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GRANDMOTHERS AND UNCLES: THE ROLE AND STATUS OF OLD PEOPLE IN LIDIA BOBROVA'S *BABOUSYA* AND ANDREÏ MAKINE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

By comparing the award-winning Franco-Russian film *Babousya* (2003) by Lidia Bobrova (b. 1952) and several novels by Andreï Makine (b. 1957), a Russian-born French-language writer, this article demonstrates that both artists posit the impoverishment and disempowerment of old people as symptomatic of Russia's transformation into a capitalist society. While opposing the self-effacing and ever-suffering elderly to the newly-rich business class of post-perestroika Russia, Makine and Bobrova express their unabashed nostalgia for Communism or perhaps even for the pre-Petrine past. Opposed to the city, which is often synonymous with the West, the rural Arcadia they advocate is marked by communalism, solidarity, generosity, loyalty to tradition and respect for the elderly, whereby Makine and Bobrova perpetuate Slavophiles' belief in the virtue of the common folk and in Russia's inherent distinctiveness from, not to say superiority to, the West.

Keywords: Makine, Andreï; Bobrova, Lidia; old age; post-Soviet Russia; Russian cinema; French literature; post-Communism; post-perestroika; society of the spectacle, the; Marxism; consumer society

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ALTHOUGH AGE REMAINS a striking absence in twentieth-century literature, the fact that the protagonist of *Le testament français*, the 1995 winner of the Prix Goncourt and Prix Médicis, finds his adoptive grandmother both intellectually challenging and sexually attractive has so far passed largely unnoticed. In fact, Andreï Makine's works are populated with *babushkas* and *dyadyas*, as the Russians may call any elderly woman or man and not only their grandmother or uncle. Setting up a narrative pattern for many of the Franco-Russian writer's later works, his first novel, *La fille d'un héros de l'Union soviétique* (1990), features a World War II veteran whose mistreatment by the emerging consumerist society is presented as contingent on Russia's exposure to Western values and the accompanying move towards a market economy. Similarly, the eponymous grandmother from Lidia Bobrova's award-winning Franco-Russian feature film *Babousya* (2003) finds herself left out in the cold – literally and metaphorically – by her ungrateful, selfish, money-orientated relatives. The aim of this article is

therefore to demonstrate that for both Makine and Bobrova the marginalization of the elderly is symptomatic of Russia's transition from a traditional society to one dominated by values imported from the West and ruled by the so-called New Russians. To these arrogant, post-perestroika businessmen and gangsters, Bobrova and Makine oppose the humble, self-effacing and altruistic elderly, whose readiness for self-sacrifice is emblematized by their courageous participation in the Great Patriotic War.[1] However, like the West, which many Russians blame for never having shown its gratitude to its saviour from fascism, it is now the Russians themselves who, according to Makine and Bobrova, neglect their own glorious past. This is particularly so in big cities, which the two artists contrast with the countryside, shown to have preserved the characteristically Russian communal way of living and to be populated mostly by good people. Consequently, I shall argue that while reviving the perennial and ideologically-charged opposition of city and village, Makine and Bobrova share the view that the source of all evil is the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's concomitant opening to the West. Their work is thus underpinned with nostalgia for the past and in particular for Communism which, despite the atrocities committed in its name, was successful in both safeguarding Russia from Western influence and preserving its unique national spirit.

That old people's situation under capitalism is regrettable is implicit already in Jean Baudrillard's analysis of consumerism, which stresses our obsession with beauty, elegance and femininity/virility. In other words, a sexually attractive body has replaced both the means of production and the most desirable consumer goods, being simultaneously Western societies' currency and fetish.[2] Hence, since old age is associated with the loss of both sexual attractiveness and prowess, the elderly are unavoidably marginalized. In *La vieillesse*, published the same year as *La société de consommation*, Simone de Beauvoir explicitly links old people's exclusion to their economic inessentiality, inscribing it into the eternal conflict between the exploiting and the exploited classes:[3]

> L'économie est basée sur le profit [. . .], on ne s'intéresse au matériel humain que dans la mesure où il rapporte. (*LV*, 12)
>
> [The economy is based on profit [. . .], we are interested in human resources only insofar as they generate revenue.]

