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Translating the Untranslatable: Cosmopolitan Oscar Wilde on Soviet Television

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ABSTRACT

This article explores TV adaptations of Oscar Wilde's plays and prose on the Soviet television of the so-called "stagnation" era of the late 1960s-early 1980s. Though seemingly ideologically alien to the USSR, Wilde was a widely read and popular young-adult writer for the duration of the Soviet period. I will point to possible reasons for this unlikely popularity and look at two made-for-TV adaptations: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1976) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1968). As a queer cosmopolitan author, Wilde translates into, and undermines, a virulently anti-cosmopolitan culture. The adaptations in question use the guise of addressing and educating a young-adult audience to transmute queerness and the art-for-art's-sake philosophy (both of which I identify with cosmopolitanism) into an ideologically hostile environment that delegitimizes them. Such adaptations both embody and pave the way for the more worldly and individualistic (in the Western sense of the word) art of the 1970, which, in turn, helped along the anti-totalitarian arc of the 1980s.

Keywords: Adaptation, cosmopolitanism, Oscar Wilde, Soviet cultural studies, queer, television studies, untranslatable

WHY WILDE?

For those who were born and raised behind the Iron Curtain and, as adults, focused their research on the various incarnations of the green carnation, the symbol of the queer wing of the aesthetic movement often sported by Wilde himself and his disciples, confusion is palpable. For decades, Oscar Wilde has served as the symbol of queer resistance to normativity; the decadent resistance to wholesomeness; early modernism's resistance to Victorian realism; of the at once anarchic and individualistic resistance to the pieties of Victorian imperialism, the condescending charity of the upper classes, and looming statist authoritarianism. Wilde is the ultimate cosmopolitan individualist writer, whose ideas were popularized by the Silver Age movement that sought to bring Western values into Russia. Yet, in a society virulently opposed to cosmopolitanism for the majority of its history, until the famed Perestroika movement of the mid- to late 1980s, Wilde steadily remained a popular author.

The Soviet television adaptations of two of his major works, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1976) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1968) contain unexpected and subversive elements of cosmopolitan aestheticism. The adaptations celebrate art for art's sake, impossible in the age of ideological art and the predominance of socialist realism, while also allowing the audience to see illegal and illicit same-sex desire on screen. These stagnation-era adaptations exemplify a transition towards inward-looking, individualistic art, illustrative of the decaying dominant ideologies of the late Soviet era, as well as anticipate, and indirectly bring about, the anti-authoritarian movements of the mid-eighties, which literally and figuratively destroyed the Iron Curtain.

The cosmopolitan potential of Soviet and Russian culture is debatable, especially in light of the current political situation, but it is common for Wilde's work to bring out the potential of resistance even to the most untranslatable and impenetrable of circumstances. For the purposes of my analysis, I characterize cosmopolitanism as a conglomeration of at least three basic traits: 1) A distinctly inward, rather than communal, orientation; 2) A transnational, or transcultural, rather than nationalist, bent in artistic expression, and 3) A rejection of normative, familial heterosexuality as the norm, related but not limited exclusively to Wilde's work.^[1] Since this essay locates itself in a specific cultural and historical context, I also posit that cosmopolitan art presents an additional challenge to the collectivist, ideology-driven, and anti-formalist (that is to say, opposed to formal experimentation and supportive of a specific type of pro-Soviet content) film and television production of the Soviet period.

The adaptations in question are cosmopolitan precisely because, along with other films of the period, made for the big and small screen, they stand against the aforementioned artistic conventions and, in their values and style, reach beyond the metaphorical and literal borders of the late Soviet Empire.

On the heels of a 2011-2012 Parisian exhibit titled “Beauty, Morals, and Voluptuousness in the England of Oscar Wilde,” in 2014 the Pushkin Museum in Moscow held an event dedicated to Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, both as collaborators and separate artistic entities. The curators put together a catalog to accompany the exhibit, in which they detailed not only the biographies of the two artists but also their relationship to the artistic movements of the pre-1917 Russia. In particular, the copy of the catalogue argues that two Russian journals, published in the early twentieth century, over a decade after Wilde’s death, sought to connect the Silver Age movement in Russia (arguably, a belated incarnation of the aesthetic movement in Europe) to the hope of bringing the cosmopolitan values into the nationalist, agrarian, and insulated Tsarist Russia.

