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AESTHETICS VERSUS POLITICS:
NIGHT WATCH AS THE COLD WAR ECHO

This paper is devoted not so much to the popular literary tetralogy by Sergei Luk'ianenko, *Night Watch* (*Ночной дозор*), *Day Watch* (*Дневной дозор*), *Twilight Watch* (*Сумеречный дозор*), and *Last Watch* (*Последний дозор*) (2002-2006), editions of which have exceeded a million sales. Instead, this paper will focus mainly on its cinematic adaptations, *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, directed by Timur Bekmambetov and released in 2004 and 2006. The box office take of these films was dozens of times their budget of 4.2 million US dollars, which, while incomparable to American movie industry expenditures, is quite substantial for Russia. The movies were shown in Europe and the United States, and the third movie, *Twilight Watch*, will be shot in the United States in cooperation with the production company Fox Searchlight. These books and movies have become genuinely popular in contemporary Russia, which is no longer accustomed to huge literary editions and the cinematic fame of the Soviet Mosfilm studio. These books and movies have earned entrance to popular culture by the characteristics of their contents: while following the structure of a "formula narrative" (Cavelty), it is also an aggregation of fantasy, horror, adventure, catastrophe and many others.

The success of these movies can be explained mainly by certain effective techniques of cinema marketing, new to the Russian film industry, such as an extensive PR campaign and aggressive advertising (the film was produced by Channel One, the central state channel of the Russian television). But neither of these things, while effective, would bring fame to the films if they did not contain the qualities necessary for popular success.

This paper is intended to explicate semantic, syntactic (structural) and pragmatic (relations with a reader or viewer) aspects of both the films and the books. Both tetralogies reflect the contemporary politics of Russian popular culture in general, as the films, according to some of the critics, claim to set a framework for new national self-identification. Anton Kostylev writes that "today it serves best for the national

idea, which only means we need to understand who we actually are.” (Kostylev) However, this self-identification only becomes possible in the presence of the significant ‘Other.’ Traditionally for Russia, this Other is the West in general, and, in specific, the United States.

Critics and viewers explain the success of the films mainly by their conformity to expected Hollywood film production canons. Indeed, the authors of the film succeeded in ‘fitting’ into the popular genre by utilizing dynamic action and special effects, of which, according to some specialists’ calculations, there are 833 in *Day Watch* alone. Russian and foreign critics have competed in looking for references to Hollywood production, in both direct and parody form. *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, *Indiana Jones*, *Little Buddha*, the mystical epic *Omen* and some others are often named in this respect. In contrast, however, American critics, consider these movies to follow typical Russian film making tradition:

A swiftly moving plunge into a world populated by vampires, seers, shape-shifters and spellbinders, *Night Watch* is a rhapsodic celebration of cinema itself, as Bekmambetov reaches back to the gestural filmmaking of countrymen such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Sergei Eisenstein as well as contemporaries such as Quentin Tarantino, David Fincher and the Wachowski brothers. (Hornaday)

Furthermore, in response to a question about the cultural background of his work, the director of the film, Timur Bekmambetov, sounds patriotic: “The pioneer was Aleksandrov with his wonderful comedies *Volga-Volga* and *Circus*.” (Bekmambetov) It is interesting to note that this response appeared in an interview conducted in the United States, where Bekmambetov is working on a contract with Universal Pictures and Focus Features shooting films based on American comic books.

As shown in this quote, the film director shares mixed feelings of attraction and aversion to American culture and the taste of the popular audience. Indeed, the aesthetic reference points of the films tend to contradict their system of values and ideological dispositions. Created according to Hollywood standards, the films have latent, yet distinct anti-West and anti-American orientation. The objective of this paper is to explain the reasons of this intriguing inner conflict in Bekmambetov’s films.

The binary structure of the world, made up by Luk’ianenko, is overtly oppositional. However, according to Lotman’s observations Russian culture naturally tends to duality (Lotman and Uspenskii). The texts have a mythological basis — the confrontation of Light and Darkness — which is characteristic of many mythologies and religions. The beginning of this dualistic confrontation is difficult to trace in historic time, thereby it is established as a mythological conflict. However, in the *Watches*, this mythological conflict occurs on the battlefield between the two forces of the Moscow streets of 2004, not in the imaginary worlds so usual for fantasy and mythology.

