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Of Bestsellers and Blockbusters

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editorial

Russian cinema booked two great successes in 2005: one of them – *Night Watch* – on the international cinema market, and the other one – *The Turkish Gambit* – at box offices at home. Both films were costly projects that were produced with global fantasy and action trends in mind.

The comparison with 'Hollywood' that is drawn in many reviews reveals two things: firstly, Russia continues to match herself against the USA in the competition for global significance, including in the field of culture. This relationship has always been ambivalent; a competition implies catching up with one's competitor, but also distancing oneself from him by showing one's superiority. In Russia, 'Hollywood' stands both for modern cinema culture at the highest technical level and for superficial and ideological, and thus contemptible (though opulently outfitted), happy ending kitsch.

Secondly, the mighty and strange wave of American-dominated capitalist Western imagery that flooded Russia in the early 1990s has become a decisive reference in the debate about visual culture. In TV especially there are now many examples of a creative and playful as well as ironic use of Western formats; they seem to have made a decisive mark on the viewing habits of a large audience. It is possibly no coincidence that the directors of both films started out producing TV commercials, quickly learning to combine Russian words with Western images.

Both films are based on popular novels whose authors have enjoyed unfailing success since the end of the 1990s. In their own ways, both authors have impressively come to grips with the new market and culture of communication. In terms of their personal background they stand for two different generations of authors and illustrate how differentiated the book market and reading public have become in contemporary Russia.

Grigory Chkhartishvili, born 1956, is originally a Japanologist, essayist, translator, and editor of a literary journal. As a fiction writer, under the pseudonym 'B. Akunin', he combines two of the most popular genres, the historical novel and the crime novel, impressively reproducing the extensive educational canon of the late Brezhnev years. His image as a serious 'intellectual' author is supported by the careful, slightly old-fashioned design of his novels.

Sergey Lukyanenko was born in 1968 and is a psychiatrist by training. A self-taught author, he has been writing since his youth. In 1994 he began to work professionally as a writer of fantasy literature, another highly popular genre. The world of computers plays a crucial part in his relations with his audience; in 1996 he became the first Russian writer with a home page. As is appropriate for this genre, this page now exists in an English version.

Meanwhile both authors have developed virtual Internet empires based on their works, which fans can help build via interactive web sites. Now that the above-mentioned films are out, the two authors have conquered a new media – the big screen; in addition Chkhartishvili's work will be adapted as a TV series. While Akunin has established himself internationally as a writer through translations of his books, the first German translation of Lukyanenko appeared in the wake of the film. It remains to be seen if and when the screen version of *The Turkish Gambit*, which deals with a Russian historical myth, will be 'discovered' by the West.

Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch

analysis

Putin's Night Watch. Sergey Lukyanenko's Novel "Night Watch" and Contemporary Russian Fantasy Literature

Matthias Schwartz

During the heyday of the Cold War, fantasy and science fiction boomed not only in the West but also in the Soviet Union, where it followed official ideology but also inspired an alternative youth culture. In the post-Soviet period, after an initial crisis, the genre has experienced a come-back as Russian-language fantasy. Sergey Lukyanenko is currently its most successful author. His novel Night Watch was a bestseller; the film version is a blockbuster. His work is about a secret struggle between good and evil, which offers explanations for social crises and conflicts.

Popular mass culture responds to the ambivalence and contradictions, to the hopes and to the fears of modern societies. It takes them up and transforms them into entertaining blueprints of identity. Thus, for example, popular detective or adventure novels, apart from telling exciting and exotic stories, often also propose to resolve conflicts and restore a system of values threatened by foes, criminals, and traitors. Fantasy, in contrast, narrates conflicts and exploits that count as 'unthinkable, impossible, supernatural, utopian' from the point of view of the prevailing moral conceptions. In this sense, fantasy stories acquire special socio-political relevance in extreme situations, since they offer imaginary escape scenarios which provide a supernatural explanation for even the greatest social crises.

Thus, between 1937 and 1949 J. R. R. Tolkien wrote his three-volume 'magnum opus', *The Lord of the Rings*, about the imagined realm of Middle Earth while Germany was waging a war of extermination in 'Middle Europe'. However, the work had its breakthrough in the USA only during the hottest phase of the Cold War in the 1960s, also triggering a fantasy boom in Western Europe that left its mark on the genre for the period of the East-West conflict.

The Soviet Union, too, had its popular science fiction and fantasy literature; due to its underlying ideological assumptions, however, it referred exclusively to Soviet realities. Its breakthrough came with the first *Sputnik* flight in 1957 and Yury Gagarin's space flight in 1961, when the Soviet Union could boast of significant scientific and foreign policy successes in its 'peaceful competition' with the USA. 'Scientific fiction' was to impart the ideological optimism of this new 'cosmic era' to young readers while at the same time fostering interest in the natural and engineering sciences.

Regardless of these propagandistic demands, however, this literature very soon turned to other scenarios, in which, in contrast to Western fantasy, the good guys often remained in a minority and were not victorious, as, for example, in many works of the Strugatsky brothers. While Western fantasy clearly separates out the supernatural and magical into a special fantasy world, Soviet science fiction counters the stagnation of the Brezhnev years with a permanent unsettling of the prevailing value system. In the stories, this upsetting of ideological certainties is conferred upon aliens, wizards and magicians, doorways to anti- or parallel worlds, cybernetic intelligence, or 'wonders that have a scientific justification'.

