

Serializing National Cohesion: Channel 1's "Shkola" and the Contradictions of Post-Soviet "Consensus Management"

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It is unusual for parliaments to debate the merits of television serials. Such, however, was the controversy surrounding Valeriia Gai-Germanika's sixty-nine-part serial "Shkola" (School), shown on Russia's Channel 1 in 2010, that several Duma deputies called for it to be banned—a proposal eventually dismissed by Vladimir Putin. In a post-totalitarian society beset by intergenerational "culture clash," along with the rise of ethnic and other societal tensions, the promotion of cohesion is paramount. Conventional wisdom would suggest that "Shkola" did the cause no favors. I intend in this article to interrogate such assumptions, examining how "Shkola's" serial form enables it to negotiate the multiple tensions pitting official patriotic discourse against both grassroots extremism and liberal universalism, documentary authenticity against fictional licence, the need to remain within the bounds of permissible media expression against the urge to accommodate increasingly strident voices at the margins. The broader aim of the article is to use "Shkola" as a case study to pose some challenges to common perceptions of the relationship between media, state, and society in Putin's Russia, and about the role of popular television genres within that relationship.

Filmed in a real school using hand-held cameras and unknown actors, "Shkola" laid bare the problems afflicting Russian secondary schools: casual sex, depression and suicide, misogyny, drug-taking, self-harming, bullying, bribery, racism, violence, foul language, and unremitting disorder in classrooms characterized by unimaginative teaching. Reminiscent of the British drama "Skins," "Shkola" went further in its rupture of cultural norms and of the boundaries of the permissible. This was far from the first time that a serial had acquired the status of a "media event," generating debate and controversy

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in post-Soviet Russia, or indeed, the Soviet Union.¹ It was preceded by a storm of protest in 2006 surrounding the NTV prison serial, “Zona,” whose depiction of a prison system rife with corruption, arbitrary beatings, homophobic violence, and heroin addiction led to its being removed from prime time. Like “Shkola,” the shock that it generated reflected its claims to authenticity; it was purportedly based on a manuscript smuggled out of a provincial jail. And, like “Shkola,” it became a national phenomenon, sparking debates conducted in online forums by an audience divided into mutually hostile camps of supporters and detractors.²

Both dramas evaded the worst excesses of Putin’s media clampdown. Both adopt the multi-episode serial, or *telenovela*, format. Both acquire the attributes of what, as Anita Hill has shown, is unhelpfully labeled “Reality TV.”³ Both are characterized by their institutional setting, with its capacity for representing private life’s encounter with the public sphere. It is in “Shkola,” however, that national cohesion surfaces most prominently. Rather than undertaking a comparative analysis of the two serials, I focus on the cohesion theme in “Shkola”—something which differentiates it from its predecessor—while remaining attentive to those features of the format which it shares with “Zona,” and which account for the controversies which both serials generated.

THE TELEVISION SERIAL IN ITS INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

When set in institutional surroundings (the prison, the hospital, the school), the serial genre positions itself in relation to those settings in a particular way, using its multi-episode format and its melodramatic sensibility to capture both the repetitive routines and the dramatic *peripetiae* which characterize such environments, thus enabling it to make distinctive truth claims about them. Institutional settings like schools also straddle the boundary between the official sphere to which they owe their existence and the private realm that those who work in them also frequent (in the case of prison and hospital inmates, the two realms coincide, sharpening the conflict between them). In Russia, the institutional dimension must be considered in the context of a post-totalitarian media system which operates in a globalized environment, but which exerts strict control over the content of national broadcasters who are, nonetheless, not bound by a comprehensive, unifying ideology. This

¹The flexibility of the serial, and its sister form, the mini-series, renders it capable, in fact, of doing many other kinds of work. Elena Prokhorova has, with great skill, discussed the critical role of the Soviet detective and spy miniseries, in particular the legendary “Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia” (1979) and “Semnadsat' mgnovonii vesni” (1973), in interrogating and problematizing the boundaries between legality and criminality, and between loyalty and treachery. See Elena Prokhorova, “Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Mini-Series of the 1970s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2003). Paulina Bren provides a superb account of how the Communist party used the television serial to engage in a process of societal “normalization” in post-1968 Czechoslovakia. See *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, 2010). In a post-Soviet context, Birgit Beumers discusses the serial’s role in instilling a sense of stability and continuity between past and present. See her “The Serialisation of Culture, or The Culture of Serialisation,” in *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, ed. Beumers et al. (London, 2009), 159–78.

²For a more detailed account of “Zona” see Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia: Remote Control* (London, 2009), 114–39.

³Anita Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London, 2005), 41–57.

complex situation accords added importance to the Russian serial's role in mediating between unofficial opinion and popular beliefs on one hand, and official policy on the other.

My argument rests on the serial's capacity to foster national cohesion, not in a "top-down" manner but through a multileveled, center-periphery dialectic. I use Jesus Martin-Barbero's account of the dialectic as my departure point.⁴ I highlight the director's emergence into the mainstream from the margins of approved cultural production; the school's location at the peripheral point where official rhetoric encounters youth subculture; the serial's tendency to interact with "paratextual" discourses (web forums, newspaper discussions, and so on); and the encounter's performative dynamic (the fact that disparate voices converge within a shared context is itself a nation-unifying experience).⁵

I trace the dialectic through the serial's split narrative structure: its oscillation between a naturalistic aesthetic based on displacements from society's center to conflicts at its margins, and a melodramatic sentimentalism suited to the metaphoric modeling of that societal center and the articulation of a discourse of universal empathy. The dialectic facilitates a mutual engagement of voices (official patriotic, Soviet nostalgic, nationalist extremist, liberal oppositionalist, vernacular racist) in which each contaminates the other, yet each struggles to appropriate the universalist rhetoric. Meanwhile, the submergence of what Russians call the "national question" within a larger paradigm (intergender, intergenerational, interclass) indicates both the acute danger it poses to national cohesion and its embeddedness within Russian social structures.⁶ I point to its symmetrical pairing with the intergenerational plot line and its internal representation as a "drama within a drama" (one of a number of self-reflexive devices) evidencing this privileged status.

Ultimately, the serial format struggles to contain the multitiered complexity that it embraces. In particular, "Shkola's" rhetoric of universal empathy, and the accompanying logic of representation, is subverted by the viscerally excessive detail and the controversy's seepage into paratextual space. I argue, however, that this contradiction, and Channel 1's rejection of attacks from outraged conservatives, signal a tentative shift in the post-Soviet approach to "managing consensus" and an ability to transcend the rigidity characterising Russian state broadcasting.⁷ I conclude with a brief coda tracing the dramatic turn of events in Russia since "Shkola" was broadcast: the explosion of race riots in December 2010 and the rise of an ethnically inflected populism; the wave of protests following Putin's

⁴Jesus Martin-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*, trans. E. Fox and R. White (London, 1993).

⁵I draw here on Judith Butler's understanding of performativity as an "aspect of discourse that ... through a certain kind of repetition and recitation ... has the capacity to produce what it names" to account for how television only *endorses* official values but enacts them in their own discursive practices, thus becoming complicit in the authentication of their ideological undergirding. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: The Politics of the Performative* (London, 2007).

⁶The "National Question" is traceable to the Bolshevik period (Stalin wrote an article in 1913 on the subject, in the context of the Russian Empire's relationship with its colonial territories). It has dogged Russian policymakers down to the present, when, partly as a result of the confused Soviet terminology of race, ethnicity, nationality, and nation, its meaning has come to include relations between ethnic Russians and non-Russian citizens of the Russian Federation. For a useful analysis see Rogers Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account," *Theory and Society* 23:1 (1994): 47–78.

