Re-Visioning the Past: Russian Literary Classics in Film
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Russia has experienced a recent boom in adaptations of classic and Soviet dissident literary works for television and film. This trend bears witness to the continuing cachet the Russian literary tradition bears for a post-Soviet audience more likely to view than to read.

It is generally recognized that in the past twenty years, Russia has undergone a sea change in the structure of cultural institutions—in the simplest terms, the replacement of state control by market forces; ideology by bread and circuses; and purportedly high (and high-minded) culture by lowbrow crime fiction, soap operas, romance novels, and game shows. In fact, the picture is more complicated. Legacies of the Soviet past haunt the cultural production of the present in complicated ways, both reactive and replicative. Within this context, there is a particularly interesting recent and, to date, understudied trend: the boom in adaptations of Russian and Soviet literary “classics” for film, and especially TV miniseries. By “classics” here I mean canonic works of nineteenth-century Russian literature and dissident works of Soviet fiction that could not be published in Russia during the Soviet period. Thus, since 2003, cinematic versions of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (the unexpected success of which gave the vogue its initial impetus), Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, Gogol’s *Taras Bulba* (the former three all projects of the director Vladimir Bortko), Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, Solzhenitsyn’s *First Circle* (with screenplay by the author himself), Ilf and Petrov’s *Golden Calf*, Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*, Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Rybakov’s *Children of the Arbat*, and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* have been released, just to mention some of the more noted and notorious selections.1 This trend was underscored by the nominations and winners of the national television (TEFI) awards in 2006. As one commentator observed in an article tellingly titled “The Doctor versus the Master”:

The results of the voting of the teleacademicians in the main astonished no one. As expected, in the nominations for “artistic television serial,” classical literature emerged victorious: *The First Circle* (Rossiya), *Master and Margarita* (Rossiya), and *Doctor Zhivago* (NTV).

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In fact, Bortko won the best director award for *Master and Margarita*, and Solzhenitsyn was given the TEFI for best screenplay.

There are certainly Soviet precedents for the current crop of blockbusters—from Sergei Bondarchuk’s epic 1968 film rendition of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (which took seven years to make and, when adjusted for inflation, may have been the most expensive film ever made); to the 1973 still-cult-classic miniseries *Seventeen Moments in Spring*, based on the 1970 novel of the same name by Yulian Semyonov and featuring the Soviet superspy Max Otto von Shtrilzitz; to director Igor Maslennikov’s made-for-TV movies of Sherlock Holmes, which aired from 1979 to the eve of glasnost in 1986. In fact, 2009 saw the premier of the miniseries *Isaev*, also based on Semyonov’s Shtrilzitz novels (*Isaev is Shtrilzitz’s real name*) and subtitled “Shtrilzitz’s Youth,” marking a direct line of descent from Soviet practice to current fashion. Also worthy of note in this context is the fact that director Vladimir Bortko—a dominant force in the contemporary adaptation of classics—first made a name with his groundbreaking film version of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog* in 1988, which initiated the trend to reappropriate banned or out-of-favor Soviet “classics” in film. Yet despite the Soviet era’s heavy baggage of translating epic literary works into film, the recent surge in cinematic remakes seems to have struck a particular chord—as evidenced by strong reactions by critics and audiences in the “old” and “new” media. The Internet in particular gives the Russian viewer ample opportunity to comment on both the films themselves and on their critical reception.

The recent spate of films of literary works has sparked such passion on the part of viewers because they stand at a fraught intersection between questions of “faithfulness” and the use of classic literary texts, specifically through the intermediary of cinema and TV to remake the narrative of the national past to serve the desires and anxieties of the present. The stakes become eminently clear when we turn our attention to what has arguably been the most controversial of the recent adaptations, Vladimir Bortko’s cinematic rendition of Nikolai Gogol’s *Taras Bulba*, which premiered in Russian movie theaters in April 2009, timed to coincide with the celebration of the bicentennial of Gogol’s birth. An almost pedantic accuracy, even slavishness, with regard to the words of the literary text is something of a hallmark of Bortko’s style of adaptation. However, *Taras Bulba* is something of a textbook case in demonstrating the extent to which the very concept of “faithfulness” itself is a red herring.