Wilde, then, has a long history of being a representative cosmopolitan in Russia. According to the exhibition catalogue, the first Russian journal that put forth Wilde as a leading intellectual was *The Northern Messenger (Severnii Vestnik)* (1885-1899); subsequently, the journal *The World of Art (Mir Iskusstva)* assumed a similar stance regarding Wilde’s work and its significance. Both journals engaged European philosophy and, according to the curators, had distinctly westernized aspirations [“zapadnicheskie ustremeniya” (Oskar Uail’d 21)]. In the early twentieth century (around 1904), The Scorpion (Skorpion) publishing house promoted Wilde’s *oeuvre*, along with the work of Russian decadent and Symbolist poets. It must be noted that the word “westernized” (zapadnicheskii), still used in Russia, is essentially synonymous with “cosmopolitan.”^[2] Opposed to the nationalist ideologies and narratives of Russia’s unique culture, role, and destiny on the world stage, “westernized” ideas seek to link Russia to the rest of the world; the Symbolist and decadent poets published in these venues seek to make Russia part of the larger European art scene. But what happened after the Bolshevik takeover of October, 1917?

How is it possible, in other words, that Wilde became and remained, for decades, the Soviet Union’s favorite, as we would now say, young-adult writer? Why did the celebrated Russian and then Soviet poet, critic, and translator Korneii Chukovsky (himself known primarily as an author of poems aimed at young-adult audiences) write in his 1960 essay that “Oscar Wilde

has long since been our own Russian writer?" (qtd. in Bullock 251). The literary translations and film and television adaptations of his work were mainly aimed at children and young adults with one exception: the 1980 screen adaptation of *An Ideal Husband*, featuring a number of Soviet A-list stars, was the ultimate in the sophisticated adult fare. Anastasia G. Pease ("No More" 183-184) writes eloquently about the omnipresence of Oscar Wilde in her Soviet childhood and about finding out later how precarious and risky his presence actually was. She states insightfully that

[A] remarkable attribute of Wilde's popularity in the USSR was that his fame had been achieved with a careful excision of some of his works as well as most of his ideas and especially the details of his biography. The dates of birth were usually mentioned, along with his Irish connections and his most famous works. Apart from that, his life remained opaque and mysterious. The ideas he popularized, such as individualism and l'art pour l'art, were antithetical to the official dogma of the Soviet state. The word 'decadence' was a pejorative applied to the bourgeois excesses of the West.

Taking Pease's sharp focus on the paradox further, we might ask why Oscar Wilde, a thinker, writer, and personality so alien to the Soviet ideology, was selected to be the representative young-adult Western writer. One possible reason that Pease, as well as other scholars, notably Evgenii Bershtein and Betsy Moeller-Sally, provide is the powerful identification of the Russian modernists of the Russian Silver Age, mentioned above in relation to the Wilde/Beardsley's exhibit catalogue, with Wilde as an artist and a consummate creator of an artistic self. Bershtein ("Next" 295) moves beyond the exhibit catalogue's formalist stance and probes deeper into Russian cultural iconography:

[t]he explanation of the remarkable vitality of Wilde's Russian mythologies seems to be the easy adaptability of Wilde's life story to the discursive resources of Russian culture... Particularly relevant is the Russian nineteenth-century novelistic model of a hero's 'remaking his own essence' [...] Rooted in mythology and hagiography, this model [...] eventually shaped the modern and modernist conceptualizations of sexuality [...]