The Others (as they call themselves) are light and dark magicians. They live among ordinary people and can take the shape of a human being. The forces of

Light and Darkness coexist due to the Agreement, which regulates their relations and keeps balance between the two forces in the world. The Watch is a special organization to supervise compliance with the Agreement. The Light Watch keeps an eye on the Dark — werewolves and vampires — by night, and the Dark watch the Light during the day. The Agreement implies compromises; for example, vampires could be granted a license by the Light, giving them the right to kill a man to satisfy their need for blood. Not surprisingly, these compromises within the duality of the Light and Dark cause uneasy ethical collisions. The plot, based on the struggle between two worlds, unfolds as the representative of one of the worlds crosses the boundary of the semantic field. Let us begin by examining the confrontation of these two more or less abstract forces and see how this opposition is codified.

This confrontation is first enacted in the physiognomy and the locale of the characters of the first film, *Night Watch*. In their human shape they are visually contrasted. Geser, played by Vladimir Men'shov, the chief of the Light forces, has a typical Russian face, while Zavulon, played by Viktor Verzhbitskii, the Dark leader, has a West European one. The Light are dressed in shapeless canvas overalls, which are well familiar to most Russians as work wear for the community services, and in the real world the Light work in the organization *Gorsvet*, the Municipal Electricity Service. In contrast, the Dark are dressed in expensive gaudy clothes with Western logos, in tones of mostly blood-red and bright green. Clothes here obviously mark the social status of the wearer: the ones whose dress does not comply with the unspoken clothing regulations of their community of Light or Dark drop out of the system. For example, two non-compliant Dark father and son vampires are dressed in emphatically exaggerated Soviet clothing stereotypes. The son, Kostya, who wants to become an ordinary human, and who despite the natural narcissism and ego of the Dark, is able to love, appears at a Dark celebration in an awkward rabbit fur cap with ear-flaps (the famous Russian flap hat *ushanka*). His father also appears at the celebration — in underpants. Finally, the Light live in flats, typical of the Soviet 1950s, while the Dark reside in a Western-style hotel.

The opposition can be traced on other levels as well. The Light drive the Soviet emergency truck ZIL, and their chief, “a former USSR deputy minister” dressed in a sheepskin coat *dublyonka*, drives a black Volga. The Dark drive a Mazda sports car, whose image is now so associated with the Dark that it is advertised on Russian Channel One by a man with vampire fangs. In the book it is mentioned that the Light also own and run dairy factories, which bring little profit but promote social good. These stereotypes are embodied by the actors on purpose; Verzhbitsii, who plays the Dark leader, Zavulon, said: “I didn’t want to make Zavulon a Medieval character ... if Geser was some communist party secretary, then Zavulon ... was a dissident or a cosmopolite, or ... in 10 years would be a hippie.” (Verzhbitskii) Thus, we see the emerging opposition — somewhat outdated for the year 2004

— of the Soviet style, embodied in an ordinary Soviet man, and the Western way of life, the old and new Russians.

The contrast is also musically codified. When the Light appear on the screen the audience hears Soviet songs such as “Moscow Windows” («Московские окна») performed by Mikhail Utesov, and “Driver’s Song” («Песнь шофера»), in addition to traditional Russian romances. In contrast, the Dark are connected with Western entertainment culture and show business. One of the most prominent Dark female characters, Alissa, played by Zhanna Friske, sings in the pop group, *The Sparkles* (*Блестящие*), which actually exists in modern-day life. The role of a sinister vampire who seriously injures the protagonist is performed by Il’ia Lagutenko, the leader of the popular rock band *Mumii Troll’* (*Мумий Тролль*). Participation of these well-known celebrities nearly wipes out the boundary between film and reality. At the ‘Witches’ Sabbath’ of the Dark, the viewer also easily recognizes other representatives of the Russian artistic circle. Present are the homosexual singer Boris Moiseev, the historian of Russian rock music Artemii Troitskii, a painter with connections to high-ranking officials, Nikas Safronov, and the wife of the vice-mayor of Moscow, Anita Tsoi. All of these members of the Russian artistic elite often appear on Channel One, which produced the films. Artistic ‘Boheme’ is therefore provocatively and self-ironically opposed to the culture of ‘old Russians.’

‘Soviet’ style is also developed by the motif of books within the films; for example, the album of Moscow under the protagonist’s head while he is being operated on, and also especially the book *Tamerlain* (*Тамерлан*), published in the framework of the cult Soviet series *Life of Outstanding People* (*Жизнь замечательных людей*), which contains clues to many mysteries and which the characters often read out loud. The Dark don’t read books, of course. Rather, many advertising gimmicks are used to portray the Dark; Bekmambetov began his career as a director of such television commercials. In fact, the part of the film about Tamerlain’s military campaign is a direct reference to the advertising videos Bekmambetov shot for the Imperial bank.

