9</sup> One ad in particular comes to mind, the commercial that might best be called "The Annunciation of MMM." This TV spot immediately stood out for its high production values (still a rarity in 1992) and excellent direction; it was a combination of Western quality with Russian faces. In it, the camera shows us people from a wide variety of backgrounds, at work, at play, engaging in casual conversation. One after another, each one sees a light emanating from the heavens and looks up. Finally, we see what they see: the huge letters "MMM," accompanied by a God-like baritone proclaiming: "нас знают все" ("Everyone knows us," or, more literally, "We are known by all"). In effect, the ad worked like an incantation: endless repetitions of the words "everybody knows us" ultimately rendered them true: who didn't recognize MMM? At the same time, the ad played on a variety of mass traditions: the ever-present Soviet мы (we) that was the subject of so many political slogans had now become an object, нас (us), while the masses became the subject, все (everyone). Although both Soviet propaganda and post-Soviet advertising target the "masses," their different approaches to the populace reflect contradictory metaphors of the body politic: for Soviet propaganda, with its roots in the collectivist romanticism of the proletarian culture movement, the masses moved as one body.<sup>10</sup>

When the masses become consumers, however, the once-nationalized public body becomes fragmented, privatized. Although the advertiser operates on a large scale, he must nevertheless develop the illusion of a personal relationship between the product and the consumer. The MMM ad treated consumers as anything but undifferentiated masses or class types: the revelation of MMM was, like the revelation at Sinai, a collective event experienced by each person individually. Moreover, the Sinai comparison leads to an important point: the advertisement is suffused with a distinctly nonsecular glow. In the United States, such an approach fairly reeks of Protestantism: the skeptical housewife comes to accept Clorox bleach as her personal savior. Appropriately, this MMM ad appeals to a closer, Russian Orthodox context: as the individuals who make up the Russian все each, in turn, look up and display their profiles to the

camera, their poses effortlessly switch from the casual to the iconic, and each one basks in the reflected halo of corporate transfiguration.

Eventually, the advertisers lifted the veil of mystery from their product, and MMM was revealed to be an investment group. This, however, was no ordinary fund: first of all, it did not involve the direct purchase of stocks. Instead, MMM's "partners" bought pieces of paper that gave them redemption rights to stocks, which in turn might someday earn dividends. Most investors never redeemed their paper for actual stock; instead, the paper itself was the source of unheard-of profits. MMM newspaper ads repeatedly crowed that "our shares are guaranteed to be liquid" — they could be bought and sold at any time. Moreover, whereas the new capitalist stock market was a source of potential anxiety for consumers who were only just being weaned from a planned economy, MMM's shares came with a guarantee: not only would they always go up in price faster than the rate of inflation, but, in the best traditions of Gosplan (the Soviet governmental entity in charge of central economic planning), their future value was announced several days in advance. There was, however, no rational explanation for such profits; certainly, no investments in Russia at the time could yield such returns, nor could the currency markets (despite the inexorable decline of the ruble); even drug trafficking was less lucrative than the 3,000% annual dividends promised by MMM.<sup>11</sup>

Although a number of hypotheses have been proposed to explain MMM, the prevailing model is quite simple: it was a pyramid scheme that operated on an elegant and simple premise; if enough people were convinced to buy the shares at 1,000 rubles (the original price), even more investors could be persuaded to buy them at 1,200. Some of those who bought in at 1,000 took their money and ran, but others kept it in because the price went up as promised, suggesting further profits. When the company increased the price again, its proven track record of profitability lured new buyers, whose higher investment paid off the old buyers. In a pyramid, old investors are paid off thanks to new investments, but pyramids usually collapse when the price for new stocks gets too high to be affordable, driving down the number of buyers and, eventually, the value of the shares. Shareholders panic and ask for their money back, but the company cannot oblige; the stock undergoes a kind of physical sublimation, and "guaranteed liquidity" gives way to hot air. Investors can certainly make money on pyramids, but only if they get in early enough, since the scheme is based on an inflationary spiral. To put it bluntly, pyramid schemes function very much like a notoriously unreliable method of contraception, in which a calamitous outcome can be avoided only given a timely withdrawal.<sup>12</sup>

### Playing the Market

Pyramid schemes succeed in attracting investors only if they can show results; thus, it is essential that an aspiring pyramid builder spread the good word of his successes early on. Television advertising is the perfect means to do that: after abandoning its initial mysterious commercials, MMM devoted its massive resources to filling the airwaves with success stories about investors "just like you." But it was MMM's use of the soap opera format that proved to be a stroke of genius, even though, in retrospect, the choice of this genre seems overdetermined. Although no stranger to melodrama, the Soviet Union did not produce soap operas as such, and before the late perestroika era, the viewing public had seen few examples of soap operas from abroad. When state television began to show the Mexican serial drama *Los ricos lloran tambien* (Богатые тоже плачут, *The Rich Also Cry*), the country was so caught up in the trials and tribulations of Marianna, a street waif turned rich man's wife, that the program had to be shown twice a day in order to avoid a precipitous drop in labor productivity. For the uninitiated, it must be noted that Latin American soap operas differ sharply from those in the United States; the melodrama, unrestrained emotion, and reliance on chance that characterize Mexican and Brazilian soaps make *General Hospital* look positively Pinteresque. Perhaps more ominously for MMM and its "partners," Latin American *telenovelas* also differ from American soaps in terms of time: while *The Guiding Light* has been shining since 1948 (having successfully made the transition from radio to TV),<sup>13</sup> Latin American serials are finite — even if coming to the end of the story means skipping ahead ten or twenty years to allow the heroine's long-lost son to grow up and narrowly avoid marrying his sister.<sup>14</sup> The Latin American model is particularly appropriate for a pyramid scheme, because both reach an inevitable, tear-stained conclusion.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, MMM could not borrow from Latin American soap operas whole cloth; no matter how much the Russian audience might empathize with Marianna, or with the heroine of the most popular soap of the summer of 1994, *Prosto Mariia* (*Simplemente Maria*, or *Just Maria*), there was still an undeniable distance between Russian viewers and Mexican actresses, one that no amount of dubbing could overcome. As mentioned above, MMM had good reasons for choosing the soap opera format: the company could encourage the purchase of MMM shares by offering repeated simulacra of MMM investment success stories. MMM's target audience, however, was neither Mexican nor Brazilian, and thus the company took the *telenovela* and Russified it. The creators of MMM's

advertising campaign drew on particularly Russian sources, especially folklore and socialist realism. The connection between aggressively capitalist advertising and official Soviet propaganda might seem unlikely, but MMM cleverly borrowed a number of socialist realist tropes (the ordinary worker as hero, the conflation of personal and collective success), even as it twisted them to suit its own purposes. Moreover, MMM was able to take advantage of an audience that had been raised on socialist realist mass culture, whose idea of mimesis included not only the “accurate” representation of “real” life in art, but the expectation that “real” life can (and perhaps should) use art as its model.

