

AESTHETICS WITHOUT LAW: CINEMATIC BANDITS IN POST-SOVIET SPACE

Serguei Alex. Oushakine, Princeton University

...the bandits belong to remembered history, as distinct from the official history books. They are a part of the history which is not so much a record of events and those who shaped them, as of the symbols of the theoretically controllable but actually uncontrolled factors which determine the world of the poor...

—Eric Hobsbawm (145)

We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it.

—Emile Durkheim (1972, 124)

In the early 1920s, Isaac Babel published a string of short stories about the life of gangsters in pre-revolutionary Odessa. In his *Tales of Odessa*, gruesome pictures of extortion and murders were often presented with an unusual sensitivity to the stylistic dimensions of the criminal world. The interplay of social order and its criminal disruption that normally structures narratives about crime¹ was presented here as a series of stylistic clashes. *Tales of Odessa* turned the criminal organization into a criminal life-style, that is, into a system of aesthetic predispositions and choices of Odessa bandits. Against the backdrop of flamboyant criminal “aristocrats [...] tightly packed in raspberry vests, shoulders covered with russet jackets, the azure leather [of boots] about to burst on their chubby feet” (163), Babel’s anecdotes about robberies, killings and clan feuds seem irrelevant if not altogether redundant.²

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1. See Mandel; Oushakine 2003. For a discussion of current Russian popular literature on crime and detection see Goscilo; Levina; Nepomnyashchy; Olcott; Slavnikova; Trofimova.

2. This style of aesthetic clashes is by no means limited to semi-fictitious stories about Odessa’s famous subculture. In his study of social banditry, Eric Hobsbawm cites a police report from 1938 that lists the “equipment” of a prominent Brazilian bandit. To quote one part of a long list: “Hat: leather, of the blackwoods type, decorated with six stars of Solomon. Leather chinstrap, 46 cm long, decorated with 50 gold trinkets of miscellaneous origin, to wit: collar and sleeve studs, rectangles engraved with the words Memory, Friendship, Homesickness, etc. rings set with various precious stones; a wedding ring with the name Santinha engraved inside. Attached to the

It is tempting to read Babel's portrayal of the criminal world through the lens of a long-standing tradition of *Räuberromantik*, "bandit romanticism" (Hobsbawm 142; see also Kooistra). And Soviet mass culture has enough evidence for such an approach: from a collective version of Robin Hood, fighting in the 1920s for the power of the Soviets in *Elusive avengers* (*Neulovimye mstiteli*, 1966; dir. Ed. Keosayan) to the charming petty thieves in the post-Stalin comedies of Leonid Gaidai (see Prokhorov 126–33), to the figures of Odessa's quick and resolute underworld in songs of Alexander Rozenbaum (*Odesskii tsikl*, 1981). Conceived within (or as an opposition to) Soviet official culture, these attempts to utilize the power of transgression were mostly aimed at discovering places and discourses that could bring back a feeling of adventure. After all, as Hobsbawm suggests, it is a longing for "freedom, heroism, and the dream of justice" that has kept the bandit myth alive for many years (143).

While agreeing with the British historian, I want to pursue here a different direction. If the existence of law—right or wrong—is a necessary starting point for the bandit myth to produce its captivating effect, what are the functions of this myth in a situation where the principles of justice suddenly get blurred? If the mass appeal of the bandit to a large extent stems from his/her ability to use illegal means to restore the true nature/order of things, then how could this juxtaposition of the norm and deviation be played out in a situation where differentiation between the legal and the illegal has not yet been settled? To put it briefly, when the social polarization of the "civil world" and the "underworld" is still in progress, what could function as a narrative device able to convey this state of disarray with some navigating and structuring principles?

Following Babel's suggestion, I construe the aestheticization of banditry as an approach that reveals the ambiguous status of law in contemporary Russia. When a lack of criteria renders such usual questions as "What has been done?" and "Who is to blame?" unanswerable, it is only the question "*How* was it done?" that produces the necessary differentiating effect. I am not interested in reading the obsessive fascination with the stylistic re-packaging of the criminal world, stimulated by the market-driven efforts of Russia's cultural industry, as a sign of the overall criminalization of the post-Soviet society. Rather, I argue that the aesthetic clashes of the bandit style can be seen as a historically specific attempt to organize symbolically the state of outlawry: When the opposition of the legal vs. the illegal loses its normative meaning, it is the stylistic excess of the *criminal order of things* that is called upon to reflect the condition of social disorientation.

front of the hat, a strip of leather 4 by 22 cm with the following ornaments: 2 gold medallions inscribed 'The Lord Be Thy Guide'; 2 gold sovereigns; 1 old Brazilian gold piece with the effigy of the Emperor Pedro II; 2 others, even older, dates respectively 1776 and 1802. At the back of the hat, a strip of leather of equal size, also decorated as follows: 2 gold medallions, 1 small diamond cut in the classic fashion; 4 others of fancy cut" (Hobsbawm 92).

Commenting on Babel's early work, Victor Shklovsky suggested that it was precisely this persistent exposure of contradictions between the everyday order of things (*byt*) and criminal life-style that functioned as a form of emplotment in Babel's prose (203). By constantly juxtaposing the criminal organization of people and a highly stylized arrangement of things, Babel could produce a powerful narrative effect. Yet this narrative homogenization of pogroms and raspberry shoes came with a price. As Shklovsky somewhat caustically pointed out, "the essence of Babel's [narrative] device consists in using the same voice for talking about stars and about gonorrhea" (201). Stylistic sensitivity to the horizontality of co-existing forms and practices (crime-as-*byt*), in other words, is accomplished here by neutralizing "any kind of affective or ethical interest in the object of representation" (Bourdieu 1984, 44).

In current film studies of the gangster genre, a similar prominence of aesthetics has become an important object of scholars' attention. Focusing on Quentin Tarantino's films, many critics suggest that the new gangster movie of the 1990s replaced "ethics with exhibition and personality with spectacle" (Creeber 129).³ In this essay I will explore a similar shift in the aesthetic organization of criminal reality in the post-Soviet gangster genre by using the TV series *Brigada* (dir. A. Sidorov, Avatar Film Company, 2002) as my main example. Following a long-established tradition in anthropology, I will demonstrate that the configurations and connections used to arrange space, things and people in *Brigada*, these "aesthetic frills," as E. R. Leach, a British anthropologist, called them (12), are neither arbitrary nor value-free. On the contrary, they suggest a certain vision of emerging social space and the principles of its functioning. The post-Soviet criminality in *Brigada* is often presented through successive operations of the criminal's literal and metaphorical dis-localization. The moral or political critique of the social practices, which produced these criminal figures in the first place, is replaced here by a visual topology of spaces of emplacement (Foucault and Miskowiec 22), that is to say, by a hierarchy of locations which make criminals' acts socially possible and culturally meaningful. I will explore to what extent these mutated, confused and crisscrossed territories saturated with "informal" practices can be construed as a reflection of broader changes that make the very divide between the public sphere and the private sphere if not redundant then at least unhelpful for interpreting post-socialist developments.

The Brigands of Brigada

On Thursday, October 17, 2002, *Rossia*, a state-owned Russian TV channel, finished its weekly broadcasting of the new fifteen-episode series *Brigada* (*The Brigade*). Impressed by the high ratings and incredible popular-

3. For a discussion see also Simpson; Andrew. For a discussion of Tarantino's aesthetics in the Russian context see Vdovin.

ity of the film, the channel made an unusual move. On Saturday, October 19, 2002, *Rossia* started showing *Brigada* again, so that every weekend all those who had missed the premier could have a chance to familiarize themselves with the lives and travails of post-Soviet bandits. The unprecedented decision to re-broadcast a melodramatic saga about the 1990s, in which Aleksandr Belov and his three friends turned themselves into a *brigada*—a powerful mafia-like organization involved in drugs, weapons and real-estate operations—seemed even more striking given the general reputation of the channel as the main mouthpiece for the Russian government.