From the late 1950s, Soviet science fiction experienced a boom quite comparable to that of Western fantasy. Although from the end of the 1960s it was subjected to increasing political pressure, it developed into one of the popular alternative youth cultures in the Soviet Union. Science fiction clubs were set up where public readings were held and works that were out of print or circulating clandestinely as *samizdat* could be exchanged. At the beginning of the 1990s, domestic science fiction went through a deep crisis, just like the

analysis

post-Soviet literary scene: 90% of science fiction and fantasy books sold were translations of Western works.

Russian-Language Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Post-Crisis Revival

Only in the latter half of the 1990s did Russian-language science fiction and fantasy begin to react to the Yeltsin-era socio-political upheaval. The share of Russian works grew to a good half of all books published; between 2000 and 2004, about 250–350 new Russian science fiction and fantasy novels appeared per year. These works often copied Western narrative patterns, though no less frequently they adapted and revised Soviet models. While there were sequels to *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* and parodies set in a Russian context, the 'world of the Strugatskys' was also being expanded.

Heroic, epic, medieval-historical or romantic fantasy enjoyed immense popularity: each of them in its own way revised previous systems of knowledge and offered ways out of the current crisis. Similarly to the way Boris Akunin clears Tsarist Russia of the criticism of Soviet historiography, medieval-historical fantasy, for example, thinks through what would have happened if the Russian princes had united with the Golden Horde, or if the Decembrists' 1825 coup had been successful. Following the pattern of *The Lord of the Rings*, epic fantasy constructs alternative, often Slavic worlds of knights and princes. In heroic fantasy, the pattern of 'a Soviet person in wonderland' is still in high demand, although nowadays there are also attempts at 'religious fantasy'.

It is in this context that the psychiatrist Sergey Lukyanenko, born in 1968 in Kazakhstan, made his breakthrough as a best-selling author. In 1997, he wrote the cult novel of the Russian hacker and Net scene, *Labirint otrazheniy* (*Labyrinth of Reflections*), which became a great success as it mirrored Russian computer freaks' dreams about cyberspace, virtual realities, and hybrid identities like few others.

Since the end of the 1990s, Lukyanenko has published on average at least two novels a year. In 2004, following the release of the screen version of *Night Watch* (*Nochnoy dozor* in Russian, 1998), the yearly circulation of his books exceeded one million for the first time, a figure reminiscent of the most successful writers in the Soviet Union. Over the past years, he has won every Russian science fiction and fantasy prize there is, and in 2003 he was elected Europe's best science fiction writer at *Eurocon*, an annual fantasy and science fiction convention. In terms of content, he has dabbled in a variety of science fiction and fantasy sub-genres, such as space opera, parody thrillers, historical fantasy, epic fantasy, science fiction action thrillers, cyberpunk, and urban fantasy. The novel *Night Watch* belongs to the latter genre. Lukyanenko wrote a sequel called *Day Watch* (*Dnevnoy dozor*, 1999) together with the Ukrainian science fiction writer Vladimir Vassilyev, and a third part entitled *Twilight Watch* (*Sumerechny dozor*, 2003). According to Lukyanenko, the fourth volume, *The Final Watch* (*Posledny dozor*), officially published on 20 December 2005, closes the series.

The novel "Night Watch"

The novel *Night Watch* is about a parallel world of 'twilight' whose existence is unknown to ordinary people. This world is only accessible to the so-called 'Others', the magicians, werewolves, vampires, sorcerers and witches who can move about in both worlds. The 'Others' are divided into 'light ones' and 'dark ones' who are engaged in a struggle for humans' positive and negative energies. They are the true makers of human history, but even minute individual mood swings may be due to their influence.

analysis

Thus, for example, the October Revolution was initially an experiment of the 'light ones' that the 'dark ones' attempted to torpedo, and the conflict between them escalated in World War Two, which brought mankind to the brink of doom. Since neither side wanted all humans to perish, they concluded the 'Great Treaty' after the war – an armistice overseen by the 'light ones' through a night watch, and the 'dark ones' through a day watch. When these hierarchically organised guards cannot resolve a conflict, they submit the matter to the arbitration of the so-called inquisition, based in Bern, whose aim is to prevent the outbreak of another war.

Illustration: Screenshot from www.lukianenko.ru/illustrations_rus/84.html *with cover illustration of* Nochnoy dozor

Despite the 'Great Treaty', there were several more grave incidents late in the Stalin era; however, things remained peaceful in Russia until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The novel starts in the post-Soviet present. It consists of three inter-related stories that recount how the young 'light Other' Anton Gorodetsky gains initial experience as a field worker for the Moscow night watch, gradually gaining insight into the 'twilight' world of the guards. Right in the first story, by showing sympathy for a guilt-ridden woman named Svetlana who refused to donate a kidney to her mother, he manages to prevent a dark vortex from breaking out above Moscow with the force of an atomic bomb. Moreover, he saves a little boy called Yegor, who has the abilities of an extraordinary magician, from eternal 'twilight'.

On the level of the characters, the stories are about conflicts within the nuclear family and among close friends, in which Anton must prove his integrity. In the first story, he is facing mother/daughter (Svetlana and her mother) or father/son constellations (Anton and Yegor), while in the second story Anton slips into a woman's body and is confronted with a 'light' magician who intuitively kills all 'dark Others' without compromising and without regard for his own family. The third story is about Anton's love for a woman (Svetlana) who is destined for higher tasks, which is why he is afraid of losing her. This makes it clear what renders fantasy so attractive: conflicts of adolescence are blown up to the gigantic proportions of vital questions with a global political significance.