⁷Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York, 1988).

reelection for a third term in 2012; the xenophobic media hysteria directed against the perceived “otherness” of the Pussy Riot collective and its supporters. I suggest that these developments and their media coverage demonstrate the bitterly contested struggle over the nature of consensus, but also the contingent nature of the shift represented by Gai-Germanika’s bold incursion into Russia’s constricted official media environment.

AUTHENTICITY, MELODRAMA, AND THE SERIAL DIALECTIC

Martin-Barbero emphasizes how the nineteenth-century literary serial’s protracted length and mass appeal enabled it to “get close” to its audience, and even to modify its course in light of reader responses. He refers to “the dialectics between writing and reading ... which ... drew in the public and revealed how the world of the reader penetrated the process of writing and left footprints in the text.”⁸ In the case of the contemporary television serial, the writing/reading dialectic is replaced by a filming/viewing equivalent bolstered by the “online comment” phenomenon. As Elizabeth Lozano and Arvind Singhal suggest, the serial is “re-created and re-enacted in public gossip ... through oral and communal sense-making.”⁹ This communal sense-making process is crucial to “Shkola’s” significance.

The “to-ing and fro-ing” which the dialectical process designates mirrors what Martin-Barbero terms the serial’s “provocation-pacification” dynamics, enabling it to “sti[r] people up and denounce[e] the atrocious contradictions of society, but in the same process ... to resolve these problems without moving people to action.”¹⁰ This process is linked with tensions in the structure of the serial. Its relative open-endedness and immersion in ongoing eventness (although audiences watch it with an expectation that conflicts will be eventually be resolved, they also appreciate the protracted nature of its multi-episode format which defers plot resolution into a distant future) are identified with its authenticity, its tendency to incorporate social conflict. The pseudo-documentary filming mode has bolstered the serial’s authenticity, invoking both the prevalence of anonymous public monitoring and the popularity of amateur forms of creativity. This further enhances its capacity to mediate between public and private, since in institutions such as schools, professionals enact public lives in working hours and private lives during the evenings.

The serial’s need to conclude its elongated narratives provides the “pacification” dimension to balance the “provocation” function carried out by the open-ended, authentication devices, enabling it to resolve the issues it raises and ameliorate the anxiety they generate. Here we encounter the serial’s longstanding association with melodrama which translates gritty, everyday tribulations into climactic plots, recodes anonymous social process as intimate family drama (an intimacy which transfers to the viewer-character relationship), and mythologizes collective trauma as conflict between alternatively heroicized and demonized individuals.¹¹ The emphasis on intimacy and emotionality has allied

⁸Martin-Barbero, *Communication*, 130.

⁹Elizabeth Lozano and Arvind Singhal, “Melodramatic Television Serials: Mythical Narratives for Education,” *Communications: The European Journal of Communication* 18:1 (1993): 117.

¹⁰Martin-Barbero, *Communication*, 137.

¹¹Lozano and Singhal, “Melodramatic Television,” 117.

melodrama with feminine mythologies, a propensity confirmed in the escapist narrative embraced by the Latin American *telenovela* so popular among hard-pressed Russian viewers of the 1990s, and typically revolving around the thwarted urban aspirations of a poor girl from the rural provinces. Despite its harsh, masculine aesthetics, “Shkola,” too, betrays melodramatic influences, adopting the viewpoint of its female pupils, many of whom are the victims of unscrupulous adolescent boys.

One further ramification of the narrative tension traversing the institution-based serial is that it is capable of supporting both metonymic and metaphorical interpretations.¹² Thus, the messy, open-ended realism of its plot lines enables it claim metonymic *adjacency* with lives lived in society at large. But the closure to which those plots, and the discrete boundaries of the settings within which they unfold, submit, encourage viewers to posit those settings as self-contained metaphoric *models* of society at large.

Martin-Barbero’s interest in the serial dialectic reflects the way in which it captures the split logic of capitalist democracy, which must facilitate protests against the iniquities it generates, yet contain them within a unified societal consensus.¹³ His neo-Gramscian approach posits hegemony as the achievement of power through appropriation of the definition of what passes for “common sense.” In the appropriation process, culture becomes the “strategic battlefield in the struggle to define the terms of the conflict,” for “there is no hegemony—nor counter hegemony—without cultural circulation ... no imposition from above which does not imply an incorporation of what comes from below.”¹⁴ Mass culture—especially the media—is central to the conflict, and

to think of ... mass culture in terms of hegemony implies a double rupture: a break with technological positivism which reduces communication to a problem of media and a break with cultural ethnocentrism which identifies mass culture with the ... degradation of culture.¹⁵

While it cannot be applied wholesale to post-Communist societies lacking societal consensus, such a conception of hegemony helps us address the encounter of official Russian tolerance with patriotic populism on one hand, and with subcultural xenophobia and dissident liberalism on the other. For this conception avoids the twin dangers of assessing the Russian political class’s grip on power solely on the basis of force (juridical, political, economic) at its disposal, and dismissing subcultural forms as peripheral to the exercise of that power. The fact that “Shkola” was portrayed both as an audacious challenge to Kremlin authority and as a legitimizing tool indicates its centrality to the circulation process. Moreover, as we will later suggest, other, more radical reworkings of Gramscian theory are fully capable of accounting for contexts in which the hegemonic process weakens rather than strengthens the ruling elite.

¹²Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956), 90–96.

¹³Martin Barbero, *Communication*, 74.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 85.

A PECULIARLY RUSSIAN CONTROVERSY

Gai-Germanika was not unknown to Russian audiences. Her feature film, *Everyone Dies but Me* (2008), which explored the lives of teenage girls, received a Special Jury prize at the 2008 Cannes film festival. Concerned about perceptions that its staid schedule disregarded younger tastes, and that its rival, NTV (host of “Zona”), remained closer to viewer preferences, Channel 1 saw the edgy Gai-Germanika as promising a boost to its performance in the ratings war. As Iurii Gevorkian noted, “Channel 1 understood that it needed to change something. ... It took the first illogical step toward the new viewer by releasing ‘Shkola.’ ... It wanted to attract a new, young audience.”¹⁶

Despite its continued subservience to the Kremlin, Channel 1’s very involvement in ratings wars highlights the fact that communism’s demise has deprived it of a unifying ideology and a cadre of loyal program makers, thus facilitating the “infiltration” into the margins of its broadcasting space of unorthodox artists like Gai-Germanika; Putin’s “great state” patriotism, riddled with self-contradiction, has hardly replaced Marxist-Leninist certitudes. This is not, however, to underestimate the very real tensions and uncertainties that, as Kristin Roth-Ey has usefully demonstrated, emerged within Soviet television drama programming.¹⁷

“Shkola” began showing in twenty-five-minute episodes on January 11, 2010. It was made freely available online, confirming that Channel 1 aimed for maximum penetration. Initially broadcast in the prime-time 6:30 P.M. slot, and at 11:30 P.M., it was discontinued during the Winter Olympics, causing many to assume that it would never reappear. It was then restored to the later time, following objections from Nikolai Bulaev of the Federal Education Agency who “agreed with colleagues’ complaints that to begin a conversation about schools in this way in the Year of the Teacher was incorrect,” and claimed that after watching “Shkola” he wanted to “wash his hands.”¹⁸ The serial attracted the critical attention of Duma deputies, who demanded that Channel 1’s director be summoned to explain himself.¹⁹ The Communist deputy Vladislav Iurchik described it as a “planned violent attack against our children and our youth.” He warned against a “wave of indignation and protest from parents” if the serial was not banned and demanded “an immediate end to this lawlessness” (*bespredel*).²⁰ The Kremlin-backed party, Edinaia Rossiia, split in two over “Shkola.” Internet denunciations of Gai-Germanika went as far as demands that the director be shot.²¹

¹⁶Iurii Gevorkian, “Serial ‘Shkola’: Provokatsiia ili pravda zhizni? ZA i PROTIV” *Argumenty i fakty*, January 2010, <http://www.aif.ru/culture/article/32072> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

¹⁷See Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, 2011).