The mini-series quickly acquired popularity among viewers; Russia's professional TV critics proclaimed it the "best television film" of the 2002–2003 season.⁴ Valery Todorovsky, the series producer, labeled *Brigada* "an archive of the epoch" [*arkhiv epokhi*] (Slavutskii 2003), while Oleg Dobrodeev, the CEO of the channel *Rossia*, which funded the production of *Brigada*, maintained that it was "the only series [*serial*] that will survive our time" (*Politburo* Dec. 12, 2002, 73). At the same time, a flood of publications explained again and again that *Brigada* was the most expensive TV project in Russia, with a general budget of almost \$3 million. The fifteen episodes of the series were filmed in 350 locations and included 110 characters, 900 costumes and more than 100 cars (Generalov and Korotkov 4). The series was quickly produced in DVD format, and by the summer of 2003 the shelves of major bookstores displayed *Brigada* in its novelized form, too. Published under the name of Aleksandr Belov, the multi-volume book-set was marketed as a "Russian gangster saga" [*rusaskaia gangster-skaia saga*]⁵ (figs. 1–2).

Simultaneously, the film provoked a negative reaction among educators and politicians. Deputies of the Sverdlovsk regional parliament, outraged by totally corrupted policemen and noble bandits portrayed in *Brigada*, decided to create a special expert council that would prevent "ethically questionable materials" from being aired on local TV stations (Regions.ru). Drawing attention to the mass popularity of *Brigada*'s romanticized racketeers, a deputy Minister of Education, in turn, maintained that such a successful negative identification reflected the lack of "a decent object for emulation in contemporary literature and video-culture" (CRAS).

Surprised by the sudden and unexpectedly enthusiastic reception of

4. For discussion see Sidorov 2003.

5. Sixteen books have been published so far; four of them are basically a slight adaptation of the scenario (see Belov 2003, vols. 1–4). Additional books published later describe "flashbacks" that were not originally in the film and are presented as "a full version of the first gangster saga" (Belov, vols. 5–8). Since the final scene of the series left open the question of Bely's life or death, the publisher decided to bring Belov back. Starting with Volume 9, the book series describes Belov's "life after death," presenting his post-*brigada* adventures. When quoting from the books, I will indicate the volume and page in parentheses.



Figs. 1–2. A Russian gangster saga from a Russian gangster: the cover of Aleksandr Belov’s book *Brigada*. Vol. 1: *Fights With No Rules (Boi bez pravil)*; Vol. 2: *Fighting for a Trump Card (Bitva za mast’)*. Moscow: Olma-Press, 2003.

Brigada, Aleksei Sidorov, the director and a co-author of the screenplay, tried to point out the moral aspects of the film in one of his interviews:

Question: *How do you personally relate to your characters and their prototypes?*

Sidorov: Exactly the same way I relate to all the other citizens in our country. We are human beings, and they are human beings [*liudi*]. There are more monsters [*vyrodki*] among them than in other social groups, but they have neither horns nor hoofs. Maybe the film’s provocativeness has to do with the fact that we show normal people who suddenly start turning into non-humans [*neliudi*].

Question: *Could they go back?*

Sidorov: Back? No. They are lost souls. (*Vremia MN*, October 26, 2002)

There are two points in this quote that I want to emphasize. First, a difficulty with describing the bandits is overcome by relegating the criminal to the realm of the inhuman, asocial, and unexplainable. However, given the visual nature of the series, this process of dehumanization presents a certain difficulty. Representations of post-Soviet monsters—devoid of their “horns and hoofs”—must rely on signification that goes beyond the typical language of the grotesque and ugly. Hence my second point: the domestication of “non-humans” became possible through the aesthetics of incommensurability. By

demonstrating transgression, “non-human monsters” signal an acknowledgment of a lack of rules able to regulate (and normalize) a previously unknown situation (Haraway 180, 226). In what follows, I trace how this monstrosity of the criminals from *Brigada* is symbolically inscribed within the fabric of post-Soviet daily life.

The narrative of *Brigada* is structured as a story about four friends: Aleksandr Belov—or Bely [white], as he is usually called—Fil, Pchela [bee] and Kosmos (played by Sergei Bezrukov, Vladimir Vdovichenko, Pavel Maikov, and Dmitry Diuzhev respectively). All four were born in the late 1960s, grew up together and went to the same Moscow school. Their pre-1990s experience is only hinted at, though; their allegedly shared past serves as a necessary background that justifies the friendship rather than explains the friends’ present connectedness.

The prologue that opens the series takes us to 1997. In front of *Dolls*, a flashy Moscow bar, Bely, Kosmos and Fil are saying good-bye to Pchela, who is about to leave for the airport in a Mercedes with a small group of ostensibly non-Russian-looking men (*kavkaztsy*, i.e. men from the Caucasus). Finishing a previously started dispute, Pchela assures Bely that they are still “brothers,” regardless of the circumstances. Looking quickly at his watch, Pchela asks the driver to hurry up. Bely, Kosmos and Fil leave together in a different Mercedes, arguing about Pchela’s possible betrayal. In the car, Bely suddenly notices that the hands of his watch quickly move counter-clockwise. A close-up of Bely’s Swiss Rado is followed by a somewhat blurred image of Fil’s watch (Breguet?) and then by a close-up of Kosmos’s Breitling. Realizing that there is a magnetic bomb in the car, Bely gives orders to jump out. Abandoned, the Mercedes collides with huge panes of window glass on the top of a trailer that comes along in the next lane. The next several shots go back and forth between the figure of a severely wounded Fil in the snow and the black Mercedes exploding in the open space across from the Russian White House, the headquarters of the Russian government. Black clouds of smoke cover the screen and bring the viewers back to the beginning of the story, in the year of 1989.

The scene nicely epitomizes the general tendency of the series. From the very beginning, transgression and perfidy are symbolized through carefully arranged yet dysfunctional objects of material consumption: the brand-name watches that are not in synch with the time they are supposed to show (fig. 3). By performing the task of “formal integration into the field of public recognition” (Mayol 100–1), the objects of consumption that cannot be consumed point to an interesting gap between the symbol and its use. Designed to metonymically reproduce a necessary context, these failed signs demonstrate a collapse of expected trajectories of reading instead. Metonymy becomes a metaphor: a brand-name watch that shows time going backward. The main question, of course, is about the social condition that makes this semiotics of malfunctioning possible.



Fig. 3. Placing products in post-Soviet film: a brand-name watch that shows time going backward. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

Following the prologue, the story-line brings the viewer back to the beginning, where the main theme of the serial takes shape. Accompanied by the melody “Time, forward!”, used during the Soviet period as the opening jingle for the nine-o’clock official news program *Vremia* [Time], the “second” start of the series shows Bely’s last days in the army, somewhere in the Pamir Mountains, as the book specifies. Shots of Bely’s mother, watching a TV report about the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, clarifies the imaginary geography and explains the possible reasons for Bely’s location.

After his return home, Belov wants to meet Lena, his girlfriend, whom he has not seen for more than two years. His friends, however, inform him that the girlfriend has become a “whore.” Trying to prove otherwise, Belov finds the girlfriend at a local disco. Their short conversation is followed by a fight between Bely and a group of men headed by Mukha [fly], a local mobster and Lena’s current partner and patron. Used as a narrative shifter that bridges two different groups of men, the girlfriend-turned-whore never reappears in the series, yet it is precisely this female figure that sets Bely’s life going in the wrong direction.⁶

During the fight Bely seriously hurts Mukha and escapes imminent death thanks only to the timely arrival of Kosmos’s Lincoln. Reflecting on the events later, the narrator of the book would report Belov/Bely’s internal monologue: “He has no girlfriend anymore. But he has friends, real friends who are waiting for him now” (1: 69). What comes next is a sequence of seemingly random events that nonetheless result in the usual vector of the criminal genre:

6. I discuss the symbolic importance of the post-Soviet femme fatale in Oushakine 2001 and 2005.

The ‘career’ of a bandit almost always begins with some incident, which is not in itself grave, but drives him into outlawry: a police charge for some offence brought against the man rather than for the crime; false testimony; judicial error or intrigue; an unjust sentence to forced residence [*confino*], or one felt to be unjust. (Qtd. by Hobsbawm 16)

Visiting an illegal boxing match, Bely and his friends notice Mukha in the crowd. Mukha starts a fight, attempting to kill Bely, but gets mysteriously shot to death himself instead. As the narrative unfolds, the viewer finds out that Mukha’s cousin, Kaverin (played by Aleksei Panin), a lieutenant of the local police department, is determined “to close Bely down” [*zakryt’*]. The lieutenant initiates a search of Bely’s apartment, where the investigators plant and then “find” a suspicious gun. To avoid arrest, Bely hides with the help of Kosmos.