The solutions to these conflicts that the novel offers reveal the trained psychiatrist that is Lukyanenko. Again and again they are discussed in endless conversations, but their message is clear as day: there are no unequivocally good or bad decisions, every supposedly good deed has its

analysis

dark side; we cannot escape ambivalence and entanglements: we must accept compromise and even injustice, but remain clear about the basic choice on whether we belong to the 'light ones' or the 'dark ones'. For the 'dark ones' act only for the sake of their own happiness, set individual freedom as an absolute value, and do not care at whose expense their wealth is earned. The 'light ones', on the contrary, must take account of humankind in general. They act out of the conviction that happiness can only be achieved collectively and with regard for the needs and peculiarities of all people. In this quest, egoistic interests must step back, and the aim justifies the means.

Ideological References and Fantasy Solutions

It is on this level, if not elsewhere, that this becomes an ideological novel about world politics. It is ultimately concerned with the alternative between a '(post-)Soviet' and an 'American' social model. The novel does not broach this issue explicitly, but the author constantly hints at it in describing who smokes Russian cigarettes and who smokes American ones, who drinks what alcoholic beverages or listens to what kind of rock music. The domestic or 'secret' political dimension of this alternative is presented no less subtly: the two watches are competing organisations vying to get the upper hand in Moscow. Historical allusions, the biographies of staff members, or the methods of operation liken the 'light ones' to the (post-)Soviet secret service, whereas the 'dark ones' are similar to the military or police.

Such allusions make it possible to read the novel as a scenario for an internal power struggle between different government bodies. Written a year and a half before the actual change of power

"Day Watch"

- 1 January 2006, 2 am, Moscow, Cinema "October":
  Launch of the film and biggest New Year's party in town with actors, film crew and invited guests; guests are welcomed by armed 'Hosts of Darkness', Vampires and Wizards and enter their realm through a smokescreen.
- 1–4 January 2006: More than 2 million spectators (in the countries of the former Soviet Union)
- 1–8 January 2006: Film grosses 17.5 million US-dollars
- From February 2006: Film will be available on DVD

Advertising campaign: began in mid-November 2005 in Moscow

- From 11 December: adverts on TV and on billboards
- From 15 December: 15-second trailers are shown in supermarkets (at the cash registers) and at cash dispensers (still photographs and short film clips): on retrieving his/her bankcard the customer is asked by the witch Darya: "Have you forgotten why you came here?"
- 21 December: launch of the official website of the film *http://dozorfilm.ru*, which declared the film a "blockbuster" even before the official launch
- Electronic edition of the book for desktop computers and cell phones
- 24–27 December: readings by the author in major book stores

(Source: *http://www.dozorfilm.ru/main6.html*, 10 January 2006)

analysis

in the Kremlin, it offers a solution to the conflict whereby the 'light' secret services gradually regain the upper hand over the 'dark' military and police forces who acquired power in the 1990s.[1] This interpretation is supported by the fact that the competition between Moscow's 'light ones' and 'dark ones' becomes less important in those scenes where the more deep-seated differences between American and Russian 'mentalities' are superimposed upon it. While in the first novel of the cycle the activities of the night watch remain restricted to Moscow, in the sequels they extend to the Crimea in Ukraine (*Day Watch*) and even as far as Scottish Edinburgh (*The Final Watch*). At the same time, 'Others' from the Baltics, Ukraine, and Asian republics become more and more influential with the 'dark ones'.

Now Sergey Lukyanenko is no Great Russian nationalist or open Putin supporter, even though he keeps making consciously provocative statements in this direction. Rather he knows how to link political allusions with references to Western and Soviet fantasy and science fiction works. Thus in the screen version of the novel, for which Lukyanenko wrote the script, these references to day-to-day and identity politics are clearly less important than the conventions of Western fantasy. Even the opening sequence explicitly refers to Peter Jackson's screen version of *The Lord of the Rings*; and the film is mainly based on the first story from the novel.

While the popular mass culture of the Yeltsin era was marked by a fascination with crime, 'bandit music', and the 'code-abiding' bandit milieu – a dubious world into which ordinary people may be drawn at any time – Lukyanenko's night watch puts a stop to all this. Similar to Kafka's gatekeeper before the law, they make sure the threshold to the dangers of the underworld, the dark temptations of the subconscious and shady, is not crossed. In terms of cultural history, Lukyanenko's 'Fantasy of the Path', as he calls his narrative technique, may be interpreted as a blueprint for a national identity that functions in the same way as the big fantasy and science fiction blockbusters from Hollywood. The Yeltsin era saw an unsuccessful search for a new National Idea, with big competitions and speeches; under Putin, this National Idea is being implemented in manifold ways. However, this implementation probably takes place not so much in the propagandistic speeches of the Orthodox Church or the political elites on the occasion of national holidays as in the crime novels of B. Akunin, Darya Dontsova, and Alexandra Marinina – or in Lukyanenko's fantasy novels.

Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Reading Suggestions:

- Sergei Lukyanenko, *Nightwatch: A novel*, Miramax-Weinstein. Due to be published in 2006.
- Birgit Menzel, 'Russian Science Fiction and Fantasy in Literature', Birgit Menzel and Stephen Lovell (eds.), *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia. Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, Munich, 2005, pp. 117–150.
- Author's official website with links to related sites: *http://www.rusf.ru/lukian/english/*

[1] The inquisition, however, sits in an invisible room hidden within the pinnacle of Moscow State University. By thus enthroning the sciences as the highest 'inquisitorial' arbiter, the novel inverts Soviet science fiction in a distinctly parodist way – a procedure that is also used in many other scenes and characters of the Watch series.

film review

"Night Watch": On the Power of Light and Darkness in Today's Moscow

Eva Binder

Night Watch (*Nochnoy dozor*) is a blockbuster – the first Russian film for years that has made it into cinemas in the United States as well as the key European markets, Germany and France. Russian film saw its last surge in international reception in the 1980s during perestroika. Back then everyone's interest focused on issues of politics, ideology, and cinema aesthetics. Today, a film's success is measured by market criteria. Thus, a discussion of production costs (4 million dollars in this case, a relatively low figure by international standards) and box-office takings (16 million dollars in Russia) has become a fixture in film reviews and advertising copy.

