



The  
Maski  
show.

In the context of Bakhtin's philosophy of laughter & the postcolonial perspective:

# Ukrainian popular culture

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## abstract

The paper is a study of the Ukrainian popular culture based on the material of the Ukrainian TV comedy shows which emerged after 1991. They are: *Maski Show*, *Gentlemen Show*, *Verka Serdushka*, *Fajna Ukraina*, *Vital'ka*, and *Evening Kvartal*. These TV shows have not been investigated by Western, nor Ukrainian scholars. The Ukrainian TV comedy shows are examined in the context of Bakhtin's theory of carnival and of the ideas of the Australian Slavic scholar M. Pavlyshyn who has elaborated the concepts anticolonialism and postcolonialism in relation to contemporary Ukrainian culture.

**KEY WORDS:** Ukrainian TV comedy shows, Ukrainian popular culture, postsocialist culture, postcolonial culture, carnival.

The purpose of my study is to investigate the most vivid phenomenon of Ukrainian popular culture that emerged after Ukrainian independence in 1991: television comedies. In contrast to post-Soviet Ukrainian literature, which has been the subject of numerous studies over the last twenty years,<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian comedy shows have not been subjected to focused scholarly analysis.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Ukrainian popular culture, especially the TV comedies, remains almost unknown outside the country, despite the fact that they are fascinating phenomena that reflect the tone of public sentiment to a great degree. The other important reason to investigate Ukrainian television comedies is that public comedy in any soci-



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ety – the object and style of mockery, of laughter – can say a lot about relations between authorities and civil society, and about the possibility of criticism of the state. In addition, my study will introduce cultural and national source material currently under-represented in the humanities in Europe.

I examine Ukrainian comedy shows within the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, which's has never been applied to this type of material. I contend that the study of Ukrainian comedy, when conducted in a Bakhtinian framework, sheds light on elements of culture and society that otherwise might remain unnoticed. Such an approach first developed in the work of Ken Hirschkop, in which Bakhtin's ideas were considered not to be philosophy so much as a pragmatic way to understand cultural politics in society and the "aesthetics of democracy".<sup>3</sup> In my study I use the most suitable concepts of Bakhtin's theory: *carnival*,<sup>4</sup> which develops the idea of a grotesque collective body as a symbol of the anti-norm and eccentric behavior in a carnival space-time, the *carnival chronotope*, where carnival members try to "familiarize" the space of communication; the concept of *laughter culture*,<sup>5</sup> designates the phenomenon in which "bottom" and "top" of culture change places, reversing the hierarchies of everyday life.

**FINALLY, MY AIM** is to focus attention on the cultural transformations that occurred in Ukrainian popular culture during the

two decades after Ukrainian independence, analyzing these transformations as part of a postsocialist or postcolonial culture. The phrase postcolonial culture has many definitions, to be sure, but I suggest that the most fruitful use of the term, which I will follow here, was proposed by the Australian scholar in Ukrainian studies Marko Pavlyshyn, who defined it and related terms specifically in relation to Ukrainian culture. He noted that if "socialist culture" can be characterized as a culture which was under the pressure of the (Soviet) state and which had to be a part of a propaganda mouthpiece, the Ukrainian postsocialist culture of the 1990s was to become more depended on commercial market<sup>6</sup> than on political ideology.

Other oppositions – colonial vs. anticolonial or postcolonial – were contextualized by Pavlyshyn in relation to Ukrainian literature and writers' public activity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pavlyshyn developed his notion of cultural colonialism from E. Said's and H. Bhabha's concepts and explained it relative to Soviet and post-Soviet Ukrainian culture. Soviet cultural politics quasinaralized the unequal relations between a metropolitan center and a colonial periphery as universally applicable, where the culture which was created in the center (Moscow) was considered to be "normative" and "exemplary", and where national artists (or writers) could gain a

high professional status only after recognition in Moscow and in Russian language journals and publishing houses. The Russian language was considered to be the language of "cultural norm", and all "national" languages were indirectly presented as "marginal", or "additional", or "provincial". Despite the fact that the Soviet culture produced a large number of movies, TV shows, and books with the participation of the all Soviet nations and in some cases, ethnicity was emphasized as a sign of Soviet internationalism or multiculturalism, the "ethnographism" in Soviet and Russian mass culture was a kind of "cultural exoticism" because it presented a "cultural contrast" to the "norm".