¹⁸Quoted at <http://vshkole.ru/index.do> (site no longer active).

¹⁹Andrei Belitskii, “Serial ‘Shkola’ vozmutil deputata Gosdumy,” January 2010, <http://vesti.kz/media/36867/> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

²⁰Ibid.

²¹See Iurii Bogmolov, “‘Shkola’: Pervye uroki,” <http://www.rian.ru/authors/20100115/204650635.html> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

Channel 1 remained undeterred. Its press office issued a robust online statement in February 2010 arguing, in an echo of Thaw-era accusations against the Stalinist practice of “lacquering over” (*lakirovka*) inconvenient societal truths, that

the Year of the Teacher, about which the Moscow officials have been quick to remind us, is not an excuse to lacquer over the problems in our schools, but a reason to get to grips with them. And that is the task of the mass media: to draw attention to the existing situation.²²

It accused its detractors of being Pharisees, blind to Russia’s ailments, and reminded politicians of the difference between art and documentary, a position reminiscent of that adopted by the defenders of Siniavskii and Daniel at the infamous 1965 trial in which prosecutors refused to distinguish between the statements and thoughts of fictional characters and those of their creators.²³ On April 12, Putin intervened:

I haven’t seen this serial; I just don’t have time, and if you haven’t watched it then you don’t want to say, as in Soviet times, ‘I condemn Solzhenitsyn, although ... I haven’t read him myself.’ ... We know of the problems and we are trying to react to them. It probably is necessary to draw attention to them, but to create hysteria around them is ... harmful.²⁴

Equally significantly for our purposes, however, Putin was alert to the dangers of overgeneralizing, warning that “however acute particular cases are, it is not right to make generalizations from them.”²⁵

Some bloggers saw “Shkola” as having been deliberately planned to provoke an outcry against its negative depiction of Russian schools and thus generate support for the teaching profession, a view inadvertently endorsed by Aleksandr Isaev, president of the Duma Committee on Social Policy, who during a Channel 1 discussion of the program in the “Sudite sami” series called it a “present” to the Year of the Teacher: “Not a single decree of a single organ of state power has enjoyed this level of popularity. Now the word ‘school’ has become the most cited word in our society. ... You need to draw attention to these things.”²⁶

Viewer ratings confirm the level of interest it elicited among all age groups. According to statistics published in the respected *Kommersant*, the 18–30 group remained the most enthusiastic—they accounted for 22–23 percent of the entire television audience during

²²Belitskii, “Serial ‘Shkola.’”

²³Just as the trial helped mark the end of the Krushchev Thaw, so “Shkola” seemed momentarily to signal a new Thaw under Putin. For more on late Soviet journalistic approaches to the political status of fiction see Thomas Wolfe, *Governing Soviet Journalist: The Press and the Socialist Press after Stalin* (Indianapolis, 2005); and Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 259–97.

²⁴See “Putin o serialie ‘Skhola’: Ne nado delat’ obobshchaiushchie vyvody,” <http://www.rian.ru/culture/20100125/206194022.html> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶The program, entitled “School – Is It Life?” (“Shkola – zhizn’?”) was broadcast on January 14, 2010, and the full transcript was published on the Channel 1 website at http://www.ltv.ru/sprojects_edition/si5691/fi2813 (last accessed February 15, 2013).

the early evening showing—but it attracted significant viewer shares among people up to 55 years old. In one week, the 45–54-year-old group comprised 14 percent of the share. Despite its unspecified Moscow setting, the serial was more widely watched in the provinces.²⁷

Judging by the mass of online forums, official and unofficial, viewers divided into three categories: those who welcomed the serial’s honesty; those who accused it of insulting Russia’s teachers and young people; and those who felt that things were in fact much worse in reality. A brief but representative selection of comments from the “official” program site includes the following:

I’ve never seen anything more truthful. Super idea!
This is real school, just as it is in life!

They collected all the worse things that could happen in school and shoved (*zapikhnuli*) them into one film. Complete rubbish (*Polnyi otstoi*).

In our school at that age it was 150 times worse.
In the nineties in our school it was much harsher.²⁸

A smaller number adopted the line taken by Gai-Germanika in an interview given to *Argumenty i fakty*: that the serial was an artistic film dealing with universal issues, not an attempt to represent the specific realities of Russian schools:

I make films about human relations, about the lack of dialogue between the generations. School in this instance is no more than decoration, walls. I could have used the walls of a hospital or a police station, or even an open field.²⁹

On June 21, 2010, Channel 1 indicated that, contrary to demand, there would be no Season 2 of “Shkola.” It did, however, broadcast another hour-long discussion in the “Sudite sami” series, in which a Duma deputy and a retired teacher, horrified by the serial’s explicitness and negativity, argued vociferously with one of the actors, some real school pupils, and the television celebrity Tina Kandelaki, who defended “Shkola.”³⁰ A month earlier, Gai-Germanika was invited to become a creative director of the rock music channel MTV-Russia in recognition of her serial. These three events symbolize the ideological schizophrenia characterizing the Russian public sphere: the intimate coexistence of a

²⁷Arina Borodina, “Serial ‘Shkola’: Ot massovogo zritel’ia do prezidenta strany,” *Kommersant* 8 (4308), 2010, also available at <http://www.kommersant.ru/docsearch/1306937> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

²⁸Obtained from <http://www.shkola-serial.ru/>. This particular site is no longer active. However, interested readers can access some episodes of “Shkola,” as well as viewers’ comments about the series and episodes, by visiting www.1tv.ru/shedsearch and then entering *Серия “Школа”* into the search window. To the left will be a list of links to various episodes of the series (full audio and video), and viewers’ comments will be at the bottom of the pages.

²⁹Quoted in Sergei Grachev, “Valeriia Gai-Germanika: ‘Moi fil’m ne o shkole! Ia snimaiu kino o chelovecheskikh otnoshenii,’” *Argumenty i fakty*, January 20, 2010, <http://www.aif.ru/culture/article/32144> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

³⁰The “Sudite sami” discussion was broadcast by Channel 1 on May 27, 2010. A full transcript of the discussion is available at http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects_edition/si=5691&d=27.05.2010 (last accessed February 15, 2013).

profound social conservatism and suspicion of free expression which endures in those who remain under the shadow of the Soviet era on one hand, and the permissive mores and pervasive, informal “Western” values of a younger generation on the other hand.

“SHKOLA”: A LESSON IN PROVOCATION

What, then, was the fuss about? Viewers had certainly never before seen anything like “Shkola.” The script was skeletal and the director relied heavily on improvisation, adding to the sense of authenticity. The language was riddled with youth jargon and the only taboo was in the use of four-letter words, which were substituted by euphemisms. Boredom and aggression in lessons were likewise improvised with uncanny conviction. Background music was never used unless it featured within the plot. As noted by Joe Crescente, in this, and its use of handheld cameras, “Shkola” conforms to the rules of the Danish “Dogme 95” school.³¹ The cannabis joints smoked by the pupils when out of sight of the teachers look only too real. The serial features an extended gay kiss, gratuitous sex and violence, and close-ups of drunken pupils vomiting in each other’s faces.