Labelled as a fantasy thriller, the film is full of horror scenes, blood and gore, action, and apocalyptic themes, complete with psychic characters and accessories. Aesthetically it enthrals the viewer with breathtaking cuts, abundant special effects and computer-generated scenes, unusual camera angles, elaborate masks, and mythical medieval weapons and battle scenes. They capture the audience's attention much more than the sometimes muddled logic of the plot or the stereotyped characters.

Hidden from the population of contemporary Moscow, a struggle is taking place between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, whose balance is guaranteed by a centuries-old armistice. On the side of light there is the night watch, people endowed with psychic powers, on the side of darkness there is the day watch: vampires, witches, and masters of black magic. The protagonist is Anton, one of the night watchmen, who is cast as an ordinary guy. He is supposed to protect a boy from two vampires. The characters are as tightly interwoven as the main story lines and minor plots, which never let the suspense flag. Apart from vampires on the hunt and sword-fighting warriors, this also includes disasters averted at the last moment. And above it all there hovers an ancient prophecy about the advent of an "Other" who will be more powerful than all previous "Others" and will sway the struggle between light and darkness in favour of one of the sides.

The logic of this blockbuster's success is based on the effects of advertising, understood as a dominant feature both of the film's formal aesthetics and of its content and ideology. Its market ideology appears most strikingly in the form of unashamed product placement. Packets of coffee and mugs with 'Nescafé' written across them repeatedly come into view. As in commercials, the film sends out numerous calculated messages, which may resonate differently with different viewers. This way the director, himself a creator of well-known advertising spots, succeeds in appealing to a highly diverse public. He reaches Russian cinema goers, who expect a familiar world and a dense account full of humorous and ironic allusions, as well as European and American viewers.

The film's recipe for success resides above all in its genre. Moreover *Night Watch* is based on a

Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 10. December 2004:
"More and more people are calling up the police asking for protection from werewolves, vampires, and other evil spirits. School teachers are also complaining: instead of studying, even the most assiduous children divide themselves into 'light ones' and 'vampires' and go 'other'-hunting. […] Interestingly, such patent manifestations of 'watch' psychosis are more characteristic of the provinces – in Moscow, the 'others' are keeping a lower profile."

film review

four-part novel series by Sergey Lukyanenko that came out between 1998 and 2005 and is extremely popular in Russia. International viewers who are not familiar with this literary source will mainly be attracted by the genre itself. American films such as *Matrix*, *Underworld*, *Blade* or *The Lord of the Rings* serve as a rich intertext in terms of both formal aesthetics and content. Like the adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Bekmambetov's film has been conceived from the beginning as a multi-part sequence. The sequel, entitled *Dnevnoy dozor* (*Day Watch*) was launched in Russia on 1 January 2006. Twentieth Century Fox, which has bought international distribution rights to the first two films, has a share in part three, which will therefore be shot directly in English.

Although *Night Watch* follows the trends of international genre cinema, the scene and its realities are rooted in Russian culture, and Bekmambetov and his team keep referring back to perestroika-era cinema with their sometimes gloomy portrayal of the Russian capital. Thus the film shows the Moscow of tower blocks, run-down apartments and staircases with their Soviet-era doors, bells, or lamps, and draws on the colourful everyday life of the present day: a little old Russian lady appears in the staircase of a block of flats; a vampire works as a butcher at a Moscow market, handling blood and raw meat; the night watchmen drive a sparking Soviet-era van. The Russian public thus savours the familiar, while international viewers are invited to take a close look at a world as yet unknown to them.

Indeed, the cast will only be familiar to Russian cinema goers. Bekmambetov casts stars of contemporary Russian pop culture (the film star Maria Mironova, the rock star Ilya Lagutenko) as well as veteran Soviet celebrities (Valery Zolotukhin, Vladimir Menshov, Rimma Markova) who promise reminiscences of Soviet cinema as well as certain standards of quality.

In what may be perceived as a message to the Russian public, the American pattern is in fact subverted. Thus the world of light and darkness is not at all black and white, as would have been expected, for although good does combat evil, it also receives license to perform its own dark deeds and drive the boy (who is the one announced as the powerful 'Other') into the arms of the forces of darkness. Thus even Bekmambetov's very up-to-date techniques are not without a certain reference to cultural traditions: the approach of the director, who was born in Kazakhstan in 1961, is to send subtle messages that not everyone will understand, which reminds one of Soviet directors working under ideological pressure during the Time of Stagnation.

(*Nochnoy dozor*, 2004, 115 min., *First Channel*, directed by Timur Bekmambetov)

Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Eva Binder is an assistant professor at Innsbruck University's Institute of Slavic Studies. Her research focuses on Russian and Soviet cinema in the context of Russian culture. Her doctoral dissertation was about 'Constructions of identity in post-Soviet Russian film'.