Since MMM was trying to soak up the paltry savings of engineers and pensioners, the heroes and heroines of the company’s mini-melodramas were carefully designed to be ordinary; “New Russians” need not apply. Thus Russia was introduced to its new national hero, a man who would displace the butterfly as MMM’s primary symbol: Lenia Golubkov, construction worker.<sup>16</sup> Lenia Golubkov was a cross between a Horatio Alger success story, a Russian fairy tale, and a socialist realist nightmare. If the much-maligned protagonist of the socialist realist novel developed an unhealthy attachment to his tractor, machine operator Lenia Golubkov, the Soviet hero’s capitalist grandson, was only too happy to strike it rich and give his unlamented excavator a divorce. When first we meet Lenia, he is a typical working stiff who jumps at the chance to buy MMM shares and make money from thin air. Initially, his goals are small, hence the oft-quoted refrain from Lenia’s first commercial: “Куплю жене сапоги . . .” (I’ll buy my wife some boots . . .). The boots are followed by a fur coat, a dacha, and even, eventually, a trip to California to attend the World Cup soccer championship; indeed, Lenia needed a “family growth chart” to keep track of his burgeoning wealth through 1993, all thanks to MMM. As numerous commentators pointed out at the time, Lenia is a postmodern Ivanushkadurachok (Ivan the Fool), a fairy-tale hero who found the secret to success that involved no effort on his part.<sup>17</sup>

Lenia was quickly joined by an equally colorful supporting cast: his plump, fur-clad wife and his tattooed brother Ivan often shared the camera with him. But there were also other heroes, each designed to appeal to different segments of the audience: Nikolai Fomich and his wife, Elizaveta Andreevna, pensioners who can barely make ends meet. What can possibly save them, other than MMM? Igor and Iuliia, the young, party-loving would-be entrepreneurs of the MMM-TV generation, advise their friends to invest in MMM in order to make money to pay off a business debt. And, of course, there was Marina Sergeevna,

a lonely, single woman of a certain age. As we see her leaving her apartment, the announcer tells us that “Марина Сергеевна никому не верит” (Marina Sergeevna trusts no one). Even though she has seen MMM’s commercials, she is on her way to the Sberbank to give her hard-earned rubles to the state-owned entity that has defrauded its customers so many times. One of her neighbors tells her about her own success with MMM, and finally she is convinced to put part of her money in the bank and invest part in MMM. A nervous week goes by, and Marina Sergeevna cashes in her shares at an MMM trading point in order to receive the promised profit. Her reaction: “Надо же, не обманули!” (How about that! They were telling the truth!) To which the announcer responds, “Правильно, Марина Сергеевна!” (That’s right, Marina Sergeevna!) Like the Wizard of Oz, MMM provides something for everyone: a dog for Nikolai Fomich, a pair of boots for Lenia’s wife, and even new love for Marina Sergeevna. Just as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy would promise to personally console all of Russia’s lonely women with his sexual favors, Marina Sergeevna not only gains much-needed cash, she also meet a man, Volodia.

ANNOUNCER Marina Sergeevna arrived at her friend’s birthday party. But she didn’t come alone. There were congratulations. And, as is the custom, they drank and had snacks. Then they danced. And then they talked. The men had their own conversations, and so did the women.

WOMAN You’re so lucky, Marinka! How I envy you! How I envy you, how I envy you!

ANNOUNCER Marina! You do have something worth envying. A/O<sup>18</sup> MMM.

Ведущий: Марина Сергеевна пришла на день рождения к своей подруге. Но не одна. Звучали поздравления. И, как водится, выпивали и закусывали. Потом были танцы. Ну, а потом разговоры. У мужчин—свои. А у женщин—свои.

Женщина: Счастливая ты, Маринка. Я так тебе завидую! Так завидую, так завидую!

Ведущий: Марина! И есть чему позавидовать А/О “MMM.”<sup>19</sup>

Marina Sergeevna’s friend feels compelled to express her envy three times in a row. While one might be tempted to ascribe this repetition to the laziness of the script writer, this folkloric triple invocation of envy is actually the key to the commercial. One of the appeals to socialist ideology (if not Soviet reality) is

that it promises to eliminate envy by eliminating discrepancies in wealth; while the Soviet Union was hardly egalitarian, the conspicuous consumption of the post-Soviet New Russians has provoked the scorn (and envy) of the majority of citizens still hovering around the poverty level. Marina Sergeevna's economic success is portrayed almost exclusively in terms of her personal happiness, which may be "worth envying" but could hardly invite the hostility so often provoked by wealth. Moreover, even as the woman "envies" Marina Sergeevna, she is also able to celebrate with her, to share in her happiness. To some extent, this is an oblique expansion on Mavrodi's euphemism for his investors: "partners." MMM struck a devious compromise between the values of state socialism and "wild" capitalism: the success of individuals spreads happiness to everyone around them.<sup>20</sup>

### Heroes of Khaliava

As time passed, the soap opera elements of the MMM advertising campaign developed on two levels simultaneously: the personal (that is, the financial and romantic successes of MMM "partners" such as Lenia Golubkov and Marina Sergeevna) and the corporate (dispelling rumors that MMM was going to crash). We see Igor and Iuliia dancing around their spacious apartment, accompanied by their own personal soundtrack. The announcer asks them, "Everybody's criticizing MMM. Aren't you worried?" Iuliia's response: "Why should we worry? In our country, people always criticize what's good." In response to public concern over MMM's multi-million-dollar assault on the pathetic remains of the Russian work ethic, Lenia decides that his previous "family growth plan" was "incorrect." Instead of frittering away his profits on luxury items, he will buy back his excavator and start his own business; belatedly, Golubkov is presented as a hero of privatization. We can see an early version of his plans in an ad featuring Lenia and his brother arguing while surrounded by empty vodka bottles and leftover *zakuski*:

ANNOUNCER This is Lenia Golubkov. And this is his brother, Ivan.  
 IVAN You're a *khaliavshchik* [freeloader], Len'ka! A moron. Don't you remember what our father and mother taught us? To do honest work. And here you are running around, making a fuss, buying stocks. You're a *khaliavshchik*!  
 ANNOUNCER Leonid thought for a while, and said:

LEONID You're wrong, brother. I'm not a *khaliavshchik*, brother. I make my money honestly, with my excavator. You wanted to build a factory. You can't build it on your own. But if we all chip in, we can build it, and it'll bring us profit, it'll put food on our table. I'm not a *khaliavshchik*, I'm a partner.

ANNOUNCER That's right, Lenia. We're partners. А/О МММ.<sup>21</sup>

Ведущий: Это Леня Голубков. А это его брат Иван.

Иван: Да халявщик ты, Ленька! Оболтус. Ты забыл, чему нас отец с матерью учили? Честно работать. А ты тут бегашь, суетишься, акции покупаешь. Халявщик ты!

Ведущий: Подумал Леонид и сказал . . .

