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LAUGHTER AT THE THRESHOLD:
MY FAIR NANNY AND THE STRUGGLE OVER TASTE

The television sitcom has been a long time in coming to Russian television. Whilst American and British imports such as *Friends*, *Cheers*, *Fawlty Towers*, and *I Love Lucy* had enjoyed success throughout the 1990s, the genre did not have an established lineage in Russia. Early attempts at Russian versions of the sitcom were, perhaps not surprisingly, short-lived. The first two, *Family Matter* (*Семейное дело*) and *Strawberry Café* (*Клубничное кафе*), aired in 1997 and were removed from the schedules after less than a year.

Nor, then, is it surprising, that the first truly successful Russian situation comedy should be adapted from an American format to which it apparently adheres closely. *My Fair Nanny* (*Моя прекрасная няня*) began showing on the CTC channel in early 2004, and by the middle of the year had become the most popular programme on Russian television. It was based on the CBS sitcom, *The Nanny*, which premiered in 1993 and ran for 6 seasons, starring Fran Drescher in the lead role. The first episode established the basic situation around which subsequent episodes were based; a working-class girl from the Queens district of New York is fired from her hairdressing job by her boss and dumped by her boyfriend. Fran (the character takes the name of the actress) finds herself in the rich Manhattan district selling cosmetics, and by chance ends up nannying for the recently widowed Maxwell Sheffield, a sophisticated English Broadway Producer. Fran soon endears herself to Maxwell's prim and proper English butler, Niles, and to the children: a pubescent daughter prone to teenage crushes, a mischievous 10-year old son with a wicked tongue, and a neurotic 8-year girl already in therapy. However, Sheffield's snobish female associate, C.C., takes exception to Fran's vulgar manners, and to the attraction that Maxwell begins to feel for the nanny, who now establishes herself as the rival to C.C. for the producer's never openly acknowledged attentions, and an ally to Niles and the children in their attempts to antagonise C.C. The humour, signalled by canned laughter, combines verbal gags (mostly at C.C.'s expense), comedy of character (with Niles, Fran, her still louder mother, the children and

C.C. the main objects of fun), and of situation (revolving around differences of class between Fran and the rest of the household).

In *My Fair Nanny* (from now on referred to as *Niania*) Vika, a Ukrainian hairdresser replaces Fran. Maxwell Sheffield becomes Maksim Shatalin, a famous producer of musicals. Niles becomes Konstantin and C.C. is Shatalin's scheming financial adviser, Zhanna Arkad'evna. Vika's mother is the archetypal provincial *khokhlushka* who wants her daughter to acquire a rich, metropolitan husband. The 3 children are Masha (a teenager with her mind on boys, but more outgoing than her American counterpart), Denis (older than his US equivalent, but equally mischievous), and Ksiusha (who lacks the neuroses of her source, but is every bit as 'cute').

In my reading of the programme, which draws on five complete series of the original programme, along with web forum feedback, I will use contrasts and parallels with *The Nanny*, and with the Latin American soaps to which it is also related, to suggest that *Niania* is located at the threshold of a complex nexus of cultural 'flashpoints,' of which the most significant is one arising at the boundaries of post-Soviet taste.

Several early episodes of *Niania* are minimally adapted transpositions of episodes of *The Nanny*, but the Russian series soon acquired its own momentum and scriptwriters. Mistaken, or usurped, identity is the mainspring of its narrative situations. In several episodes, Vika reluctantly stands in for one of the Shatalins, for example, agreeing to play Denis's mother at a school parent's evening, since he is concerned at his poor performance. Elsewhere, Vika is mistaken for Zhanna by a prominent Georgian media figure with whom Shatalin hopes to do business and who, true to stereotype, takes an amorous interest in her.

Characters constantly usurp the identity of others. In one episode, Vika falls for a rich man she meets in the supermarket who promises to make a large investment in Maksim's productions. When it transpires that the man actually sells kebabs, Vika resorts to dressing as a businessman herself so that she can subvert the fake business deal the kebab-seller has set up with Maksim in a night club. Here, gender ambiguity serves as a cipher for class tensions.