The action centers on several weeks in the lives of the pupils of 9A, the most difficult class in the school, with which only the attractive, but over-familiar, physics teacher, Natalia Nikolaevna, has a rapport (she has persuaded pupils to rehearse a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at an after-school drama club). Its central character is Ania Nosova, the disturbed granddaughter of the class’s history teacher. She has recently insisted on being allowed to attend school following years of home schooling (something Gai-Germanika herself experienced). However, she is rejected by the other pupils, one of whom disseminates erotic photographs of her.

Ania seeks solace first in a group of “Emos” (a darkly pessimistic youth subculture she encounters outside of school), and later discovers an incipient attraction for Orthodox mysticism. Her pursuer harries her with anonymous text messages, then acquires a video camera with which he begins voyeuristically to film her. She steals the camcorder, but sinks into depression before being sent to a psychiatric hospital where she commits suicide, recording a video clip of her last words of desperation. Other characters include Ira, in love with Lekha, who mistreats and eventually cruelly abandons her; and the promiscuous Olia Budilova, nearly raped while drunk by another pupil on a school trip to Suzdal’, but also troubled at home by her mother’s messy divorce. Class issues find their way into the plot via Sergei Korolev, son of a rich couple. Following an abortive attempt by Sergei to seduce Natalia Nikolaevna, the teacher instead begins an extramarital affair with Sergei’s father. The family disintegrates, Natalia Nikolaevna loses the respect of pupils and teachers alike, and her own marriage collapses.

Then there is Vadim Isaev, beaten by his drunken father, but a thieving, racist bully at school. He constantly makes xenophobic comments about immigrants and torments Timur Zadoev, a quiet Muslim boy from Dagestan who is ignored by the others. The two have several physical encounters. Vadim crops his hair, seeking an identity among local skinhead

³¹Joe Crescente, “Valeriia Gai-Germanika: *School*,” *KinoKultura* 28 (2010), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2010/28r-school.shtml> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

groups. Eventually he falls afoul of intergang rivalry, is badly beaten, and mends his ways. Vadim is encouraged by the school's geography teacher, Arsenii Ivanovich, a nationalist extremist who establishes an extracurricular group to promote his beliefs in a Russia free of non-Russians. In the end, Arsenii Ivanovich is sacked by Acting Head Teacher Kharitonova, who accuses him of fascism. Timur, meanwhile, a paragon of virtue, dissuades his cousin from kidnapping Vadim's brother in revenge and begins a romantic relationship with Sonia, a modest pupil whom he invites to his brother's Muslim wedding celebrations, but who is rejected by the other guests.

The serial ends with two compelling episodes which abandon the multiple-plot format and focus on Ania's final hours in the psychiatric institution, then on the aftermath of her death. Ania's death shocks the community into placing their worldly concerns into perspective and resolving their differences. The final episode also features an appeal to the parents of class 9A by the Acting Head Teacher. In a Soviet-style moral lecture Kharitonova calls for parents and teachers to "listen to their children, to try to understand them, and to be their 'friends.'"³² But a number of issues are left hanging, and the closing scene consists of a bizarre response to the appeal for pupil-teacher friendship: Natalia Nikolaevna is depicted drunk in a karaoke bar with her favorite (female) student, bellowing out the words to an optimistic rock number as she celebrates the apparent rescue of her marriage to a man she feels no affection for. The spirit of subversive ambivalence is confirmed in one of several points of self-referentiality: the number 69, that of the final episode, has a familiar sexual subtext.

(DE)CONSTRUCTING THE NATION

The much-quoted 1934 *Pravda* headline, "The Whole Country Is Watching Chapaev," might have been adapted for "Shkola." Like the Socialist Realist film classic, *Gai-Germanika*'s social-realist shocker gripped the nation, generating a popular mythology. Despite its grim aesthetic and uncompromising content, "Shkola," too, is bound up with a vast project aimed at unifying a fragmented nation not just in the negative sense ("Shkola" as an attempt to provoke shared outrage at the Kremlin's patriotic optimism) but also positively (Channel 1's status as a vehicle of the nation-binding mission accounts for the serial being released in the "Year of the Teacher"). The serial undoubtedly addresses issues of social cohesion and their links to national (dis)unity. The introduction to the "Sudite sami" discussion of January 14, 2010, refers to the "societal split" that "Shkola" caused.³³ The central trope is that of intergenerational alienation: the pathos flows from the inability of teachers and parents to manage their teenage charges. The theme operates not only on the level of plot (parent-child, teacher-pupil), but also performatively: the dominant reaction among older viewers was, "We don't recognize our children in these monsters"; a prevalent response from younger viewers was, "At last, something which tells it like it is!" One might add the

³²This occurred in Episode 68. Where appropriate, further references to episodes in the serial will be given parenthetically. The official online version of the program used for this article was at <http://www.shkola-serial.ru/smotret-serial-shkola-online.html>, but this site is no longer active.

³³See <http://www.1tv.ru/prj/sudsami/vypusk/2813> (last accessed February 15, 2013).

mutual alienation of genders: several plot lines revolve around males treating girls as objects of sexual gratification. Class animosities are aroused through the image of the BMW-owning New Russian. Finally, the serial explores both interracial tension and the relationship between popular xenophobia and official patriotism.

“Shkola,” then, sets out to overcome a litany of othernesses. The sixty-nine-episode trajectory enacts metatextually what is narrated at the textual level: just as the conflicts that failure to transcend alterity generates are ameliorated, so the impression of alienation created by the initial negativity gives way to a rhetoric of mutual empathy more likely to resonate with older viewers. The (partial) triumph of the “adult” rhetoric of reconciliation signalled in Kharitonova’s emotional address to attentive parents sitting silently at their desks is confirmed in the excruciating scene at Ania’s graveside which further develops the girl’s stirrings of Orthodox sentiment. The closing episodes incorporate a set of symbols which resonate with a Soviet past still active in the memories of the serial’s older viewers, but bolstered with the post-Soviet supplement of Orthodox virtuosity. Ironically, given its initial press, “Shkola” concludes by contributing to a wider post-Soviet trend toward nostalgia for an idealized Soviet past and reestablishing the Myth of the Child, and of the Teacher, central to Soviet culture, particularly during the Stalin period.³⁴ If it had in earlier episodes seemed bent on dismantling those myths, it now appears to have “purged” them of sentimental falsehood. In the first Channel 1 discussion of the program, Elena Drapeko, deputy president of Russia’s State Culture Department, observed:

Myths about school exist in our country. There are all the old films about school. There are our memories of Soviet schools, films of our childhood years, our childhood teachers and we are all saturated (*propitany*) with these myths. And now they’ve taken these myths and overturned them (*oprokinuli*).³⁵

The serial’s own long narrative arc authenticates the cathartic process.

Likewise, the juxtaposition of the mournful scenes of reconciliation, and Natalia Nikolaevna’s debauched mockery of teacher-pupil friendship, encapsulates in narrative form the central controversy that “Shkola” evoked; does it boldly challenge official optimism about national harmony, or does it build support for the symbolic importance of the pedagogue in Russia’s Year of the Teacher, revitalizing the officially endorsed values of tolerance and social harmony?³⁶

³⁴For the Myth of the Child in Soviet culture see Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1891* (New Haven, 2007). During the Soviet period, the teacher was held up as “a leading figure on the cultural front” and “a model for children, parents and society to emulate.” See E. T. Ewing, “Soviet Teachers and the Politics of Identity, 1931–1939,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Association, New Orleans, 1994.

³⁵See <http://www.ltv.ru/prj/sudsami/vypusk/2813>.