Леонид: Ты не прав, брат. Я не халявщик, брат. Я свои деньги честно на экскаваторе зарабатываю. И вкладываю их в акции, которые мне приносят прибыль. Ты захотел построить завод. Один ты его не построишь. А если мы все сложимся, мы построим его, который будет давать нам прибыль, кормить нас. Я не халявщик, я партнер.

Ведущий: Верно, Леня. Мы-партнеры. А/О "МММ."

The heart of this particular commercial is, of course, Lenia's *cri de coeur*: "I'm not a *khaliavshchik*, I'm a partner." Here the increasing attacks on MMM are transferred to the familiar, comical realm of the drunken kitchen debate (Ivan's speech is slurred, while Lenia is at great pains to form a coherent sentence), and their discussion highlights the aspect of MMM that was considered most unsavory by the television pundits and the man on the street: the moral quandary posed by easy money. While the source of MMM's profits was cause for curiosity, it was not the legality of Mavrodi's pyramid scheme that was of primary concern; nor did the ethical ramifications of making a profit at the expense of other "partners" seem to bother investors, who were well aware that the pyramid would have to crash eventually.<sup>22</sup> Instead, MMM, a company that seemed to produce nothing but its own commercials, brought into focus the public uneasiness over the concept of labor in the post-Soviet, postindustrial world.<sup>23</sup> Pyramid schemes aside, Russians in the early 1990s watched with discomfort as trade and service began to supplant the Soviet industrial economy. Diehard Communists watched in horror as their apocalyptic visions seemed to come true; Russian factory assembly lines ground to a halt while candy stands selling Snickers popped up at an alarming rate.<sup>24</sup> MMM repre-

sented a frontal assault on one of the primary myths of official Soviet culture: labor. The situation, in which production dropped while the circulation of consumer goods increased, was no less paradoxical than the everyday economics of Soviet life, in which the workers' labor produced nothing but shortages.<sup>25</sup> Or, as Vladislav Todorov argues, Soviet factories were "not built to produce commodities," but were rather "allegorical figures of industrialization" resulting in "a deficit of goods, but an overproduction of symbolic meanings."<sup>26</sup> Even if the ineffectiveness of Soviet labor was the butt of endless jokes ("We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us"), respect for the idea of labor was inculcated at the same time that the desire to perform actual labor was suppressed. The Soviet economy may well have been simulative from the very beginning, as Todorov claims, but by unceremoniously dispensing with even the illusion of work, MMM aroused the public's latent anxiety that hard work was obsolete. It also led to the "rehabilitation" of a word previously consigned to oral slang: *khaliava*.

*Khaliava* refers to anything that can be obtained without effort, whether it be money or possessions. Although the word is by no means obscene, it is safe to say that it was never featured prominently in such respected newspapers as *Izvestiia* and *Literaturnaia gazeta* before the MMM scandal. The term itself became a focal point for the public anxiety over the fate of labor, for while it was often used as a term of derision, a number of commentators recognized *khaliava*'s seductive appeal to what they considered the "Russian soul."<sup>27</sup> Elena Ivanitskaia wrote at the height of the MMM crisis that such pyramid schemes recall Dostoevsky's question: "It's not yet clear which is more awful: Russian outrageousness [*bezobrazie*] or the German method of saving up money with honest work." According to Ivanitskaia, the voucher privatization campaign was "doomed" from the beginning because "it's shameful for us, with our Russian bravado, with the breadth of our soul and our beloved outrage to take such laughable trifles seriously."<sup>28</sup> For their part, MMM's supporters admitted no such "Russian" desire for easy money, and instead objected to their characterization as lazy. As Sergei Bardin wrote at the time in *Nezavisimaja gazeta* (one of MMM's staunchest apologists), "We, the greedy, sly, the stupid . . . who are guilty before the government of desiring to get rich *na khaliavu* [for nothing], still have some positive qualities despite all our negative ones."<sup>29</sup>

Lenia and Ivan's "kitchen debate" did more than simply address the issue of *khaliava* head-on: it attempted to disarm MMM's critics by incorporating their

complaints into the ad itself and then immediately superseding them with a new entrepreneurial myth. And yet, like the ad about Marina Sergeevna at the birthday party, this particular commercial managed to package the new "by-your-bootstraps" ethic in terms that would be comprehensible and acceptable to an audience raised on socialist values.<sup>30</sup> Lenia's story is now represented in terms not of mere individual success (which can always breed envy and resentment), but of group effort. Hence the repeated invocation of MMM's brilliant euphemism for its investors: partners. Nothing is accomplished individually, and even the paradise of private ownership that Lenia paints in vodka-enhanced hues is actually more of a cooperative. The dream itself is quaintly "pre-post-industrial": Ivan and Lenia want to build a factory. The kind of factory makes no difference whatsoever; simply the fact of a factory (Todorov's "allegorical figure of industrialization") is enough to show that Lenia's values have not been distorted.

#### MMM as Shadow Cabinet

Of course, the greatest challenge to Golubkov's creators was the pyramid's collapse in the summer of 1994. As the value of MMM's shares continued to rise, the government intensified its scrutiny of the company's operations. On July 18, the State Anti-Monopoly Commission urged television stations to stop broadcasting MMM's commercials, but the plea fell on deaf ears; 2,666 MMM ads had aired on Russian television in March, April, and May 1994, bringing financially strapped stations much-needed cash.<sup>31</sup> Of far greater consequence was an announcement made by the Tax Inspectorate three days later: MMM's subsidiary Invest-Consulting owed 49.9 billion rubles in taxes, payable immediately. Mavrodi responded the next day (July 22) by upping the ante: if forced to pay, he would shut down MMM and let the government deal with his outraged shareholders. By the time MMM shut down all its trading offices on July 26, panic had already erupted. Huge crowds gathered outside the company's main office on Varshavka — from two to three thousand people on July 26 to an estimated thirteen thousand the following day. Independent dealers were already buying up MMM shares at 65,000–75,000 rubles on the twenty-sixth, down from 115,000–125,000 before the crisis began.<sup>32</sup> Typically, the government and MMM moved to calm down the unruly crowd in their own fashions: Mavrodi recorded a soothing message, while the authorities sent in OMON, the "special forces" that are as inevitable in any post-Soviet mass crisis as a chorus is in a

Greek tragedy. On July 29, MMM, laying the responsibility for the panic entirely at the feet of the government, announced that circumstances had forced it to drop the official price of MMM's shares from 115,000 rubles to 950. By evening, the crowd had stopped traffic on Varshavka, and only OMON could restore order.<sup>33</sup> The next day, Mavrodi issued new MMM "tickets," which the Ministry of Finance announced it would not recognize; for its part, MMM designated these tickets "promotional material" — truth in advertising at last, even if only in the fine print.<sup>34</sup> The new tickets also differed from their predecessors in bearing the likeness of Sergei Mavrodi himself, a wise move from the standpoint of publicity, if not aesthetics, for it suggested that MMM's founder had no plans to try to slip out of the country unnoticed. The tickets' official rate was 1,065 rubles, and despite the assault on MMM's reputation, brisk trading began.<sup>35</sup>