Identity-shifting dominates *Niania* to a greater extent than *The Nanny*, where the comedy relies on differences between the Sheffields' effete manners, and Fran's sharp-tongued Queens' wit. In an episode which found particular favour with female viewers, Konstantin pretends to be Shatalin, mischievously telling the besotted Zhanna who has her eyes closed in anticipation of a kiss that there is nothing which excites him more than hearing her grunt like a pig; Zhanna, naturally, obliges.

Uncertainties and shifts in class allegiance drive much of this comic chaos. Class was equally central to *The Nanny*, where the juxtaposition of English old money and the vulgar materialism of the upstart nanny from Queens struck a chord with post-Reagan America in which the post-war New Deal settlement, backed

by a patrician establishment, had been shattered by Reaganomics. The fact that *Niania* reflects such class uncertainties through dramatic identity shifts rather than sharp-tongued gags indicates the still greater socio-economic shifts taking place in post-communist Russia.

Viewers, however, praise *Niania* precisely because it offers a light-hearted break from the concerns of the world outside. Nataliia from Moscow suggests that “it has been created especially to enable you to take a break from problems at work, or family problems.” (Forum) However, female viewers are alert to its status as a modern-day Cinderella story in which a provincial girl enters a world of glamour to find the Prince Charming who will rescue her from adversity. One Muscovite opines enthusiastically: “Every girl dreams of meeting a man like Shatalin.” (Ibid.)

The model in which a poor maid falls in love with a rich male from amongst her employers was, of course, familiar to Russian viewers. Following the earlier successes of Latin American soap operas like *Simplemente Maria* (*Просто Мария*) and *Los Ricos Tambien Lloran* (*Богатые тоже плачут*), *Niania* thus occupies the status of a ‘realistic,’ domestic version of the ‘illusory’ Latin American dream, demonstrating how, in the localisation of global formats, one culture (the US) can serve to mediate between two others (Russia; Latin America). The fact that the class tensions are inscribed beneath the surface of the Cinderella myth and released only at the point at which the sexual tension between Vika and Maksim comes to a head helps explain the programme’s comic appeal. The link is foregrounded in one episode where Vika is watching a Latin American soap in which the poor girl marries the man of her dreams. She is reprimanded by Maksim who, however, becomes drawn into the action himself.

Underlying the sexual tension is the question which underpins Latin American soap plots: will the girl ‘get her man’? Typically, Vika ‘upsets’ Maksim, they are reconciled, but then recoil from consummating the mutual attraction. Maksim alternatively plays the disinterested male, or the rival to Vika’s many suitors, forced to admit his jealousy. The strength of Vika’s own commitment is often placed in question, through her interest in other rich males, or by comparison with her mother’s more overtly socially motivated desire to ‘marry her off.’ Vika and Maksim transpose social conflict into the more subtle language of sexual tension.

As a standard sitcom, *Niania* centres its comic effects around characters made the unwitting victims of unanticipated circumstances, and verbal gags in which one or more character consciously mocks one or more of the others. The gag functions as an instrument of social or sexual control. At the end of an episode in which Shatalin proposes to Vika to spite his visiting mother, Vika, now furious at the deceit, throws a negligee at Shatalin who, on enquiring why it is so “transparent,” is told that, since this is what she would have worn on her wedding night, he should “go and torture [him]self with regret.” Vika’s ‘put-down’ enables her to reassert the control over her aspirations which she momentarily loses in succumbing to the

false dream. The witticisms meted out to Zhanna are motivated by a desire to put this social parvenue back in her place; Zhanna's role is as a calculating member of the new business class out to dominate Shatalin intersects with her aggressive femininity.

