

# Soviet Television and Popular Mass Culture in the 1960s

by Kristian Feigelson

## Abstract

In the 1960s, cinema was the most appreciated entertainment for a multicultural Soviet audience. In contrast, television was rather considered a propaganda tool. And yet, during the Thaw, television appears to have expressed an atmosphere of hope. Despite the heritage of Agitprop and the tradition of using visual media as a political weapon, television became the medium of the everyday life.

**Keywords:** agitprop, cinema, entertainment, everyday life, popular culture, television.

After Soviet television was widely established in the 1950s, it helped to legitimize a new culture of images in the USSR from the 1960s onward. Prior to this, mass political education through cinema became a central aspect of the Bolshevik policy during the revolutionary period, even though they failed until the 1930s to organize cinema as an effective propaganda weapon.

How was it possible to rebuild a new popular mass culture after the Second World War? Television eventually became a new weapon, able to educate but also to entertain. The so called "cultural revolution" (1928-1932) had altered the face of the previous mass culture once and for all.<sup>1</sup> Collectivization and industrialization almost destroyed the popular culture on an ancestral and rural basis, as the intelligentsia was eradicated and peasant culture almost ceased to exist during the Stalinist era. After the 1960s, a large urban audience focused on television was able to support the aims of this new audio-visual culture. Television made this popular culture accessible to most citizens and a larger audience. Yet it was not an easy task, as Soviet mass culture operated under a double burden: television had to both edify and entertain. Its role was more to inspire than to report the truth, as citizens were asked to identify with these Soviet

values. This new mass culture was supposed to show how this audience made their lives more fulfilling: workers and peasants devoted to the national economy, mothers and fathers devoted to their families, simple heroes devoted to the Soviet Union, their homeland.<sup>2</sup>

State television of the Communist Party State became a showcase for every kind of experimentation. From 1960 on, it was an essential socializing tool for propagating mass popular culture values. Popular culture remains a difficult term expressing an even more difficult concept. After the era of the cinema Agitprop movement (1917-1921), popular culture was in theory a set of rural, national and religious values that supposedly persisted in the peasantry and in rural locales. In reality, the farmers and peasants were being wiped out by famines in the countryside, especially in Ukraine, religion and the bedrock attachment to Orthodoxy fell victim to the atheism of the Bolsheviks and the confiscation of church property. The end of the decade (1929-1940) heralded Stalin's policy of "liquidation of the kulaks as a class," followed by the forced collectivization of agriculture, which decimated the peasantry. In the cities, forced marshalling and labor slavery quashed any hopes for the development of an urban folk culture. Popular culture, as presently understood, is distinctly

1 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution in Russia (1928-1931)*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

2 Kristin Roth-Ey, "Finding a Home for Television in the USSR", *Slavic Review* 66/2, 2007, pp. 278-306.



Figure 1: Old TV tower in Shabolovka street, Moscow.  
Private collection Carmen Scheide

urban, far from the rural values connected to the traditional folk culture: industrialization, mass media, social mobility and other forces have changed the whole notion of popular culture in the Soviet Union. An everyday art, television was by turns political, pedagogical, and entertaining, at once giving a new image of society, an ideal and the arena of every debate taking place in the USSR.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s and 80s there was a brief renaissance of writ-

<sup>3</sup> I conducted this research first in the USSR in the mid-1970s, then after the publication of a book on

ers and filmmakers who glorified rural and national values, but it never developed into a nationwide movement. Soviet television was infrequently explored during the 1960s and 1970s, except from the angle of television as a propaganda instrument and an apparatus of the Party-State, an approach which neglected any deep understanding of its effects.<sup>4</sup> As little as ten years after the emergence of the technology, Soviet society was being televised on a huge scale. Soviet culture in the framework of a multinational empire, claimed for the first time the ability to describe the whole of reality at a time when this false ethnic harmony composed of 108 different peoples, among whom Russians only accounted for 54.65 per cent in 1959, was fragmented and undermined by the enforced exile of entire nations.<sup>5</sup> In conjunction with the whole Soviet cultural production, television played a major and significant role in reshaping this society during the Thaw years (1954-1967) when cinema also contributed on a more critical level to these visual practices.<sup>6</sup> However, because of its power of

this subject: Kristian Feigelson, *L'URSS et sa télévision*, Seyssel: INA/Champ Vallon, 1990. This volume was based on a research project on television conducted at EHESS/Paris to observe the Perestroika through Soviet television in the late 1980s, cf. chapter "La Télévision Soviétique à l'Heure de la Glasnost", *Culture et Révolution*, eds. Marc Ferro and Sheila Fitzpatrick, Paris: Ehes, 1989, pp. 167-183.