Pavlyshyn argues that all anticolonial (i.e. nationalism-oriented) strategies in Soviet or post-Soviet Ukraine were consolidated by the use of the rhetoric of *rebellion* against the Soviet empire and the Russian-oriented norms. But a problem was that the anticolonialism strategy of the former political opposition in Soviet or post-Soviet culture was seen as a subconscious desire to usurp the place of the official normative power, to put its own cultural values in place of the former colonial canon, and to dictate its own values exclusively, reversing the previous rule.<sup>7</sup> Newcomers, previously excluded from the process of literary canon-making, became introduced in canon.<sup>8</sup> Anticolonialism as the necessary cultural alternative is an unproductive strategy for Ukrainian society because it does not account for the significant cultural, religious, and lingual diversity in Ukraine;

the “anticononial protest” took as a basic position that Ukraine is a politically, lingual, and culturally homogeneous society. In reality, different parts of Ukraine for many centuries belonged to different states and different cultures, resulting in a different systems of political and cultural values: while Lviv and Galicia had been traditionally oriented on Warsaw and Vienna as the centers of empire Moscow as a cultural center was attractive for the eastern and south Ukrainian regions. Postcolonialism is therefore a much more productive cultural strategy than anticolonialism, because postcolonialism in Ukraine means integration of all regional cultural strategies and of the voices of all national and cultural representatives. Pavlyshyn believes that postcolonialism in Ukraine marks a step away from the “romanticism” of anticolonial protests towards a “pragmatism” based on the multicultural reality of post-Soviet Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Postcolonialism refuses to consider culture in a binary system only as a collaboration with the authorities (the colonial type of relation) or as a liberation from them (anticononial).<sup>10</sup> Postcolonialism can demonstrate the development of the cultural postmodernist polyphony of many cultural voices (as described by Bakhtin). In my work I will try to analyze the contemporary TV comedies in Ukraine in terms of Pavlyshyn’s discourse on postcolonialism and Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony and carnival.

### Tendencies in comedy in early post-Soviet Ukrainian culture

Ukrainian comedy shows emerged in the early 1990s, when the importance of commercial television culture as a realm of entertainment and a space for free experimentation was on the rise. The first shows, created immediately after the collapse of the USSR, manifest a strong desire to deconstruct Soviet propaganda clichés and artistic stereotypes. The first Ukrainian comedies drew upon the Soviet comedic traditions, to be sure, but they underwent an ironic reworking. The Ukrainian comedic culture of the 1990s blended the comic elements of the socialist comedic traditions with the postsocialist commercial culture, as well as the Ukrainian “anticononial” (“remonstrative”) discourse, which was presented as the parody of the canonical Soviet comedies.

The first and the most prominent post-Soviet Ukrainian project of the 1990s went on air as the *Maski Show* (in English, “Show of masks”), led by Georgiy Deliev with his comic troupe from Ukrainian Odessa. The series was released in 1991 and lasted until 2006. Some films in the series had titles suggesting they contained traditional socialist plots, such as *Maski in the kolkhoz* (1998), *Maski at the Red partisans* (1998), and *Maski in the army* (1993), but they parodied the typical scenes of the Soviet classic films of the 1960s to 1980s, with which the post-Soviet audience would have been very familiar. More than 58 films were shot and they were shown in every post-Soviet space, including Ukraine and Russia.