The comparison of *Niania* with its Latin American predecessors requires several qualifications: 1) the generic distinction (*Niania* is a sitcom, not a soap); 2) the language/cultural difference; 3) the chronological gap (Latin soaps were at their height when the Russian economy was at its most precarious). These differences have a bearing on the status of the show as alternatively aspirational and realistic. The budding romance between Vika and Shatalin must remain frustrated in order for the sitcom format to continue to generate the tension that drives it, and to remain on the territory of the real in which hopes remain frustrated and class positions fixed. Aside from her good looks, Anastasia Zavorotniuk's popularity is explicable in terms of the sheer 'ordinariness' of her role: Vika is the archetypical provincial girl living with her mother; her Ukrainian accent, short skirts and heavy make-up are all reassuring to an audience seeking the familiar and the down-to-earth with which to balance the dreams of social (and sexual) betterment they share.

Also concordant with audience sensibilities, is the association of wealth and privilege with urban good taste; Shatalin is a cultured, tastefully-dressed producer of musicals, not a grasping New Russian. This 'air of culture' (*культурность*) adds both to the aspirational function he fulfils, but by the same token to his realism (it is precisely such men whom women like Vika aspire to 'catch').

Both *Niania* and *The Nanny* feature guest appearances by television personalities. However, in *Niania* the celebrities invariably play themselves (rather than fictional roles), and their shows are worked into the plot. In one episode, Zhanna's brother bets with his sister that Vika can win a TV quiz show to which he has access. Vika proves him right, to Zhanna's dismay. The foregrounding of celebrity at both narrative and metanarrative levels indicates the shifting boundaries between private and public space. With celebrity now representing one of the paradigms for success, it is consistent with the breakdown of this barrier and with Vika's aspirational persona that she should albeit temporarily attain the status of celebrity herself. Individual episodes thus instantiate the basic plot situation around which the comedy is structured: that of the illicit intrusion of a provincial girl into the media world. At the same time, the sitcom genre facilitates the incursion of Anastasia Zavorotniuk into the sitting rooms of her 'ordinary' viewer.

The boundary confusion is bound up with that over generic status. Most web commentators refer to it as "serial," assuming that the narrative situation would eventually be resolved through Vika's marriage to Shatalin. Later respondents point out that the programme is an adaptation of a sitcom. This ambivalence is in turn connected with confusions over Vika's dual status as both aspirational subject-with-whom to identify, and comical object-at-which-to-laugh, and over whether the

show's key role is to provide escape from the cares of work, or to give expression to viewers' own everyday concerns.

The conflict can be resolved through reference to the particularity of television realism. For when Vika appears on television, or watches soap operas, within the plots of her own show, she negotiates the divide between her status as celebrity, and her ordinary viewers for whom, nonetheless, the public sphere is no longer remote. Prutkovskaia, who meets stars, and Zavorotniuk, the embodiment of celebrity, converge. Also striking about the feedback is the number of respondents who address themselves to the actress (using the 2nd-person singular and the diminutive *Nasten'ka*) rather than the character. In television, rather than underscoring the text's aesthetic status, or aligning it with surrounding reality — the two standard functions of the metatextual *mise-en-abyme*, the device foregrounds the phatic link between text and audience, character and viewing situation and on the strength of this link bases its claim's authenticity.

One of the keenest topics of debate in the forums is the heroine's cultural standing and aesthetic tastes. Vika's uncouth, ill-informed behaviour (in one episode she mistakes an authentic Pushkin manuscript for a shopping list!) incense the show's detractors. Yet its defenders respond by making improbable comparisons with adaptations of Dostoevsky and Bulgakov. Others take the view that it is unhelpful to draw such comparisons, since MFN is not intended to be taken as high art. The fact that such a debate has arisen at all is a further reflection of the fluidity of generic boundaries in Russian television and the tension between 'high' and 'low' art in post-Soviet culture generally.