One would think that the results of a battle between the central government and one private company would be a foregone conclusion, and yet the government's campaign against MMM was foundering, at least in part because it did not know how to fight an enemy based entirely on image rather than substance. The government's lack of comprehension of the rules of the narrative game was a definite obstacle to its belated attempt to clamp down on MMM's operations, and it allowed Mavrodi to outmaneuver his enemies every step of the way. As a result, officials made themselves look foolish when they engaged in a war not just with the company, but with its fictional creations as well. One of the more memorable moments came when Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin addressed Marina Sergeevna and Lenia Golubkov on national television, warning them that they should be more careful with their money.<sup>36</sup> Mavrodi then turned the tables on Chernomyrdin: "So, the authorities do not like Lenia Golubkov and Marina Sergeevna," he responded in the nation's newspapers. "But do Lenia Golubkov and Marina Sergeevna like the authorities? No one's asked about that. Yet."<sup>37</sup> If the prime minister and Mavrodi were engaged in a war of words, then Chernomyrdin was well on his way to defeat. He had already ceded important rhetorical ground by invoking MMM's characters as if they were real; in his response, Mavrodi also referred to Lenia and Marina Sergeevna by name, but their enemies, "the authorities," remained abstract. As a result, MMM's heroes not only appeared to be classic "little men" victimized by inhuman bureaucratic forces, they also seemed more "real" than the nameless governmental authorities who opposed them. Moreover, Mavrodi's words contained a thinly veiled threat: if the government closed down MMM, then Mavrodi's "partners" would get their revenge at the ballot box.

Indeed, as events unfolded over the next two years, it became more and more

clear that MMM and its "partners" were styling themselves as an alternative not only to the current "party of power," but to the Russian state itself.<sup>38</sup> Mavrodi claimed that MMM was the most powerful political force in the entire Russian Federation, large enough to gather the one million signatures needed to call a referendum on the current government and the constitution. Yeltsin's government was particularly vulnerable at that point, having just put the country through an almost interminable four-question referendum process in a failed attempt to resolve the country's constitutional crisis.<sup>39</sup> By August 8, Mavrodi's "partners" were openly talking of nominating him for president. If only a few years ago the greatest threat to Yeltsin's government seemed to be from the Communists, now MMM appeared to be on its way to taking over the mantle of the opposition; when diehard Communists organized a demonstration commemorating the failed coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev on August 19, an MMM rally held on the same day had a far greater turnout.<sup>40</sup>

MMM's newspaper advertisements strongly encouraged a presentation of the company and the government as equivalent forces. In one such ad on August 16, MMM's representatives claimed that the company was the "target of the entire propaganda machine of the Russian state," implying that the battle was unfairly weighted in the government's favor. This "injustice," however, was described in terms more appropriate to a rival company than to a government; the ad expressed outrage that "information from the authorities is published by the newspapers immediately, on the day it is announced, and absolutely free. But information coming from MMM has to be paid for."<sup>41</sup> In any case, MMM's "partners" quickly followed the company's lead, repeatedly making comparisons between the government and MMM, and always to the detriment of the former. In an advertisement run in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* on August 14, four families signed a letter saying that "if the government did even one-tenth of what A/O MMM did for us ordinary mortals," they would have started hailing it long ago.<sup>42</sup> Particularly telling were the investors' suggestions. An economist by the name of B. Dukhnevich wrote on August 5, "It's time for MMM to have its own newspaper, its own savings bank, to become more active in solving social problems, such as housing construction. . . . It would be good if MMM would . . . produce calendars, T-shirts, caps." In other words, MMM should assume all the state functions neglected since the Soviet Union's collapse. Moreover, there was a general expectation that MMM should accord special treatment to the social categories that had special status in Soviet times. It was repeatedly suggested after MMM closed its trading points in July 1994 that the company pay retirees and war veterans first.<sup>43</sup> Dukhnevich's wish



list continues: "It would be wonderful if MMM . . . were to help veterans find a place in market relations, arranging a special movie showing for us, or a play, or special literature."<sup>44</sup> If the Soviet state was supposed to take care of the elderly under communism, it should be up to MMM to help them in a market economy.

Enough people believed the promises of MMM to vote Mavrodi into public office. On October 31, 1994, Mavrodi was elected to the state Duma, whereupon he squandered most of his public support by announcing that MMM offices would remain closed until the following year and that all present shares in the company were invalid. Clearly, Mavrodi, who had been released from prison only two weeks earlier, had run for office only to gain parliamentary immunity.<sup>45</sup> His wife, Elena, the former "Miss Zaporozhie 1992," twice ran unsuccessfully for a Duma seat, first in 1995, then in 1997 (when her opponents included chess champion Anatoly Karpov and Yeltsin's former bodyguard, Alexander Korzhakov).<sup>46</sup> If 1994 saw MMM emerge as a political force, 1995 was the year that Mavrodi's political ambitions were crushed. In September, the Central Electoral Commission denied registration to his "Party of People's Capital" because of his decision to pay dividends on MMM shares to party members only. A mere two hundred protesters picketed the commission, a far cry from the glory days of 1994.<sup>47</sup> Mavrodi lost his reelection bid in December, whereupon he announced his candidacy for the Russian presidency in January. By then, however, Mavrodi was facing new criminal charges, and the Electoral Commission refused to register him as a candidate. Although Mavrodi did launch another pyramid scheme (MMM-1996), it has failed to attract anywhere near the attention to which he was once accustomed; clearly, Mavrodi's moment has passed.<sup>48</sup>

### Unlimited Partners

In order to understand how MMM could have seemed even a vaguely credible alternative to Russian governmental institutions, it is necessary to return to the critical moment when Chernomyrdin stopped attacking fictional characters and turned his attention to Mavrodi himself. The arrest of Mavrodi was a carefully staged media event that was apparently an attempt to dislodge MMM not only from its central financial position, but from its dominant place on the airwaves as well. Again, however, the measures taken by the authorities lacked subtlety: the government responded to MMM's soap opera with a poorly scripted police drama (OMON's raid of Mavrodi's apartment). If anything, the arrest made

Mavrodi a martyr, an image he would exploit from prison with some success. During the same summer that Americans were treated to the spectacle of the Los Angeles Police Department's low-speed chase of O. J. Simpson, Russian TV viewers watched as members of the special forces scaled the side of Mavrodi's building in order to capture the physically unimpressive little man behind the financial wizard's curtain. The result was bad television, in part because the authorities suffered from generic confusion: a producer who decides to send the cops from *NYPD Blue* to arrest the Bundy family from *Married, with Children* can expect to have to look for a new job.