In a condensed form, this episode reveals the main theme of *Brigada*: betrayal—a concealed non-correspondence between a represented identity or intention and one’s actual position or motivation—is a major driving force, a major explanatory tool, and a major narrative device in the series. Throughout, it is the instability of personal loyalty that provides a feeling of suspense. Loyalty becomes situational, demonstrating the impossibility of moral judgment in a situation where principles and hierarchies are skewed. The key question seems to be: “Have I been betrayed? Will I be?” Expectation of commitment has no viable grounds except for the monetary one: the girlfriend changes her partners depending on their financial background; the same logic is followed by policemen. “Loyalty, like everything else, has its price” (Hayward and Biro 208).

Bely’s friends seem to be the only major exception in this case, yet, characteristically, even here the threat of betrayal is always present. The *brigada*’s internal coherence is constantly tested, putting each member periodically under suspicion. These suspicions are not always groundless: at the end of the film the viewer learns that the mysterious killing of Mukha, which started Bely’s long-lasting feud with Kaverin, was actually carried out by Kosmos. Hiding this fact, Kosmos, nonetheless, “rescues” Bely from punishment for a crime that Bely hadn’t committed.

The episode spells out an important aspect of this post-Soviet pragmatic configuration: It is the intertwining of three main vectors of identification—family connections, homosocial friendship, and relations with organized (both legal and illegal) forms of power—that creates the context in which the *brigada* emerges and evolves. None of these three axes of identification acquires a positive value in *Brigada*, though. In *Brigada*’s “archive of the epoch,” the 1990s are marked by the eventual collapse of family bonds, the gradual corrosion of friendship connections, and the complete corruption of political relations.

Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to add that *Brigada* not only archives the 1990s but also references the history of the gangster film genre

as a whole. It brings to an end the fascination of the mob films of the 1920s with the individual success of people like Al Capone; it exposes the vacuity of criminal organizations and the cult of “*famiglia*” epitomized so vividly by *The Godfather* in the 1970s (dir. Francis Ford Coppola); and it undermines the romantic nostalgic belief in the male bonding of the friends from *Once Upon a Time in America* (dir. Sergio Leone, 1984).⁷

Private Space Under Construction

Summarizing his discussion of taste in *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu writes:

Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore to benefit—an individual occupying a given position in space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties and towards the practices of goods which benefit the occupants of that position. (1984, 466)

It is important for Bourdieu that a “sense of one’s place” is a product of a practical, i.e. not always articulated, knowledge, just as it is a reflection of one’s position taken within the “*space of possibles*” (1993, 31). One’s attachment to a place can be understood as a “process of eliciting meaning” (Jimenez 150); a sense of one’s place is a result of negotiation between one’s own experience and one’s own aspirations, reified within the existing field of practices and possibilities. *Brigada* certainly follows this logic of presenting individuals and groups through their spatial practices. However, it adds a post-Soviet twist to the tendency described by Bourdieu. A sense of *one’s own* place is materialized here in a situation where the very differential “*space of possibles*” is going through a massive reconstruction. Let me trace the stages of this materialization.

The visual narrative about the criminal hero in *Brigada* is necessarily framed as an endless movement of the spatial signification. The story line is envisioned as a succession of Bely’s dwellings, a succession which is more a chain of displacements than a chain of positions. By itself, such a “dislocating localization” (Agamben 175) is hardly unusual for the structure of the criminal narrative, where hidings and quick disappearances are part of the genre. It is the *forms* of the spatial transformations in *Brigada* that endow them with a distinctive effect. These spatial transformations are, of course, deliberately designed or carefully selected movie sets; décor and actors are the only elements of feature films that are purposefully exposed to the camera (Affron and Affron 35). What is the narrative role of the decorative settings in *Brigada*, then? How do these decorative “frills” supplement, develop or undermine the main plot? What kind of “reality effect” are they to produce?

Following the Affrons’ description, I suggest that the sets in *Brigada* tend to combine two major functions. The visual prominence of several *locales* in

7. For a review see Cawelti and also Messenger.

the series allows the settings to “punctuate the narrative” and thus to offer each time a “recognizable nexus of narrative and décor” (38). Simultaneously, the evolution of the settings in the progress of the series, i.e., the settings’ own visual histories, amplifies the dominant fiction of *Brigada*.⁸

At least two moments make the succession of Bely’s settings in *Brigada* important for understanding the general trajectory of the narrative about dehumanization. First, Bely’s housing is seldom a hide-away place; it is normally an expensive and symbolically meaningful property. As haphazard and accidental as it might seem, the chain of Bely’s residences demonstrates a steady elevation of his social status and allows us to sketch a symbolic hierarchy of private dwellings in post-Soviet Russia.⁹ Criminal activity as a source of continuing income is presented in the series as one of the available “ladders of social mobility” (Bell 129). The “steps” of this ladder take their shape through Bely’s aesthetic choice of places and things. Secondly, every major change of dwelling in the film usually signals a major change in Bely’s family history: personal biography becomes a derivative of a particular locale. This rule, however, is not reversible: Bely’s locations seldom acquire the status of a personalized space; they remain “taken” rather than “occupied.”

Bely’s initial *mise-en-scène* is the apartment of his mother (the father is missing)—typical late Soviet public housing in a high-rise building constructed from pre-fabricated concrete panels: two small rooms, a tiny kitchen, a bathroom and an entry-hall pasted with bright maroon wallpaper. Views from the apartment’s windows display the three steaming pyramids of pipes of a huge industrial power plant. Associated with the previous generation, this type of housing would be the starting point, the lowest possible step from which the hero would climb up (fig. 4).

Nowhere in the film do we see a *kommunalka*, an apartment shared by several families, usually perceived as the most characteristic type of Soviet housing¹⁰ and romanticized in some Soviet films.¹¹ To some extent, this disappearance of the communal organization of space, with all its mechanisms of support and control, indicates a general fragmentation of social fabric and the vanishing of the previously established communities—be it a group of tenants [*zhil'tsy*] or a “labor collective” [*trudovoi kollektiv*]. This disappearance also demonstrates a different principle of association around which new groups are being formed. A collectivity (forcibly) imposed by spatial boundaries is replaced by a collectivity built around shared personal characteristics (e.g.,

8. On the set as punctuation and as narrative see respectively ch. 3 and ch. 5 of Affron and Affron. See also Lamster; and Shiel and Fitzmaurice for useful collections of essays on the cinematic representation of space.

9. For a review see Ruble.

10. See e.g. Gerasimova.

11. See, for instance, the film *The Pokrovsky Gates* (*Pokrovskie vorota*, dir. Mikhail Koza-kov, 1982).



Fig. 4. Life in a high-rise by a power-plant: Bely's friends in his courtyard. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

age, gender, experience, etc.). Space in *Brigada* is perceived not so much as a list of physical boundaries that it might impose but rather as a realm in which individual and group actions could be realized. Correspondingly, “blind spots” in the perception of space are a result of a “spatial censorship” rooted in one’s practical knowledge of certain spatial practices and space arrangements (Mayol 104).

The absence of the *kommunalka* in *Brigada*, in other words, indicates a different vector for Bely’s spatial trajectory, an “orienting practice” that points towards those who possessed the financial and real-estate capital during the *perestroika* period: the Soviet academic intelligentsia. It is symptomatic that the only private space that is prominently displayed in the series is the apartment of Kosmos’s father, an academician. Yet even this case displays the same process of “alienation from residence” (Ruble 50): in the expansive and stylishly decorated apartment with a nice view, we never see Kosmos’s own space.