Reading suggestion:
David MacFadyen, 'Timur Bekmambetov: Night Watch', kinokultura 6 (October 2004), available at:
http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R104dozor.html

analysis

B. Akunin's Fandorin Saga: To Be Continued?

Yulia Idlis

With their record circulation figures and crowd-pulling screen versions, Akunin's 'literary projects' embody a new type of literary production in contemporary Russia. The special attractiveness of his novels is a result of their multi-layered nature: they can be read as captivating entertainment or as ambitious literary texts, while at the same time combining different genres and time levels. Akunin's marketing strategies are just as varied. They partly hark back to historical models and partly explore the boundaries and possibilities of contemporary market and genre structures in a playful way.

The writer Boris Akunin does not write books. He produces 'literary projects', and the primogenitor of all his projects is the detective Erast Petrovich Fandorin.

Akunin's Fandorin series fulfils the innermost fantasies of those contemporary readers who are weary of postmodernist 'intellectual literature' yet despise undisguised pulp fiction such as police novels or love stories. The novels about Erast Fandorin are 'new detective novels': a hybrid of contemporary literary tendencies such as playing ironic games with the horizon of readers' expectations or intertextual references. They are cast as gripping detective stories set in 19th century Russia.

Akunin's novels, like for example those of Umberto Eco, can be read on several levels: in terms of their plot they are simply absorbing detective stories; on the level of literary allusions they can be read as collections of quotes or a kind of 'literature reader', a post-modern parody that explores the boundaries of the literary. The search for quotations in Akunin's novels – sentences, dates, characters, or even storylines – in itself turns into an absorbing investigation. The Akunin fan site *www.fandorin.ru* features a section where readers can publish the results of their research. Thus, for example, *The Winter Queen* begins in Moscow in May 1876 – just when Anna Karenina from Leo Tolstoy's novel throws herself under a train at a station near Moscow. In *Murder on the Leviathan*, the newspaper item about the murder on the rue de Grenelle is signed 'G. du Roy'; as some readers may remember, Georges Duroy is the pseudonym of the journalist from Guy de Maupassant's novel *Bel Ami*.

Astride centuries

By crossing two popular genres – the detective story and the historical novel – Akunin has made his brainchild intensely modern. Not for a minute are readers left alone with the 19th century; they are never allowed to forget the time in which they live. While chasing after criminals in a carriage, Fandorin, under stress, imagines a portable radio transmitter, something that of course will take another 50 years to materialise: 'Ah! If only I had a telephone set in the droshky … and could ring up Karachentsev to send a couple of carriages from the police station to head them off.' (*The Death of Achilles*).

In the first novel, *The Winter Queen*, we meet a still very young Fandorin; in the last novels of the series, he is nearing 50. The series spans the period from 1876 to 1905 – an age of new technologies, which saw the appearance of telephone communications and the gramophone, as well as fingerprinting, a technical breakthrough in detective work. This enables the author constantly to allude to the present by surrounding events known from history textbooks with a 20th or even 21st-century technological aura.

But it is not only the new technologies that do not let readers forget the present while allowing them to become thoroughly engrossed in the historical plot. Attentive readers will spot the tempo-

ral traps that Akunin distributes across the text. Thus in the novel *The State Councillor*, one of the characters is reading 'the fashionable *Herald of Foreign Literature*'; some readers may remember that Grigory Chkhartishvili, the creator of both Fandorin and Akunin himself, was for a long time editor at the *Foreign Literature* journal.

All these games with the readers make Akunin's novels work as a stereo-system, resonating between past and present, between truth and fiction, between Grigory Chkhartishvili and Boris Akunin. In the Fandorin series, Akunin gave the 19th century a contemporary psychology; in his early and little-known collection of stories *Tales for Idiots*, in contrast, he endowed contemporary characters with the lofty way of thinking that we tend to associate with the century before last. Instead of the well-known contemporary tabloid *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (*The Moscow Komsomol Member*) there is a paper called *Moskovsky Bogomolets* (*The Moscow Pilgrim*). Fanciful explanations are given for well-known political events, for example a fairy called Limousine appears before the oligarch Boris Berezovsky and unveils electoral campaign secrets to him, and the characters act upon the most noble of motives: Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, is portrayed as a hero who joined the party on purpose in order to destroy this 'sect' from within by sacrificing himself to public opinion.

This simple device is based on the use of gaps in knowledge – in history and in literary plots – which may be filled with anything. We do not know what the juvenile tsarevitch Mikhail Georgievich did during the month before the coronation of the last tsar, Nicholas II. The official account is that he got measles and died; but one may well surmise that he was kidnapped and killed (as in the novel *The Coronation*). We do not know the reasons for which the sculptor Zurab Tsereteli is covering the centre of Moscow with his huge, ugly monuments; but one may fancy that Tsereteli is an alien who is thus sending signals to his home planet (as in the story *Tefal, you are thinking of us* from the *Tales for Idiots*).

Akunin works with our historical memory in a very distinctive way: he chooses moments in Russian history that are traumatic for the national consciousness and at the same time highly mythologised: the battle of Plevna, the Russian-Japanese war, the terrorist bomb attacks in the second half of the 19th century, the Time of Troubles etc – events that Russia has little to be proud about. Thus, for example, the battle of Plevna is always seen in a heroic light, despite the fact that the Russian troops actually suffered a defeat. Moreover, by selecting these particular events in Russian history, Akunin places his characters in surroundings that will be familiar to his readers: all these historical events are studied as part of the compulsory school curriculum in history, and everybody knows about them, usually in the form of popular historical 'myths'. These 'mythologised' moments of history provide the author with a convenient stage to sway the destinies of his literary, fictional characters, because fiction and fact meet at these moments, turning history into myth.