MMM's counterattack was, as usual, inspired, and it represented the expansion of the soap opera well beyond its accustomed bounds. Recall that MMM's ad campaign represented a rapprochement of the viewing public and the soap opera format: where once all soap opera heroes were exotic, now they were almost laughably familiar. As MMM attempted to inspire confidence in its "partners," it went one step further: the company flew in Victoria Ruffo, star of *Just Maria*, an immensely popular soap opera that was still airing in Russia at the time.<sup>49</sup> In the course of one day, MMM's studio filmed a series of advertisements in which "Just Maria" met with each and every hero of the MMM soap opera.<sup>50</sup> The fact that Ruffo speaks no Russian was scarcely an obstacle (her only words, "Si, si!" vaguely sounded to the Russian ear as though she were calling attention to one of the more prominent features of her anatomy); the ever-present announcer always supplied half the lines.

ANNOUNCER Igor and Iuliia felt a bit shy around Maria, and so they made small talk: about the weather, young people's fashions, movies, music, their favorite performers. And then finally they got around to asking for an autograph. "A memento for Igor and Iuliia — Just Maria." A/O "MMM."<sup>51</sup>

Ведущий: Игорь и Юлия чувствовали себя с Марией немного скованно, а потому говорили обо всем подряд: о погоде, о молодежной моде, о кино и о музыке, о любимых артистах. И в конце концов попросили-таки автограф. На память Игорю и Юле. Просто Мария. A/O "MMM."

In another spot from the same series, Marina Sergeevna and Just Maria have just swapped photographs of their respective boyfriends. Volodia and Viktor, when Volodia arrives in person:

MARINA SERGEEVNA Oh, Maria, I love him so much! It's scary. . . .  
What do you think, can I trust him?

ANNOUNCER . . . Marina Sergeevna asked Just Maria. "An interesting man," thought Just Maria, "but Victor is better." "Yes, Victor is really handsome," thought Marina Sergeevna.

MARINA SERGEEVNA And this is Volodia!

ANNOUNCER And that's how Volodia and Just Maria met. A/O  
"MMM."<sup>52</sup>

Марина Сергеевна: Ах, Мария, я его так люблю! Что мне страшно. . . . Как ты думаешь, ему можно верить?

Ведущий: делилась Марина Сергеевна с Просто Марией. — Интересный мужчина,—подумала Просто Мария,—но Виктор лучше. —Бесспорно, Виктор красив,—подумала Марина Сергеевна.

Марина Сергеевна: А это Володя!

Ведущий: Так познакомились Володя и Просто Мария. A/O  
"MMM."

First the foreign heroes of soap operas were replaced with more familiar Russian characters, who could more easily represent the viewer and therefore attempt to convert the viewer into a "partner" by inducing the mimetic desire to invest. If the ads worked then the viewer, essentially, became the hero of the commercial.<sup>53</sup> Now, as a special treat, the Russian heroes get to meet the Mexicans who served as their inspiration; thus the Russian viewers watched as their stand-ins met the foreign movie star. When Just Maria walked into the apartment of Marina Sergeevna, she entered the home of the viewer as well. After successfully domesticating the soap opera, MMM bridged the distance between its own prosaic heroes and their exotic models.<sup>54</sup> The Russian viewer was only one step away from being a soap opera heroine herself.

But the total participation of MMM's "partners" in the company narrative required two unexpected shifts, one in medium, the other in genre: from television to newsprint, and from domestic melodrama to hagiography.<sup>55</sup> When the authorities turned the spotlight on Mavrodi himself with the televised arrest, Mavrodi told his own story, the slick attempt at autohagiography of a latter-day Avvakum. In full-page ads taken in central newspapers of all political persuasions in August 1994, Mavrodi published a series of letters from prison in which he explains his motivations and gives his "partners" a clearer sense of

the company's president. Two components of his strategy are immediately clear: Mavrodi is a martyr; Mavrodi is a saint. The "Biography of Sergei Mavrodi, President of MMM" even includes childhood miracles: when he was in eighth grade, little Seryozha studied higher mathematics on his own, and when his teachers were sick, Seryozha was called on to teach class in their place. In a letter entitled "In the Light of Conscience" (При свете совести), Mavrodi refers to his arrest as "treacherous" (вероломный). "To suffer for the Fatherland is easy and pleasant. Only in short-term solitary confinement have I truly understood the correctness of these words." The letter concludes with an appeal to Mavrodi's public: "Don't let up, and don't let them fool you again; together, we'll win. After all, we're partners."<sup>56</sup> Thus Mavrodi's suffering was our suffering, and Mavrodi's triumph our triumph. The subtext of MMM's entire media campaign was the overcoming of adversity through proper financial planning, and, borrowing liberally from the hagiographic tradition, Mavrodi rewrote his own story to fit the message.

It was in these print ads that MMM succeeded in completely subsuming its "partners" within the corporate master narrative. For if Lenia Golubkov, the representation of the Russian investor, could meet Just Maria on television, "real," nontelevised investors would share space with Mavrodi himself in newspapers throughout the land. In August 1994, entire pages of Russian newspapers were dedicated to "Letters to MMM," in which "partner" after "partner" expressed outrage over Mavrodi's treatment and faith in the miraculous powers of his company. Their faith in Mavrodi's miracle was apparently complete, and was remarkably reminiscent of the faith demanded by an earlier, decidedly anticapitalist culture. Pensioner Dmitri K. wrote, "Your stocks have changed reality, like in a fairy-tale [*skazochnyi*] dream."<sup>57</sup> His words, perhaps unconsciously, reflect a song sung by Soviet schoolchildren in the 1930s, "We were born to turn the fairy tale into reality" (Мы рождены, чтобы сказку сделать былью). Another investor provided a more personal account: "At my most critical moment, MMM saved me from poverty. I'm not talking about a fur coat or vacation resorts, but about my daily bread, since after 35 years of working in the defense industry, the government could provide me only 15 (fifteen) thousand rubles a month: I've got more than a year to go until I retire, so leaving or finding a new job isn't realistic. And besides all that, I'm a woman."<sup>58</sup> By this point, it is no longer clear if the genius of MMM's advertising directors is that they portrayed everyday Russian life so well, or that they created a set of narrative conventions so compelling that the audience was

induced to unconsciously replicate the formula in its own letters. The Mukavev family from Perm, headed by a single mother, wrote of its own version of Lenia Golubkov's early, more modest successes: thanks to MMM the daughter bought a leather jacket and the family could eat milk, soup, and meat bouillon every day, with even the possibility of buying the occasional banana at the market. Such stories are, of course, touching, which is the most obvious reason for their inclusion in MMM's print advertisements. But they also represent the total identification of the investors and their "soap opera" heroes. Just as the act of purchasing MMM stock was consistently portrayed in the advertising campaign as a transformative moment, the campaign itself worked its enchantment on its object, changing the soap opera hero into the investor, the TV viewer into the "partner," and the "partner" into not only a player in the MMM narrative, but even, eventually, the narrative's coauthor. For a company targeted by numerous government investigations, this strategy makes sense: if the viewers (and voters) become both heroes and authors, their investment in the company's plot will be at least as great as their investment in company stock; they will do their best to make sure their story has a happy ending.