³⁶The Russian constitution makes multiple references to tolerance and the rejection of racial and religious prejudice. Under the auspices of a state-supported “Societal Chamber” a Commission on Issues of Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience has been set up under the chairmanship of Valerii Tishkov, author of many works on Russian national cohesion, including one on tolerance and the Russian media. See Valerii Tishkov, *Etichnost’ i tolerantnost’ v sredstvakh massovoi informatsii* (Moscow, 2002).

SCHOOL AT THE MARGINS

The implicit, and elusive, goal of “Shkola” is the integration of four conflicting discourses: a pseudo-liberal critique of Kremlin patriotism; a set of deviant youth subcultures with which Kremlin symbolism fails to engage; a generalized rhetoric of cohesion and unity; and the dominant discourse—official patriotism itself. The reconciliation that such an integration would herald amounts to the achievement of Gramscian hegemony. For the counter-discourses would, in this case, not only be assimilated into official patriotism, but would actually consolidate its dominance by actively performing the transcendence of opposition via “hegemony as dialectic process connecting/articulating the margins to the center.”³⁷

Gai-Germanika as director of, and the school as locus for, the Channel 1 project come into their own here. Each belongs to a separate cultural periphery: Gai-Germanika to that of the mainstream artistic elite, and the school to the margins of Kremlin authority (too far displaced from the center of power to remain impervious to external forces, but nevertheless steeped in that center’s values). The school is thus the ideal site on which to explore the discursive encounter. The lessons portrayed—Russian Literature, Soviet History, Geography—are informed by the patriotic agenda. They are delivered against the backdrop of students surreptitiously sending text messages, exchanging insults, plotting after-school exploits, and so on. The older generation’s struggle to overcome adolescent recalcitrance becomes the central figure for the conflictual encounters. For these are the challenges that the state must meet in its effort to insure intrasocietal cohesion. Paradoxically, this enables the school to function simultaneously as the displaced, peripheral effect of the state’s confrontation with alterity, and as that confrontation’s central model.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION: PERIPHERY OR CENTER?

The intergenerational conflict is both displacement of, and model for, the “national question” which supersedes it, and which dominates the paradigm of differences to which they both belong. The logic of substitution (of which modeling and displacement are each examples) is bound up with the linking of particular phenomena to their “universal” meanings. Universalism offers a way of relating individuals to wider humanity. It is key to the manner in which interethnic conflict is handled (the claim to ownership of the “truly universal” solution to such problems is vital), and, as we shall see, to the serial’s logic.

The playing out of the displacement/modeling dynamic is evident in the fact that, while tensions in the political center’s approach to interethnic tension are fully modeled from within the school authority structures, the xenophobic sentiment with which the question is expressed at the popular level is displaced beyond the school’s parameters. Adopting the officially sanctioned “tolerance” stance, Kharitonova will have no truck with xenophobia,

³⁷David Morley, “Finding Out about the World from Television News: Some Difficulties,” in *Television and Cultural Knowledge*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (London 1999), 152.

while Arsenii Ivanovich reflects the views of the patriotic right in regarding her refusal to recognise the threat posed by the “national problem” as treachery: “You love Jews, but not Russians,” he rails, before storming out (Episode 60). Vadim, by contrast, must venture beyond the school environment to find succour for his xenophobic inclinations within a skinhead subculture whose main passions extend to football, music, and fashion.³⁸ Significantly, when Arsenii asks Vadim to serve as a witness to a pupil’s accusation of fascism against him, Vadim declares that he will never be the class informant (*stukach*), thereby asserting his allegiance to the broader youth subculture (Episode 42). Here, the naturalist aesthetics of displacement wins out over metaphoric modeling, positioning race simultaneously at the (displaced) periphery and the (modeled) center.

(MIS)MANAGING INTERETHNIC CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM

Timur provides another indication of the national theme’s location at the center-periphery threshold. Until the final third (when he is befriended by Sonia), and other than his clashes with Vadim, Timur remains at the margins of the collective. He sits on his own, ignored by his classmates, suffering the very ostracism Ania endured. The two fates unfold in parallel: Timur proceeds from loneliness to friendship, touching romance with Sonia (a blond girl of archetypally Slavic demeanor), and thus reconciliation, while Ania’s journey ends, via the alterity of Emo subculture, in alienation and death. The intersection of racial exclusion (a “peripheral” theme) and a teenage angst born of social exclusion (the “central” narrative line) ensures a mutual contamination, the penetration of center by periphery.

The modeling function is evident in the school’s approach to the management of inter-ethnic tension, combining discipline and control with informal proselytising and formal inculcation. For example, the History lessons follow a familiar sequence: that of the history of the Soviet Union from the 1917 Revolution, through Stalin’s purges and the Second World War, to perestroika. The pupils’ ignorance of historical landmarks points to the challenges faced by the state in its efforts to instil national pride. During the lesson on the Second World War, Vadim is shown muttering objections to criticism of the Nazis and the other pupils respond with sniggers (Episode 15). In the Literature lesson pupils are reduced to hysterics when one of them reminds the class of the scatological myth that, as part-negro, Pushkin was famed for his gigantic penis (Episode 7), revealing why adolescent subculture proves such fertile territory for the xenophobic right. Geography is taught by Arsenii Ivanovich, and in his account of Russian regional structures he suggests that Moscow is overrun with migrants, echoing the bending of official nation-building to extremist ends.

When the conflict between Vadim and Timur is brought to the attention of the staff (Episode 13), the permanent Head Teacher announces stiltedly the need to deal with “interethnic disharmony” (*mezhnatsional'naia rozn'*)—the term used in the state media. The intuitive Kharitonova inflects state harmonization policy with a less formalistic idiom; when she sacks Arsenii Ivanovich, her voice quivers with anger as she declares that she will not permit fascism in her school (Episode 62). As Acting Head, she has yet to become

³⁸See Hilary Pilkington et al., *Russia’s Skinheads: Exploring and Rethinking Subcultural Lives* (London, 2010).

steeped in the formalism of the state institution; nor is it accidental that it is she who decides to introduce a “Self-Governance Day,” when pupils lead the teaching. Her spontaneous liberal tolerance provides a welcome fillip to official rhetoric.

Kharitonova’s initial position outside the school hierarchy enables her to import the unsullied values of liberal tolerance to the heart of the authority structure; this, too, is why her personalized peroration calling for mutual understanding resonates in a way that it would not if it were phrased in dry officialese. But that same extra-institutional position, to which she must return, undermines the institution’s modeling function, reasserting its role as a periphery at which normal rules do not apply. In the classroom, center-periphery contamination works to opposite effect. Vadim’s clash with Timur simmers throughout. On one hand, it is depicted in relentless detail drawn from the broader social context: unsightly brawls; frequent use of the insults “chernozhopye” (black-asses) and “churki” (literally, “wooden stubs”); vile abuse that Vadim shouts at a group of Tadjik workers he spies from the bus during the school trip to Suzdal’, during which he also yells the nationalist slogan “Russia for the Russians” (Episode 51). Less authentic is the manner in which the conflict is confined to two individual pupils. No other pupil is depicted uttering racist remarks. The restriction of the national theme to three characters sits uneasily with Gai-Germanika’s efforts to convey the “drip-drip” of “everyday racism.” Vadim’s constant racist posturing is credible enough, but the fact that it finds no resonance is not, and threatens to turn the character into a mere cipher. Here, too, the clash is at work as Vadim’s and Timur’s figurative significance (their capacity to represent interethnic conflict in the round) is undercut by their weakened metonymic function (their ability to appear as that context’s own displaced periphery).