<sup>4</sup> Mark W. Hopkins, *Mass-media in the Soviet Union*, New York: Pegasus, 1970; Georges Mond, *La Télévision et les Masses*, Paris: La Documentation Française, 1970; Ellen Propper-Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public*, New York: Praeger, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> The last census of January 1959 in André De Moura, "Nationalités et cultures nationales en URSS", *Population* 18/1, 1963, pp. 144-148. See also on this matter Rasma Karklins, *Ethnic Relations in the USSR: The Perspective from Below*, London, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> The so-called Thaw is a period of ambiguities (1954-1967) and referred to the novel of Ehrenburg *Ottepel* (1954). Cf. "Le XXème Congrès et la culture", *La Revue Russe* 28 (2006); as well as the visit of Khrushchev to the USA in 1959. Cf. William Taubman, *Khrushchev and His Era*, New York: Norton, 2003, pp. 396-441.

manipulation to affect viewers and to impress on them new images, television became the most important tool of the Soviet State, with the goal of creating “homo Sovieticus,” the new Soviet man.<sup>7</sup> Television held the potential to fulfil the longstanding dream of a Soviet New Man delivered directly to every home. It offered a compelling symbol of a modern new Soviet “way of life” in which new consumers embraced this nascent medium and played an essential role in its promotion after the 1960s. How can we revisit television’s origins and its role in the consolidation of a new mass culture, which since the Thaw of the Cold War has served as a force of cohesion for the greater Soviet population? Our research is inscribed in a theoretical social science framework, but makes use of numerous field surveys conducted on this subject in the past. How can we examine television as a vector of a specific mass culture in order to understand the social appropriation of audio-visual culture in the USSR?

This will prove of particular importance for the period after 1960, when the cinema often provides an alternative critique, while the gradually reforming USSR, exhausted after the Stalinist era, begins to put new resources into play for popular entertainment.<sup>8</sup> Cultural questions were a significant area of discussions in the 1960s after the long darkness of the Stalinist period, but Soviet power still gave its determination to control them. Compared to the role played by cinema at this time, in doing what literature under strict control could not accomplish, television appears to be con-

servative. Its central administrators failed to manipulate adequately the televised image as requested, despite the energetic debates within the society. Television, then, becomes an essential apparatus, despite being continually ill-perceived and poorly controlled. The authorities at first seemed to encourage the critics but then moved back to regain control. They subsequently faced criticism mainly from other printed media. For millions of new audience members, however, television has become a kind of new art of the everyday, for it falls under the category of *byt* (everyday life), a new, specifically Soviet lifestyle, connecting the collective values of real socialism with the emergence of a more individualistic mind-set that is promoted by television. New viewers or consumers wanted entertainment and as in other many countries television offered a distraction from the difficulties of daily life. Our task is therefore to revisit this audio-visual industry, which reflects the complexities of many other questions undergoing major evolutions after the fall of the USSR, the region’s entry into globalization later, and the emergence of other cultural industries.<sup>9</sup>

### Visual culture of the 1960s

The 1960s are marked by a changing preference for television over radio as a means to transmit political messages. In 1960, the state was forced to take up television with a kind of urgency: the USSR had to show its citizens an image of a world where the progress of so-

7 Cf. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

8 Kristian Feigelson (ed.), *Caméra Politique: Cinéma et Stalinisme*, Théorème 8, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2005; Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, New York: IB Tauris, 2000.