Without overtly proposing an alternative socio-economic model, Beauvoir mentions some rural communities, primitive tribes or Scandinavian countries where the elderly are considered valuable members of society, or at least are not reduced to destitution. It is only in the appendix that she claims, though rather timorously (admitting that her findings are based on official and therefore potentially inaccurate data), that the elderly are better off in the Eastern Bloc and especially in the USSR. This is because in a state-controlled economy 'la vieillesse s'intègre dans l'ensemble du plan et n'est pas contrariée par le jeu des intérêts particuliers' ['the elderly are integrated into the totality of the plan and

are not disadvantaged by individual interests at play'] (*LV*, 587). Beauvoir also praises the extended family model which, promoted by Communism, ensures that old people do not suffer solitude; she notices the advantages of the shortage of housing afflicting Soviet cities, and she lists legal mechanisms guaranteeing both the economic welfare of the aged and their integration into Party activities.

If Baudrillard's and Beauvoir's analyses of Western societies can be applied to Bobrova's and Makine's portrayals of capitalist Russia, the speculations of Beauvoir regarding the prosperity and happiness of the aged under Communism find reflection in the two artists' nostalgia for the pre-perestroika era. In *Babousya* Tosya's life in Soviet Russia is summarized in two scenes which show her looking after her daughter's five children during the prolonged absences of Vera and her husband Ivan. Set in bucolic scenery surrounding Tosya's spacious wooden house whose interior is decorated with handcrafted artefacts and filled with folk-singing, the two scenes are awash with bright morning light, once a Soviet metaphor promising a beautiful future.[4] As sun pours into the *izba*, Tosya is stoically making dumplings, reconciling the fighting twins and encouraging Lyouba, her eldest granddaughter, in her studies. Showing Vera and Ivan returning from work, their arms loaded with presents purchased thanks to their well-paid jobs, the second scene, however, already contains a warning against the encroaching materialism. It evidently links the collapse of the family to consumerism, for the woeful cry 'Babousya!' ['Granny!'] that Tolik utters as he falls over shows that children need love and attention more than expensive gifts. Finally, the ominous significance of the toy guns that the twins, both to perish in Afghanistan, receive from their parents, indicates that Bobrova blames materialism for all Russia's troubles, including its military conflicts.

Likewise in Makine's novels, grandmothers, be they biological or adoptive, find fulfilment and occupation in looking after their grandchildren: Olga in *Au temps du fleuve Amour* (1994), Charlotte in *Le testament français* (1995), Sacha in *Requiem pour l'Est* (2000) or Alexandra in *La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme* (2003). Moreover, in Makine's Soviet Russia, at least prior to the Brezhnev era, old people seem fully integrated into society, which is partly thanks to the state-encouraged respect for war veterans, and partly because of the crowded communal apartments.

It is in *La femme qui attendait* (2004) that we find a true old people's paradise.[5] Even the name of the far-flung hamlet, Mirnoïé, where most of the action takes place, has a rich and dual significance, deriving from 'mir', meaning both peace and a self-governing community of peasant households dating back to Imperial Russia. To the blasé young writer who arrives from Leningrad to research wedding and funeral rites, Mirnoïé appears to be the perfect application of Communism or rather of Slavophiles' ideal of communalism based on belief in people's inherent virtue and goodness. Since forests and lakes provide the villagers with whatever they need, money has little value in this community governed by '[b]onté, altruisme [et] partage' ['kindness, altruism [and] generosity']:

[A] Mirnoïé, on est peinard [. . .], pas de loyer à payer, la moitié des maisons sont inoccupées, on entre, on s'installe, c'est vraiment le communisme!' (*FQA*, 58)

[In Mirnoe you have a cushy life [. . .]; no rent to pay, half the houses are unoccupied. You walk in, make yourself at home. This is real Communism!]

The idyllic quality of the village is further enhanced by the fact that it is populated mainly by women, who in Makine's writings embody traditional Russian values such as humility, patience, resignation, serenity and devotion to tradition. Indeed, these daughters, sisters, and widows of soldiers who perished in World War II and especially in the defence of Leningrad maintain both their region's folk customs and the memory of Russia's struggle against fascism, their two preoccupations coming together in their songs:

[L]eurs lèvres avouaient ce qu'elles avaient réellement vécu: des hommes qui partaient et qui disparaissaient à jamais dans les fumées grasses de la guerre, des hommes couverts de blessures qui revenaient pour mourir sur le bord de ce lac. (*FQA*, 166)

[Their lips were confessing what they had really lived through: men who were leaving to disappear forever into the heavy smoke of the war; men who, covered in wounds, were returning to die by the lake.]