Hiding Bely from police, Kosmos brings his friend to the empty dacha of yet another academician, a friend of Kosmos’s father. Located not far away from Moscow, the dacha of this professor of astrophysics, who at the time is lecturing abroad, is a big two-story stone building painted in pale yellow and stuffed with books. Located in a forest, the dacha compound enjoys the protection of a special post of police installed to keep an eye on—and guard when necessary—the Soviet academic elite.

This accidental upward mobility,¹² while still envisioned as a movement

12. For a discussion of “accidental” and “natural” upward mobility among the new Russian elite, see Ries (2004).

from one kind of urban periphery (a working-class district) to a different kind of periphery (a settlement for the intelligentsia), is presented nonetheless as a series of *topological* (industrial area vs. residence; urban district vs. green park; high-rise building vs. two-story dacha) and *class* oppositions (public housing development vs. quasi-private house; poor vs. affluent). To a large extent this trajectory outlines a general trend of the early 1990s, when similar state dachas leased earlier by the government to the Soviet intellectual, artistic, military and party elite became a prime target for occupation by the newly emerging class of business elite. While their perfect location and respectable past produced an effect of ennoblement by association, the limited quantity of available dachas instantly turned them into objects of corruption, conspicuous consumption, and perennial scandals.¹³

In Bely's life this effect of spatial ennoblement was realized literally: hiding away at the professor's dacha, he meets his future wife, Olga (played by Ekaterina Guseva), a student at the Moscow conservatory, who lives in the dacha across the street. The granddaughter of a famous musician (there is a short remark about a hall in the conservatory named after Olga's grandfather), she is constantly practicing a concerto by Nicolo Paganini under an eye of her stern grandmother (there are no parents). The grandmother's complaints about the matrimonial *mésalliance* between an heir of the famous grandfather and a "young man with unspecified employment" quickly fade away when Bely's trio of friends give the young couple as their wedding gift an apartment in the so-called "Stalin skyscraper" [*stalinskaia vysotka*] on the Kotelnicheskaya embankment, not far from the Kremlin. Perhaps the most prestigious skyscraper in Moscow in the early 1990s and the home of prominent actors, politicians and military officers, the Kotelnicheskaya building was one of seven buildings constructed in the late 1940s and early 1950s in downtown Moscow to celebrate the victory in the war with Germany and to ensure the amalgamation of social and spatial hierarchies.¹⁴

What is remarkable about the visual representation of Bely's attempt to get

13. For example, in 2000 the Russian news agency RIA-Novosti announced that Vladimir Kozhinov, an official who supervised property for the President's administration, decided not to renew the lease for a state dacha that had been occupied since 1995 by the notorious Russian entrepreneur Boris Berezovsky. The chief of Kremlin property indicated that Berezovsky's widely publicized information about the cost of the annual rent was false: the rent was \$300,000, not \$500,000, as the businessman liked to boast (Lenta.ru). In 2006 the allegedly illegal privatization of a state dacha by ex-prime minister Mikhail Kasianov became the subject of extensive media coverage and public debate (e.g. Chabanenko). See also Lovell 163–231. On the dacha in the Russian literary imagination see Barksdale.

14. Vasily Aksenov's 2006 novel about the *vysotka* in the 1950s provides an extensive discussion of this attempt to see in the post-war *vysotnoe stroitel'stvo* [elevated construction] a materialized metaphor for the consolidation of the Soviet "nomenklatura," *vysomaia grupa grazhdan* [the elevated group of citizens]. For a journalist's account of the building's post-Soviet history see Nivat.



Fig. 5. *Remont* as a lifestyle: Bely and his wife in their *vysootka* apartment. Film still. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

self-inscribed into the *habitus* of the Soviet elite is that in *Brigada* the viewer can hardly see how it was realized in practice. The *vysootka*-house never becomes part of the visual narrative; it never emerges as a part of a habitual landscape of the hero.¹⁵ Nor do we see any conscious attempt to inhabit the new setting. For most of the series, the apartment remains in a state of permanent reconstruction—with empty rooms in which walls and windows are plastered with newspapers (fig. 5).

This failure to master the distribution of things and positions practically (Bourdieu 1984, 466) demonstrates a certain narrative tendency. The *choice* of available spatial possibilities, while (almost automatically) reflecting the previous dispositions of the characters, is rarely translated into a culturally distinctive and personally appropriated space. A spatial possibility, in other words, rarely becomes a place (see Menin 7). The setting in *Brigada* is never finally set, so to speak. In the absence of a differentiating template, a newly assumed location cannot produce an effect of identification.¹⁶ It can always be turned into something else. Most often, it remains in the peculiar position of being vacant, that is, unoccupied yet assigned, a material trace of one's absence, the failed possibility of being inhabited. Never a grounded position, such a setting nonetheless serves for the characters of *Brigada* as a temporary *platzdarm* for future advancement, as a material point for temporary attachment. *Brigada*'s main character frames well this problematic correlation between the contextualized position and the goal of the movement: "war is bull-

15. For an opposite symbolic use of the same *vysootka* in Soviet film, see *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, dir. Menshov, 1979).

16. For a discussion of this trend in current Russian cinema see Stishova.

shit but maneuvers count [*voina—khernia, glavnoe manevry*].” It is precisely this close-up perception of the constantly changing social landscape (“tactics”) that anchors the characters, without determining the direction of their further movement. Movement in space happens “without concretization of this space,” as the Russian film critic Nina Zarkhi recently observed (Dondurei et al. 14).¹⁷

This symbolic non-presence and structural ambiguity of an emerging group is not a new phenomenon. Anthropological literature on liminality and acquisition of a new status is full of examples indicating that transition often includes manifestations of symbolic divestment of “previous habits of thought, feeling and action” (Turner 105). In this context, *remont* [renovation] in *Brigada* is perhaps a less esoteric but no less meticulously staged operation of breaking previously created bonds.¹⁸

Apart from its symbolic meaning, *remont* as a conscious attempt to aesthetically reconfigure space in *Brigada* captures an important social trend of the early 1990s, when an emerging class was claiming its own presence by taking control over its immediate surroundings. Unable yet to construct its own housing, this group had to readjust and reconfigure for itself already existing living space. Significantly, the attraction of the dwelling was determined by the history of the site rather than by the actual quality of the space. However, this consumption of history came with a price: convenient use of the space had yet to be created.¹⁹ Hence, renovation becomes a life-style of the period, aptly reflected in the term “*evroremont*” [euro-style renovation], i.e., a prolonged and professionally guided attempt to completely reconstruct an old space, mostly by using such newly available materials as drywall and recessed lighting.²⁰ It is only fitting that “*evroremont*”—despite the wide range

17. See also a discussion of the road-movie genre in this context in Dondurei et al., 17–19; see also Eyerman and Lofgen.

18. On the Soviet roots of *remont* as a life-style see Gerasimova and Chuikina.

19. For a cinematic attempt to structure the plot of the film around the redistribution of symbolically important Soviet property see *Old Jades* (*Starye kliachi*, dir. Eldar Riazanov, 2000).

20. *Evroremont*, a slim book of advice published in 1998, for instance, explains the essence of reconstruction in the following way: “We all live in an environment that is way too uniform. The level of this unification is different in different countries; it is the highest in the United States, it is lower in Europe [...]. Without rejecting the functionality and comfort of the dwelling [*zhil'e*], one wants to create one’s own world, to establish personal relations with the place where one lives, with its history and nature. This is why there is a need to restore, so to speak, the architectural image of past times, especially when it is well known from literature and favorite films. The “Anglo-Caribbean” style born in the nineteenth century in the slave South of America is a good example [...]. The United States of America is a ‘young country’. Europe is represented in its history by a tremendous variety of architectural styles; there is a lot to choose from, if an architect decides to add a local flavor to a new building” (7–8). A displacement through which a desire to create one’s own world is equated with restoration of the learned past is telling; one’s own world is indeed someone else’s history. The quote demonstrates an important shift in perceiving space, though: “history” here is not any longer a legacy to be reconnected with.

of its stylistic vocabulary—in practice is usually associated with minimalist design, white walls and relatively empty space: a perfect canvas for a picture which is yet to be drawn.²¹