The basic genre of the *Maski* entailed parodying Soviet artistic and political identities, to point of absurdity and the grotesqueness. The accentuated provincialism of the characters was used to great comic effect, and was an integral part of the show. However, a detailed analysis of the *Maski* can demonstrate not only political parody but a complex mix of traditions of clowning, gestures of silent cinema, and Italian *commedia dell’arte*. The comedic effect was a result of situations with elements of the gag, ridiculous physical appearances, and the vulgar manners of the characters. The artists of the show depicted the same social or psychological stereotypes in all episodes of the series (for example, “Poor scholar”, “Provincial”, “Fat man”, “Sex vamp”). These characters acted in accordance with their social temperament and the expectations of spectators, and displayed the carnivalesque blend of Ukrainian burlesque images and global pop culture (“Sex vamp”, “Poor scholar”). I believe that laughing at the plots and characters of the *Maski* had obvious therapeutic functions in the extreme social and political chaos of the post-

**“ACCORDING TO BAKHTIN, THE CARNIVAL IS A SYSTEM OF PRODUCING NEW SUBJECTIVITIES THAT DO NOT BELONG IN THE REALM OF ‘NORMALCY’.”**

Soviet societies of the 1990s.

Many of the *Maski* characters were presented with ridiculous, deformed bodies (too big, too fat, too sexual) that can be understood as the Bakhtinian “grotesque body” of carnival subjectivity. According to Bakhtin, the carnival is a system of producing new subjectivities that do not belong in the realm of “normalcy”; the *Maski* evoke what is a clear example of carnivalesque laughter, because they mix the norms of Soviet culture and the antinormalcy of post-Soviet subjectivity. I consider the *Maski* to be a phenomenon of postsocialist culture, which developed into something more commercial, politically independent, and, in its orientation towards the Soviet canons, more ironic. The spectators of the *Maski* can get aesthetic pleasure at two different levels: those with a Soviet past can enjoy the bright irony and deconstruction of the canonical Soviet genres, and a Western audience who never experienced Soviet culture in any significant way can take pleasure from the carnival plots and grotesque appearance of the characters.

Another popular Ukrainian comedy of the 1990s was *The Gentleman Show*. It emerged in Odessa as well, which was recognized as the unofficial “capital of humor” during the Soviet period. *The Gentleman Show* was a TV comedy program created by the former participants of KVN at Odessa State University. “KVN” is an abbreviation that means “Club of playful and witty people” (Russian: *Klub veseluh i nahodchivuh*). It was an enormously popular Soviet TV show in which participants from different Soviet universities matched wittiness, bright mottos, erudition, and dramatic performances. KVN has existed since 1961, and has attracted millions of viewers. Amid the monotonous Soviet everyday life with a huge number of official events and extremely limited entertainment possibilities, the KVN show

was one of very few Soviet TV comedy shows. KVN was established in the late Khrushchev thaw, a period of liberal changes in the USSR, when Stalinist repressions had ended and totalitarian censorship waned. During Stalin's rule, a person could be sent to the Siberia camps for five years merely because they related an unfortunate anecdote, and that is why even very light and nonpolitical KVN jokes were experienced as fresh air by the Soviet viewership in the post-Stalinist epoch. During the 1960s and '70s, KVN was understood as part of the joyful and creative student life; many Soviet universities and scientific institutes had their own KVN teams. KVN had several competitive leagues (like football teams) among cities and regional clubs, and many contemporary humor shows and presenters in Russia and Ukraine came out of the KVN shows. Many popular writers of satire of the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras were originally from KVN teams. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Soviet citizens living in Israel, the US, Germany, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan continue this competition of wittiness as an international project.

**BECAUSE** erudition, a demonstration of high intelligence, and an ironic attitude to the reigning social and political clichés was an essential part of the scientific life and the image of an intellectual in the Soviet Union, the KVN show was especially popular among the Soviet technical and creative intelligentsia, as well as among people who more or less associated themselves with the opposition to Soviet officialdom. KVN created, not precisely a satirical, but rather a very ironic type of laughter and the Soviet government allowed the KVN players such laughter. In the official culture this was understood to mean that young KVN competitors were not criticizing Soviet rule, but were simply demonstrating, as it were, their creative potential, which would be used in the service of the Soviet state in their professional future. It meant that the KVN produced a "Soviet" type of laughter and a socialist critique of weak points in the Soviet life from the standpoint of "a loyal Soviet subject", but not from any other standpoint – such as that of people who found themselves in opposition to the Soviet regime (the "anti-Soviet Other"), or those who found themselves outside the Soviet society (for example, the Western Other). Thus, it was a "permissible" laughter in the Soviet period, and this canon was used and transformed in the post-Soviet period.