That the aged of Mirnoïé are well looked after is evident from the moment of the narrator's arrival, when he notices Véra, a forty-six-year-old spinster, escorting an elderly woman from the *banya* (a traditional Russian bathhouse). Later he himself will help Véra bury the same old woman and fetch another one from the neighbouring village, of which, through progressive depopulation, she has become the only inhabitant. To these *babushkas* Véra is both a surrogate daughter and a maternal figure, as implied by the resemblance between the cart in which she transports Katerina and a pram, or between Anna's feather-light corpse and a swaddled infant. Thus, motivated by loyalty to tradition and to the memory of war victims, Véra has forsaken both her personal happiness and her academic career in Leningrad, a city of which, as I will demonstrate later, Makine has a negative view, associating it with restlessness, individualism, dissent and slavish aping of the West.

It is also in the country that Bobrova's elderly heroine finds, however temporarily, a haven. After the initial setback created by Ivan's hospitalization that serves Tosya's loathsome son-in-law as a pretext for packing the old woman off to her sister's, the grandmother rediscovers the joys of communal life in a rural setting. Like Tosya's own hamlet, Anna's village seems suspended in a spatio-temporal vacuum, bearing no traces of collectivization, nor indeed of the social upheaval triggered by perestroika. It is summer again and viewers are treated to the spectacle of a happy communal life set against splendid vistas of natural landscapes filled with a woodpecker's drumming and folk-singing. The only blemish on this romanticized picture of rural Russia is the heavy drinking of Anna's son, Vitya, just as Mirnoïé has a man who hangs himself, too ashamed

of his alcohol habit. Even so, Vitya's vodka-encouraged musings about God and Satan elevate him from a common drunk to an intertextual echo of Dostoyevsky's morally-torn heroes, while his violent behaviour is played down by Anna's ability to handle her otherwise obliging son in a pragmatic manner. Like Vitya's drinking, reminiscent in particular of Communist times, Kolya's passion for folk music testifies to the village's resilience to change. His work with the boys' choir can be appreciated during a festival whose attractions include a handicraft exhibition, a concert on traditional instruments, a performance of the sailor's dance *yablotchko*, and a fashion show which, though seemingly a sign of modernity, presents clothes with a distinctive folkloric inspiration.

By creating the character of Kolya, Bobrova, like Makine, insists on linking commitment to tradition and sensitivity to old people's plight. For, defending Tosya's dignity, Kolya challenges Lyouba's rogue of a husband and then, by referring to the punch that he receives as his own 'battle of Stalingrad', simultaneously pays tribute to his father's participation in the war and identifies the New Russians as his country's new enemy. Yet, as evidenced by Liza, Anna's daughter who has married a broker and is a successful investigative journalist in Moscow in the style of Anna Politkovskaya, one does not have to stay in the country to respect the elderly or to preserve one's nationalist spirit. While Liza's attachment to her peasant roots is symbolized by her long hair which she wears, Yulya Timoshenko-like, in a wrap-around braid and which, when spread in Anna's lap, is suggestive of an umbilical cord linking her to her origins, her compassion towards Tosya is prefigured by her solidarity with the Chechens who, like the elderly, bear the stamp of alterity.

It is therefore Liza and Kolya, both working for the community, be it national or local, who after Anna's accident feel morally obliged to re-house Tosya. The unfavourable change in the heroine's fate is emphasized by a sudden change of season where lush greenery gives way to a thick covering of snow. In this bitterly cold weather, Liza takes Tosya on her final journey, calling on all their relatives and each time finding her plea refused. The action now moves to the city and speeds up by comparison with the slow-paced village episodes. For this is obviously a very different Russia, one of four-wheel-drive cars and apartments boasting saunas. This affluence puzzles Tosya who thinks that a 'broker' is a motor racer, has never heard of the New Russians, and asks whether people like herself own the luxurious new villas. Her naïve question is answered with her two granddaughters' homes, both starkly at odds with the sober modesty of Liza's clothes, Kolya's old Lada or the bundle holding Tosya's belongings. As we learn from the increasingly violent exchanges between Liza and Tosya's relatives, whose insensitivity is in proportion to their wealth, Tosya divided the money from the sale of her house between her three grandchildren while Tolik lives on his grandmother's meagre pension. Before that, having been orphaned, Tosya raised her sister Anna, then started working at sixteen, and during the war dug trenches around Stalingrad, for which she received a medal, the only