While for Bershtein, Wilde is a tormented, transformed Christ figure, for Betsy Moeller-Sally, whose essay predates the catalogue by fourteen years but largely agrees with its interpretation, the Irish icon is an epitome of a worldly, cosmopolitan style:

...the Russian response to Wilde often assumed the outer form of dandyism, with Wilde as the model it sought to emulate. As such, it was a manifestation of non-conformity

with conservative norms of behavior and also a mode of conspicuous, public self-expression...Wildeism participated in broader efforts on the part of the Symbolists, among others, to reconstruct and revitalize Russian culture, principally through transformation of the arts and of social norms (462).

Note that both Bershtein and Moeller-Sally look at pre-1917 Russian modernism, the ideological foundations of which are disconnected from, and often actively hostile to, Soviet ideology. But there is likely no continuity between this identification and the widespread acceptance of Wilde in the Soviet Union, as the Silver Age and post-1917 Russia could not be farther apart ideologically.

The second plausible explanation has to do with the principal Soviet criterion for publishing Western writers of various periods and origins: their concern with class struggle. The subject matter is certainly on Wilde's mind, from the scathing critique of upper-class slumming in *Dorian Gray* to reflections on charity and poverty in "The Happy Prince." However, Wilde is hardly wholly ideologically appropriate, overall: the peculiar combination of individualism and anarchism in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (despite the title, not a recommended reading in the Soviet Union) would not bolster the authority of an ageing Secretary General. Wilde's deployment by the Soviet ideological and cultural machine is a unique phenomenon deserving a separate consideration. Some television and cinematic adaptations (particularly those of his fairy tales) make use of Wilde's texts to send firm mainstream ideological messages to the malleable young; others, such as the ones on which I am focusing here, are an example of a Wilde text breaking through the seemingly impenetrable wall of censorship.

An additional explanation of Wilde's prominent position as a young-adult writer in the Soviet Union has to do directly with the erasure of Wilde's biography, noted by Pease. A reference to the erasure of his biography usually means the elision of Wilde's sexuality, trials, and imprisonment. As is well-known, homosexuality--or, as the Soviet law defined it, acts of sodomy (*muzhelozhestvo*) between two men--, was illegal in Russia through most of the Soviet period and until 1993. The notorious article 121.1 of the Soviet Constitution subjected gay men to a prison sentence of at least five years, and lesbians to repressive psychiatric treatments. The act of biographical erasure is simultaneously, I would argue, an act of infantilization. Strands of psychoanalysis see gay male desire as an incomplete Oedipal development or the persistence of the child's narcissistic ego-libido. It is important not to make a simplistic link between Soviet psychiatry and Freud. The former is more

reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century sexology with its male/female, soul/body binary. In fact, as Philip Ross Bullock notes, in the early 1920s, before Stalin's regime shut down any discussion of sexuality, the aforementioned Chukovsky wrote a version of his essay on Wilde in which he described Wilde "as having 'a poor woman's soul imprisoned in a man's body'" ("Not One of Us?" 258-259).

Nonetheless, the principle and logic of erasure appear to be similar in Wilde's case. The narrative of gay desire and imprisonment, too close for comfort, is subject to suppression, censorship, and the representation as a regression to childhood. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the Soviet Union was a tremendously popular young adult text treated primarily as a *Bildungsroman*. Readers, such as the young Anastasia Pease, were meant to identify Wilde mainly, if not exclusively, with childhood, the period of latent or immature sexuality, even though an unexpurgated English version was somehow in circulation as well. The youthful reader, for instance, took Basil Hallward at his word when he avows that he "never loved a woman" because he "never had the time" (Wilde *Dorian* 102). The challenge was different for those who did not read English. In his informative essay, Philip Ross Bullock notes the numerous omissions and distortions in Soviet-era translations. In what follow, I am suggesting that, despite the official versions of Wilde, at least two television adaptations of his work generally resist heteronormativity and allude to love between men.