The clash is endemic in “Shkola’s” logic, which synthesizes open-ended contingency and closed narrative arcs. It is epitomized in Vadim’s discovery of skinhead culture, which has a plurality of social motivations and entails an entire lifestyle, of which racism is only one component. This holism is conveyed through Vadim’s entry into the skinhead environment, attributed to a complex mix of his clash with Timur, resentment over his family’s migration-induced economic hardship, and his father’s alcoholism. Yet the cathartic emphasis of the dénouement demands that Vadim be cleansed of his angst; expelling his skinhead girlfriend from his hospital ward and reconciled with his parents (Episode 68), he miraculously casts a whole identity into oblivion.

UNIVERSAL EMPATHY

Social causes and consequences are, nonetheless, carefully observed. On arrival in Suzdal’ on a school trip designed to introduce the children to Orthodox spirituality, Vadim, looking out of the bus window at the new surroundings, asks aggressively “Where are the *gastarbeiters* (guest workers), then?” (Episode 51). His obsession with Tadjiks reflects popular perceptions, pointing up the illogicality of his hostility to Timur who, as a Dagestani, is a Russian citizen, not a migrant. (The term “migrant” is often used misleadingly in Russian nationalist discourse, since Dagestanis, Chechens, and Ossetians, to whom the term is applied, are Russian citizens, with all the legal protection that this status supposedly accords them, though they also require a Moscow residence permit to live and work in the

capital.) The serial captures the symbiosis of national and gender identities through Vadim's gradual assertion of masculine pride; he finally draws on his newfound skinhead aggression to strike his inebriated father to the ground, informing him that he, Vadim, is now the "true man" (*muzhik*) (Episode 61).

Timur's characterization, too, is grounded in his cultural background. His Muslim greeting to his relatives ("As-salam aleikum"), and his comment following Ania's death that "suicide is regarded as a sin in Islam" (Episode 69), authenticate an otherness that threatens to alienate viewers along with Vadim; when Timur meets with his cousin to complain about Vadim, their exchange, rendered in a Dagestani language with Russian subtitles, points to a revenge kidnapping of Vadim's young brother fully concordant with popular prejudices (Episode 14). Similarly, when Timur takes Sonia to meet male family members and observe his culture's traditional customs (*obychai*), their hostility, conveyed, again, in a Dagestani tongue, aligns viewers with the excluded Russian girl (Episode 59).

However, the individualization leads to a decontextualized universalism embodied in the attitude of the stern but sympathetic Kharitonova. She takes pity on Vadim when he is caught stealing money, citing his domestic circumstances when he is threatened with expulsion (Episode 62). Likewise, Vadim and Timur begin the serial as friends, and end with an implied reconciliation, as though universal goodwill always trumps social circumstance. These values are enacted at every level: narrative (the reconciled antagonists); performative (the portrayal of Timur as the epitome of sensitivity and the "punishment" of Vadim as the director's contribution to "overcoming otherness") metatextual (*Romeo and Juliet*, in which love transcends difference; the Dagestani, Timur, and the Russian, Sonia, first find love when practicing their lines from the play together), and paratextual (the serial as facilitator of a national "coming together").

"Shkola's" embrace of universalism accounts for the submersion of the national question within a network of surrounding issues. Vadim's everyday racism merges with the rest of Class 9A's insubordination; Arsenii Ivanovich's resentment of Kharitonova's challenges to his Fascist sympathies reflect his jealousy over her appointment as Acting Head. The integration of sociopolitical antagonism toward the Other with teenage alienation sees metaphor and metonymy converging, as "mutual understanding" resolves the conflicts threatening to tear the Russian state apart (as modeled within one of its peripheral institutions), and those private hells afflicting individual lives (displaced from the center of humanity itself).

The prominence that humanist rhetoric acquires is facilitated by the serial format. The initial episodes' visceral horror was enough to attract an audience, but too much to sustain it; while the narrative had been pre-plotted, its tone was clearly recalibrated following the intensity of the reaction.

WHOSE TOLERANCE, WHOSE PATRIOTISM?

The ambivalence of the humanist triumph points to a mutual contamination of discourses. Populist xenophobia (Vadim), official tolerance (the previous Head Teacher), semi-approved nationalism (Arsenii Ivanovich), and liberal universalism (Kharitonova) interact and inflect one another. Vadim's skinhead prejudices enter the orbit of Arsenii Ivanovich's nationalism,

which in turn appropriates the vigor of the former. Yet, Vadim's loyalty to his counter-culture prevents him from succumbing to Arsenii Ivanovich's strategy. Meanwhile, Ania's death (and Vadim's beating) prompt the replacement of the official agenda of opposition to "national disharmony" by the spontaneous humanism of Kharitonova, whose proximity to the wellsprings of adolescent rebellion lends authenticity to her liberal empathy.

Ania's incipient Christian mysticism, and the school's embrace of funeral ritual (infused with the pathos of Ania's fate), reveal the reverse contamination of liberal humanism by the Orthodox piety of formal nation-building. And in Kharitonova's empathy for "our children," the Soviet Myth of the Child resurfaces. The Soviet/post-Soviet dialectic is at work also in the serial's relationship with its context. For its battle with the Duma replicates that of Soviet dissidents with the Kremlin. (It is no accident that Putin attacks those who condemned Solzhenitsyn without reading his work.) But questions remain as to whether the school will fully assimilate the changes once a permanent Head Teacher is appointed. Has Kharitonova cleansed official culture of its Soviet-era formalism with her individual-centered empathy? Or does the fact that her sermon is addressed only to parents suggest that official discourse has failed to hegemonize the humanist message? Does the continuing resistance of adolescent subculture to assimilation by the formal pieties of the center leave space for Arsenii Ivanovich's nationalist extremism, now expunged from the institution, to realign itself with populist xenophobia? Given the harsh logic of the early part of the serial and the potential that the latter two questions might elicit a positive response highly inconvenient to Channel 1's political masters, it is no surprise that "Shkola 2" was ruled out.

The center-periphery dialectic permits multiple voices to circulate, align with, and confront one another, testing out their respective capacity for imposing unity (whether that of the adolescent subculture, the cohesive state institution, the multicultural federation, or the ethnically cleansed nation). It also enables competing discourses (official patriotic/liberal oppositional) to struggle over ownership of the universalism endorsed by the director. Gai-Germanika herself remains caught between a commitment to universal values based on an idealized image of the Soviet "brotherhood of nations" cult fully in step with the Kremlin's official, nation-building mantra about Russia's embrace of its multicultural, multifaith heritage, and a universalism grounded in post-Enlightenment European "tolerance" of the other's inalienable right to free expression, with which Putin's Russia is distinctly ill at ease.³⁹ In this sense, her serial retains a genuine open-endedness and ambivalence as to its plot outcomes. But the resolution of the interplay of competing discourses that she unleashes is not something over which she, or for that matter her Channel 1 sponsors, can hope to exert full control.

SELF-REFERENCE, PERFORMANCE, AND PARATEXT

One way in which the interplay is enacted is via "Shkola's" cultural liminality. This is enhanced by the ability of character types to migrate to the surrounding context. The

³⁹For the Soviet concept of "Brotherhood of Peoples" see Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001). For a perceptive and critical analysis of the origins and implications of the Western liberal notion of "tolerance" see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, 2006).