## Notes

The author thanks Mark Lipovetsky and Frances Bernstein for their comments on a draft of this chapter.

- 1 Viktoriia Dubitskaia, "Bakhyt Kilibaev: Ia i Lenia Golubkov — takie, kak vse," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 1 (1995), p. 19.
- 2 On September 14, 1994, the European-Asian News Agency reported that a young man in Ekaterinburg was put in a mental hospital after trying to convince his friends and family that he was Lenia Golubkov. One of the doctors interviewed remarked that extreme reactions to advertisements were not unusual and cited the "Uncle Ben's effect," which causes vomiting in children who have seen the ad for the American rice company too many times. See Aгенство Evropeisko-aziatskie novosti, "Lzhe-Golubkov popal v psikhushku na Urale," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, September 14, 1994, p. 1. Like so many feature stories published in Russian newspapers in recent years, this one should certainly be taken with a grain of salt. However, this chapter is concerned with the portrayal and perception of MMM rather than "reality"; one need not subscribe to postmodern notions of "hyperreality" and "simulacra" to recognize that the relationship between the world of commercial advertising and objective reality is tenuous at best. Thus I offer the following disclaimer: In this essay, newspaper articles and television broadcasts are cited not as unimpeachable sources but as contributions to the creation of MMM's public image.

- 3 Azer Murasliev, noting that only the more financially independent *Segodnia* declined to print MMM's newspaper advertisements during the summer of 1994, ironically refers to the papers' tendency to criticize Mavrodi and print his ads in the same paper as the press's "loss of innocence": the press is now independent of the "government-rapist," but has been "seduced" by Mavrodi ("Chetvertaia vlast' teriaet nevinnost'," *Moskovskie novosti*, August 7, 1994, p. 8).
- 4 Here, too, some skepticism is also appropriate. It is quite possible that at least the initial letters were fabricated by MMM's advertising arm, although such falsified ads could have served to stimulate letter writing from actual investors.
- 5 Certainly, commentators were well aware at the time that MMM was more than an economic phenomenon. Aleksei Tarkhanov notes, "Now saying 'I invested in MMM' unites people no less than 'I fought on the Belorussian Front.' But to reply, 'And I invested in Chara' [another pyramid scheme] would be the height of poor taste" ("Prostota luchshe vorovstva: Obsuzhdenie reklamnoi kampanii 'MMM,'" *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 1 [1995], p. 7).
- 6 Irina Savvateeva, "Khorosho schitat' i torgovat' Mavrodi nauchilsia na fakul'tete prikladnoi matematiki," *Izvestiia*, August 4, 1994, p. 4.
- 7 Vladimir Yemelyanenko, "The State Meets Its Match," *Moscow News*, December 2, 1994.
- 8 Aleksandr Liasko and Sergei Razin, "Kak govoriat v narode, v sem'e — ne bez Mavrodi!" *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, August 3, 1994, p. 3.
- 9 Maiia Turovskaia writes that this particular ad "remains a mystery to me: I don't know if one should understand it as a symbol of the movement from the shadow economy to the legal economy, or as a metaphor of poverty-shadow and wealth-light . . . , or as the 'conversion' of [communist] party money" (Maiia Turovskaia, "Lenia Golubkov i drugie," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 1 [1995], p. 22).
- 10 For a discussion of the "mass man" in Soviet culture, see Vladislav Todorov, *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 94–99. Mayakovsky depicts the Soviet people as one giant body in his epic poem, *150,000,000* (1919). Contemporary readers are most familiar with such imagery in its negative, satiric form, in Evgeny Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We* (1920).
- 11 Reuters, untitled, September 11, 1994; Nikolai Andreev, "V ianvare — sapogi. v avguste — KPZ," *Chas-Pik*, August 10, 1994, p. 2. Moreover, even if MMM could have sustained such high dividends, it could not have given small investors such as Lenia Golubkov enough money to purchase all the luxuries he would obtain during the course of the advertising campaign (G. Demidov, "Lenia Golubkov bez telegrima," *Argumenty i fakty* 31 [August 1994]: 5).
- 12 The sexual comparison, although crude, is by no means inappropriate: the constant visual connection drawn between capitalist success and sexually available young women in the post-Soviet mass media lent the free market the air of free love. Moreover, the very language of commerce, with its foreign borrowings and odd circumlocutions, seems almost tailor-made for double entendres. Chubais's plan for

privatization of state enterprises introduced a number of ungainly Anglicisms into the Russian language, most notably the word *ваучер* (voucher). In certain everyday financial contexts, the term takes on a distinctly risqué overtone when combined with the Russian verb “to invest” (вложить), which literally means “to insert.” It is difficult to imagine a Russian man asking a Russian woman, “Where can I invest my voucher?” with a straight face.

- 13 According to Muriel G. Cantor and Suzanne Pingree, *The Guiding Light* is the only old radio soap opera still on the air. The show first aired in 1937, was dropped briefly in 1941 (and reinstated after angry listeners organized a letter-writing campaign), and was broadcast on television and radio simultaneously for four years until the radio version ended in 1956. As one might imagine, the cast of characters has changed drastically over the last sixty years. Muriel G. Cantor and Suzanne Pingree, *The Soap Opera* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983), p. 97.
- 14 The open-endedness of American soap operas has yet to be completely assimilated by Russian television, leading announcers to alert the viewing audience that at 8:00 P.M. they will be able to watch, for instance, episode 271 of *Santa Barbara*.
- 15 The radically different time frame of the *telenovela* has led some American scholars to conclude that it cannot be called a soap opera. Cantor and Pingree consign the *telenovela*, which “last[s] for eight or nine months,” together with miniseries and “nighttime soaps,” to a different generic category: “In South America and other parts of the world the *telenovela*, produced locally by country, has been compared to the American soap opera, but actually resembles the shorter series in form” (*The Soap Opera*, p. 25). Or, as Madeleine Edmonson and David Rounds argue, “Soaps are serials, but not every serial is a soap.” For them, soap operas are by definition “stories about American life.” See Madeleine Edmonson and David Rounds, *The Soaps: Daytime Serials of Radio and TV* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 17.
- While defining a genre based on its sense of time is compelling, especially to Slavists steeped in Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, such a narrow definition precludes any international perspective on a form of popular entertainment that knows few boundaries. Indeed, it is a particular characteristic of American television that “seriality” (the extension of plots and the repeated appearances of characters for as long as the market will support them) is integral; most other television cultures (including the ex-USSR) assume that a series will come to an end. Moreover, even if the time frame of the North American soap and the Latin American *telenovela* differs, both serve similar functions in their respective cultures: they provide popular daytime entertainment for a largely female audience. In addition, the heroes and heroines of each genre live in a world in which both fate and chance play a crucial role, a largely domestic world that occasionally opens up to include incursions by organized crime. If we compare Rosa Gómez’s “Temas articuladores en el género *telenovela*,” in *Telenovela/Telenovelas: Los relatos de una historia de amor*, ed. Marita Soto (Argentina: Atuel, 1996), pp. 37–50, with Cantor and Pingree’s chapter “Soap Opera Content” (*The Soap Opera*, pp. 69–94), we find both variation and