The Light thus get support from a very strong benefactor, the Russian literary tradition. Indeed, the film plays home to a Dostoevsky-like collision. The protagonist, Anton, has ‘crossed the line’ a lá Raskolnikov. He has sold his soul to the forces of evil: out of desperation and jealousy he agrees for the magically induced miscarriage of his wife’s fetus. This action threatens the universal balance and ultimately leads to a world catastrophe. Unlike the action of the book, the films show this character as the protagonist’s son, thus giving the plot a new ethical tension. In consequence of Anton’s actions in agreeing to the miscarriage, Anton’s son Egor chooses not to believe in the Light and instead goes to the Dark.

We have to admit that ethical dimension of the film is quite superficial. But the director of the movie calls ethical dilemmas programmatic:

The difference of the *Watches* from, for example *X-men*, is that the protagonist of an American movie will never suffer from remorse, but our hero made a mistake, which made the world crack into two halves, and the hero finds himself in the middle of battle between the two world forces. Our film is about conscience of guilt, self-sacrifice, a moral dilemma. These are the most important topics of the classic Russian literature and culture. Americans are not concerned about these things at all. They have different important questions. How to win? How to succeed? And for us it is important how to redeem one's fault and who is guilty. (Bekmambetov)

According to the director and the producers these 'eternal questions' make this film belong to elite art, rather than popular culture: "Eventually, this is an art house film. ... *Watch* reflects the inner word of a [contemporary individual] — torn into pieces, fragmented and dislocated. An explosive mixture of the 19th century Russian literature and American comic strips ... this is my self-expression, but not everybody manages to understand it." (Bekmambetov)

Thus, we can make a conclusion about the components of the main opposition: the Light and the Dark, 'the Soviet' and 'the Post-Soviet.' The latter is oriented to Western values. Indeed, as John Jameson noted, science-fiction always reflects contemporary political unconsciousness. Luk'ianenko, in consequence, admitted that he was writing his book with "the opposition of intelligence services of the two great powers" in mind. (Bekmambetov) The opposition in the case of the movie is somewhat asymmetric: not the Russian, but the Soviet is opposed to the American. The director feels that this opposition fits the current situation very well, in that the popular mass audience is attracted by Russian-Soviet doctrine, especially following the military campaign in Chechnya and the war in Yugoslavia. In addition, this opposition also ties into the current increase of isolationism and nationalism. In fact, results of opinion polls, conducted by the authoritative Levada-center, show that 23% of Russians see the United States as an enemy, while only 11% see the United States as a friend. (Dubin, 301-308) This view of Soviet history eliminates the formerly prominent communist and ideological connotations; instead, the common people feel reconciliation with the Soviet experience. Now it has become 'our glorious past,' and the gap between the Imperial Russia and the USSR is almost 'forgotten.' In the mid-1990s the idea of the symbolic nation replaced the negative identity of the *perestroika* years and became the basis for symbolic identification. This re-identification is not only a state of public opinion, but is also shared by some representatives of the intellectual community. The many volume monograph *Soviet Civilization* by A. A. Kara-Murza could serve as a good example of these tendencies. (Kara-Murza) According to Boris Dubin, a sociologist of literature, the strategy to transfer one's cultural mission to the past in search of new symbolic order is caused by belated, hence accelerated modernization of contemporary Russia. (Dubin, 316)

In art these attitudes lead to cultivation of the unofficial Soviet heartfulness, rather than the Soviet mythology of the Grand Style, or the so-called, "Culture-2."

(Papernyi) This concerns not popular culture only. In this way, Soviet nostalgia could be seen in the 1988 novel by Eduard Limonov, *We Had a Great Epoch* (*У нас была Великая Эпоха*), in the poems of the 1990s by Timur Kibirov (in the 1994 collection *Sentiments* (*Сантименты*), for example), or even in the 2000 novel *Live in Moscow* (*Живите в Москве*) by the ironic Dmitrii Prigov. This tendency towards unofficial Soviet identification turned into a fashion, as radical rockers named their band after the Soviet city of Leningrad, and a popular singer Oleg Gazmanov sings “I was born in the Soviet Union; I was made in the USSR.” Patriotic, pro-Russian and anti-American attitudes can also be felt in the 1997 and 2000 movies by Aleksei Balabanov, *Brother* (*Брат*) and *Brother 2* (*Брат 2*).