The popular team from Ukraine, the "Odessa Gentlemen's Club", established a very fashionable, humorous show after winning many KVN competitions over the course of several years, and the participants of the Odessa team started their own independent show in the beginning of the 1990s. The sketches of *The Gentleman Show* were devoted sometimes to political themes, but much more to family, gender, and national minorities' issues. The Ukrainian *Gentleman Show* constructed its

## "THE UKRAINIAN GENTLEMAN SHOW CONSTRUCTED ITS HUMOR ON THE INTERSECTION OF THE JEWISH-UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN COMEDIC TRADITIONS."

humor on the intersection of the Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian comedic traditions because prerevolutionary, and Soviet Odessa was a very multicultural city with a strong accent on traditional Yiddish culture, including food, family relations, and music, in the Russian-Ukrainian surroundings, as presented in the postrevolutionary stories by Isaac Babel, Ilya Ilf, and Evgeny Petrov.<sup>11</sup> Solidarity with a national or minority subject became a principal point of view in the post-Soviet Ukrainian laughter of the middle 1990s, and it was a tradition from the Soviet under-

ground culture. The famous Soviet dissident writers P. Vayl' and A. Genis wrote that the "philosemitism of the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1960s was a particular case of identification with a representative of a national minority, not a national majority [...] because it was an opportunity to be on the side of a victim, but not an authority"<sup>12</sup> An ironic look from a (Jewish) periphery at the Soviet subjectivity offered more opportunities for humorous understanding of the absurd sides of the life. Jewish and Yiddish culture in the post-Soviet *Gentleman Show* was presented not as

a marginal culture, but as the subject of laughter, thus elevating the culture to a new representative of normativity. It should be remembered that Ukraine has always been a country with a high percentage of Jews, especially in big cities such as Odessa, Kharkov, Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk, and Donetsk, where Jews traditionally played a significant role in cultural, scientific, and artistic life. *The Gentleman Show* legitimized Jewishness not only as a cultural norm in the post-Soviet Ukrainian culture, but all ethnic minorities as a subject, not an object, of laughter. And it was not just a returning to Babel's traditions, but the creation of a space where representatives of different ethnic minorities move from a periphery to a cultural center. It meant that the minority subject, who was marked as the "provincial" and "ethnographic" body in the Soviet time, moved to the more tolerant, postcolonial and multinational chronotope which combined several different tendencies: socialist critique, postsocialist satire, and commercial entertainment at the same time. Where the colonial culture was constructed upon the opposition between the "imperial center" and the "colonial periphery", the anticolonial culture tried to inverse them, but postcolonial laughter adapted all existing cultural and ideological positions present in Ukrainian culture after independence.

## Carnivalization in Ukrainian comedies after the 2000s

The show by the Ukrainian artist Andrei Danilko in the character of Verka Serdutchka can be considered a fundamentally new phase in Ukrainian comedic culture, and a perfect example of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. An identity, at once double and carnivalesque, of a new character was presented first at the simple level of a name: "Verka" is a female Russian name in a vulgar

pronunciation, and “Serduchka” is similar to a Ukrainian street nickname. This hybridization of the name can be considered a symbol of the transgressive subjectivity formed in Ukraine in the late 1990s.