Grigory Revzin, a leading architectural critic in Russia, points to the core of this emptiness of stylistic attempts. Noting that even by 2003, after “ten years of advancing capitalism,” there was no specific Russian architectural style to speak of, Revzin rightly concludes that such an absence has nothing to do with a lack of creativity or talents. The lack has to do rather with the fact that the very *everydayness* as a social environment that can routinely reproduce itself through reproducing its own traditions has started to emerge only recently. The absence of one’s own traditions of arranging interior space corresponds to the embryonic status of one’s own interior (Revzin 2003b, 27). In order to be stylized, *byt*, daily life, the everydayness, has to “settle down” first, has to be grounded in the materiality of daily rituals and habits (see also McCracken). I think that Revzin’s observation could be usefully expanded: private-space-as-an-object-of-construction is not only a good metaphor for the general lack of a settled private domain; in addition, and perhaps more importantly, such an obliteration of the domestic in the film estranges Bely and his friends; it materializes the bandits’ ungroundedness in daily life and familial space.²²

The stylistic and social difficulties with appropriating a symbolically charged location from the previous epoch in *Brigada* modify the visual narrative of the series. Episodes *in* the apartment are visually offset by episodes *next to* the apartment. Thus the couple’s attempt to spend their wedding night at the new apartment is prevented by a hand grenade planted on the landing in front of the apartment. Subsequent shots of blackened walls, a crooked railing and deformed steps leading to the apartment remain as yet another metaphor for the ladder of social mobility climbed by Bely. The episode with the “wedding grenade” is the first event that creates a profound sense of suspicion and betrayal among the members of the *brigada*. It results in the first collectively executed murder of the traitor, who turns out to be Bely’s driver, a murder that binds the group together.

The sense of the appealing and treacherous nature of old cultural symbols is intensified in the series by an interesting set of visual displacements: the non-presence of the Kotelnicheskaya-building is often referenced by images

Rather, history is a depository of available cultural “styles,” a set of accessible spatial models. As a result, the aesthetic supremacy of “Europe” is determined by the range of its stylistic vocabulary, unimaginable in “young America.” In turn, one’s own space, devoid of any “inherent” stylistic qualities, functions as a surface for available expressions.

21. For a very different attempt to perceive space as a possibility for restoring previous historical connections, see *A House for the Rich* (*Dom dlia bogatykh*, dir. Valery Fokin, 1997).

22. For more on the absence of home in crime films see Krutnik. For a discussion of the post-Soviet construction boom among the newly emerging elite see Gorelov.

of yet another Stalin *vygotka*. The series is punctuated by several key scenes shot in front of the main building of Moscow State University, suggesting a post-Soviet modification of the old theme of “my universities” most prominently started by Maxim Gorky (1949). Just as in Gorky’s autobiography, the symbolic prominence of the university has nothing to do with formal education but rather emphasizes a lack of it, serving as a reminder of the unfulfilled dream of becoming a student that Bely cherished in the army.

Brigada will have a fully furnished and inhabited contemporary apartment in a post-Soviet luxury version of the *vygotka*, but it is an expensive and garish place with purple walls and kitschy paintings owned by (former lieutenant) Kaverin, Bely’s principal enemy. The symbolic importance of this real-estate accomplishment of the enemy will become clearer later in the series, when the viewer sees how Bely methodically and single-handedly demolishes the place by using a grenade-machine on the ground. Perhaps it is not accidental that the final encounter between Bely and Kaverin also happens in a *vygotka* of sorts—this time as a radical reversal of the previous semiotic disposition of the low/high. Having killed Kaverin, Bely dramatically drops the enemy’s body from the top floor of a tall water-park building into an empty pit prepared for a swimming pool.

Bely’s inability to conquer the cultural hierarchy of the Stalin *vygotka* results in a logical spatial move: a switch to horizontality. The rest of Bely’s dwellings in the series will be close to the ground. The switch also resumes Bely’s previous inclination toward the geographical periphery, reflecting an important modification of the Soviet spatial hierarchy. Bely’s movement from one form of periphery to another strikingly contrasts with the usual (Soviet) pattern of social and geographic mobility vividly elaborated in texts of Social Realism, where the center was the ultimate symbolic destination (Clark 10–11).

This post-Soviet *peripheralization*, however, has very little in common with a usual politics of marginality. Bypassing the “center,” the “periphery” in *Brigada* functions as an autonomous space of activity and suggests a form of localization that cannot be reduced to the usual centripetal/centrifugal movements.²³ With some rare exceptions, there is no recognizable imagery of Moscow in the series. An absence of the expected cultural *core* is presented as the center’s decreased ability to function as the definitive indicator of success. By provincializing the center (Chakrabarty), the periphery attains its own self-sufficiency. As a result, periphery becomes not so much a sign of the center’s inaccessibility but of its growing cultural and social irrelevance.²⁴

23. For more on different aspects of the increasing structural autonomy of the periphery in contemporary Russia see Kalashnikov; Ioffe et al.; Alexander, Degtyarev, and Gelman; and Kirkow.

24. Timur Bekmambetov, the author of famous television commercials for the Imperial bank in the early 1990s and the director of *Nochnoi dozor* (*Night Watch*, 2004), confirms in a recent interview that periphery becomes a conscious stylistic choice, a narrative device in contemporary Russian film. As the director put it, “our prefabricated [*panel’nye*] buildings from concrete

This reorientation toward the horizontal and the peripheral marks a clear dissatisfaction with the symbolic and social opportunities that existing spatial configurations provide, yet it hardly changes a general disassociation between building a home and actually having it. Bely's new dwellings perform the already familiar role of objects of consumption that defy the process of consumption and materialize a contradiction between imagined style and practiced behavior, between arrangement of objects and sequences of actions, between configuration of space and configuration of one's life.²⁵ Thus, we will never see the family house in Florida with "a tennis court, a pool, four bedrooms" that Bely bought in order to mend the harm to his family relations provoked by his affair with an actress. In turn, Bely's final real-estate gesture—a huge pink castle in a suburb, with a fountain, a bridge with lampposts and a tall stone fence—will remain practically unfurnished and mostly unoccupied. Frightened by the exploded Mercedes, Olga first returns with her son to her grandmother's dacha, then later leaves for Florida (figs. 6–7).

One can interpret the symbolic importance of Bely's spatial localizations by exploring frequent juxtapositions of the vertical and the horizontal in *Brigada*. It is easy to see in Bely's movements the embodiment of a constant interplay between "low" and "high," whether it is the hierarchy of classes (working class/intelligentsia), spaces (high-rise/castle), or worlds (Russia/USA). And the word "*podniat'sia*" [to ascend, to rise] often used in contemporary Russian to describe financial and social success, certainly supports this temptation: the generational horizontality of the "brothers" in *Brigada* requires vertical means of distinction.²⁶ As I argue above, though, the sinusoid of Bely's spatial fluctuations could also be read as a series of stylistic moves. The choice and arrangement of one's own space is determined by one's ability to materialize one's experience in a hierarchy of objects. Within this perspective, the succession of settings in *Brigada* acquires a different trajectory. The symbolic importance of associations that a place could arouse (a Stalinist *vygotka*; an academician's dacha) is replaced by a perception of place as a backdrop, as a surface for holding one's own personal reminiscences (a house in Florida, a pink palazzo). A space as a site of institutionalized memory is overshadowed by the space as a setting for one's own experience.²⁷ The se-

panels are already cult constructions [*kul'tovye sooruzheniia*] [...] when for everyone in the world Moscow is symbolized by Zamoskvorech'e [one of the oldest districts in central Moscow—S.O.], it means that we all live outside Moscow, then. I want people to feel [*chuvstvovat'*] their own legends, their own myths" (*Gazeta*, July 7, 2004).

25. For a useful discussion see Humphrey 188, 193, 199. See also Podgorodnikov; and "Eto ne Kanary."

26. For an architectural version of this striving for elevation see Davydova; Papernyi.

27. For more on the aesthetic of reminiscence and the aesthetic of surface see Revzin 2003a, 85–109. For a cinematographic example of space as a way of re-connecting with the historical past see *Russian Ark* (dir. A. Sokurov, 2002).