possession she values. Such dedication is incomprehensible to Vitya who mocks Tosya's ridiculously low pension, a reaction symptomatic of the young generation's disregard for their parents' and grandparents' selflessness, perseverance and *priterpelost*, as the Russians call a capacity to endure combined with patience. In Tosya's case her attitude is shown to be both culturally constructed and proceeding from her Christian outlook: it is by evoking the Lord's suffering that the heroine encourages Anna to bear the cross of Vitya's drinking. The grandmother's boundless generosity manifests itself again when she offers her last coin to an old man, reduced to begging despite having worked for sixty-seven years. Following this logic, it is unsurprising that Tosya is finally welcomed by Tolik, a destitute 'refugee' from Chechnya who, since the bombing of his Grozhny flat, has been living hand-to-mouth in a rented house with a neurasthenic wife and a shell-shocked daughter. However, to convey the message that capitalist societies have no place for the war generation, Bobrova's film must end on a pessimistic note; having performed a Christ-like miracle by restoring her great-granddaughter's speech and thus metaphorically healing the trauma caused by the Chechen war, Tosya leaves Tolik's house and dies of exposure. Crucially, the paradise that she reaches is her original wooden house bathed in sunshine and inhabited by Tosya's late grandchildren and daughter.

Like Bobrova's melodramatic representation of post-Communist Russia, whose underlying assumption is that the countryside is superior to the city and that loyalty to cultural tradition is indissolubly linked with respect for the aged, *La femme qui attendait* contrasts the harmonious life of the Mirnoïé elderly with the anonymous and miserable existence of the aged in Leningrad. Makine's and Bobrova's works thus perpetuate the dualism of city and country that mark both village prose and the cinema of the thaw, which, whilst celebrating nature and the villagers' rustic mores, essential honesty, goodness and solid values based on tradition and history, condemn the arrogance, selfishness, spiritual bankruptcy and materialism of urban types.[6] In Makine's novel, Leningrad's young and rebellious artists are indeed more preoccupied with their freedom, be it sexual, political or of artistic expression, than with the predicament of the city's former defenders. Travelling on the metro, the narrator pities

> des femmes âgées qui allaient gratter avec des brosses métalliques la crasse des fabriques enfumées, des hommes qui allaient remplir des wagonnets avec des rebuts rouillés ou se traîner, par moins trente, autour des clôtures en béton des usines, un vieux fusil à l'épaule. (*FQA*, 41)
>
> [old women who were going to smoky factories to scrape the grime with wire brushes, men who were going to load carts with rusty scrap metal or drag themselves along the concrete walls of industrial plants in minus thirty degrees, an old rifle hanging from their shoulder.]

He then focuses on a man who has lost his fingers during World War II, blown off by his own submachine gun. The amputee therefore uses his thumbs to hold

Pravda, the party's official organ and the paper used by Stalin to whip up national feeling after the German invasion of the USSR, a detail potentially confirming the man's meek acceptance of Communism and his correlated adhesion to the myth of the Great Patriotic War.

The fact that *La femme qui attendait* is set in the mid-1970s does not mean, however, that its criticism of old people's situation is limited to those times. Rather, Makine castigates capitalist Russia whose origins he locates precisely in the Brezhnev era. The author's choice of Leningrad is in itself telling, since his works thus maintain the view of St Petersburg as both Russia's 'window to the West' and a hostile and treacherous place, found in the works of Gogol, Dostoyevsky and some Slavophile writers. Like Gogol who saw St Petersburg as 'quelque chose d'une colonie européano-américaine' ['something of a Europeano-American colony'] totally deprived of national character,[7] Makine calls Leningrad 'la copie de l'Occident' ['the copy of the West'] (*FQA*, 33) and depicts it as a city where artists' clandestine meetings degenerate into drunken, sex-crazed parties. The allusion to May 68, the presence of an American journalist brandishing a scented blue condom and, finally, the drug abuse and the casual sex, including homosexual encounters, taking place during literature readings are meant to foretell the inevitable onslaught of capitalism.