The first performances of Andrei Danilko as the stage persona Verka Serduchka on Ukrainian TV was in 1997 in the comedic *SV show*. Verka Serduchka cut an image of the provincial, vulgar, but kind, friendly, and witty train conductor whose statements quickly became well known. The show had a principally “performative” character because many sketches by Danilko/Serduchka were improvised and depended on dialogue with other participants. We can thus say that the show *Verka Serduchka* uses several national comedic traditions: the Ukrainian tradition of burlesque, and the Western variety of the same – drag shows – and Soviet cross-dressing. Although burlesque is typical not only in the Ukrainian tradition,<sup>13</sup> it is presented in the Ukrainian classic literature as a genre, and it was first used in Ivan Kotlyarevsky’s “Aeneid” (1798–1820), an extremely popular Ukrainian burlesque poem which was built as the parody deconstruction of the classical *Aeneid* by Virgil, with a strong Ukrainian Cossack coloration. Kotlyarevsky was a successful Russian officer from an aristocratic East Ukrainian family and the first well-known Ukrainian writer in the Russian empire to use the “Malorussian” (contemporary Ukrainian) language in his literary works, and he gained great popularity because of his humorous and vivid style. He frequently used details from Ukrainian peasant life as symbols of the “bucolic” Ukrainian past. And he was the first to include Ukrainian “provincialism” and carnival as a cultural myth about Ukraine in the Russian cultural sphere.<sup>14</sup> The combination of the comic elements with the fantastic ones, as well as the lyrical and ironic elements in the Ukrainian burlesque traditions, was also taken up by Danilko in the creation of the visual and speech images of his representations of Verka Serduchka.

The new (for Ukrainian comedies) feature was the emphasis on cross-dressing and queer motifs, as a male artist, Danilko, was portraying himself as a single coquette, not young, not old, with accented female sexuality. Some Western scholars have argued that queer motifs existed even in the Ukrainian literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>15</sup> but they were hidden because queer images were not permitted

in Soviet literature, cinema, or theater. Queer motifs existed in the early 1920s, and they emerged in the liberal Soviet 1970s. The first Soviet popular film to use cross-dressing was *Hello, I am Charley’s Aunt* (1975), based on the English play *Charley’s Aunt* by Brandon Thomas and performed by a cast of admired Soviet actors, with A. Kalyagin in a leading role. The plot revolved around an unemployed man named Bubs who ends up in a lavish home and changes his male clothes for female ones to play the role of a rich lady from Brazil. The man plays the role of a middle-aged femme fatale and attracts two men who believe in the constructed female image more than in “natural women”. This movie was shot in the style of silent movies of the 1920s with many comic situations which could be compared to the famous American drag movies such as *Viktor-Viktoria*, *Tootsie*, and *Some Like It Hot*. This Soviet movie became the source of many visual and verbal quotations in the post-Soviet period.

**DANILKO USED** the popular Soviet tradition of cross-dressing and interfused it with the Ukrainian burlesque style. Verka Serduchka’s cross-dressing represents, in my view, not Judith Butler’s concept of queerness<sup>16</sup> as a principal refusal of “normativity”, but more the Bakhtinian idea of carnival as a deconstruction of cultural hierarchies and traditional oppositions (male and female, urban and provincial, normative and marginal). The visual style of Verka Serduchka is exceptionalism and interruption of normality in the Rabelaisian style, because her visual style gravitates towards a considerable and grotesque enlargement of everything, all life pleasures: in particular, it is an accent on the abnormally gigantic bust of Verka Serduchka, too massive and bright bijouterie, the love of shiny spangles. However, this grotesque enlargement of physicality and the zest for life of Verka Serduchka can be considered self-irony under the rubric of her own “Rabelaisianism”, a quality of post-Soviet Ukrainianness: the excessiveness of Verka Serduchka can be seen as symbolization of consumerist appetites of the young Ukrainian nation for everything that glitters, and for everything that can mark the post-Soviet Ukrainian culture as distinct from the Ukrainian Soviet tradition, even if the accent on such differences results in apparent ridiculous and provincial qualities. The various cultural and linguistic traditions enter into carnivalesque dialogue within the very image of Verka Serduchka, who is, at same time, a transgressive<sup>17</sup> and hybrid<sup>18</sup> subjectivity.

The carnivalesque style of total parody was used in many images of Verka Serduchka: in particular, Andrei Danilko in the role of Verka Serduchka was



Andrei Danilko in the stage persona Verka Serduchka.