Channel 1 debate, for example, features not only the actress who played Kharitonova, but also school students, a “conservative” teacher, and members of the liberal-artistic elite. Meanwhile, internet forums show that, just as the young actors formulated their own interpretations of the skeletal script, so their teenaged fans emulated their language and mind sets in a symbiosis facilitated by a shared subcultural idiom: “Frigging hell! (*Blin!*) Why do we have to wait so long for the next episode? What a nightmaaare! (*Kaaashmaaar!*).”⁴⁰ Others treat the characters as real acquaintances:

Friiiging hell! (*Bliiin!*) She’s really driven me crazy (*zabesila*), your Budilova. She gets pregnant and runs straight away to Pif [a male character in the serial] and straight away she needs him. What’s all that about? ... And that geography teacher—he’s a rat.⁴¹

Gai-Germanika’s own liminal status accounts for her performative approach to her themes; her familiarity with adolescent mind-sets reinforces her explosive critique of arid official culture. At the same time, her sympathies with the nation-building agenda enable her to cleanse its commitment to intercultural understanding of that aridity with her touching narrative of the romance between a Russian girl and a Dagestani boy.

The shock that “Shkola” administers to received values brings people of all generations, persuasions, and origins together in a controversy played out within the confines of the mainstream. Ultimately, the controversy focuses popular attention on the role of the pedagogue and the predicament of Russia’s children in the state-designated Year of the Teacher, resurrecting the Soviet Myth of the Child in the context of a universal “overcoming of difference.” This points to a consensus-management process more sophisticated than the state propaganda with which Russian television is often associated.

One reason for the ambivalence characterising “Shkola’s” nation-building role is that text (primary narrative), paratext (external texts related to that narrative), context (its sociocultural environment) and metatext (intranarrative reflections of the text’s relationship with the latter) are intertwined. We have pointed to the number 69 and to the play-within-the-play as alternatively scabrous and literary modes in which “Shkola” references its own shock effect and its thematization of intercultural difference. Also of note is how the serial’s amateur filming technique is internalized within the narrative. The technique is an authenticating device designed to ground the narrative in the community that it depicts (the boy who films his peers with a camcorder). But its voyeuristic mode aligns it also with the oppressive state institution. Accordingly, it is the boy with the camera who stalks Ania, precipitating her tragic demise. Ania’s decision to use the camcorder for her final message takes on a symbolic dimension as she asserts the right of the objectified Other to take control of his/her own self-representation.

⁴⁰This was available at <http://www.shkola-serial.ru/smotret-serial-shkola-online/smotret-online-serial-shkola-besplatno.-56-seriya.html>, but the site is no longer active.

⁴¹This was available at <http://www.shkola-serial.ru/smotret-serial-shkola-online/smotret-online-serial-shkola-besplatno.-47-seriya.html>, but the site is no longer active.

THE (MIS)PLACING OF RACE

The national question features in only one of multiple subplots. But the fact that the serial was championed by Russia's patriotic cheerleader (Channel 1) in the face of fierce opposition from the right-wing periphery of the ideological spectrum whose borders it is the broadcaster's task to patrol means that interethnic issues acquire a privileged value; In the director's own interpretation, "Shkola" is aimed at encouraging mutual understanding. We have emphasized the serial's focus on the transcendence of a variety of "othernesses." Our analysis identifies interethnic cohesion as the privileged link in the chain: the reverse symmetries linking Timur and Ania; Timur's role in *Romeo and Juliet*; the thematization of Russian nationhood.

The most authentic and effective way for a film director, or other artist, to convey the national question's influence on public life is precisely to submerge it beneath other topics. Thus, Gai-Germanika chooses to represent the Timur-Sonia-Vadim triangle at one level as just one of many inter-student conflicts, overlaid with gender, classroom, and family tensions. The emphasis on Vadim's everyday racism as part of a generalized class rebelliousness and the attribution of Arsenii Ivanovich's nationalism to professional rivalry reinforce the normalization strategy. But the fact that Vadim's racism is individualized and meets with no peer support, and that, once dismissed, Arsenii Ivanovich vanishes, opens up a gap between strategy and realization. The gap is a corollary of the metonymy/metaphor tension. Do events displace to the subcultural periphery phenomena occurring at its center (the social tensions pitting migrant cultures against indigenous Russians)? Or is the conflict between Timur and Vadim an individualized model of a larger Manichean duel? The apparent resolution of the tension through the universalist discourse of tolerance is illusory. For such a discourse is at odds with the visceral shock of the naturalistic detail. The shock effect has a strong interethnic dimension recognized by Gai-Germanika's *Argumenty i fakty* interviewer who, in complaining about the language, says that he can forgive the ubiquitous four-letter euphemisms but not the racist *chernozhopye*.⁴²

Addressing the failure to contain the national question within liberal tolerance rhetoric, and epitomising the mutual contamination of discourses which drives the serial's narrative logic, Gai-Germanika invokes a nostalgia for things Soviet; Kharitonova's paean to the Child and high-flown appeal for mutual understanding have a distinctively pre-1991 ring to them. And the sight of the grieving Nosov (originally a cipher for pedagogic formalism) weeping over his daughter's coffin points to a reconciliation of the Soviet myth of harmony with its post-Soviet nemesis. The problem that "Shkola" evinces is one of placement: where to "put" the national question. One apparent solution comes in the serial's capacity to recalibrate its narrative lines in the light of audience reaction. "Shkola's" sustained internet presence maximizes the exposure of its themes to multiple voices, transposing the controversy raised by the national question into the unpatrollable space of the world-wide web. In this context, there is an intergenerational contrast between the teenaged bloggers debating issues relating to adolescent subculture, and the smaller number of adult

⁴²Grachev, "Valeriia Gai-Germanika."

commentators who single out the interethnic problem as “the most dangerous.” The answer to the question of where to “place” the national question is to displace it into a blogosphere of communities (liberal-oppositional, adolescent-subcultural, traditional-Soviet leaning) whose mutual disjunction mirrors the communicational malfunction targeted by the serial.

The reason for the displacement is partly the political constraints placed upon Channel 1, and partly the lack of a framework within which controversies might be aired. These issues came together in an exchange between Aleksei Venediktov, chief editor of the Moscow Echo radio station, and Irina Iarovaia, a *Edinaia Rossiia* Duma deputy, which took place during the first “Sudite sami” program:

IAROVAIA: There should be no censorship. Today it is important to talk about the social contract (*obschestvennom dogovore*). If we speak of unified value orientations (*edinykh tsennostnykh orientirakh*), then they must be uniform for the mass media, too, and for schools. Whereas we have this strange situation in which the mass media can be immoral.

VENEDIKTOV: So you are suggesting introducing uniform opinion (*edinomyslie*) in Russia?

IAROVAIA: No, a uniform culture.

VENEDIKTOV: We have a very diverse culture in our country, a multifaith society. There is no uniform culture.

IAROVAIA: Russian Culture—we have that in common. If you’ve got pro-American values, then you’d better tell us.⁴³

Despite its occlusions, and despite (or perhaps, on the contrary, thanks to) sharp disagreements of this sort, “Shkola” represents a gesture toward a center-periphery dialectic through which a more mature, more stable consensus might be negotiated (the risk being, however, that such a consensus might throw into question the long-term viability of the very state media apparatus through which it was given expression). The negative portrayal of Arsenii Ivanovich, the chastening dénouement, and the attenuation of sociopolitical conflict as “universal (mis)understanding” contribute to the wider mission of managing the infiltration of extremist rhetoric into the mainstream. That this comes at the expense of permitting a liberal critique of extremism’s presence within both youth subculture and official patriotism is part of the “hegemonic bargain.” “Shkola” epitomizes the potential, and the concomitant dangers, that the serial harbors for the Russian media in fulfilling their nation-building obligations. As I shall now suggest, subsequent developments appear to indicate that “Shkola” was ultimately judged to be “a bargain too far” and that the new departure in the hegemonic process which it signalled was eventually revealed to be something of a blind alley. For as Ernesto Laclau has shown in his influential recasting of Gramscian theory, the logic of hegemony is paradoxical. The identity and universalism to which it tends require the perpetual reassertion of tension and difference. It is this paradox which enables hegemony to retain its dynamism and thus its authenticating power.⁴⁴

⁴³See <http://www.ltv.ru/prj/sudsami/vypusk/2813>.