common ground. It is worth noting that Latin American scholars (who, thanks to the relentless export of American popular culture are likely to be intimately acquainted with both varieties of daytime drama) do not, as a rule, insist on isolating the soap opera from the *telenovela*: “*Telenovela, teleteatro, culebrón*, soap opera, televised melodrama—all are names by which society recognizes a series of audiovisual narrative texts. The consumption, criticism, classification, . . . and even parody [have at their basis] a series of common characteristics that distinguish them from other fictional texts, such as humor programs or other types of televised comedies and dramas” (Gustavo Aprea and Rolando C. Martínez Mendoza, “Hacia una definición del género *telenovela*,” in Soto, ed., *Telenovela/Telenovelas*, p. 17). Finally, one must also take into account the reception of the Latin American *telenovela* and the North American soap opera in contemporary Russia; although many viewers may have distinguished between the two, they are usually discussed as variants of the same form of popular entertainment.

- 16 In interviews, Kilibaev made the relationship between his heroes and their intended audience quite clear: “We wanted the television viewers to identify with our characters” (Dubitskaia, “Bakhyt Kilibaev,” p. 14). Critics, however, have argued that such an identification is unlikely. Konstantin Ernst argues that “the viewers identified these characters not with themselves, but with the people who live next to them” (“Prostota,” p. 5). Turovskaia puts it more plainly: “Lenia Golubkov has one permanent virtue: he always seems more stupid than any viewer” (Turovskaia, “Lenia Golubkov,” p. 23).
- 17 The comparison is made by Turovskaia (“Lenia Golubkov,” p. 23), Marina Shakina (“Sergei Mavrodi kak otets rossiiskoi mechty,” *Novoe vremia* 31 [August 1994]: 25), and Tarkhanov (“Prostota,” p. 8).
- 18 “A/O” stands for акционерное общество (*aktsionerhoe obshchestvo*), joint-stock company.
- 19 My thanks to Rebecca Stanley for sharing her *Russian TV Sampler* video cassettes and teachers’ guides, from which this text is taken (Stanley, *Russian TV Sampler*, program 103, p. 8). For more information, write to Rebecca Stanley, New York Network, P.O. Box 7012, Albany, NY, 12225; (518) 443-5333; stanterm@nyn.sunycentral.edu.
- 20 This theme is also present in an ad starring Nikolai Fomich and Elizaveta Andreevna. Since they are retirees, they claim they don’t need much out of life. Thanks to MMM, they’ve started to “help others,” including their retired neighbor (Stanley, *Russian TV Sampler*, program 102, p. 9).
- 21 Stanley, *Russian TV Sampler*, program 103, p. 8.
- 22 Indeed, Mavrodi’s apologists often argued that MMM was under no obligation to explain how it made its money. In her notorious defense of Mavrodi on the pages of *Nezavisimaa gazeta*, Larisa Piyazheva argued that “all this is his business, and he is free to tell it to society, the state and even his shareholders, or not to tell them; after all, any shareholders who do not like his reticence can pick out another Mavrodi. one

- who is more talkative" (Larisa Piyazheva, "Position: Free Sergei Mavrodi! On Entrepreneurial Ethics and the State's Zeal," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, September 27, 1994, pp. 1, 4; trans. in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 46, no. 39 [October 26, 1994]: 12).
- 23 By the summer of 1994, MMM officials had all but admitted that their only product was their advertising. When Kilibaev announced that there would be a new series of MMM ads despite the company's apparent crash, he said that the new spots were "designed to calm people down, to show them that MMM is alive and producing new commercials" (Mikhail Dubik, "Lyonya Seeks New Life as a Small Businessman," *Moscow Times*, July 29, 1994, p. 2).
- 24 Thanks to aggressive marketing by the Mars Corporation, Snickers was a lightning rod for popular discontent with the flood of foreign imports. In 1993 and 1994, the Mars Corporation accounted for 80 percent and 63 percent, respectively, of all TV ad time devoted to sweets. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy even campaigned to ban Snickers from the airwaves in December 1993. See Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 236–37.
- 25 For an extended examination of the Soviet attitude toward labor, see Mikhail Epstein's "Labor of Lust: Erotic Metaphors of Soviet Civilization," in *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism in Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp. 164–87.
- 26 Todorov, *Red Square, Black Square*, p. 10.
- 27 Nikolai Andreev laments that "capitalism in the MMM commercials . . . is portrayed as heaven for do-nothings and the feeble-minded," but also admits that "if you take into account our Russian nature . . . , then such an image of existence couldn't be more appropriate" (Nikolai Andreev, "Khorosho li dlia Rossii to, chto prekrasno dlia 'MMM'?" *Chas-Pik*, August 3, 1994, p. 2).
- 28 Elena Ivanitskaia, "Metafizika aksii. Piat' podstupov k teme," *Obshchaia gazeta*, August 5–11, 1994, p. 9.
- 29 Sergei Bardin, "Nas reshili sdelat' plokhimi, chtoby ne reshat' nashi problemy?" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 12, 1994, p. 7.
- 30 Vladimir Magun considers Lenia's rejection of *khaliava* a "false move, an idiosyncratic concession to the old values that goes against the general, pro-capitalist orientation of this advertising serial" ("Prostota," p. 11). While the ads are definitely a concession to socialist values, it is difficult to see Lenia's desire to build a factory as inimical to a "pro-capitalist orientation"; here Magun himself seems to identify capitalism with *khaliava*. Turovskaia takes a more nuanced view, recognizing that Lenia's new plans "fit quite well in the Soviet propaganda tradition," but also seeing the new Lenia as a result of MMM's realization that "the ideology of 'khaliava' is still not respectable enough" (Turovskaia, "Lenia Golubkov," p. 23).
- 31 Julia Wishnevsky, "MMM," *RFE/RL Daily Report*, July 19, 1994; "Na TV emotsii perevodiat'sia v tsifry," *Izvestiia*, June 17, 1994, p. 9, as quoted in Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, p. 237. The television channels would have been hard-pressed to stop airing MMM's ads, since the commercials had been paid for in advance (Otto Latsis, "Chto eto za istoriia?" *Izvestiia* August 6, 1994, p. 2).
- 32 Andrei Kniazev and Alina Kazakova, "AO 'MMM': a ved' vse moglo byt' inache . . .," *Russkii biznes*, August 1–7, 1994, p. 14.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 34 Andrei Koleshnikov, "Aksii otchaianita," *Moskovskie novosti* July 21, 1994, p. 1; Otdel ekonomicheskoi politiki, "Kommentarii," *Kommersant*, August 10, 1994, p. 15.
- 35 Louisa Vinton, "MMM Pyramid Comes Crashing Down," *RFE/RL Daily Report*, August 1, 1994.
- 36 "We must warn those like Lenia Golubkov and Marina Sergeevna, the opportunities for easy money in the market will soon begin to disappear" (broadcast by Michael Shuster, "Russian Investors Rocked by Pyramid Scam," *National Public Radio Morning Edition*, August 3, 1994, transcript 1403–4).
- 37 Sergei Mavrodi, "Ob'iasnenie v nelubvi," *Kuranty*, July 27, 1994, p. 11.
- 38 This new twist in MMM's self-presentation was by no means lost on Russian commentators at the time. Valentin Aleksandrovich wrote on August 12, 1994, that "capital is now making claims on power. A/O MMM wants to be treated as a sovereign entity, uniting the functions of a party and government, with the right to form popular opinion, issue its own newspapers, and have no outside regulation" (Valentin Aleksandrovich, "Chastnyi sluchai ili krizis politiki?" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 12, 1994, p. 7).
- 39 Indeed, the possible referendum is one of those rare instances that seems even more threatening with the benefit of hindsight; the breakdown of Albania's central government after a series of pyramid scheme failures in 1997 was cited by the head of Russia's Federal Securities Commission as one of the reasons for the commission's decision to refer documents relating to MMM to the General Prosecutor's Office on March 20, 1997, effectively renewing the possibility of criminal proceedings against Mavrodi (Natalia Gurshina, "Pyramid Scheme Documents Given to General Prosecutor," *OMRI Daily Digest*, March 30, 1997).
- 40 Julia Wishnevsky, "August 1991 Anniversary Roundup," *RFE/RL Daily Report*, August 22, 1994.
- 41 "V istorii s 'MMM' nezavisimaia pressa okazalas' zavisimoi ot vlastei," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, August 16, 1994, p. 4.
- 42 "Pis'ma v MMM," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, August 14, 1994.
- 43 See, for example, Bardin, "Nas reshili," p. 8. Soon after the crash, Louisa Vinton reported that MMM, in an attempt "to project the image of a kinder, gentler pyramid scheme," offered to redeem the shares of "selected 'needy' investors at the pre-crash price . . . providing shareholders could prove they needed the money for a funeral, wedding, or other emergency expenses." Meanwhile, an ad hoc investors' committee announced that "the handicapped, Afghan war veterans, and Chernobyl victims will also be able to redeem their shares at the old price" (Louisa Vinton, ". . . While MMM Builds Good Guy Image," *RFE/RL Daily Report*, August 2, 1995).