That Makine sees the 1970s as the moment when Russia's traditional values were first compromised becomes evident from his debut novel, written in response to the Soviet Union's disintegration. *La fille d'un héros de l'Union soviétique* rather crudely metaphorizes Russia's getting into bed with the West as the moral downfall of the eponymous heroine who, by sleeping with foreign businessmen, makes a mockery of her father's wartime heroics and, consequently, drives him to an early grave. While the post-war years are glorious for Ivan who as the Hero of the Soviet Union enjoys some privileges, gives talks to schoolchildren and even appears on television, the times of Brezhnev and Gorbatchev witness his decline. Things start to deteriorate when Ivan's wife dies after a piece of shrapnel, stuck in her chest since the war, pierces her heart. The fact that Tanya collapses when jostled in a queue for butter stresses the clash between the values of the war generation and those of the nascent materialist society. Subsequently, Ivan starts drinking, his habit being only exacerbated by his understanding of the true nature of his daughter's job. Oblivious to the role of the KGB in Olia's demise, he blames it solely on the West's corrupting influence to which his daughter became vulnerable by moving to Moscow where she works as a translator, dates a diplomat and shops at Beriozhka.[8] Significantly, Ivan learns about the official interpreters' intimate relations with their clients from another war veteran who, having lost his leg in combat and with it his virility, drinks his solitude away in a squalid *kommunalka* (a shared or communal flat). Unable to survive on his pension, Semionov resells theatre tickets bought thanks to his veteran status, and it is when trying to make a deal that he is assaulted by youths:

'Toi, écoute, Héros de Borodino. Je vais te les casser, tes béquilles. Tu vas rentrer sur le ventre.'[9]

['Now listen, you Hero of Borodino. I'm going to smash your crutches for you and you'll crawl back home on your belly.']

This incident anticipates Ivan's own humiliation which he experiences when watching Olia enter a hotel with a German who, like himself but on the enemy side, fought in the battle of Moscow. To vent his anger Ivan storms into a Beriozhka where he vandalizes the goods that, like his daughter's body, can be bought with hard currency, and insults the staff:

'Allez, va, ma fille. Va les servir [. . .]. Nous, il nous reste juste à les servir, les uns au lit, les autres au comptoir . . .' (*FHUS*, 170)

['Go on, my dear. Go and serve them [. . .]. That's all we're good for. Serving them. Some in bed, others behind the counter . . .']

Then, speaking to the foreign shoppers, Ivan pulls out the trump card of his veteran status:

'Moi, j'ai versé pour vous des tonnes de sang, salauds! Moi, je vous ai sauvés de la peste brune [. . .]!' (*FHUS* 171)

['I shed gallons of blood for you, you bastards. I saved you from the brown plague [. . .]!']

Finally, to punish the treacherous and malevolent West, he grabs Misha, the Olympic mascot of the 1980 Moscow Games which, crucially, gave rise to Olia's first 'assignment', and smashes it on the head of a Japanese tourist. Ivan's behaviour shows that he has internalized the official nation-consolidating discourse according to which Russia continues to be exploited and scorned by the West despite having saved Europe from fascism.[10]

Having played episodic roles in Makine's later fictions, the disabused veteran comes back centre-stage in *La vie d'un homme inconnu* (2008), the action of which, after a Parisian prelude, returns to St Petersburg forty years after the events described in *La femme qui attendait*. The narrator, a moderately successful Russian-born French-language writer, is made to feel 'terriblement vieux et désabusé' ['terribly old and disillusioned'] when his young lover leaves him for a man her own age.[11] The desertion of Léa, an admirer of contemporary literature and a budding author herself, is a sign of the narrator's incompatibility with French society, whose veneration of youth finds reflection in the alleged banality and formulaic nature of today's novels. Considering the latter '[d]es petites dissertations de psychologie' ['silly little dissertations in psychology'] (*VHI*, 57), Choutov believes in

le devoir de témoigner qui incombe à l'écrivain, la quête de la vérité [et] la psychologie des personnages qui bouscule les *a priori* de l'auteur lui-même. (*VHI*, 43)

[the duty to bear witness that weighs on a writer, the quest for truth [and] the characters' psychology which shakes the author's own preconceptions.]