Another opposition to the West can be seen as Russia today turns to the East. This is evident both in the movie and in the book. Starting in the 19th century, the Caucasus played the role of the East, the exotic Other of Russia. It seems that now, in the 21st century, the role of the East has been assumed by Central Asia. There are numerous central Asian motifs in the movie: the walls of Samarkand, *caftans*, *hookahs*, and various other typical examples of the region. But these motifs probably have a deeper meaning for the Uzbek director Timur Bekmambetov, and for Sergei Luk’ianenko, who has spent many years in Kazakhstan. Samarkand is the place where both Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism appeared in 7-6 centuries B.C. Both religions contain background and motifs that could be the sources of the duality of the Dark and the Light within the books and films. The films show Afrosiab, an architectural monument connected with Zoroastrianism. It is important that the Islamic factor is not being actualized in popular culture, while there are 88 % of Muslims in Uzbekistan, but instead a more neutral and universal Zoroastrianism is chosen. Indeed, the name of mysterious Zoar, the owner of the magic ‘chalk of fate’ in the books and films, is an allusion to the prophet Zoroaster himself.

Geser, the chief of the Light in the books and the films, whose name sounds appropriately exotic to the Russian ear, was born in Central Asia. In addition, Geser is the name of an epic hero of the Mongolian and Buryat Geseriada epos, which is still popular today in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. But the Dark Zavulon, the enemy of the Light Geser, has nothing to do with Turkic mythology. Rather, Zavulon is the name of Abraham’s descendant, the younger son of Lia. Taking this etymology into consideration, the opposition of values and ideology, given in the book and emphasized in the movie, reveals additional message in terms of history and cultural geography. The East, Asia, is seen as the source of power and light, and the Dark European-visaged Zavulon is a hint at a Semitic conspiracy.

Thus, the above described binary oppositions distinctly reveal the hidden ideological and cultural conflict of the popular text.

Let us now investigate this conflict between the Light and Dark on the level of spatial semiotics. The action takes place in Moscow, but it is a Soviet Moscow, where the Headquarters of the Light Others is close to VDNH, the site of the fa-

mous 1958 Exhibition of the Achievements of Soviet Industry and Farming. In its essence, VDNH represents the USSR: each of its pavilions formerly represented one of the Soviet Republics, and today the grand Fountain of Peoples' Friendship is still present in the center of the pavilions. In the film one can clearly see the 1937 monument by Vera Mukhina, entitled *Worker and Woman-Collective Farmer* (*Рабочий и колхозница*). The monument is a well-known emblem of the Mosfilm studio. In addition, the adventures of the characters unfold at the 'old' Moscow subway stations, *Smolenskaia* and *Novoslobodskaia*, or in the courtyards of the Stalin-times buildings. It is not a tourist Moscow; there is no Arbat, no Kremlin. Nor is it a contemporary Moscow, as there are no new districts. There are some other remarkable signs of the time and place — the movie theatre *Udarnik* (meaning "a shock worker" in the Soviet times), Ostankinskaia Tower (which falls down spectacularly in *Day Watch*), and a joy-wheel, rolling around the Moscow streets, an indispensable component of any Soviet park of Culture and Leisure.

The major action stage of *Day Watch*, the place of the decisive battle between the Light and the Dark, is the Soviet hotel, Cosmos, a very well chosen setting. On the one hand, this place in Moscow is traditional and very Soviet, and on the other hand, the name "Cosmos" supports the effect of universality of what is happening, the cosmological dimension of the world of the Others. The eventual destruction of the hotel adds to the feeling of the cosmic scale of the conflict between the Light and the Dark.

The film version of *Day Watch* ends differently than the original plot of the book. The authors of the film created a circular plot structure. Anton, the son of the protagonist, repents that he was ready to 'cross the line' to the Dark. He rewrites his destiny by using the Magic Chalk, and becomes a human, forgetting forever that once he was one of the Others. The ending of the film takes place in the famous Moscow boulevards: a young man, Anton Gorodetskii, careless and unaware of the world of the Others, runs towards Svetlana, who has become just a stranger in the street. He is happy "walking around Moscow" past the two retired people (Geser and Zavulon), who are sitting on the bench and talking peacefully. It inevitably reminds of the 1963 Georgii Daneliia film *Walking around Moscow* (*Я шагаю по Москве*) and the Soviet space which was about to be destroyed is ultimately revived through this parallel.