COSMOPOLITAN ADAPTATIONS

I am first focusing on the 1968 made-for TV two-part film *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, written and directed by Valery Turbin and featuring Soviet A-list actors, Yuri Yakovlev as Lord Henry and Alexander Lazarev as Basil, as well as a respected theatre actor Valery Babyatinsky as Dorian. The sparsely produced film, or, in the parlance of the Soviet TV, a "teleplay" ("*telespektakl*") is, according to the opening credits, loosely based, or, to use the Russian phrasing again, "based on the motifs" of the original novel. The elegant translation is quite effective in conveying Wildean aphorisms. The principal plot points (the afternoon in Basil's studio and the meeting with Lord Henry; the brief courtship between Sibyl Vane and Dorian and her suicide; the near-fatal encounter with James Vane in the opium den; the murders of Basil Hallward and James Vane, and the final stabbing of the portrait) all comfortably fit in the span of two and a half hours.

The adaptation dates back to 1968, near the beginning of the stagnation period that coincided with Leonid Brezhnev's rule as the Secretary General until his death in 1982; economic and moral decline; the emergence and flourishing of dissident subcultures, and slightly more lax censorship, at least compared to the brutal earlier standards. It was the beginning of the end of the USSR, and artists, particularly filmmakers, both contributed to, and benefited from, the overall decay. The relatively obscure adaptation in question is an example of such duality. In *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era*, Alexander and Elena Prokhorov brilliantly describe the film and television of the period as making a subtle turn towards Western texts and values. Many films and television shows of the era focus on the individual emotions and private tribulations of an isolated and cynical Soviet citizen; many likewise make a departure from the socialist realism's requirement to supersede and subsume the individual by means of larger social and ideological forces. The authors claim that, among the predominant trends of the film and television of the 1970s, are the increased number of adaptations of classical works of literature, especially the Western ones; the whimsical aestheticized settings of films, which, according to the authors, helped directors avoid censorship, as well as the exploration of private lives and private spaces. The rejection of forced adaptation is coterminous and simultaneous with the relocation of the visual text into Western contexts and settings. Such relocation uses the two-pronged strategy of setting visual texts in other countries, real or imagined, or adapting the works of international authors to film and television. The adaptation of Wilde's texts illustrates both directions.

Although the adaptations in question are not melodramas, citing Alexander and Elena Prokhorov's extensive analysis of late Soviet melodramas is helpful in analyzing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as both follow similar, if not identical, ideological and artistic patterns of resistance and cosmopolitanism. The Prokhorovs write, "Yet, of all genres, melodrama most explicitly negotiated the collective/public and individual/private identities in late-Soviet culture, and many individual films provoked heated polemics in the press..." (149). They contend that

...late socialist melodramas offer a radical reevaluation of the genre. Not only are the private identity and the nuclear family at the center of those films, but more often than not they are incompatible with collectivist goals or state service—the very core of socialist realism. New phenomena—the rise of the urban professional middle class, the role of consumerism in a nuclear family, redefined gender roles in the

family and society—eventually form the structure-bearing conventions that constitute melodramatic syntax, gradually watering down socialist realism and challenging its meanings. (150)

Moreover,

On the surface, of course, late-Soviet melodrama paid lip-service to the achievements of the socialist state and did not openly challenge its institutions. Many films of the period are set in modest but comfortable households and families want for nothing—at least materially. But this is precisely where the late-Soviet melodrama broke the mold of socialist realism, by evoking the spiritual realm beyond the world of Soviet ideology and the everyday—what Peter Brooks calls ‘the moral occult.’ (153)

The scholars conclude:

In short, late-Soviet melodrama redefines the future-looking temporality typical of socialist realist narratives. Instead, it captures, celebrates, and mourns ‘the radiant past,’ conveying a sense of loss and an unbridgeable gap between utopia and empirical reality...[.]just as surely they document the death of utopia, which leaves devastation in its stead. (157)

The made-for-TV *Dorian Gray* does precisely what the more popular melodramas do: privilege the private over the public; focus on interiority (including sexuality), and introduce the normally marginalized, or altogether prohibited, spiritual component.