The clash between the perceived triviality of French literature, engendered by its commercialization, and Choutov's implicit convictions that a writer must suffer and that an act of creation invariably means an act of prophecy, are laid bare during a talk show which makes the narrator feel old and ridiculous by comparison with the self-assured and witty young authors. Conversely, Choutov empathizes with a middle-aged female novelist whose performance is similarly lacklustre and whom Léa describes as 'vieille, moche, enfin pas sexy' ['old, ugly and, well, just not sexy'] (*VHI*, 47), a comment announcing the novel's overall message that in capitalist societies age is a major handicap.

To escape a culture that fetishizes youth and has commodified literature, Choutov returns to Russia in search not only of writers ready to suffer persecution or even die for their work, but also of a woman he once secretly loved and whom he imagines as a disgruntled and corpulent *babushka*. To Choutov's surprise, Yana is a slim, youthful, sophisticated, self-confident and professionally successful woman who also has a younger lover. Moreover, she bears an uncanny resemblance to Léa, which, as Choutov realizes, is due to her ubiquitous look:

elle est conforme à un certain type de femme européenne: sveltesse, blondeur lisse, visage soigneusement préservé des rides. (*VHI*, 71)

[she conforms to a certain type of European woman: slender, softly blond, the face carefully preserved from wrinkles.]

Yana's appearance is the first sign of Russia's loss of its cultural distinctiveness caused by its overzealous adherence to capitalism: 'ils ont recréé la quintessence occidentale que [Choutov] n'a pas vraiment connue en Occident' ['they have recreated the essence of the West that [Choutov] has not really known there'] (*VHI*, 79). Fast cars, mobile phones, aggressive advertising, pet jewellery, the omnipresence of English, and sumptuous apartments such as the one that Yana, a New Russian herself, is refurbishing by joining together several *kommunalkas*, are the visible symptoms of the country's socio-economic revolution. Even culture is subject to market forces; the transatlantic publishing house run by Yana's son prints whatever sells, that is trash novels and sensationalist, pseudo-historical books: '[Vlad] vend des livres comme il vendait des aspirateurs' ['[Vlad] sells books as he used to sell vacuum cleaners'] (*VHI*, 96). That the Russians have surpassed the West in the application of capitalism is corroborated by the references to Mstislav Rostropovich, Madonna and Andy Warhol, who already in the 1960s was criticizing the connection between cultural production and capitalism. And so while a plaster cast of the cellist's hand serves as

a key holder and that of the head of the champion of pop art as a coat hanger, the chest of the queen of pop music has been decorated with war medals, a sign that even Russian heroism can be dissolved into commodified artefacts.

Russia's exuberance in embracing consumerism supports Guy Debord's thesis that the degradation of *being* into *having* caused by the economy's domination of social life has been followed by the move from *having* to *appearing*, resulting in 'the society of the spectacle': 'Le spectacle est le capital à un tel degré d'accumulation qu'il devient image' ['The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images'].[12] In Makine's novel, the society's spectacularization manifests itself as the carnival celebrating the tercentenary of St Petersburg. In the visually cacophonous crowd, people dressed as Peter the Great – another reference to the repetitiveness of postmodernism and an allusion to the first attempts at Russia's westernization – rub shoulders with half-naked Brazilian dancers, all pressing around a blow-up model of the cruiser Aurora. Further along, look-alikes of Lenin, Stalin, Nicolas II, Brezhnev and Gorbatchev pose for a photograph captioned 'les vaincus de l'Histoire' ['the losers of History'] (*VHI*, 86). And like all carnivals that profane or overturn social hierarchy, this one culminates in the mayor's 'decapitation', where it is a Gucci tie, a New Russian's quintessential accessory, that is severed. This re-enactment of the Revolution is a perfect example of the consumption of history, since for Baudrillard

> la consommation culturelle peut être définie comme le temps et le lieu de la résurrection caricaturale, de l'évocation parodique de ce qui n'est déjà plus.[13]
>
> [cultural consumption may thus be defined as the time and place of the caricatural resurrection, of the ironic evocation of what no longer exists.]

Yet, read in the light of the carnival's prophetic role in Makine's earlier work,[14] the spectacle may also be his warning against another bloody social and political upheaval. Then, as tradition requires, the overthrown ruler is replaced by the court jester who, like the protagonist, whose name – coincidentally – derives from the Russian word for buffoon (*chout*), arrives late at the ceremony. Suddenly, sharing in the general unbridled excitement, Choutov himself feels empowered, joyous and, most significantly, rejuvenated.