The vitality of the viewer debates result from a difference over how to read this internally foregrounded 'bad taste.' There are three approaches. The first is to make no distinction between the *poshlost'* portrayed within the narratives and that which the show itself embodies; in this reading, the metatextual function of the 'inner' *poshlost'* is merely unwittingly to reveal the essential *poshlost'* of the viewers. Parallels are, indeed, frequently drawn between Vika and her female admirers, particularly by male commentators. The second approach is to identify with Vika, 'excusing' her *poshlost'* as part of her feisty honesty, and accusing her detractors of elitism. This illustrates the 'metatextuality as televisual realism' phenomenon and finds favour among younger, female viewers. The third reading involves presenting *Niania* as the site of a critical objectification of the shallow-minded materialism on display in contemporary post-Soviet society. (Paradoxically, it is the 'intellectuals' who embrace both this approach and its polar opposite: that of *Niania* as cultural scourge.) *Niania* thus serves as battleground for the struggle to establish the boundaries of new Russian taste.

Mapped onto this conflict is one over national identity, again with identical qualities cited in support of opposing viewpoints. For example, some, undeterred by the existence of an 'inferior' American precursor, portray the show's lack of

sex and violence as a native bulwark against the tide of US-inspired excess. (This gesture corresponds to Iurii Lotman's identification of the 3rd stage in intercultural dialogue: when a receiving culture perceives imported texts as "belonging over here" in their authentic form. (147)). The most virulent comments combine extreme irritation at Vika's Ukrainian accent (*зобор*) (though often it is the accent's 'put on' nature which most offends), with disgust at her grasping western materialism. Thus, anti-western sentiment is grafted onto elitist anti-provincialism. But the programme has a large following amongst Ukrainians who, unlike Russians prone to cite Vika's provincialism as evidence of the show's native authenticity, defiantly claim Vika as a representative of Ukrainian honesty. In one case, a fan appropriates the term '*khokhlushka*' as a rallying point for young Ukrainian fans seeking role models: "She is a *khokhlushka*, but she is at least our *khokhlushka*" is a familiar refrain. (Forum) Thus, the Ukrainianisms map simultaneously onto three varieties of nationalism: one associating them with American vulgarity, one connecting them with earthy Russian authenticity, and one with the discourse of local identity (provincial, and/or Ukrainian) posited against the metropolitan centralism of official Russian identity.

Niania's threshold function is modelled through its own internal space. The opening animation sequence depicts a traversing of social space up to the point of the threshold which is never fully crossed; Vika's journey across town from the cheap hairdressing saloon ends at the door of the Shatalin residence. Within each episode, the threshold separating the Shatalin household from the world outside forms the conduit through which the characters who temporarily 'disrupt' the equilibrium are admitted: the celebrity actors; Vika's new boyfriends; her mother; Zhanna Arkad'evna. Many narratives are initiated by Konstantin's movement across the living room to answer the doorbell, as the audience awaits in anticipation to discover who has arrived. This shift — from the 'outside' viewpoint of the stylised frame text to the 'inside' viewpoint of the inner narrative — itself marks Vika's temporary intrusion into the 'illicit' inner space of the Shatalin sanctum.

Also significant is the movement of characters across, and in and out of, the space of the Shatalin household. Zhanna Arkad'evna's status as representative of an aggressive new female business class deprives her of the right to a stable spatial position; she is rarely seen seated, but rather perched on the edge of a sofa. Her trademark nervous, tic-like fidgeting when standing complements her constant striding across the space of the household, often in comic pursuit of, or pursued by, another character. The kitchen space is reserved for Konstantin and Vika, and when Zhanna intrudes, she is swiftly ejected beyond the boundaries of represented space. Equally, however, she appropriates the space of Shatalin's study; here, on the threshold of the world of work and the home, it is Vika who is often ejected for impeding the dubious business deals on which Shatalin works under Zhanna's influence.