As in the 1976 adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in this made-for-TV film, the issue of class, central to Soviet art, and, for different reasons, equally central to Wilde’s own thinking, appears to be virtually insignificant and gives way to reflections on art and Christian morality. The inward turn may account, at least in part, for the marginalization of the class aspect of Dorian’s conflict with the Vane family, from poisoned Sibyl to hunted James. Dorian’s slow destruction of the Vane family is the novel’s foremost class conflict. Part of it also takes place in (Wilde’s idea of) nature, Dorian’s country house and the surrounding forest, where Dorian Gray shoots Vane, bent on avenging his sister’s suicide, during a hunting outing. The setting of the film (due to the conventions and limitations of the made-for-TV film, but only partly so) never moves out into nature, taking place in an artist’s studio and aristocratic living rooms. This adaptation, then, follows quite closely Wilde’s own celebration of indoors and the artificiality of nature as a human construct.

Stylistically, this is a refusal to emphasize a plot line that is distant from the dilemmas of life, art, and individual self-fashioning.

Instead, the adaptation resorts to Christianity as a way of condemning the protagonist's behavior, in that respect echoing Wilde's own seemingly repentant approach to aestheticism and hedonism. In the TV version, the cynical Lord Henry quotes Matthew 12:16 to his younger friend when discussing his almost-seduction of Hetty and murder of Basil: "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul"? (*Portret* 2:12:07). The Biblical reference does not appear in the 1891 edition of the novel and emerges surprisingly from the militantly atheistic and stringently censored bowels of the Soviet state-sponsored television. Though the New Testament is not explicitly mentioned as a source (in an officially "scientifically atheist" state, it could not have been), Dorian is not a feudal oppressor but an un-Christian sinner, according to this film.

Twenty years later, in the late 1980s, the Perestroika-era Soviet artists, writers, and other representatives of the intelligentsia will eschew escapism and inwardness, along with the Soviet totalitarian ideology, and replace both with what they called "universal values," a thinly veiled reference to New Testament Christianity. They saw in Christianity the kind of cosmopolitanism and individualism that Victorians like Wilde saw in classical antiquity. To the late-Soviet and post-Soviet intellectuals, Christianity is not an institutionalized religion, but, rather, an expression of inner, individual freedom and, simultaneously, a connection to the values and spirituality that transcend the boundaries of a national identity or a restrictive ideology. In addition, we may consider this turn to Christianity *avant la lettre* an ideologically subversive move, which parallels Wilde's own subversive, anti-establishment readings of Jesus and the Old and New Testaments in *De Profundis* and *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. What we see in this addition of an unsanctioned New-Testament reference is a subtle indication of a future political change.

An even more fascinating resonance with Wilde appears in the film's treatment of gay male sexuality and sociality. In *Translation and the Making of Modern Russian Literature*, Brian James Baer echoes my claim that the relegation of Wilde to children's literature both helped Wilde's work to escape censorship and accorded him a status of "the author of didactic literature" (140). When it comes to the translation of Wilde's sexuality into the Soviet literary (and, by extension, visual) context, Baer is pessimistic. He argues that, in an effort to distance itself from Western-style LGBTQ identity-driven representation, Russian translations of

Wilde, as well as other queer writers, take on three predictable strategies: “[e]rasure” (142), “[a]estheticization” (144), and “Russification” (147). Official Soviet/Russian culture, largely unchanged and adamant in its refusal to grant LGBTQ people equal rights, has long sought to divorce politics from sexuality and bar the community from having a distinct identity that could bring about liberation.

Baer’s three strategies apply here as well, except that, in Wilde’s case, the erasure of essentialist sexual identity in *Earnest* and the aestheticization of queer love in *Dorian Gray* are precisely the strategies that Wilde himself uses to depict sexuality. In addition, the explicit use of language pertaining to romantic love makes the adaptation of *Dorian Gray* far removed from the strategy of erasure. Arguably, obliterating essentialist sexual identities and representing them as art are themselves queer strategies deployed by Wilde. They seek to elide the Soviet censorship, just as Wilde’s original texts seek to elide the censorious British stage and press. The elision of censorship via the disarticulation of identity is precisely what makes this adaptation queer and cosmopolitan.