⁴⁴According to the Laclauan model of hegemony the power capable of generating consensual values consists of “nodal points” or “chains of equivalence” which partially (and provisionally) fix dominant meanings within

CODA: REALITY TRUMPS REALITY TV?

That the hegemonic stakes are so high for Russia's broadcasters became only too apparent at the end of the year in which "Shkola" was shown, when racially motivated riots sparked by the murder of a Spartak football fan, Egor Sviridov, at the hands of a group of men from the North Caucasus began on Moscow's Manezhnaia Square, before spreading to other Russian cities. At the center of the concerns of those who instigated the violence was the purported collusion between Moscow's North Caucasian community and the corrupt law enforcement organs which initially, and suspiciously, released Sviridov's assailants without charge. Although the Manezhnaia riots eventually faded from the news agenda they had dominated for weeks, the "anti-corruption" campaign became a leitmotif of the protests that swept Russia in the wake of the controversial Duma elections of 2011, and then of Putin's tainted victory in the presidential election of 2012. It is significant that the anticorruption activist Aleksei Naval'nyi, *de facto* leader of the opposition movement, had also played a prominent role in the "Stop Feeding the Caucasus" campaign mounted by Russian nationalists, and had endorsed the same "Russia for the Russians" slogan chanted with such venom by the skinhead, Vadim, in "Shkola." As the Kremlin, too, established the battle to root out corruption and "antisocial behavior" among Russia's migrant and "diaspora" communities as a core element of its nation-building policy, a potentially dangerous new consensual ethnopopulism emerged in Russia's volatile media environment.⁴⁵

The process appeared to take a further turn away from Gai-Germanika's liberal tolerance in state television's reaction to the scandalous Pussy Riot "punk protest" against the church's collusion with Putin during the presidential election campaign. Here, a barrage of talk shows and conspiratorial documentary "exposés" were deployed in an attempt to establish the narrow parameters of a shared commitment to "traditional" values. They included the respectable Channel 1 discussion forum hosted by Maksim Shevchenko, "V kontekste"; an edition of Andrei Malakhov's less-than-reputable Channel 1 talk show "Pust' govoriat"; and two editions of Rossiia's controversial "Spetsial'nyi korrespondent," which were hosted

a complex system of differences and antagonisms. For Laclau, hegemonic power is inhabited by difference: "The two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them." This instability facilitates the emergence of "overdetermined" chains of equivalence. Hegemony thrives on such tension, for "a situation in which a system of differences had been ... welded together would imply the end of hegemonic politics." However much pressure they place on media outlets, ruling elites will, unless they establish themselves within such chains, never control hegemony. But the framework best captures the Russian situation in the negative, by pointing up the (near) *absence* of chains of equivalence and thus demonstrating the *failure* of the regime to benefit from hegemonic power (a failure reflected in Channel 1's paranoid fear of alternative opinion, Pavlovian obedience, and crude polemicizing). See Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985), 135–42.

⁴⁵The fact that even REN TV, the sole independent voice among Russia's national broadcasters, eventually adopted some of the lexicon, if not the ideological content, of the Kremlin's critique of migrant "behavior" in its interpretation of the significance of the Manezhnaia riots is testament to this shift in the consensual ground. For a detailed analysis of television coverage of the riots see Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, "Faultlines in Russia's Discourse of Nation: Television Coverage of the December 2010 Moscow Riots," *Slavic Review* 71 (Winter 2012): 873–99.

by the polemicist Arkadii Mamontov, and whose titles (“Provokatory 1” and “Provokatory 2”) revealed their conspiratorial content.⁴⁶ In “V kontekste,” the discussion of the Pussy Riot affair included an intervention from a representative of the Orthodox Church, Maksim Kozlov, which envisaged a very different common ground from that advocated by Gai-Germanika:

This action was a conscious provocation ... against the slowly maturing consensus in our society. Against the fact that, while we are maximally different, we can reach agreement with one another if we gather together the foundations of some shared concepts. ... We have two cultures. One is connected to the great Russian culture. ... And there is another one, which for a long time will have these “maidens” (*devits*) as its symbol. This is a clash of civilizations between traditional Russian culture and this alluvial, film-like layer (*s etim nanosnym plenochnym sloem*).⁴⁷

It was left to Mamontov and Malakhov to make the paranoid link between the alien degeneracy represented by Pussy Riot’s “unconventional forms of self-expression ... radical-looking tattoos, hairstyles, outfits and lifestyles,” and the dark forces of what Mamontov referred to as the “global government” manipulating that subculture from without.⁴⁸ The deeply unconventional Gai-Germanika’s plea for a consensual acceptance of radical difference in all its forms, contaminated as it is by nostalgia for an imagined version of Soviet brotherhood, represents the mirror image of this exclusionary version of unity. Indeed, the exclusionary approach and the earlier latitude shown by Channel 1 (and Putin) to Gai-Germanika highlight state television’s (and, indeed, an increasingly desperate ruling elite’s) fractured and contradictory response to its acute awareness that it has failed to speak to and for a growing segment of Russia’s younger generation: it “indulges” that segment through risky ventures such as “Shkola” while at the same time invoking the likes of Mamontov to demonize it as treacherous and degenerate.

One might surmise that, by the time the Pussy Riot scandal had run its course, the latter strategy had prevailed. Nonetheless, the very same period saw the habitually populist NTV broadcast a bold example of “reality TV” in a genre different from, but complementary to, that of “Shkola”: a spoof documentary mocking Mamontov’s shock-revelatory style and making the patently absurd claim that scientists have discovered a “fascist gene” accounting for Russia’s nationalist movement.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, at the peripheries of the Russian media sphere, the youth channel TNT continued to host the equally subversive comedy sketch show “Nasha Rossiia,” in which an Armenian-Russian duo poured weekly scorn on nationalist stereotyping of Russia’s migrant community. The stars both hailed from the cult

⁴⁶See Channel 1, “V kontekste,” March 15, 2012, http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects_edition/si=5851&d=15.03.2012; and Channel 1, “Pust' govoriat,” March 15, 2012, http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects_edition/si5685/fi14384; and for the Mamontov videos see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRpYBbhūyo>; and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czYbR-9b29w>. (all last accessed February 15, 2013)

⁴⁷Channel 1, “V kontekste,” March 15, 2012, http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects_edition/si=5851&d=15.03.2012 (last accessed February 15, 2013).

⁴⁸See Elena Chebankova, “Contemporary Russian Multiculturalism,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28:3 (2012): 339.

⁴⁹The program was called “Total Eclipse” (“Polnoe zatmenie”) and was the brainchild of controversial journalist Andrei Loshak. See http://www.ntv.ru/peredacha/Rossiya_Polnoe_zatmenie/m22560/o109456/ (last accessed February 15, 2013).

satirical show “KVN,” whose Soviet heritage, subcultural ambiances, and celebration of interethnic collaboration partook of the same universalist sensibilities as Gai-Germanika. The fact that, as these phenomena indicate, all is still to play for in Russia’s internal hegemonic struggle, is part of the legacy of the sixty-nine-part serial. The raging controversy around “Shkola” perhaps, after all, helped mark the painful birth pangs of a genuinely pluralistic Russian public sphere, the current interruption to whose development must only be temporary.