9 In a comparative perspective and further developments on these topics in the era of globalisation, see Kristian Feigelson and Iakov Ioskievitch, “Russie: un paysage chaotique et innovant”, *Dossiers de l’Audiovisuel* 94, 2000; *Mediakul’tura Novoi Rossii*, A.B Kirillova (dir.), Moskva: Akadem. izd., 2007. Cf. Kristian Feigelson, *Le Cinéma Russe Aujourd’hui*, Moscou: Regards de l’Observatoire franco-russe, 2014, <http://obsfr.ru/fr/le-rapport-annuel.html>.

cialism was no longer a matter of doubt. This image would appear in multiple, progressive incarnations. Television reports will offer visible and tangible proof of these “national realities” and of the march toward “a radiant future.” The year 1960 sees the proliferation of live broadcasts of model workers. Television played a role in Soviet citizens’ civic education; it bases its entire strategy on the fight against laziness and parasitism. Television did not however enjoy a particularly privileged status. Visual media remained “for internal usage” as the USSR did not yet have many cultural exchanges with the West. From the mid-1950s through the end of the Soviet period, Indian films were immensely popular with Soviet audiences, compensating for the lack of American movies during the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> With the end of Stalinist isolation and the rise of a television culture that broadcasts new movies, Soviet cinema benefited too from exposure to a wider world. In this case, despite its control, television was still regarded with some suspicion by the Soviet authorities, who only wished to see it as an instrument for entertainment.

By 1965, these antiquated conceptions were already irrelevant. The Soviets realized that they were lagging behind compared to the United States and demanded a better analysis of programming. Traditional ideology was replaced by other new functions based on entertainment.<sup>11</sup> This institutionalization occurred progressively. Within a decade, thanks to a

concentration of technical resources in large urban centers, a rationalization for the installation of television networks was reached: television must cover all space and reach all categories of people on a continent-wide scale. The 1960s had seen the creation of a Committee for Radio and Television (*Gosteleradio*), subordinate to the *Gosudarstvennyi Komitet Soveta Ministrov SSSR* and the launch of about 160 television studios. The Ostankino-Moscow complex, chosen by these political elites, was the symbol of this centralized, technical development able to recruit new young generations of professionals well trained at the VGIK (*Vsesovetskii gosudarstvennyi institut kinematografii*) film school.<sup>12</sup> This spatial territorialization by means of audio-visual media was the object of a Party resolution in January 1960: *O dal'neishem Razvitii Sovetskogo televideniia* (*On the future development of Soviet television*). This act affirmed the need for further program development, arguing from the perspective of “the ideological struggle against capitalist countries” and of “Socialist education of the masses.”<sup>13</sup> Television has since then become the favourite medium of the State, despite the fact that members of the State Committee for Radio and Television underestimated the major changes that had taken place in Soviet society since the 1950s.

On April 19, 1962, the State Committee for Radio and Television was placed under the aegis of the Ministers’ Council without changing its personnel as a bureaucratic restructuration. The technicians and those in charge of

10 Cf. Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Cf. Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010.

11 Which reminds us of the birth of another culture of entertainment in the 1930s, cf. Richard Taylor, “Boris Shumiatskii and the Soviet Cinema in the 1930s: Ideology as Mass Entertainment”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 6, 1986, pp. 48-54.

12 Cf. Kristian Feigelson and Clara Darmor, “Le VGIK: Une Ecole de Cinéma à Moscou”, *Can We Learn Cinema – Knowledge, Training and Profession*, co-ed. Martina Panelli, XIX International Film Studies Conference, University of Udine, March 2013, pp. 29-41.

13 *O dal'neishem Razvitii Sovetskogo televideniia*, Party Resolution January 1960 Moscow, in: *Pravda*, January 1960.

programming are from this moment a part of the same state organism. Though programs remain relatively specialized, this act achieved a unification of television's technique and content to control it in a better and centralized way. Television was called upon to promote political unity in a society wherein many national debates are still thorny. By incorporating non-Russian entities, the policy of Russification that began well before 1917 was intended, after World War II, to realize the dream of a unified Soviet empire; television had to bring the "harmony of the total State" into reality. At the beginning of the 1960s, almost 10 million television sets were sold to a nationwide audience of 40 million; however, these social innovations did nothing to quell criticism aimed at the medium. Conformity was still the order of the day. Take, for example, this comment on Soviet television by an American journalist:

*When not making a feature film, the Russians are content to film a theatrical play, a round-table discussion, a concert or a dance recital, as if the function of this mode of expression could be reduced to rendering visible what was previously only heard and read... Everything is filmed head-on, without using camera angles or lighting to create movement and surprise, without any sense of the specific language that constitutes television.<sup>14</sup>*

The programs' absorption of ideology, along with their technical failures, explain television's weak performance. Certain filmmakers who contributed to the birth of post-war Soviet cinema remained reluctant to experiment in television. An overall framework was still

<sup>14</sup> Maria Mannes, "Essay on Soviet Television", *New York Magazine*, March 5, 1961. During the Cuban missile crisis (1962), American media were covering different aspects of daily life in the Soviet Union. Cf. William Taubman, *Khrushchev and His Era*, New York: Norton, 2003, chapter 19.

missing, and the programs' quality showed as much. Criticism accumulated in the press, which only encouraged an increased rigidity of top-down media control.

Many viewers complained about the quality of the television sets and the difficulty of repairing them or obtaining new parts. Nikita Khrushchev echoed a common lament in his report to the Central Committee in November 1962:

*The manufacture of television screens is allotted to 19 businesses spread across different towns. In 1962, 12 models were issued but differed from each other only in color and size. The multiplicity of the models and the excessive dispersion of the factories prevent the lowering of the price and, worse, an amelioration of quality.<sup>15</sup>*

After 1960, television shows focusing on the everyday began to appear: children's programs, such as *Grandma Television's Tales* (*Skazki babuchkini*); women's programs, such as *For You Women* (*Zhenshchiny*); and for farmers, shows such as *Conferences on Wheat Cultivation* (*Po sel'skhochoziaistvo*). Shows judged tedious or unconvincing were quickly set aside, as journalists saw their roles rehabilitated from that of mere propagandist to entertainer.

### "Interactive programs"

Television began to adopt organizational tools such as surveys, discussions with audiences, collective screenings, and televised contests. "Interactive" programs appeared, including *With All My Heart, Countrymen* (*Serdechenno kolchozniki*) and *Kontakt* (*Kontakt*), which re-

<sup>15</sup> *O Razvitiu teledeniia*, November 1962. Cf. Kristian Feigelson, *L'URSS et Sa Télévision*, Paris: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel / Champ Vallon, Seyssel, 1990.

sponded to audience letters. One of the main goals of 1960s television was to associate watching television with collective action. This new approach to television programs gradually brought forth a few changes, transforming television into a genuine forum, despite the fact that it remained a dependable, cowed propaganda instrument of the regime. However, to some extent, television became a critical tool of a new type of social control step-by-step. At the same time, in this supposedly unified and internally reconciled society, television's differentiated programming divided audiences into categories. This pigeon-holing contradicts *Sovetskaia Kul'tura's* rhapsody:

*Television has united the schoolboy and his grandmother, the mathematician father and the school-teacher mother. Television has reconciled tastes and satisfies varied demands and diverse intellectual needs.*<sup>16</sup>

The public became more and more compartmentalized. Images were categorized by their intended audience's age, sensitivity, and activity. Television created an image of Soviet society that is much more fragmented than egalitarian, with different programs aimed at different categories of viewers (soldiers, teachers, workers, engineers...)<sup>17</sup>

From this moment, television embraced all aspects of the everyday. Programs diversified and became less "political" and more "cultural", even though the ideological basis of fashioning the "New Man" was not forgotten. Formal references to Lenin's writings on the role of the revolutionary press did not lose

their place. On August 11, 1962, the first live satellite Vostok-3 transmission evinced a two-fold effort: to spread the knowledge of Soviet progress in space exploration and to usher in a new era of the moving image in the USSR. Television was no longer simply a propaganda tool for the Party; however, images were still shown selectively, even parsimoniously: "images of the farm, of the kombinat belong to a reality in motion." Adapting certain montage techniques from the 1920s, depictions of kolkhozy in 1960 were meant to remedy the effects of "bourgeois propaganda"<sup>18</sup>. Every day, the media showed socialism's advantages over capitalism, reflecting "the harmonious development of the USSR and its success in constructing socialism."<sup>19</sup> Every year on May 7, *Radio day* (called *Den' Radio*), which took place on the day on which in 1895, Alexander Popov successfully demonstrated his invention, the policy of the Party for the audio-visual sector was reaffirmed.