Marketing strategies

Akunin employs the time gap between past and future not only in literature, but also in his use of the market mechanisms of the book trade. The Fandorin series followed the publishing principles of 19th century novels that came out in instalments and broke off at the most interesting moment. At the end of every new adventure of Erast Fandorin, Zakharov Publishers included the first chapter of the next novel, so that later readers would not just read a new book but finish reading one they had already started. Having begun

analysis

with print runs that would have been unimaginable for previous 'intellectual detective stories' (50–70,000), Akunin kept producing new stories about Fandorin; and as is well known, constancy is a powerful drug.

A detective novel is a one-off book; one that is read but not re-read. Few readers will want to return to a puzzle already solved, and that is why every new book from the Fandorin series was doomed to succeed. In Russia alone, Akunin's books have had a circulation of 11 million, and they have been translated into more than 30 languages. And this was only the beginning: *Turkish Gambit* was made into a film, and Zakharov Publishers have already published a new edition of the novel illustrated with film stills. There is also a screen version of *The State Councillor*, with an all-star cast including Nikita Mikhalkov, Oleg Menshikov, Oleg Tabakov. Akunin's detective play *Yin and Yang* has seen its premiere, and Grigory Chkhartishvili and Artemy Lebedev are putting the finishing touches to a project to create an interactive electronic book. Boris Akunin and Grigory Chkhartishvili have 'jointly' published a book called *Graveyard Stories*, with novellas by the former and essays by the latter about famous graveyards in various countries. Finally, February 2005 saw the publication of three books from Akunin's new 'Genres' project: *Children's Book*, *Espionage Novel*, and *Fantasy*.

The 'Genres' Project

In his new literary project, Akunin has decided to change his strategy: instead of letting readers wait, he published three novels almost at the same time. The writer may be said to be exploring not only the boundaries of various genres and the structure of the novel, but also the mechanisms of the book market as well as marketing strategies in literature. In the case of the Fandorin series readers swallowed book for book without having a choice, because every new novel came out after a period of intense expectation. With the 'Genres' Akunin allows his readers to compare three books simultaneously published and pick a genre to their liking.

Does this mean that Boris Akunin and his publishers are not afraid of 'scattering' the crowds of readers, confident that even at such circulation figures (*Children's Book* and *Espionage Novel* had an initial print run of 150,000 each; for *Fantasy* the figure is 100,000) every book will find an

Illustration: Screenshot from www.akunin.ru/main.html

audience? Does it mean that 'Boris Akunin' has turned into a brand name stable enough to ensure that readers will always be prepared to buy up any quantity of his books?

All three of the 'Genres' books made the *Moskva* bookshop's top ten best-sellers' list as soon as they were published, none of them below the sixth place. It may already be stated with confidence that 'Boris Akunin' is a literary blockbuster on a par with *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. And while these British narratives belong to the fantasy genre, Akunin's *Fantasy* (to judge by its print run and rating) is in fact the least popular of the three novels. Judging by the dynamics of demand for *The Lord of the Rings* and everything related to it, Boris Akunin is in for another forty years of success, and fans are going to buy up any items displaying their idol's cherished name, starting with T-shirts printed with stills from Dzhanik Fayziev's film *Turkish Gambit*.

Moreover, the 'Genres' are not in fact genres. The three books from the new series occupy top places in *Moskva's* overall rating, but if we look at ratings by genre – 'detective novels', 'children's fiction', or 'fantasy' – we find a different picture. Each of these genres has its own leader: in Russian fantasy, it is Sergey Lukyanenko (unsurprisingly, after *Night Watch* hit the screens), while Alexandra Marinina and Daria Dontsova still top the list of best-selling Russian detective stories.

The Fandorin Saga

The 'Genres' are in fact a continuation of the saga about the big and restless Fandorin family: Lastik (Eraser), the main character in *Children's Book*, is a great-grandson of Erast Petrovich Fandorin himself; the ancestors of the hero of *Espionage Novel*, Yegor Dorin, were natives of a village owned by the Fandorin family; and Dronov and Darnovsky (sic) from *Fantasy* are so similar to the characters in the other two books that by the middle of the novel even the author gets confused about them. In *Fantasy,* Dronov is sometimes called Dorin, leaving the reader to guess whether this is an accidental typing error or due to the proof-reader's malice, or whether the author is winking at the attentive reader from behind the printing-press.

Akunin has always been good at creating works that have unexpected, hidden meanings. The first example of this deceptiveness is his pseudonym, which turns out to be a Japanese word (*akunin* = evildoer, scoundrel), but also reminds one of the anarchist Bakunin. In the new series, it is the genre designations that are deceptive: the novel about Lastik does not belong to the genre of 'children's literature', as the advertising campaign would have it, it is in fact a 'unibook' in which the boy finds answers to all his questions. *Espionage Novel* does not belong to the genre of the title; rather it is a love story between Dorin and young Nadezhda intertwined with the search for a German spy and other 'virile games'. *Fantasy*, however, is indeed pure fantasy: it does seem fanciful that two supermen heroes should fall so madly in love with a little village fool, and a mute one at that!

Readers who see through this simple hoax may sigh with relief: what they are offered is not another post-modernist textual construct that explores the formal boundaries of the genre and of literature as a whole. It is yet another story about Fandorin who, like Superman, Batman, Spiderman and Vladimir Lenin, is forever alive and prepared to fight evil in all its manifestations. The more attentively one looks at the 'Genres', the more familiar features begin to show through the 20th century setting.