This temporary sense of belonging is nevertheless illusory since, according to Debord, whilst pretending to unify, the spectacle, like capital, produces alienation and can therefore only reunite spectators in their separateness:

> De l'automobile à la télévision, tous les biens sélectionnés par le système spectaculaire sont aussi ses armes pour le renforcement constant des conditions d'isolement des 'foules solitaires'.
>
> [From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender 'lonely crowds'. (*SS*, 15)]

This is largely because the spectacle is the opposite of dialogue, being 'le discours interrompu que l'ordre présent tient sur lui-même, son monologue élogieux' ['the ruling order's non-stop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise' (*SS*, 13)]. Debord's observations are supported by Choutov's hampered communication with Yana and Vlad, always in a rush or on their mobile phones, or by his lonely evening in front of the television which, with kaleidoscopic infallibility, serves up the same items in a continuous loop.

Estranged from the New Russians, the narrator finds a soulmate in the eponymous Unknown Man, who is eighty and is generally thought to be mute, a detail manifestly symbolizing the new generation's lack of interest in Volsky's story of courage, sacrifice, resignation and suffering. For, through his sheer willingness to listen, Choutov restores speech to a man who, before marching on Berlin, sang for Leningrad's starving population and for the troops defending the besieged city. Moreover, typically for Makine's heroes, Volsky's dream of becoming an artist was shattered by the war and by Stalinism, which relegated him to menial jobs, separated him from his beloved and thwarted his voluntary work with disabled children. However, like socialist realist heroes who persevere against all odds, Volsky hardly regrets his operatic career, finding singing under shellfire or teaching music to orphans more rewarding than performing before the supercilious Leningrad bourgeoisie. And, just as he bears no grudge against Communism, he does not reproach the New Russians for evicting him from his *kommunalka*:

> Il ne rouspète même pas. Il lit. Ne réclame rien, ne se plaint pas, ne condamne pas cette vie nouvelle qui va fleurir sur ses ossements. (*VHI*, 115)
>
> [He does not even grumble. He reads. Does not ask for anything, does not complain, does not deplore this new life that will blossom on his remains.]

Choutov meets Volsky on the eve of his move to a nursing home which, as the protagonist observes with relief, has not been modernized:

> les misérables vestiges [de l'époque soviétique] permettent aux vieux d'avoir l'illusion de ne pas être totalement rejetés. (*VHI*, 291)
>
> [the miserable vestiges [of Soviet times] allow the elderly to have an illusion of not being totally rejected.]

In the meantime, vegetating in a tiny room in Yana's ostentatious, tasteless and labyrinthine flat, Volsky suffers loneliness and humiliations shown to be an abomination associated with Russia's socio-political transformation. The new generation's disrespect for war heroes is visible not only in Yana's and Vlad's contemptuous attitude towards Volsky, but also in the scene reminiscent of the aforementioned assault on Semionov and showing Choutov being attacked by

youths whom he catches urinating on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Consequently, while identifying with this human emblem of the Soviet era, Choutov, who is an orphan, finds a father-figure in the veteran. Moreover, he admires Volsky's truly Russian modesty, altruism, appreciation of high culture and acceptance of hardship which, like Tosya, he welcomes as God's way of allowing humanity to achieve purity and redemption (*VHI*, 246). Finally, the encounter with the old man helps Choutov get over his failed relationship with Léa which, compared with Volsky's tragic and eternal love for Mila, seems as inconsequential as today's literature. He therefore leaves Russia with a renewed sense of duty to save the Soviet Union from misrepresentation and oblivion:

> [Choutov] restera jusqu'à la fin dans un passé de plus en plus méprisé et de plus en plus inconnu d'ailleurs. Une époque qu'il sait indéfendable et où pourtant vivaient quelques êtres qu'il faudra coûte que coûte sauver de l'oubli. (*VHI*, 289)
>
> [[Choutov] will dwell until the end in a past that is increasingly reviled and, moreover, increasingly obscure. An era that he knows to be indefensible and yet which saw some men whose memory should be preserved at all cost.]