Nevertheless, content changed gradually, and new techniques appeared in the mid-sixties: interviews and live transmission on *Gorizont* (Horizon), aimed towards youth, and in series like *Slava geroiam truda* (Glory to the Working Heroes) and *Leninskii Al'bom* (The Leninist Album). Later, the televised investigation appeared in *Splav* (Alloy) or *Vzaimnaia anketa* (Common Inquiry). These shows presented scientific discoveries and their technical applications in factories, and end with a live discussion. Shows like *Priglasaem na iarmarku* (We Invite You to the Market) brought producers and consumers, specialists and the public, face to face over a specific common theme. Television now seemed ready to supplant radio in

<sup>16</sup> R.A Boretsky, "Kogda est' mnogo kanalov (When there are many channels)," *Sovetskaia Kul'tura*, September 11, 1965, pp. 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Kenez, "Cultural Revolution in cinema" in *Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*, London: IB Tauris, 2000, pp. 91-113.

<sup>19</sup> *Partiinaia Zhizn'* 4, February 1960.

news coverage and the depiction of reality. On August 19, 1965, a *Pravda* editorial declared: "From television we expect complementary information and clear commentary, helping the public to better understand the context of events. Thanks to these visual techniques (film, snapshots, photos), television, unlike radio, has every opportunity to make contact with the viewer convincingly and sensitively, permitting him to discern the facts by showing them to him."<sup>20</sup>

Relations between the two media were not perceived at that time as competing, but as complementary. And yet, television was still only the "eye of radio", since it ventures out rarely on location and produces most of its material in the studio: "*Television isn't television when it speaks to viewers about important events without showing them*" was a sentiment frequently voiced around 1965.<sup>21</sup>

### A new mass culture

Toward the middle of the 1960s opinion turned more and more favorable toward the visual media. Television had to gain its independence and no longer be content to be an add-on to radio or a spokesperson of the printed press. However, the televised image was far from being completely mastered by the engineers. The divide between intentions and necessities seemed just as wide as ever. In addition, even if they could technically control the image at its source, producers had no concept of the impact of its broadcasting into millions of homes. In the past, the function of militant Agit-Prop in the 1920s was simply political and pedagogical, a matter of eliminating any possible doubt about the reality of socialism by means of the

image.<sup>22</sup> With television, the image's priority was to be a faithful mirror of reality, and only then as a showcase for social experimentation. Thus, the repetitive character of the programs on Soviet television was capable of threatening its own ideological foundations. In the 1960s, these programs reflected the legitimization of private emotions and lives in an emerging focus on ordinary people living everyday life.<sup>23</sup> The audience craved entertainment at a time when no mass culture audience could be forced to watch television. The State-Party needed its values legitimized by images, but Soviet mass culture needed accommodation, which encouraged diversity of opinion. Official mass culture monopolized the media. In the context of a post-Stalinist society, thanks to television, different new categories or interest groups were able to negotiate the consumption of a new visual mass culture and to express their personal views. Outsiders at this time imagined Soviet society to be uniform; however, despite official censorship, underground culture was lively, offering a constant commentary on this culture of homogeneity dominated by mass media. The content of this alternative culture mattered quite a lot, but its form counted far more because in the 1960s these people, "*the stiliagi*", paid particular attention to their style due to their belief that this generation should look different. Alternatives were few for those from society's margins in the post-Stalinist years, but they attracted great attention when *stiliagi* became

22 Cf. Kristian Feigelson, "L'Héroisme Bolchévique: Entre Mythes et Représentations," *Héros et Super-héros au Cinéma*, Théorème 13, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2009, pp. 19-29.