Figs. 6–7. Bely's pink castle (top) and its interior (bottom). Film stills from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

ries, however, also shows that a new spatial arrangement of the private often remains unarticulated and non-symbolized. Private space, in other words, acts in *Brigada* as potentiality, a structural possibility whose internal meaning and configuration have yet to be worked out.

This lack of a stable private domain suggests an important social consequence. When the private is devoid of the structuring nucleus of daily routines and localized interests, then the very line between the public and the private becomes problematic.²⁸ What lies at the foundation of criminality in this situation, then, is not so much a (purposeful) confusion and conflation of the private and the public, but rather their non-differentiation, their hybrid or, perhaps, mutated co-existence. It is the law that is supposed to introduce a clear boundary, to mark off the different domains and spheres of interests. But what

28. For a discussion within the early Soviet context, see Oushakine 2004.

happens when the law itself loses its normative function, that is to say, when its ordering and regulating effect is fragmented? I will try to answer these questions by looking at representations of public space in *Brigada*.

Expropriating Professional Space

The muted or “underdeveloped” state of the private settings of the bandits in *Brigada* interestingly differs from another film that is also focused on a similar—albeit less “brutal”—process of forming a new economic class. In Pavel Lungin’s *Tycoon: The New Russian (Oligarkh, 2003)*,²⁹ a deliberate investment in displaying one’s life-style, in designing elaborate interior spaces, in staging excessive private parties is a part of the game. Creating a luxurious *House of Receptions [Dom priemov]*, i.e., an institutionalized setting that usefully blurs spatial borders between the official and the private, is just as important for tycoons as devising a new scheme of tax evasion. To a large extent, this difference in consumption has a class origin. Unlike the bandits of *Brigada*, the quintet of friends in *Tycoon* comes from an academic background, and their striving to display stylistic distinction is a materialization of previously accumulated knowledge about the hierarchy of taste. Yet class origin alone could hardly explain the oligarchs’ passion for actually inhabiting newly created spaces completely. It appears that *demarcating* a new “space of relationships” (Bourdieu 1985, 725) is not the primary goal of institutionalization for the *brigada*. The initial impulse seems to be quite different. As Bely’s failed attempts to spatially inscribe himself within the habitus of previously important social groups indicate, it is a desire to become *part* of the picture, a desire to find a place within an existing/emerging field of socially meaningful relations that determines the choice of topographic and aesthetic strategies of the *brigada*. Rather than creating their own distinctive field of action, the *brigada* structures its activity through the deliberate imitating of available stylistic codes. Hence, a lack of functional private space is compensated for by a different type of spatial arrangement. An open market [*rynok*], an initial place of the *brigada*’s racketeering and extortion, acquires a literal and metaphoric roof.³⁰ By “offering” their protection service to a local businessman, Bely and his friends expropriate the businessman’s office and start their own “professionalized” career, implicitly sponsored by the Federal Security Service. In the book version of *Brigada*, the office is described in the following way:

The office [*ofis*] of the company “*Kurs-In-Vest*” was equipped in accordance with the latest word in modern technology. Even the brief glance of an innocent visitor could easily spot real

29. See also Yuly Dubov’s original novel (2002) that was used as a base for the film. For a discussion see Lipovetsky (2003).

30. On “roof protection” see Yurchak; Humphrey 99–126; Kosals and Ryvkina 2001 and 2002.

oak doors, stylish Italian furniture, deep leather chairs made in Germany, the newest office equipment and long-legged secretaries. And nothing could possibly indicate that only several months ago this office on the first floor of an old house on the Tsvetnoi Boulevard was occupied by an association of the visually impaired. (2: 22)

This “career move” radically alters the visual story-line of *Brigada*: most of the series is reduced to dialogues confined within various types of enclosed “working spaces.” Scenes in the “office of the private company,” as Bely calls his own headquarters, are interspersed with scenes in what he labels as *kontory* [bureaus] of state officials. This relapse into the stylistic of the Soviet *proizvodstvennoe kino* [cinema about industry] is accelerated further by changes in the bandits’ *prozodezhda* [business attire].³¹ A new dress code (suits, white shirts, ties) makes the “brigade of capitalist labor” almost indistinguishable from their counterparts—governmental bureaucrats and state security agents. As Bely justifies the change in a conversation with his friend, a drug supplier: “Because of my status, I cannot walk around unshaved anymore [*polozhenie ne pozvoliaet nebritym khodit’*].” Stylistic homogenization produces a homogenization in habits, too: as the dominant trend of the bureaucratic fashion of the 1990s, tennis also becomes a natural part of Bely’s routine. It would be wrong to think that tennis becomes Bely’s passion, the novelized *Brigada* explains, “but he has been visiting this tennis club—the most prestigious and most expensive tennis club in Moscow—for half a year. As if it was his job [*kak na rabotu*], every Wednesday and Saturday” (2: 285).

The transforming mimicry of the bandits results in social cohesiveness with former enemies. The security agent—with the telling last name Vvedensky (derived from “introduction,” *vvedenie*)—offers Bely cooperation, explaining that it would be a “mutual process. On the one hand, you could count on our support in a critical situation. On the other hand, we would demand of you certain action, when there is a need.” Cornered in a park by Vvedensky (“this is a big political issue of state importance”), Bely agrees to participate in a massive supply of weaponry to Chechen fighters, initiated by another group of criminals and actively supported by Vvedensky. What results from this (somewhat unwilling) cooperation is a close-knit network of mutual obligations and interdependency of contradictory forces. What is perhaps even more telling is the fact that it is Kaverin, Bely’s “loyal enemy,” who acts as a middleman between the state, the bandits, and the Chechens. The network, in other words, is possible due to the profound instability of personal loyalty, which is divided among the various sociomoral locations occupied simultaneously by the same individual. It is this situation of *implosion*, as Humphrey calls it (99–127)—i.e., a constant structural and individual oscillation within

31. From “*proizvodstvennaia odezhda*”; the idea of special business attire was originally pioneered by Varvara Stepanova and Lubov Popova for Alexandr Rodchenko’s industrial photos and Vsevolod Meyerhold’s biomechanical projects respectively (see Lavrent’ev; Varst).



Fig. 8. A business meeting: the *brigada* and Kaverin discuss their co-operation. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

different and often conflicting fields—that determines the logic and direction of exchanges in *Brigada* (fig. 8).

Disagreeing with Vvedensky's plan to sell the weapons and yet unable to refuse his "offer," Bely provides Zorin, his tennis partner and a high-positioned state official from Russia's White House, with a map for the weapon delivery in Chechnya. Following the map, a division of *spetsnaz* [special task military formation] blows up the weapons and the group of rebels, and almost kills Kaverin. As a payback to Bely, Zorin promises to finally move ahead with signing the documents that would grant Bely's foundation immense import-tax breaks. The financial deal is accompanied by a symbolic contract, too. Zorin's promise, "While we are bound [*poka my v sviazke*], nobody will touch you," is parried by Bely's quick and somewhat bitter confession: "One has to depend on someone anyway [...]. Otherwise—...Tchik, and you are gone."

Importantly, as the series demonstrates again and again, in many cases the state itself—or rather fighting factions within the state structure—creates zones and areas that can be usefully exploited by newly emerging criminal groups.³² Yet, it is not the production of criminal opportunities that is significant here. Rather, it is the normative effect that this state-induced criminality brings with it. In *Brigada* the "law" of bandits and the "law" of the state are not merely co-existing or even competing with each other. Instead, it is their supplementarity, the unwilling but inescapable co-dependency of the (civilized) criminal and the (corrupt) official that makes profitable economic and political exchanges possible. In a conversation with Vvedensky, Bely sums

32. For more on this see Humphrey 109–26.

up this condition of institutionalized symbiosis in the following way: “It is you and us who make up the state [*gosudarstvo—eto my s vami*].”

Almost three decades ago, Frederic Jameson in his article on “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” usefully pointed out that “the ideological function of the Mafia paradigm” embodied in *The Godfather* was to manifest “an organized conspiracy against the public, one which reaches into every corner of our daily lives and our political structures to exercise a wanton ecocidal and genocidal violence at the behest of distant decision-makers” (145). The Mafia conspiracy of *The Godfather* for Jameson was a “strategic displacement of all the rage generated by the American system onto this mirror-image of big business provided by the movie screen” (146).