- 44 "Pis'ma 'MMM.'" *Pravda*, August 9, 1994.
- 45 Indeed, an attempt to strip Mavrodi of his immunity on April 7, 1995, failed, and a month later criminal proceedings against him were suspended.
- 46 This race, which Korzhakov ultimately won, is an amusing footnote on MMM's foray into politics. In 1994, MMM made a concerted effort to appear as though it had more than its own corporate interests at heart, but by 1997, Elena Mavrodi's campaign in Tula was indistinguishable from the pyramid scheme itself. Citizens who signed contracts to become "agitators" for Mrs. Mavrodi were eligible to receive 3,000 rubles (about 55 cents at the time), with the possibility of receiving up to 50 million rubles (then \$9,000) after the election, depending on "the election results in your polling area." For each agitator they recruited, they received an additional 3,000 rubles (Laura Belin, "Yelena Mavrodi's Election Pyramid Scheme in Tula," *OMRI Daily Digest*, January 6, 1997). Elena Mavrodi's registration was revoked on the eve of the election (Anna Paretskaya, "Korzhakov Wins Duma Seat," *OMRI Daily Digest*, February 10, 1997).
- 47 Laura Belin, "MMM Shareholders Picket Central Electoral Commission," *OMRI Daily Digest*, October 5, 1995.
- 48 Alastair Macdonald, "Russian Pyramid King Back in Business," *Reuter European Business Report*, January 13, 1997.
- 49 In December 1993, *Just Maria* (*Prosto Mariia*) was one of the ten most popular shows in Russia, along with its American counterpart, *Santa Barbara* (Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, p. 234).
- 50 Ruffo was later quoted as saying that she knew nothing about MMM, and she expressed her concern that her image was being used to "dupe" people (ITAR-TASS, "Ruffo ne znakoma s Marinoi Sergeevnoi," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, August 17, 1994, p. 3). It was also alleged that Ruffo planned to sue MMM, but nothing appears to have come of it ("Bakhyt Kilibaev — otets Leni Golubkova," *Argumenty i fakty* 33 [1994]: 8).
- 51 Stanley, *Russian TV Sampler*, program 102, p. 9.
- 52 Stanley, *Russian TV Sampler*, program 102, p. 9.
- 53 Cf. Aleksei Tarkhanov: "the director has turned the consumers of his commercial, and not the commercials' heroes, into his characters" ("Prostota," p. 6).
- 54 Maiia Turovskaia finds Ruffo's role particularly telling: "By inviting Victoria Ruffo into his serial, Bakhyt Kilibaev openly defined his audience — the circle of people to whom A/O MMM addresses itself" (Turovskaia, "Lenia Golubkov," p. 23). But Konstantin Ernst sees Ruffo's inclusion as "completely unorganic": "the heroes of our commercial simply have nothing to talk about with her, except maybe for 'the weather.' And I don't see this as the director's fault. Such contact could not take place on principle, because 'Maria' is different, she's from another world" ("Prostota," p. 6). Ernst's interpretation of the Ruffo series in general (and *Just Maria*'s meeting with Igor and Iuliia in particular) misses the point; the very fact that their conversation is strained is perfectly consistent with the reaction her starstruck audience would have to meeting her face-to-face. In any case, *Just Maria* is treated here

- as a living icon rather than a thinking subject; if the characters grew too close to her, it would detract from her aura of stardom. Finally, the limits placed on the MMM characters' dialogue (either by invoking "shyness" or through the announcer's monopolization of the spoken text) have an obvious practical purpose: the less the Russians speak, the less we are aware of the fact that Maria herself is incapable of saying a single word in their language.
- 55 This is not to say that MMM did not print newspaper advertisements before the summer of 1994; on the contrary, full-page ads featuring primitively rendered cartoons could be found in all the major newspapers. However, these print advertisements failed to capture the public's imagination the way that Lenia and his friends did. As a result, they are rarely mentioned by Russian commentators and fall beyond the scope of this essay.
- 56 Sergei Mavrodi, "Pri svete sovesti," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 18, 1994, p. 6.
- 57 "Pis'ma v MMM," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, August 11, 1994.
- 58 "Pis'ma v MMM," *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, August 9, 1994, p. 4.