The *Evening Kvartal* TV show.

chosen to represent Ukraine at Eurovision in Helsinki in 2007, and he/she secured second place. In a New Year's celebration performance Verka Serduchka appeared in a small red dress and makeup in the style of the American sex icon Marilyn Monroe. In that image, Andrei Danilko presented the figure of a grotesque Ukrainian woman simulating the famous American actress in the same way done in the American drag movie *Some Like It Hot*, an actress who is an enduring pop culture symbol. Danilko constructed a parody of a parody by displaying the Ukrainian provincial woman who herself is the parody of the stereotypes from popular culture. Verka Serduchka creates a carnival polyphony with multiple reversals within the body of just one performer. This amounts to an effective kitsch parody of the kitsch nature of popular culture itself.

**ANOTHER IMPORTANT ASPECT** is connected to Serduchka's manner of speaking, which is a comical "surzhik", that is, a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian literary languages, and which has been identified in Soviet linguistics as a low (street) form of a literary (normative) speech. However, it must be noted that a significant proportion of non-urban Ukrainians have been speaking different versions of surzhik and that surzhik, is in fact a native way of speaking for many who are not well-educated in Ukraine, and in southern Russia as well. The American scholar Lada Bilaniuk has defined, several categories of surzhik, including: an "urbanized version of rural speech"; a mix of rural dialects; and a "speech culture of cultural bilinguals".<sup>19</sup> Bilaniuk holds that surzhik is not only a language, but also part of the national culture and identity. But the status of surzhik has been reconceptualized in the post-Soviet situation: if the traditional (normative) culture saw surzhik as a variant of a cultural kitsch used by the uneducated,

or as an ethnographic stylization, contemporary Ukrainian pop culture tries to find new sources of national identity that are its own, and surzhik takes on a new meaning. In contrast to the normative Ukrainian and Russian languages, which have strict writing and pronunciation rules, surzhik, as a nonliterate mixture of both, can be considered a more liberal way of speaking, closer to folk consciousness: surzhik has thus lost the derogatory connotations instilled by the Soviet schools for decades, and come to be regarded as a local version of regional speech. Internet communication without grammatical rules and regulations has also altered perceptions of surzhik.

On the one hand, the use of surzhik on stage still induce laughter (especially among educated Ukrainians). Yet on the other hand, surzhik is heard everywhere on Ukrainian TV and it is perceived as a transgression of Soviet imperial normativity, as a symbol of a new cultural identity in the Ukrainian mass consciousness starting at the turn of the century, especially during the Maidan protests of 2004–2005, in which some political parties presented surzhik-speaking people as the "true Ukrainians".

The transgressive character of Verka Serduchka's image manifests itself at the level of psychology as well: the majority of people fear loneliness, or looking provincial, at some subconscious level. Verka Serduchka brings these human fears to the surface on the stage, making them larger than life, at the same time mocking them, and so allows the audience an opportunity for catharsis by laughing with Verka Serduchka. I believe that Verka Serduchka presents a transgender and transnational body of the new post-Soviet and postcolonial Ukrainian culture which has a transitive nature because it lies between center and periphery, between Ukrainian and Russian cultures, between masculine and feminine, between ideals of high culture and the realities of mass consciousness, and it makes her a typical example of the carnival culture.

*The Verka Serduchka Show* has reflected, since the two-thousand aughts, the different needs of the Ukrainian audience – the postcolonial laughter and the post-Soviet laughter that combine the multifaceted nature of the opposition to the Soviet past, and to the Ukrainian present, in which the new postsocialist TV advertising reflects bourgeois well-being. Verka Serduchka is the product not only of popular culture and parody, but at the same time she is a kitsch person and an image of a little provincial person in a cold world in the humanistic perspective of Gogol's and Chekhov's laughter through tears. And this humanistic perspective of Verka Serduchka made her attractive to different audiences.