23 "In the early and mid-1960s, the situation has changed in spite of the official resistance to the ideologically unacceptable division between elite and mass cinema, in reality a body of B-grade movies developed, many made for television" in Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw*, New York: IB Tauris, 2000, p. 14.

20 *Pravda*, August 19, 1965. Anonymous editorial.

21 Ibid.

pioneers of the “unofficial culture”.<sup>24</sup> The Party had fewer options to impose new communist norms after 1956. The control provoked public dissent among some Party intellectuals, artists and filmmakers. They felt a new freedom to distinguish between the Party political authority, which they almost did not question, and the field of culture where they gained and prized a kind of new autonomy.

Cinema and radio were still the main universal media of that time. Western movies started to circulate in Eastern Europe and the cultural competition of the early Cold War years was asymmetrical. Soviet television had nothing with which to compete, while Radio Free Europe was broadcasting 3 hours of American popular music every day.<sup>25</sup> At the beginning of the 1960s, amid Soviet cinema’s post-Stalin renaissance - that of *Ivan’s Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*) by Andrei Tarkovskii in 1962, *The First Teacher* (*Pervoi Uchitel’*) by Andrei Konchalovskii in 1965, and *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Tini zabutikh predkiv*) by Sergei Parajanov in 1964 – television was rebuked for detracting from the cinema.<sup>26</sup> Going to the cinema was still a strong collective pleasure in this era in the Soviet Union. Studios complained of the devastating impact it had on movie-going. Meanwhile, the cinema in this period of Thaw was already playing the role of social critique. Other kinds of films, new values of the 1960s, less enthusiastic or collective than in the 1930s (with the Stalinist slogan *Life is get-*

*ting better*) but more individualistic, offered a chance of redemption. An unofficial popular cultural visual form flourished beneath the surface.<sup>27</sup> Culture was no longer a protected zone where everyone could get their instructions from above except in the fields of the media, where despite this new freedom everything was still subordinate to politics. Television productions, however, were criticized for their lack of ideology by letters received from the viewers. The press, Party leaders, and the public complained about television’s uninteresting, over-serious, and insufficiently diverse programming. The correspondence among members of the audience, which was now permitted, assumed a definite influence. However, we still cannot speak of “public opinion”, which was still a rather vague notion in the USSR (*obshchestvennost’*).<sup>28</sup>

The second half of the 1960s saw crucial gains for the audio-visual field in the USSR. Televised material was culturally integrated at last. The social functions of television diversified, and more rigid audience sectors were formed. Television obeyed conventions that had come to be socially recognized. The budget allotted to the television industry rose from 54.8 million rubles in 1961-1965 to more than 140 million in 1966-1970. By March 1969, 124 million Soviets in over 70 percent of the territory could receive television signals, and ten years later the number climbed to 200 million. Distorted transmissions between the cit-

24 Juliane Fürst, *Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism, 1945-1956*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

25 Tony Judt, *Postwar, a History of Europe Since 1945*, Penguin, 2005, New-York, pp. 224-225.

26 Cf. Birgit Beumers, “The Thaws: New Beginnings, New Lives (1954-1966)”, *A History of Russian Cinema*, Oxford: Berg, 2009, pp. 112-145. Cf. Kristian Feigelson, “Le Cinéma Soviétique du Dégel, l’Ennemi Transfiguré”, *La Libération en Europe (1945-2005)*, eds. Christian Delporte and Denis Maréchal, Paris: INA/L’Harmattan, 2006, pp. 404-418.

27 Cf. Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; James von Geldern and Richard Stites, *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

28 Cf. Kristian Feigelson, “Médias et opinions en Europe centrale”, *Télérevolutions Culturelles*, ed. Kristian Feigelson / Nicolas Pelissier, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998, pp. 47-57. Cf. Boris Firsov, *Televidenie glazami sotsiologa*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971; L.A. Gordon & E.V. Klopov, *Chelovek posle raboty*, Moscow: Progress, 1976.

ies and the country decreased. With 98 sets for every 100 families, televisions became one of the first purchases of Soviet households. The USSR gradually developed and consolidated a new media culture able to give an emblematic image of the society.<sup>29</sup>