Though the second part of the film treats the characters of Adrian Singleton and Alan Campbell with a certain sexual ambiguity, it focuses on Dorian’s heterosexual exploits. The first part, however, especially the initial conversation between Basil and Henry quite clearly positions Basil’s relationship with Dorian as love, or a love affair, which, as Lord Henry clarifies, is “grounded in art (*Portret* 5:31). He uses the word “*svydanie*” to describe encounters between Basil and Dorian, a word that can be translated as a “date” or a “lovers’ assignation” (*Portret* 10:04) and carries unmistakable romantic overtones. Basil admits to a love that “can be misunderstood” (*Portret* 8:12), a seemingly negative but significant evocation of “the love that dare not speak its name.”

The Pushkin Museum catalogue of the Wilde/Beardsley exhibit refers to Lord Alfred Douglas both as Wilde’s “close friend” (*blizkii drug*) (21) and as his “lover” (*lyubovnik*) (30). Seemingly, the two designations appear together arbitrarily, thus undermining Baer’s thesis that queer sexuality is always erased or aestheticized. In the adaptation, however, the use of language pertaining to romantic relationships goes beyond presenting queer sexuality as a mere whim of an artist. The limited release of this adaptation on an educational channel, as well as the cover of a classical adaptation promote the queerness or ambiguity of this representation and translation. Such queerness (as opposed to identity-based taxonomies of sexuality), too, is a precursor of cosmopolitanism.

In 1968, in the grip of article 121.1, the film makes explicit homoerotic references but strategically places them in the context of artists and the art world. Artists can legitimately fall in love with a muse of any gender, the film argues. The rhetoric of artistic exception places homoeroticism beyond, or above, the law. That is precisely the rhetoric that Wilde deployed in his famous speech in court on April 26th, 1895, one that nearly turned the legal tide in his favor:

The love that dare not speak its name' in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name," and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (*The Trials* 37).

An unlikely rhetorical similarity emerges, then, in the two contexts 73 years apart, in which gay sexuality is illegal and punishable by imprisonment. Both Wilde's emphasis on the intellectual and artistic context of male same-sex love and the Soviet film's overcoming of censorship by making male same-sex desire legal for artists and their peculiar connection to their models and muses circumvent the law and social opprobrium. While we know enough about Wilde and his defense of Lord Douglas's poem "The Love That Dare not Speak Its Name," we can only speculate about the motivations and rhetoric of Turbin's screenplay. Is it an earnest attempt to show the strangeness of the artists as people apart, or a subtle defense of illegal desires? In each case, Wilde's novel inspires a departure from ideologies weighing heavily on the creators of screen adaptations of Western texts.

Like *Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1976), directed by Alexander Belinsky and starring such then-rising (and now veteran or deceased) stars of the Soviet stage and screen as Igor Starygin, Tatyana Vasilieva, Evgeniia Simonova, and Vladimir Kaidanovsky, is the sort

of TV version of a classic Western play that never got into a wide release and was likely to remain on rotation on Channel Three of the state television, the Education Channel, an ideologically charged mix of the U.S. History channel and the National Geographic channel. As always, the limited viewership is a mixed blessing. While the context allowed a dissident aesthetic to slip through (as, I would argue, is the case here), since the Educational Channel had a young viewership, the shows also needed to walk a fine line. *The Importance of Being Earnest* nonetheless manages to unsettle gender roles and to make an aesthetically anti-realist statement.

This adaptation emphasizes aesthetics over ideology, and form over content, which was generally unacceptable in the realm of Soviet realist aesthetics (at least from the 1930s onward). This strategy is both politically and aesthetically insubordinate: representation triumphs over the alleged “message.” The play’s remarkable philosophy, at the center of which is an act of naming that trumps substance, finds a faithful rendering in this Soviet production. Before the play begins, a voiceover explicates the Victorian/English wordplay on Ernest/Earnest that underpins the play, while the next screen introduces the famed subtitle of the play, “[a] frivolous comedy for serious people.” The introduction obviously has an educational purpose, which is both a feature of the Soviet television and a maneuver to ward off censorship. The didactic element, however, also co-exists with the attention to language and genre, form over a content, which is not so much a way of educating the audience about Wilde as following Wilde’s own philosophy of art in a context in which such philosophy is strictly off limits.