What transpires from the above analysis is that while inscribing itself into the orphaned narrators' quest for parental figures, which indeed constitutes the backbone of Makine's œuvre, the Franco-Russian author's interest in the elderly may be, as in Bobrova's case, a sign of the writer's concern with his own advancing age, both artists being in their fifties. Leaving the autobiographical approach aside, Makine's and Bobrova's representations of old people have an ideological function, serving to condemn the selfish individualism and rampant consumerism of today's Russia and to praise the equality and communalism officially encouraged by the Soviet state. Epitomizing pre-perestroika times, Makine's and Bobrova's protagonists are generous, patient, tolerant and mellow, enduring their marginalization under capitalism as stoically as they suffered the privations inflicted upon them by Communism. Yet, even if Soviet times become an obvious contrast for today's reality, Bobrova's film and Makine's novels are noticeably tinged with the 'narodnism' championed by Slavophiles and, after Stalin's death, taken up by village writers and filmmakers of the thaw. Consequently, the two artists' work is impregnated with nostalgia for the countryside which emerges as an ideal of solidarity, harmony and traditional values, including esteem for the elderly and especially for those to whom Russia owed its super-power status in the post-war era. But in the work of Bobrova and Makine who both posit – implicitly or explicitly – art's didactic role, the peasant village is not only a past Arcadia but also a future Utopia. Immune to Western-born ideologies, whether Communism or capitalism, it can offer a third way for Russia, one away from modernity, economic growth and military invasions, but ordered by organic morality, spirituality and respect for tradition.

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NOTES

[1] The term, coined following Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, is used to describe the period of World War II from 22 June 1941 to 9 May 1945. It was meant to motivate the population to defend their homeland and has patriotic and symbolic significance.

[2] J. Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 200.

[3] S. de Beauvoir, *La vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 227. Referred to subsequently in the text as *LV* followed by the page number. All translations from French and Russian apart from those from *La société du spectacle* are mine.

[4] See J. E. Knox-Voina, '"On the Road" in Russia', *The Russian Review*, 63:1 (2004), 136–43 (p. 142).

[5] A. Makine, *La femme qui attendait* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 128. Further references to *La femme qui attendait* will be given in the text as *FQA* followed by the page number.

[6] Village prose was a movement which began after Stalin's death and which included literary works focused on rural communities. Amongst village writers are Fyodor Abramov, Valentin Rasputin and Alexandr Yashin. They espoused an idealized picture of the Russian village, and in the 1970s and 1980s became associated with Russian nationalism. Like many village writers, Makine and Bobrova come from Siberia where many communities held on to their ways longer than elsewhere.

[7] See Georges Nivat's Introduction to N. Gogol's *Nouvelles de Pétersbourg* (Paris: Gallimard folio, 1979), pp. 7–38. Nivat observes that in Gogol's work 'Pétersbourg [est] le lieu de déportation de l'homme russe, le lieu de sa souffrance, l'espace de son aliénation. [...] La ville gruge, mutile, berne, châtre les homoncules qu'elle héberge. Elle prive de sens. Elle *déracine* au sens propre les bannis qui s'y agglomèrent tant bien que mal' ['Petersburg [is] the place of the Russian man's deportation, the place of his suffering, the space of his alienation. [...] The town dupes, mutilates, deceives, castrates the dwarfs whom it harbours, driving them insane. It *uproots* in the literal sense of the word the outcasts who gather there as best as they can'] (p. 9).

[8] A store where foreign and quality Russian goods could be purchased with dollars.

[9] A. Makine, *La fille d'un héros de l'Union soviétique* (Paris: Gallimard folio, 1995), p. 145. Further references will be given in the text as *FHUS* followed by the page number.

[10] See G. Gibian, 'Russian National Identity in Soviet Culture Today', in *The Search for Self-Definition in Russian Literature*, ed. by E. M. Thompson (Houston: Rice University Press, 1991), pp. 1–20.

[11] A. Makine, *La vie d'un homme inconnu* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 57. Further references will be given in the text as *VHI* followed by the page number.

[12] G. Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), consulted at <http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/debord_guy/societe_du_spectacle/spectacle.html> [last accessed 10 October 2010]; *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by K. Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2004), p. 17. Page numbers in the text (prefaced by *SS*) refer to this translation.

[13] Baudrillard, *La société de consommation*, p. 147.

[14] In *Le crime d'Olga Arbélina*, the fancy dress parties during which the existing social structure is figuratively overturned anticipate the October Revolution.