The Fandorins' family quirk is their striving to restore justice. And since there are 64 carats more evil than good in the world – that is the exact weight of the Paradise Apple that Lastik is look-

ing for – the large clan of born gentleman-detectives will always find something to do. The hero of the *Children's Book* has not been able to destroy the centre of global evil, which means that a wide sphere of action remains open to all the other (Fan)Dorins.

Erast Petrovich, the forefather of the Fandorins of all times and peoples, is getting more famous with every new book by Akunin. After vaguely referring to him in *Altyn-Tolobas* and *Extracurricular Reading*, in *Children's Book* the author says bluntly: 'Fandorin is a great detective who has been the subject of books and even films'. The action takes place in 2006 and the *Children's Book* appeared in February 2006 – at which time Fandorin really was 'the subject of books and even films' already, which of course justifies this boasting.

Series characters-to-be

Having turned to Erast Fandorin's descendants as well as the scions of Fandorin family offshoots, Akunin has provided himself with work for many years to come. The writer has left enough blank spots in his hero's long and secret life to clone ever new descendants who will be fearless, lucky, starry-eyed and, above all, just.

Akunin has turned every 'Genre' into the potential beginning of a new series by making every book end with the sentence 'To be continued…'. In the near future we may indeed expect every one of them to be continued, depending on which of the writer's characters will have the greatest appeal to the public. So far the public is voting for Yegor Dorin: the *Espionage Novel* has left behind both the *Children's Book* and *Fantasy* in terms of copies sold.

The 'Genres' project has every prospect of being carried into the list of best-sellers in the wake of the only genre in which Akunin is unrivalled: the 'stylised intellectual detective story'. Detective novels pure and simple have for a long time been automatically dismissed as 'pulp novels', and so an additional attribute was needed before the word 'detective'. The 'hermetic detective story', the 'espionage detective story', the 'conspiratorial detective story' – all of these have ultimately become synonymous with the 'Akunin detective story' or the 'Fandorin novel' understood in a generic sense. A genre all of its own.

But a glut of literature of one particular type on the book market creates new niches on that market. The market for Russian detective stories was flooded with Alexandra Marinina and Daria Dontsova, and so Akunin emerged with his stylizations. Once the Russian book market has been saturated by Akunin, someone else will come into view.

Back in 1998, at the very beginning of his project, Akunin/Chkhartishvili gave a talk to undergraduate and postgraduate students at Moscow State University's Faculty of Philology. When asked by a member of the audience: 'Aren't you afraid that some P. Ushkin will appear and write sequels to your Fandorin adventures?' Akunin replied: 'No, I'm not afraid of that' and 'That would even be interesting'. So far Fandorin's godfather is writing so fast that no Ushkin could ever keep pace with him. But should he ever reduce his speed, the niche of the 'Akunin detective story' will immediately be flooded with new best-sellers written by new novelists.

Translated from the Russian by
Mischa Gabowitsch

About the author:
Julia Idlis, Moscow, is a journalist and film critic. Her academic interests include the interaction of literature and film, and the transmediality as a category of contemporary culture.

analysis

Suggested readings:

- Sofya Khagi, 'Boris Akunin and Retro Mode in Contemporary Russian Culture', Toronto Slavic Quarterly 13 (2005), available at *http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/13/khagi13.shtml*
- Official websites (only in Russian):
  - *www.akunin.de*
  - *www.fandorin.de*

Boris Akunin in English:

Series: The Erast Fandorin mysteries (Random House):
Turkish Gambit: A Novel
Murder on the Leviathan: A Novel
The Winter Queen: A Novel
The Death of Achilles: A Novel (due to be published in April 2006).

Series: The Sister Pelagia Mysteries (Weidenfeld & Nicholson)
Pelagia and the White Bulldog. The First Sister Pelagia Mystery (due to be published in May / June 2006).

Novels planned for this series:
Pelagia and The Black Monk
Pelagia and The Red Cockerel

All of Akunin's novels which have appeared so far in English were translated by the renowned translator Andrew Bromfield, who has already translated the cult author Pelevin into English.

film review

"Turkish Gambit" – Sacrificing a Pawn for a Box-Office Hit?

Andrei Rogatchevski

Ever since Russian publishing fell on hard times in the early 1990s, launching books as part of a series has become one of the industry's strategies of survival. If an entire series focuses on the same central character(s), its structural principles have a great deal in common with the genre of TV drama series, and the appearance of a televised version of a successful book cycle is only a matter of time.

It is in this context that the screen adaptations of Boris Akunin's novels should be considered. It comes as no surprise that before signing a contract with *Channel One*, which plans to produce the screen versions of every single book in the cycle about the late 19th-century Russian detective Erast Fandorin, Akunin was also approached by the NTV and *Rossiia* ('Russia') channels. The first novel in the cycle, *Azazel*, was adapted for the small screen in 2002 by Aleksandr Adabashian. Now comes the turn of the second, *Turetskii gambit*. Marking the increasing significance of the First Channel as a major film producer, *Turetskii gambit* has been filmed not only as a four-part serial, but also as a motion picture released to a record box office success in February 2005.

The action in *Turetskii gambit* unfolds against the background of the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish war and centres on the siege of the Plevna fortress in July–November 1877. 'Gambit' is a chess term that refers to making a sacrifice in order to gain an advantage, and as the Plevna siege significantly delayed the Russian advance in the Balkans, Akunin finds it appropriate to call it 'the Turkish gambit'. He ascribes the difficulties experienced by the Russian troops in the course

film review

of the siege to the actions of a fictional Turkish spy, Anvar-Efendi, whose identity Fandorin is trying to establish.

