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FILM REVIEWS

Monetochka. "Eto bylo v Rossii."

Produced by DV. YouTube, posted June 14, 2024, 3min. 15 sec., Color. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_otogxga6ww.

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Emphasizing cultural and national distinctiveness provides one avenue to impede the naturalization of neoimperial authoritarian aggression. Accordingly, calling for increased representation of Ukrainian art and culture as well as for more precision in distinguishing things Ukrainian from things Russian in global art worlds is and has been one pivotal strategy for delegitimating Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Such a strategy of representation is meant to counter Russian neoimperial tropes that legitimate the ongoing war through popularizing the idea that only Russian culture in an imperial key guaranteed peace in the area of what was once called the eastern bloc. Fostering a greater representation of Ukrainian art aims at sensitizing international audiences to the reproduction of Russian imperial nationalism through the conflation of things Russian and Ukrainian as well as a taken-for-granted enjoyment of Russian art.

How does all this connect with a music video review, written upon invitation by *Slavic Review*? If we believe sociologist Howard Becker, reviews and other forms of public talk *about* art are essential for creating art worlds as symbolic and material networks of collaboration. As such, a review can have political traction: Reviewing a Russian song rather than a Ukrainian one may be interpreted as taking part in a struggle over representation within the art world.

My warrant for reviewing Monetochka's *It Was in Russia* is at odds with the strategy of representation. The warrant I propose also does not chime with the journalistic notion that *It Was in Russia* expressed an emotional state that would be predominantly shared by *relokanty*—those émigrés who, like the artist Monetochka herself, left the country after the Russian authorities escalated the war against Ukraine in February 2022. Rather, I propose that the song's capacity to communicate emotional closure independent of musicians' and listeners' positionality renders it worthwhile for public review.

While, of course, a systematic engagement with the song's reception would be needed to substantiate this proposition, several comments posted under the music video on YouTube suggest that it is not unfounded. "Bravo Monetochka! Thank you for the verses and the music. Thank you from me, a Ukrainian" reads one of them. A person who decided to stay in Russia, despite their alienation with from Russian society due to the war, writes: "Warm moments from childhood, when there were hopes for a happy future. But now you live and you don't know which (train) ticket to choose. And you don't exist anymore, and yours don't

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exist anymore." "It was in Russia" appears to express emotions that a variety of listeners can recognize as their own. Through this review I seek to enhance a better understanding of how music videos, and popular songs more generally, may help to sublimate feelings of pain, loss, and disorientation by giving recognizable form to such widely shared emotions.

The video invites us to enter a child's mind by way of collage. Scraps of exercise books with ransom notes and tiles (*plitky*) evoke a mosaic of the past, conveying that memory is made by placing pieces together. Fading colors, black-and-white imagery and scratches create a retro style widely associated with things past. Khrushchevki apartments, along with 1990s-era toys, such rainbow springs, situate these recollections in a post-Soviet setting. The persona Monetochka appears as a puppet-like comic figure. She wears chucks *(kedy)* and rides a scooter.

Childhood and bygone times are also thematized through sound. A repetitive, lullaby-like melody, played by an organ and set in a minor key, introduces the song. These elements' interplay evoke listening to a music-box of bygone times. Setting in together with a bass drum, Monetochka's delicate sing-song voice, breathy and high-pitched, contrasts with the gravity of the beat. The juxtaposition accentuates fragility and vulnerability. Echo effects of her singing appear like voices from a past throughout the song. Effects used towards the song's end suggest that the singing itself was an echo. The outro repeats the intro's music-box tune, now accompanied by background noise equaling the crackling of old movies.

Through the lyrics, we learn about Monetochka's unwillingness to forget her dreams connected to a past life. Tags of everyday memories elicit sensory perceptions that invite us into the life world of a child and teenager: This persona remembers her grazed elbow covered by plaster after falling off her scooter; the drizzling rain when leaving the cinema and how Vitia kissed her for the first time. These sensations provide cues that can prompt images of growing up in post-Soviet Russia. These cues are domestic and intimate. While they eschew alluding to political history, few other do.

"And you don't exist anymore, and yours don't exist anymore *(I sebia uzhe net, I svoikh uzhe net)* ... There, they sing in a different language now. So incomprehensible that it is pointless to dream." These lines picture a lost lifeworld impossible to reinhabit. They also speak to a changed meaning of the term *svoi.* Since 2022, *svoi* has been used on recruitment billboards inviting young men in Russia with the words "join your own kind" (*prisoediniaisia k SVOim*). *SVO* is the acronym officially denoting Russia's war in Ukraine as a special military operation. Monetochka's line can be read as an illustration of how the war fractured relations; a war that is neither named, nor captured metaphorically in the song. While for instance singer Zemfira's music videos for her song Homeland (*Rodina*) connect Russia directly with a history of violence, *It Was in Russia* plays with images moving towards a future and back into the innocent past of a child.

Such movement is epitomized visually by a bouncy ball that leads us through a changing spatio-temporal landscape. The bouncy ball is eventually substituted by a comic figure that looks like Monetochka. In the first half of the video, forward momentum aligns with temporal progression: childhood recedes into the past as the protagonist moves away, perhaps emigrating when boarding a train. We follow her riding and walking away from the screen's left side towards the visuals appearing on its right end. After 90 seconds, the directional flow of visuals suddenly reverses. The fictional Monetochka now runs back, from right to left, as if attempting to return to that place of the past that she had just attempted to leave. About ten seconds after this change of direction though, a 1980s dance-pop beat sets in that changes the overall tone. The combination of beat and synthesizer connotes strength and forward movement. "To steal one's dream, is not in anyone's power. So it [the dream] will remain with me" are words being sung and appearing in random text on the screen.

Can control over one's memories be achieved by dancing to a sad melody invoking bygone situations? It might facilitate changing the arc of one's life story by integrating the experience of loss. Sublimating painful memories through art can provide emotional closure. Monetochka's *It Was in Russia* provides an example for a song that has the capacity to do so. Whether such art can provide the many with a tool to regain a sense of the future demands further social inquiry.