The setting of the film illustrates this idea. Its *mise en scène*, all green and purple (Wilde’s choice of a sinful and decadent colors), complete with pseudo-Japanese stained glass and screens, is meticulously crafted to convey the atmosphere of decadence and *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism. The show does so in a completely neutral fashion, without condemnation, which, in itself, is a dissident move. Similarly to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with its decadent approach to nature and all things “natural,” but unlike the contemporary Western cinematic versions of the play, this adaptation resolutely avoids a natural setting when depicting Jack Worthing’s home in the country. The only element of the backdrop that changes is color: the setting of the country home is a pseudo-natural blue and green, instead of the city green and red. The smart artificiality of the setting suggests subtle fidelity to the spirit of decadence.

In addition to a discernible nod to aesthetics, the adaptation focuses on form, at the expense of the predictable moral and political lessons that Soviet-style social realism. While class consciousness and attention to class division actually constitute a core theme of the play, arguably, the play's single most important example of Wilde's affirmation of the working poor, the wise and wisecracking character of the servant Lane is virtually completely eliminated (reduced to one line at the beginning). Early in the play, his brilliant dialogue with Algernon Moncrieff lays out Wilde's views on class and marriage, but the adaptation erases it, as if honing in on aesthetics and decadence at the expense of a possibly ideologically useful statement on class. It is entirely possible that the comments on marriage are too *risqué* for the target youthful audience. However, the possibility emerges that the reduced role of Lane, like the downplaying of the class dimension of the Vane family in the *Dorian Gray* adaptation, is a move away from the ideological drive toward the classless society; instead, it is a move in the direction of aestheticism and artificiality. It is a comedy of manners for its own sake. The near-elimination of the class-struggle angle, again, illustrates the film's unusually close hueing to Wilde's aestheticism, attention to the intricacy of the plot imitating the Greek New Comedy, and the privileging of content over form. As an educational adaptation, this version of *Earnest* illustrates the theory of aestheticism well, while, at the same time, deploying the strategies of censorship avoidance typical of stagnation-era art.

Yet we cannot celebrate the adaptation in its entirety as insubordinate and thus cosmopolitan. Crucially, the phantom character of Bunbury, so central to the play, despite his physical absence, gets the same treatment as Lane. Sexual dissidence, with which the absent character is routinely connected, is not welcome. As noted above, the erasure of sexuality is crucial to maintaining Wilde's status as a young adult writer. Gender receives an ambiguous treatment as well. The male characters are suitably dandified. Algernon's enormous pink hat is a loud signifier of gender non-conformity, despite the very rigid (downright Victorian) codes of public and private gendered behavior promulgated in the USSR. At the same time, traditional femininity is reinscribed in the character of Lady Bracknell.

From Michael Redgrave's 1953 film to the 2011 production of *Earnest* at the Roundabout Theatre in New York, Lady Bracknell is a strong woman who performs stereotypically male functions and possesses stereotypically male assertiveness. The Roundabout production took the matter of gender performance to its logical conclusion: a male actor played Lady Bracknell. The Soviet production softens and feminizes the character through both costumes and acting. The Lord Bracknell plotline is absent: while in the original play, the

sick husband in the attic allows his wife to make all decisions, matrimonial and otherwise, in this adaptation, traditional gender roles are reinstated, partly due to the writing out of this character and the gender role reversal that he occasions. Non-compliant femininity appears to be more risky than non-traditional masculinity (out of which the pseudo-adolescent characters may just mature). Such distribution of gender normativity is, consistent with another instantiation of late Soviet cultural production, a “woman’s film,” which, though not entirely progressive, still focuses on the private life of a couple or a family, at the expense of a futuristic social utopia.^[3]

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In “Where Did All the Normal People Go: Another Look at the Soviet 1970s,” Juliane Fúrst notes the way in which, while seemingly bland and pessimistic, the decade brought into existence various underground subcultures that existed largely undeterred, though not encouraged, by the dying regime, and thus, eventually, made possible the demise of said regime. The cultures to which Fúrst refers were, in their way, cosmopolitan: the inward-oriented cinema, underground experimental art, the belated Soviet-style hippie-style youth culture, and the mostly Jewish *refusenik* movement. These phenomena were, at once, supportive of an individualistic, personal expression of identity and oriented toward the wider world, particularly the West.