Thus, the recipe for success of a contemporary, cinematic text for the popular Russian audience could be the following. One should take the formulae, plots and genres of the world literature, forgotten during the years of the normative Social Realism. For Luk'ianenko's books and Bekmambetov's films, these also include occult and mystic literature. The critic Mikhail Zolotonosov names some predecessors of the *Watches* from the beginning of the 20th century, such as books by Kryzhanovskaia, Lavkraft, Pshibyshevskii, and Liutostanskii. It is a witty supposition, but we can hardly talk about any sort of cultural legacy in this respect, as the likeness here is mostly typological. It is unlikely that such a busy and successful writer as Luk'ianenko read such exotic and elusive texts. Rather than this unlikely

ingredient to the narratives, we should add cinematic language, which is familiar to young viewers from music videos and commercials, pop-music and memories of Russian Literature lessons at school. We should season this all with Hollywood-like special effects and references, and Central Asian spices. The most important thing is not to forget about the nostalgic Soviet patriotic flavor, as it has become an essential component of different genres of popular culture: national-patriotic novels, detective stories, and love stories.

Such a national cuisine is oriented to the scope of readers' expectations. During the post-Soviet years the non-religious consciousness, which had been a sort of religious substitute during the Soviet times, lost its habitual ideological value. This situation created a fertile field for all sorts of supernatural beliefs, which spread around Russia of the 1990s (Kashpirovskii and Grabovoi can be used as examples here). Russian people do not trust law and order, which indicated why the idea of the Watch is so dear to the popular consciousness. In addition, it craves for paternalism and an iron hand. Popular culture also tries to meet the need for national pride, which in its extremes leads to attacks in Moscow Synagogue or explosions at Cherkizovskii Market.

The national-patriotic ideology does not only reside in the field of popular culture. Examples of it can be easily found in the field of Political Studies and Philosophy (for example, on a web site, symptomatically called "The Dark Side of America"). Apart from the mentioned books by Kara-Murza, one can remember some philosophical and aesthetic recipes by A. Dugin or S. Kornev on transgressive fundamentalist post-modernism, the aim of which is to fight Western ideology using *pseudomorphosis*, the process of affirming national ideas by means of western artistic forms. (Kornev) The saga of the *Watches* is the example of such *pseudomorphosis*.

To tell the truth, many Russians have no wish to go back to the past of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. But we have to admit: contemporary popular culture, like official culture in the days of Cold War, still preserves hostility to otherness, as seen through Luk'ianenko's books and Bekmambetov's films. Russians are plainly on guard for their culture. In this situation popular culture turns into a mediator. The mythology it creates sublimates political contradictions into aesthetic images, and transfers conflicts into the virtual and visual game space.

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НОЧНОЙ ДОЗОР КАК ЭХО ХОЛОДНОЙ ВОЙНЫ

Резюме

В статье рассмотрены стереотипы современного российского национального самосознания (в оппозициях Я/Другой), проявившиеся в популярных книгах С. Лукьяненко и фильмах Т. Бекмамбетова. Структурно-семиотический анализ показал, что эти типичные образцы современной российской массовой культуры эстетически ориентированы на голливудский канон, но идеологически имеют отчетливую антизападную, антиамериканскую направленность, сохраняют «образ врага», сформированный еще в годы холодной войны. Советский образ жизни (прошедший в последние годы декоммунизацию и деидеологизацию) противопоставлен здесь постсоветскому, ориентированному на западные образцы.

Marina Abasheva

STRAŻ NOCNA JAKO ECHO ZIMNEJ WOJNY

Streszczenie

W artykule omówione zostały stereotypy współczesnej rosyjskiej narodowej samoświadomości (w opozycji ja–inny), manifestujące się w popularnych książkach S. Łukjanienki i filmach T. Biekmbambietowa. Strukturalno-semiotyczna analiza pokazała, że te typowe figury dzisiejszej rosyjskiej kultury masowej są estetycznie zorientowane na kanon hollywoodzki, ideologicznie zaś posiadają wyraźnie antyzachodnią, antyamerykańską orientację, przechowują „obraz wroga” ukształtowany jeszcze w epoce zimnej wojny. Sowiecki sposób życia (który w ostatnim okresie przeszedł dekomunizację i deideologizację) przeciwstawiany jest tu postsowieckiemu, zorientowanemu na wzorce zachodnie.