A curious feature of every *Niania* episode (and borrowed from *The Nanny*) is the insertion towards the end of each narrative of a shot from outside the Shatalin apartment block looking up at the elegant stone walls and windows of the building. The viewing audience is suddenly called upon to reoccupy an external subject position, constructed now, like Vika, as a temporary intruder into the inner living space of the media celebrity.

Indeed the key determinant of *Niania*'s success is the way in which it positions itself at the metathreshold of text and television audience, a threshold which subsumes the other border tensions we have discussed and which foregrounds *Niania*'s place at the centre of a move towards a more dynamic cultural model characteristic of early 21st century Russian television (this, despite the constraints placed upon it under Putin). Just as the *khokhlushka* from the peripheries of the Russian-Soviet colossus penetrates the metropolitan, media-soaked centre, so the peripheral American sitcom forces its way to the forefront of post-Soviet television culture whose flagship remains the staid, high-art output of Channel Kul'tura, beloved of Putin. In accomplishing this move, *Niania* imports the semiotic values of the periphery into the space of the centre, which is itself transformed in turn, offering, perhaps, an early sign that the polarisation between 'television as trash' and 'television as parasitic on the high culture it must aspire to' is at last on the point of being overcome.

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Стивен Хатчингс

СМЕХ НА ПОРОГЕ: МОЯ ПРЕКРАСНАЯ НЯНЯ И БОРЬБА ЗА ВКУС

Резюме

Моя прекрасная няня (МПН) была первой успешной комедией ситуаций на российском телевидении. Успех этой комедии, которая напоминает американский сериал *Няня*, я связываю с тем, что МПН позиционирована на стыке некоторых ключевых постсоветских культурных «сенсативных точек»: жанра (позиция на пограничьи жанра сериала с его очерченными границами и «бесконечной» комедией ситуаций), эстетического вкуса (его пограничный «вульгарный» юмор), и класса (разграничение между столичным предпринимателем и провинциальной няней). Эти карта сенсативных точек проецируется на напряженные отношения реализма и фанатазии (жизнь няни представляется как совокупностью проблем, порожденных постсоветской жизнью, так и моделью надежды на спасение), на разделение общественного и частного (известность предпринимателя, который является ее работодателем, выступает одно-

временно и как стимул и как препятствие для проявления его чувств), гендера и сексуальности (находчивая няня, готовая «использовать» сексуальное очарование для экономической выгоды; образованный, но все же легковверный предприниматель), и национальной идентичности (проблематизация элементов, из которых складывается образ «россиянина»).

Stephen Hutchings

ŚMIECH NA PROGU: *MOJA WSPANIAŁA NIANIA* I WALKA O GUST

Streszczenie

Moja wspaniała niania (MWN) była w rosyjskiej telewizji pierwszą komedią sytuacyjną, która odniosła sukces. Popularność komedii, która przypomina amerykański serial *Niania*, wynika z tego, że MWN została usytuowana na styku pewnych kluczowych postsowieckich kulturowych „punktów wrażliwości”: gatunku (na styku serialu z jego wyraźnie zakreślonymi granicami i „nieskończonej” komedii sytuacyjnej), gustu estetycznego (pograniczny „wulgarny” humor) i klasy (rozgraniczenie pomiędzy stołecznym człowiekiem interesu i pochodzącą z prowincji nianią). Owa mapa punktów wrażliwości projektowana jest na napięte relacje pomiędzy realizmem i fantastyką (życie niani prezentowane jest jako nagromadzenie problemów zrodzonych przez postsowieckie życie oraz nadziei na ratunek), na rozdzielanie tego, co społeczne i indywidualne (rozpoznawalność człowieka interesu, który jest jej pracodawcą, staje się równocześnie bodźcem i przeszkodą w objawianiu jego uczuć), problemów płciowości i seksualności (pomysłowa niania, gotowa „wykorzystać” seksualne oczarowanie dla korzyści ekonomicznych; wykształcony, ale mimo to łatwowierny biznesmen) i narodowa tożsamość (problematykcja tych elementów, które składają się na obraz Rosjanina).