Brigada’s ideological attempts to transform criminal space and habitus into “business-as-usual” are rooted in a similar rage against the corrupt political and economic system that took shape in Russia in the 1990s. However, there is a significant difference. The professionalization of criminality in *Brigada* is not so much the result of a strategic ideological displacement but a utopian fantasy, a groundless belief in the civilizing power of the capitalist evolution. The bandits’ visual normalization, their spatial and aesthetic proximity to the state bureaucrats, becomes synonymous with the bandits’ “legalization.” Simply put, the changing of the dress code performs here an equivalent of money laundering (fig. 9). The question is whether, in the process of their civilizing circulation, professionalized bandits do not change the very nature of the social field in which their circulation becomes possible, i.e., whether the genealogy of their “profession” does not undermine the professional field as a whole.³³

Brigada is not alone in its utopian hope for the normalizing effect of manners, and a similar trend can be easily traced in current sociological studies and popular literature on criminality in Russia. For example, Vadim Volkov, a Russian sociologist, writes:

[...] state formation, taken in its structural rather than substantive aspect, entails simply the formation and maintenance of boundaries, such as those between public and private, formal and informal, legal and illegal, impersonal and personal. [...] state formation [then], or at least the most important aspect of it, coincides with divergent trajectories of violence-managing agencies: some are integrated into the market economy and get transformed into business firms,

33. In their study of the mafia in Sicily, Jane and Peter Schneider convincingly demonstrate that “normalization” of this institution of contract enforcement is not always an option. As the anthropologists conclude, it was “the persistence of a clientelistic pattern of political mobilization at national, regional, and local levels [...] that nurtures mafia since the 1800s until 1992” (251). Raimondo Catanzaro similarly points to the importance of the cultural predispositions of *mafiosi*. As the sociologist indicates, “the passage of the *mafiosi* from power brokers to entrepreneurs” results in modification of old patterns of relations rather than in their disappearance. The symbolic-emotional nature of relationships is transformed into a patronage-exchange relationship that brings together “business groups, political factions and parts of the apparatus of the state” in order to ensure financial predictability within certain sectors of the economy (50).



Fig. 9. “Bandits became managers.” Cover of a special issue of the *Russian Newsweek* (March 6–12, 2006) on post-Soviet gangsters. Courtesy of *Russkii Newsweek*.

some become separated from the economy, become subjected to central control and make the core of the state. Ideally, both sides should be interested in boundary maintenance. (61)³⁴

Such an attempt to rhetorically rationalize crime by using the vocabulary of business management brings with it a corresponding discursive construction of the state, or rather statehood, as a field to be appropriated by competitive “market agents.”³⁵ This understanding of violence as a marketable commodity, consumption of which could be forcefully imposed on potential “customers,” however, appears to be missing a crucial point. The primary, constitutive component of crime depends not so much on whether various “agents” succeed in carving out and monopolizing a spatial segment of the *market* that could professionally “sell” violence but rather in the relation of these agents to the *law*. Comparing the economic effectiveness of the regime of violence exercised by the state with that of organized criminal structures, the business-styled analysis of post-Soviet criminality tends to replace the notion (and institutions) of law with the “logic” (and institutions) of the market (see e.g.

34. For an analysis of corruption focused on the role of the state see Timofeev.

35. In some cases, the teleology of “state formation” and market mechanisms logically results in the thesis about the “necessity of gangster capitalism” as an inescapable stage in the process of capital accumulation (see e.g. Holmstrom and Smith).

Volkov). Consequently, the mechanism of law enforcement becomes analytically split: the status and functions of *law* are left unquestioned. Instead, not unlike the portrayal of the evolution of manners in *Brigada*, the focus of attention shifts to practices of *enforcement*.

It might be instructive to make a short theoretical detour in order to see how this idea of the supplementary nature of crime is problematized in a different context, more specifically, in the work of Emile Durkheim. As is well known, for the sociologist “crime is normal because a society exempt from it is utterly impossible” (1966, 67). This “normality” of crime, however, is not based on the inevitable presence of certain people with certain “deviant inclinations.” Instead it stems from laws existing in a given society. The criminality of an act, as well as the criminality of violence associated with this act, in other words, is not defined by the nature of the act itself. As Durkheim suggests, a criminal *offense* is constituted by the collective norms and sentiments (“common consciousness”) that this offense challenges. The key argument, in other words, is contextual rather than structural.

This basic presumption reflects a different picture of society and the mechanisms of its production and disruption. It appears that for Durkheim the main task of all three mechanisms of subjection (law-crime-punishment) is to reproduce the societal framework—either through restricting and re-enforcing a list of acceptable acts (*law* and *punishment*), or through attempting to expand it (*crime*).³⁶ It is “social solidarity”—rather than monopolization/fragmentation of the protection market—that functions as a primary target of crime in Durkheimian sociology (see Durkheim 1971, 123).³⁷ Without the context of “certain collective sentiments,” without the *conscience collective*, as Durkheim defines it, *crime* is impossible (1971, 123). Hence punishment, that is, the organized violence used by the state, is aimed differently here: “[society] punishes, not because chastisement offers it any intrinsic satisfaction, but so that the fear of punishment may paralyze those who contemplate evil” (124).

Perhaps one could see in this picture of society, rooted in *sentiments* about the legitimate and the illegitimate and re-enforced by punishment whose primary task is to produce an *emotional* effect,³⁸ the core of Foucault’s later argument about bio-power and the disciplinary practices of the “juridico-anthropological functioning” of the modern state. As Foucault puts it, disciplines take the *body* of the individual as their primary target to assure “the ordering of human multiplicities” (1979, 218). What is important for my discussion here is the fact that in both cases there is a certain social “mecha-

36. On crime as a form of subjectivization see Salecl.

37. For an in-depth discussion see Greenhouse.

38. To quote Durkheim: “Punishment is, first and foremost, an emotional reaction” (1971, 124).

nism” that frames and brings these “human multiplicities” together—be it Durkheim’s “collective conscience” or Foucault’s embodied “panopticism of every day” (223). Differently achieved and enforced, these mechanisms apparently were capable of producing certain feelings of social order in relation to which an individual could define him/herself and others.

Utopias of evolutionary normalization of crime³⁹ outline an absence of such a mechanism of social mediation. To be more precise, as *Brigada* and functionalist sociology demonstrate, the mediation task is mostly appropriated by illegal structures.⁴⁰ What I have been suggesting throughout this article, though, is that by looking at representations of space and spatial practices in *Brigada*, we can draw certain conclusions about mediating mechanisms of symbolization that have not yet been consciously articulated. Social boundaries are actualized by making and remaking space. As Jean and John Comaroff have pointed out, “in the face of material and moral constraints, [human beings] *fabricate* social realities and power relations and impose themselves on their lived environments” (295; see also Ries 2002). It is precisely such a fabrication of environment that effectively disrupts the steady pace of the imaginary transformation of the *brigada*’s “thug realism” (Weiss) into the stylish professionalism of a group of power managers. As the series develops, dialogues in offices become interspersed with scenes in hospital wards. The enclosed and secure world of the “workplace” is increasingly overshadowed by the dangerously open “outside.”⁴¹ The external environment quickly turns into a threatening and contested location, a liminal zone where rules do not exist and boundaries are constantly undermined.⁴² For instance, the very act of Bely’s recruitment by Vvedensky takes place in an endless, dark, empty alley surrounded by tall gray walls (fig. 10).

Similarly structured are settings of multiple assassinations, arrests and murders: Bely’s drug supplier is killed in a public park; Kaverin is severely handicapped in an open field and killed on a construction site; Pchela and Kosmos are murdered just outside of their office. Even the final scene of the series, with Bely deciding on the ramp of the Sheremetievo International Airport not to leave Russia, ends with the sound of a gunshot. Far from being a traditional

39. For a sociological discussion of prospects of such an evolution see e.g.: Rawlinson; for a theoretical framework see Elias; for a fictional version see the economic detectives of Yu. Latynina.