Fúrst writes,

The 1970s did not kill the Soviet Union. Indeed, they hardly threatened it. It was not only Soviet citizens who thought that ‘everything was forever.’ Most outside observers did, too. Yet there was something inherently unstable about the “normality” that was constructed in this period. With everybody’s ‘normality’ centered on a different set of norms, with multiple ‘normalities’ layered on top of one another, and with disengagement and disconnection becoming enduring features of “normal” life, it was hard to create the sense of longevity and destiny that was so crucial to the socialist project... [V]ery soon after the passing of the 1970s, Soviet “normality” first found itself thoroughly reformed and then ‘was no more.’ (639)

Lilya Kaganovsky’s analysis of the 1970s Soviet film, “The Cultural Logic of Late Socialism,” detects a similar note of disaffection. Using *Autumn Marathon* and *Irony of Fate*, two cult late-seventies comedies as examples, she argues that the Soviet stagnation cultural output

eliminates desire, at least in its teleological direction of fulfillment (sexual desire standing in for the alleged futurity of the totalitarian Communist project). She writes (“Cultural” 187), “By eliminating desire (desire for an object that promises a future, desire that produces desire, keeping the subject at play), *Autumn Marathon* and *Irony of Fate* point us to the ‘graveyard’ of late socialism, a state when there should be nothing left to want.”

Notably, the two films are, generically at least, comedies that, atypically, eschew happy endings. Kaganovsky shrewdly links the downplaying of sexual desire to a lack of future prospects of the decaying regime. While the two films depict avowedly heterosexual characters, we are reminded of one of the staples of queer theory, Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. According to Edelman’s argument, the combination of a lack of future and the end of normative desire signifies the end of the future as it was officially conceived (“conceived” is a pun since, Edelman sees the Child as a stand-in for the future). Here, the queer component of cosmopolitanism comes in again. Both Wilde adaptations make parody of heterosexuality and make available to youthful audiences a barely disguised representation of same-sex desire and gender as a construct. In some ways, the adaptations constitute a more radical rejection of the future and futurity, even if they do not possess the cult status of the comedies mentioned by Kaganovsky.

The adaptations of Wilde’s most famous play and his only novel are part of the proto-cosmopolitan tapestry of the stagnation-period culture. The key components of Wilde’s philosophy, the centrality of art, deeply individualistic self-fashioning, and resistance to procreative heterosexuality both reflect and strengthen the elements of the 1970s subculture that slowly but surely undermined the Soviet collectivist project. Oscar Wilde did not bring about single-handedly the mid-1980s and the Perestroika epoch, which, by definition, was cosmopolitan, as it opened the borders of soon-to-be-former Soviet Union and allowed for the penetration of “Western” values (temporary and precarious as it has been) into the predominantly Russian culture of the country. While cosmopolitanism and gay rights are, essentially, off-limits, in the late 1980s and 1990s, both became possible for a brief moment, in part due to the surreptitious resistance of stagnation-period cultural production that included the two adaptations under discussion. The intelligentsia were finally free to celebrate what they considered “universal,” but were primarily western values. Nonetheless, the two adaptations are less known but emblematic examples of the stagnation culture that surreptitiously introduced such ideas and brought about the end of the Iron Curtain years in 1989.

NOTES

1. For a link between queerness and cosmopolitanism, see my "Queer, Cosmopolitan" in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, in which I argue that, like queerness, cosmopolitanism "insists on open possibilities, tight knots, and meandering paths when it comes to identity and desire" (405).
2. All translations from Russian into English are my own.
3. See Lilya Kaganovsky and Alexander and Elena Prokhorov for the analysis of this sub-genre of melodrama.

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