In the case of *Taras Bulba*, controversy has raged not so much over “faithfulness” to or betrayal of Gogol’s text as around the question of faithfulness to which text. Bortko, whose own roots are Ukrainian and who cast noted Ukrainian actor Bogdan Stupka in the title role, has taken considerable heat, especially from Ukrainians, for choosing (with funding provided by the Russian Ministry of Culture) to adapt for the screen not the earlier version of *Taras Bulba*, first published in the collection *Mirgorod* in 1835 and considered “pro-Ukrainian,” but rather the revised and distinctly chauvinist “pro-Russian” edition of 1842, which Gogol, some have recently suggested, the parvenu writer from the periphery of empire, staged as a Russian imperial epic to assure his place in the Russian literary pantheon.

Arguably, the film is in many ways a remarkably effective rendering of Gogol’s original text—right down to the liberal profusion of blood and violence that characterize Gogol’s tale of generational, cultural, and national struggle embodied in his title character and his sons. The scenes that faithfully reproduce the very phrasing of the novel are less interesting to me than the ways and means by which the film reshapes Gogol’s text. In looking at the differences between the film and the novel, most telling is that while Gogol’s narrator insists repeatedly on the historicity of his account, on the fact that it belongs to a past the brutality of which has been transcended, Bortko’s film pushes in the other direction, underscoring the relevance of the past to the present situation. In part, this means weighing the relative impact of Gogol’s decision, an assimilating “Ukrainian” writer in the 1830s and 40s, to tell Taras Bulba’s tale as an apotheosis of Russian imperial aspirations against the same decision by a post-Soviet “assimilating” Ukrainian filmmaker. Were the stakes different? Yes and no. Today, of course, Ukraine is an independent country, yet it remains haunted by its “colonial” past in the form of its proprietary, larger neighbor Russia.

In a TV news interview shortly before the film’s release, Bortko openly maintained

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that “Taras Bulba is a film about our time as well.” Viewed in this light, Bortko’s choice of Taras Bulba seems inevitable as a vehicle for commentary on the current political situation in post-Soviet geopolitics—because it is precisely about the shaping of an imperial identity out of a confused mix of ethnic and religious groups without clearly defined state borders. The blurring of the identity of the Cossacks as a border people who, even in Gogol’s original, simultaneously represent freedom from the regimentation of the state and the incarnation of pure emotional drive—as Ukrainian freemen violently defending Russian Orthodoxy against the Catholic Poles—appears particularly fraught and potent. It is precisely this heavy mix of brute force, ethnoreligious fanaticism (expressed in a curious combination of over-the-top rhetoric and physical brutality), and Russian messianism that forms the core of this film and resonates with or inflames the political passions of viewers on both sides of the Ukrainian-Russian border. When we compare the concluding words of Gogol’s story with the ending of the film, we find a distinct divergence between the verbal text and the visual image. The centerpiece of the scene remains the words pronounced by Bulba, faithful to Gogol’s original, as he burns to death while his remaining Cossack troops escape:

“Farewell, comrades!” he cried to them from on high. “Remember me and next spring come here again and have a good rampage. What, did they take us for, the devil Poles? Do you think there is anything on earth a Cossack could fear?

Wait a bit, the time will come, there will come a time when you will find out what the Russian Orthodox faith is! Even now peoples near and far already sense that a tsar will arise from the Russian land, and there will be no force on earth that will not submit to him!”