40. On the mafia as an institution of mediation see Hess.

41. In a different context, Boris Rodoman frames well a similar process in the polarization of post-Soviet space on a larger scale: “Owners of bio-toilets, air-conditioners, and buyers of bottled drinking water are less interested in mass sewage treatment, and in quality of piped water and street air. The clean and lively space equipped with modern conveniences lessens, shrinks around the elite, and the remaining space is driven into dirt and dark”. (35; as quoted in Ioffe et al., 77).

42. For an interesting portrayal of the outside as a prime site of unrestricted violence see Kotkov’s screen-play *Mertvyi*.



Fig. 10. The dangerous outside: Bely in an alley before a meeting with Vvedensky. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

sign of unrestricted freedom,⁴³ the open space becomes an unbounded—and often deserted—territory, only to be animated by multiple acts of *razborki* (“sorting things out”) between bandits.⁴⁴ Public space emerges as a visual equivalent of the uncivil⁴⁵ (fig. 11).

Without an established private sphere and with a steadily shrinking public domain, what kind of spatial position could be available for the bandits of *Brigada*? What could act as a meaningful location within their “space of possibles” that denies any possibility of a stable position? Given the characters’ simultaneous striving for materiality and mobility, it comes as no surprise that the most personalized and inhabited space in *Brigada* is epitomized by cars. They shorten social and geographic distance; they act as a protective shield; they serve as a location available for serious private negotiations.⁴⁶ In the absence of other forms of mediation, cars in *Brigada* perform the vital function of a socio-spatial interface that connects socially and geographically dis-

43. On open space as a traditional symbol of freedom in Russian culture see Likhachev 6–10.

44. This tendency of conceiving the outside as a site of ultimate contest was taken to its logical limit in *Antikiller* (dir. Egor Konchalovsky, 2003). Clashes between different groups of bandits as well as between bandits and security services are staged here in settings that are conspicuously devoid of any strangers.

45. There is one possible exception to this general rule in *Brigada*. A casino, prominently featured in the series, suggests an interesting gray zone that mediates between the uncivil public outside and uninhabited private space. A liminal zone of sorts, the casino, nonetheless, provides the *brigada* with certain rules for conduct and interaction in a semi-public location. I thank Mark Lipovetsky for drawing my attention to this.

46. Perhaps, ironically, the only shopping scene in the film that presents an act of choice of an object of consumption depicts Bely and his wife Olga in a surprisingly empty store arguing about buying yet another form of materialized mobility—a baby carriage for their son.



Fig. 11. Public space as a place of *razborki*. Two groups of bandits “sort out” their business. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.

jointed parts. The omnipresence and unavoidability of cars in *Brigada* often suggest a contemporary incarnation of the divine *machine*: in several cases Bely’s salvation is possible only due to a miraculously arriving vehicle. Correspondingly, a failure to properly monitor others’ access to one’s own car could have a grave consequences: the explosion of the Mercedes in the prologue was a result of Fil’s negligence; the “wedding grenade” was planted by Bely’s driver; another Bely driver murdered Fil, Pchela and Kosmos.

Tellingly, several recent Russian films use cars as a prime locus of the cinematographic narrative. In *The Kopeck* (*Kopeika*, dir. Ivan Dykhovichny, 2001), the first model of the Soviet Zhiguli acts as a center of material connections, allowing the metonymical tracing of the country’s recent past. The narrative of *Bimmer* (*Bumer*, dir. Pyotr Buslov, 2003) is structured similarly. In this case a stolen BMW (or “Bumer”) is both a means of transportation and a narrative vehicle: the characters’ trajectories are determined by the car’s abilities.⁴⁷

Cars in *Brigada* are equally distanced from the extreme personalizing fetishism of the automobile in *Kopeika* and the no less extreme alienation of it in *Bumer*. Kosmos’s Lincoln with flame wings painted on the sides (“by Andy Warhol,” as Kosmos insists), Bely’s black Jeep with scarlet leather upholstery, or his respectably black Rolls-Royce suggest an interesting way of capturing “the multiple mobile [...] relationships that involve the complex and fluid hybridizing of public-and-private life” (Sheller and Urry 2003, 108).

The shrinking of public space discussed earlier preempts any chance of using a car in *Brigada* as a pretext for displaying a cityscape or for turning it

47. For a discussion of cars in Soviet films see Prokhorov.



Fig. 12. Against the backdrop of cars: Bely after murdering his driver. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy of Avatar Film Company.



Fig. 13. Cars in landscape: Bely and his friend discussing a drug deal in front of their mobile entourage. Film still from *Brigada*. Courtesy Avatar Film Company.

into a motorized version of the post-Soviet *flâneur*.⁴⁸ Cars in the series seldom provide a point of view from within; rather they themselves are the objects of the cinematic gaze. A camera is normally positioned in front of the car, above it, or on its side, often presenting the car as part of the environment (figs. 12–13). The landscape, the outside, is not distanced here from the privatized space of the car but rather is envisioned as a necessary condition for the very act of mobility. Cars here simultaneously compress space and keep it fragmented, while negotiating (from a distance) the “heterotopia” of relations.⁴⁹

48. For a discussion see Clarke (1997).

49. In their essay “Of Other Spaces” Foucault and Miskowiec explain “heterotopia” in the following way: “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (25).

Perhaps, unlike any other form of spatial arrangement, the *brigada*'s cars point to a new type of emerging sociality, aptly called "automobility" by Mimi Sheller and John Urry. A floating signifier of sorts, this "'iron cage' of modernity" (Sheller and Urry 2000, 745, 744) is firmly located within the spatially ordered environment and yet it is devoid of any symbolic meaning apart from the aesthetics of its form.

By looking at the representation of space and mobility in *Brigada* I have tried to understand to what extent these figures of criminals can be seen as a necessary sign of the renegotiation of new social positions and the modes of their symbolization. The instability of the main character's localization, I have suggested, often acts in the series as a spatial metaphor for social disassociation. In my interpretation of this structural ambiguity I have attempted to avoid the usual tendency to see its origin in the Soviet legacy of institutionalized duplicity that stimulates corruption and blurs the boundaries between the private business and the public office. As portrayal of space in the visual narrative of *Brigada* shows, the very distinction between these spheres is extremely problematic in the post-Soviet context.

By drawing attention to a persistent incommensurability of things within the criminal symbolic order displayed in *Brigada*, I have also pointed out the gap between the materiality of the signifier and one's failure to locate it within the signifying chain. I maintain that such attention to the material in general, and to the aesthetic organization of things that this attention provokes in particular, should be taken seriously. For the aesthetic can be understood first of all as a primary mechanism for providing forms for ideas, experiences and concepts that have not yet acquired a stable location within existing systems of social relations.⁵⁰ In this context, criminality functions as a signifying structure, a syntax that unites different objects and institutions in order to produce a meaningful effect (Siegel 34). Bringing together a diversity of forms, relations and experiences, the aesthetics of criminal space in *Brigada* offers a peculiar trajectory in the reading of the shifting state of the post-Soviet cultural landscape.

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50. For discussion see Kaufman 374–75.

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Абстракт

Сергей Ушакин

Эстетика без закона: бандиты в постсоветском кино и пространстве

В современных исследованиях западных гангстерских фильмов вопросы эстетического оформления визуального нарратива все чаще становятся объектом исследования специалистов. По мнению критиков этические вопросы и социальная проблематика преступности в гангстерских фильмах 1990-х гг. оказались вытесненными зрелищными эффектами и эстетизацией реальности. Данная статья исследует сходное смещение внимания в сторону эстетической организации криминальной действительности в постсоветском гангстерском киножанре, используя ТВ-сериал *Бригада* (реж. А.Сидоров, 2002) в качестве основного примера. В *Бригаде* постсоветская преступность зачастую представлена в виде последовательных операций буквальной и метафорической дис-локализации героя-преступника. Моральная и политическая критика социальных практик, давших жизнь этим криминальным персонажам, заменена здесь визуальной топологией зон их место-нахождения. Анализируя особенности частных и публичных «зон», представленных в *Бригаде*, статья показывает, что само деление на «частную» и «публичную» сферу оказывается крайне проблематичным при интерпретации постсоветского развития.