I explore the shift in the changing mythologies of Soviet culture in order to emphasize the complexity of this new visual culture and its impact on the ordinary lives of Soviet citizens. Thanks to television, the regime could reinforce its monopoly on culture production and broadcast it widely. Soviet culture indeed became a new mass media culture in the sense that it was shared and consumed by the vast majority of society, even though it was fundamentally different from western mass culture. Yet in that case, more attention should be paid to the question of the audience, the viewers and how they reacted.<sup>30</sup> In the 1960s, the Soviet system had finally settled on its own visual machinery to complement its multistoried propaganda frames, its banners, its Leninist parades, etc. From the mid-1950s to the end of the 1970s, a particular period of Soviet history, including the ideological revision of the system, this new visual culture was able to juxtapose reality with images for a large and popular audience. Unknown at the beginning of Soviet history, the media gradually became a way of life and the voice of fundamental change. Until the collapse of the Soviet system, where television also played a major role spreading

29 Alexander Zinoviev, *Les Hauteurs béantes*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1977.

30 How are these cultural contents spread in a Soviet environment? How can we fill the gap in our knowledge about popular resistance toward these images and messages promoted by Soviet television and by this official culture? Soviet mass culture contained its own conflicts and was also a mixture of contents negotiated from above and from below. Cf. Gabor Rittersporn, "Qui lit la Pravda?", *Le Débat* 2 (Juin 1980). In a comparative manner, cf. Paul Yonnet, *Jeux, Mode et Masses: La Société Française et le Moderne 1945-1985*, Paris: Gallimard, 1985.

news and forbidden images, the ascendance of television in the mid-sixties was the driving force of a new culture of mass entertainment. This visual mass culture could reach the mass audience only by compromising its audiences' tastes.<sup>31</sup> The *Homo Catholicus* (a "new TV addict") defined a new *Homo Sovieticus* split between collective solution and individual desires. Paradoxically, through this communist public space, television symbolized the expansion of privacy. Viewers were able or unable to re-appropriate these Soviet values in the intimacy of their homes. After the 1960s, television tried daily to promote and articulate these Soviet values while meeting the expectations of this new audience: during this period de-Sovietization and westernization had not yet profoundly affected the roots of the Soviet system as they did later in the mid-1980s. Later, in the Perestroika years of 1986-1990, television contributed paradoxically to the collapse of the Soviet Union, mobilizing a large part of the population by means of the small screen to take part in frank debates about the vast changes in and the final fall of the USSR.<sup>32</sup> It may be the case that the Perestroika from 1986 further refined the approaches of the sixties. This visual mass culture doubtlessly helped to maintain the Soviet system from the 1960s, but

31 Even though the most popular movies stars in the USSR were American since the 1920s, from Douglas Fairbanks to Mary Pickford. Concerning the questions of stars and heroes in early Soviet Cinema, Kristian Feigelson, "L'Héroisme Bolchevique".

32 Marc Ferro, *Les Origines de la Perestroïka*, Paris: Ramsay, 1990. On this subject cf. *Culture and the Media in the USSR Today*, eds. Julian Graffy and Geoffrey A. Hosking, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989; Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroïka and the Soviet Media*, London: Routledge, 1991; *Mass Culture and Perestroïka in the Soviet Union*, ed. Marsha Siefert, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Victoria E. Bonnel and Gregory Freidin, "Televorot: The Role of Television Coverage in Russia's August 1991 Coup", *Soviet Hieroglyphics*, ed. Nancy Condee, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 22-51; Tristan Mattelard, *Le Cheval de Troie de l'Audiovisuel*, Grenoble: PUG, 1995.

in the end its role in society was much more complex and unpredictable, as mentioned during this period in this last anecdote: On television, Comrade Rabinovich raised his hand in favor of all Party resolutions. Since he was raising his hand so energetically, Nikita Sergeevich asked him: "Don't you have any of your own personal ideas?" "Yes, Nikita Sergeevich, but I don't agree with them!"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "Soviet socialism was not the inflexible ideology it claimed to be: it was a set of social practices and cultural inclinations in constant flux, which hid its intentions not only from the outside world but from itself", in James von Geldern and Richard Stites, *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia*, p. 17.