With filming on location in Bulgaria, period costumes and battle scenes, an extensive investment was required, and the project had been patently commercial from its inception. As Konstantin Ernst, the *Channel One*'s Director General and *Turetskii gambit*'s co-producer, put it, they had not given up on a risky idea of making mainstream films in the country where art house cinema reigns supreme. *Gambit*'s budget is estimated to be somewhere between 3.5 and 5 million US dollars, which is approximately three to five times higher than the current average for a Russian feature film. Recovering the costs – no easy feat by any means – would already be praiseworthy. *Gambit*, however, grossed over 18 million US dollars in the first five weeks after its release. This is, quite simply, the highest box-office figure since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A film for the whole family

Akunin's script has undoubtedly played an important part in *Gambit*'s remarkable success. Still, Akunin's fan base would hardly guarantee the film's profitability on its own. Powerful special effects allowing the viewer to get inside both Fandorin's brain during the detection process and a shrapnel shell that is about to explode, have been obviously designed with a younger audience in mind, i.e. those who spend more time playing computer games than reading books. On the other hand, *Gambit*'s epic battle scenes, reminiscent of Sergei Bondarchuk's four-part Oscar winner *Voina i mir* (War and Peace, 1965), and the general atmosphere of patriotic pride – Russia extending its mighty arm to aid brother Slavs – appeal primarily to the older generation. This generation feels rather nostalgic about the times when the Soviet Union positioned itself as Europe's liberator from the Nazi oppression – and could easily afford mounting film productions on a grand scale. It is not coincidental that Egor Beroev, who plays the part of Fandorin, claims that *Gambit* 'is not an imitation of Hollywood but a return to the candid and highly professional films that were made in the USSR'. In fact, *Gambit* is more about Hollywood-style commercialism in a pseudo-Soviet wrapper.

It is hardly surprising that *Gambit* has been advertised as a 'film that has something for the whole family. Such films are the most successful when it comes to the box office, and they are precisely the kind of films which modern Russian cinema does not have enough of'. However, some sceptically minded critics believe that *Gambit* is an attempt to please everyone, which predictably results in a 'spectacle, impeded by its mixed genre, confused tone and unclear goals'. Firstly, the film is not sufficiently fast-paced for an action flick. Secondly, it is not lyrical enough for a romance; the budding relationship between Fandorin and his unlikely assistant, a young and rather naïve lady called Varvara, is undermined at the outset by her dogged faithfulness to her fiancé, whom she followed to the frontline. And thirdly, it is not accurate enough for a historical drama; contrary to what the filmgoer is lead to believe, magazine rifles were not invented yet and even the bravest Russian general could not have possibly shouted at the Russian emperor. Besides, the genuinely impressive special effects are a little out of place in a motion picture set in the 1870s, when even exotic but legitimate props, unwarranted by Akunin's book, such as a hot air balloon and a steam powered car, look somewhat suspicious.

As a result of all this eclecticism, the two leads Egor Beroev and Olga Krasko appear to be confused as to what exactly they are expected to act

film review

out, and their creative input is reduced mostly to a representation of youthful freshness. Several outstanding actors, such as Andrei Krasko (NCO) and Leonid Kuravlev (Major), also seem to be wasted, as they have been inexplicably engaged in the 'blink and you'll miss me' parts.

The success formula for a national box-office hit?

As for the film's goals, its creators claim that their only aspiration is to entertain the public; they even admitted to using feedback from focus groups to fine-tune the subtleties of the visual presentation of the subject matter. Some observers have noted, however, that *Gambit*'s counter-espionage topic would particularly please at least one very significant member of the public, i.e. President Putin, and others have alleged that by trying to be all things to all people, Ernst, Faiziev and Co. embark on a mission of messianic proportions, to produce a success formula for a national blockbuster.

Gambit's commercial triumph seems to suggest that such a formula has indeed been discovered. This achievement should be put into perspective, though. *Gambit*'s revenue constitutes almost a 1/20 share of the projected 2005 annual Russian film revenue, currently estimated to be at 350 million US dollars, whereas the US cinema release figures for the first half of 2005 alone amount to 4.34 billion US dollars. Moreover, the audience's enthusiastic cinema attendance should reportedly be credited to the First Channel's relentless TV advertising campaign, rather than to the film's artistic qualities, which, some suggest, have been sacrificed in compliance with the chess term of the title. Between 5 January and 12 March 2005, the First Channel spent 435 minutes of its broadcasting time on *Gambit*'s promotion, which is approximately equivalent to US$4m worth of advertising revenue. This has lead to an official enquiry, submitted to the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation by the Duma deputy Aleksandr Lebedev, as to whether the channel has actually received any payment for the *Gambit* ads.

The quality of the *Gambit* two-and-a-quarter-minute preview reel itself, however, has not been called into question by anyone. On the contrary, some critics believe it to be sufficiently representative of the film to advise the filmgoer to refrain from watching *Gambit* in its entirety and to spend the saved time more wisely, such as devoting it, for instance, to (re-)reading Akunin's book instead.

(*Turetski Gambit*; 2005, 132 min., *TriTe Studios / First Channel*, director Dzhanik Faiziev)

About the author:

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Suggested reading:

Elena Prokhorova / Alexander Prokhorov, 'Dzhanik Faiziev, Turkish Gambit', Kinokultura 10 (October 2005), available at: *http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R10-05-gambit.html*