Yet the film uses the power of the visual to underscore the parallels barely implied by Gogol’s text—between Bulba’s self-sacrifice to save his Cossack band by offering himself up to be burned alive and Christ’s crucifixion—by focusing the viewer’s attention on Bulba’s bodily suffering as he perishes, secured to a wooden frame on high and surrounded by enemies, defiantly speeding his comrades to safety with a messianic vision of the imperial future. Moreover, if Gogol ends with something of a deflation, with an almost nostalgic image of the Cossacks escaping as they remember their fallen leader, the film ends with a visual demonstration of militant force, with hordes of Cossacks confronting the audience in a panoramic shot that represents a climax to the impassioned rhetoric of the dying martyr, Bulba. By the same token, Bortko loses no opportunity to demonize the Catholic Poles and associate them with the Muslim Turks in terms of their threat to the Cossacks as keepers of Orthodoxy (transparently mirroring current geopolitical realities), while also playing down (in this bloodiest of movies) the elemental destructive force of the

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Cossacks as portrayed in Gogol’s text. So, to return to Bortko’s statement that Taras Bulba is “a film about our time,” we can see quite clearly how the film is used to create or regenerate a myth of resurgent Russian Empire, laying claim to the “near abroad” of “lapsed” Soviet colonies and justifying brute force as a defense against neighboring enemies who pose a threat to the true Russian faith.

The serialized version of Doctor Zhivago takes the argument even further. Echoing Bortko, director Aleksandr Proshkin has maintained: “Zhivago is in a certain sense a picture of our present. Of course it is a historical picture, but at the same time we have not emerged from the same circle of problems. We have learned nothing.” If Bortko’s Taras Bulba sticks relatively closely to its literary source text, Proshkin’s Doctor Zhivago exhibits no qualms at taking enormous liberties with Pasternak’s novel. Not only are characters’ roles considerably altered, but the film’s dialogue and narration constantly deviate from Pasternak’s text. Proshkin and his screenwriter Yury Arabov have made it clear that they approached the remake of Doctor Zhivago for a present-day audience “according to motifs” from Pasternak’s novel—that is, with no obligation to the text of the literary work—which speaks eloquently to the same issues raised by Bortko’s Taras Bulba. If Proshkin is seeking to give his own version of Russian history (and he has willingly admitted that he changed the ending of Pasternak’s novel because he did not feel it suits the present day), the question becomes: Why, then, use Doctor Zhivago at all? What is the power of the classical literary text in contemporary Russian film and, more important, in the project of refashioning Russian history into a usable present?

The use of literary texts to create a Russian narrative of identity is nothing new. Writers from Pushkin onward through the Soviet period treated literary works as textbooks for life and gauges of national belonging. What is striking in the current adaptation boom is that, at a time when what Soviet cultural authorities termed the “most well-read nation” may have stopped reading virtually anything but LiveJournal blogs, the literary text (albeit translated into film) still holds a special authority as a basis for defining the national self—an authority mustered to a vision that appears aggressively imperial in scope. This trend is especially disturbing given the fact that in the high-budget media of film and TV, the Russian state has become a primary sponsor of this revisionist “historical realism.”

What, then, is the power of the classics over a reading public that no longer reads? The most straightforward answer would seem to be that these works retain a tenacious “brand name” value as cultural capital, which makes them attention-grabbing channels for attempts to reshape post-Soviet national narratives, especially for highbrow filmmakers who seek to perpetuate the role of the educated elite in the process of national mythopoiesis—with unquestionable political implications. Thus, one critic applauded the liberties taken in the adaptation of Doctor Zhivago on the grounds that precisely by taking liberties with the text, the filmmakers prompted the contemporary viewer to consider the same questions that the book posed to the original audience:

At the end of the series, Misha Gordon, carried away by the new fashion for cinematography, accepts the suitcase of poems left behind by the deceased Yury Zhivago. Poetry yields to the cinematography that has entranced the age so that many decades later the movies could return poetry to their viewers. . . . So Pasternak’s novel would be read by those who, without having their interest kindled by television, would never get around to reading it.1

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1 I would place this “boom” in contrast to such outliers as the 2001 Daun Khaus (Down house), an updated version of The Idiot set in the 1990s with “New Russians” and described on the KinoRossii website as “a hooliganistic comedic reworking of motifs from F. M. Dostoevsky’s The Idiot.” Such irreverent treatments of the classics certainly belonged more to the early Putin period than to the era of straightlaced and “faithful” adaptations overwhelmingly dominant in recent years.

2 For the most sophisticated discussion of the question, see Eddyta M. Bojanowska, Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism (Harvard University Press, 2007).