**TWO MORE UKRAINIAN** shows involving the use of surzhik are *Vital'ka* (this is the diminutive form of the masculine Vi-

taly) and *Faina Ukraina* [The good Ukraine]. They build upon the aesthetic and humorous innovations of Verka Serduchka, the aesthetics of surzhik, travesty, and cross-dressing, and demonstrate the comic element of visual kitsch. *Vital'ka* has been a popular show since 2012 and can be understood as a combination of a Ukrainian *Mr. Bean* and a light version of *The Benny Hill Show*. *Vital'ka* does not make any open references to Mr. Bean, but the similarities can be reconstructed from the main character in *Vital'ka* (played by Garik Bircha): he is a strange young man, making heavy use of expressive facial mimicry, who is not socialized and continually gets into ridiculous situations. Here, the similarities with Mr. Bean end, for the British show focuses on the British cultural stereotypes and the inability of the hero to adapt to these cultural norms, whereas the Ukrainian *Vital'ka* is an aggressive young man who is interested in sex only.

Another feature of *Vital'ka* is that *Vital'ka* speaks only in surzhik, while all other characters speak in standard Russian and behave like cultured urbanites. The comic situations arise from collisions between the urban Russian-speaking community and the provincial, surzhik native. On the one hand, *Vital'ka* recalls characters of the Soviet Russian writer M. Zoshchenko (1898–1958), who used to write his works from point of view of a greedy, provincial, and uneducated person. Yet on the other hand, *Vital'ka* is presented as a source of sexual energy and Ukrainian provincial vitality, while the city intellectuals look like toneless people, and vanish into the background. I would submit that *Vital'ka* reflects many qualities of Ukrainian postcolonial culture, of the early post-Soviet period when many people fled from the villages to the big cities (especially Kyiv). The newcomers had no intention of accepting the urban culture: they kept their provincial way of life and thinking. But in Ukraine, the countryside is seen in some political and cultural discourses as a source of new national identity because it corresponds with the anticolonial strategy in which the rural periphery can supersede urban and imperial normativity.

*Faina Ukraina* is a popular Ukrainian comic sketch show with many episodes which was shown on the New Channel from 2008 to 2010. *Faina Ukraina* was created by the Ukrainian artists Sergei Molochny and Andrei Prytoola. Initially, the program was conceived as the Ukrainian analogue of the Russian sketch show *Our Russia* and the British *Little Britain*. This show demonstrates the carnival chronotope of the Ukrainian postcolonial society in that two male actors play all male and female roles and depict the multicultural consciousness of Ukrainians from different social levels and regions. *Faina Ukraina* calls to mind the burlesque traditions of Kotlyarevsky and Gogol. The characters of this satirical and humorous show were “ordinary Ukrainians” from different social and professional groups: office managers, middle-level journalists, single, middle-aged women in searches of a rich partner, stupid officers,

provincial scientists, and even Ukrainian cosmonauts who never made it to space. The comic couple Anton and Marichka from a provincial town are characters from Ukrainian urban folklore; other characters of the sketches came from different sources, in particular from Soviet student jokes about professors and students; some characters parody famous American shows such as *Doctor House*. The combination of visual cross-dressing and a mix of many cultural voices has an obviously carnivalesque character: carnival is described by Bakhtin as a time in which anything is possible. In my opinion, the difference between *Faina Ukraina* and *Vital'ka* is that, while *Vital'ka* highlights both ironic and positive elements of Ukrainian provincialism, *Faina Ukraina* used provincialism and surzhik as the objects of laughter.

### The political carnival show *Evening Kvartal*

Finally, the most popular Ukrainian comedy has been *Evening Kvartal* (first aired in 2005), devoted mostly to current political themes. The artists and authors behind *Evening Kvartal* came from the Ukrainian KVN, and created their own, original project which had no analogue in the post-Soviet comic chronotope. The genre of *Evening Kvartal* is close to the genre of political variété: it combines vivid entertainment, artistry, and a strong orientation towards political events. The structure of *Evening Kvartal* includes a large number of parodies on well-known Ukrainian and foreign politicians and popstars, brave and remonstrative songs about the contemporary situation in the country, cabaret, and sarcastic monologues on topics of the day. What is unique about

*Evening Kvartal* is that all its actors play roles of specific political officials of the highest rank (Ukrainian presidents, vice-presidents, their political opponents, and so on), presenting them and their political debates as quarrels between neighbors or members of a family, mixing political and sexual intrigues, or depicting political struggle as a fight for sexual dominance. The most frequent targets of the ironic comic sketches have been: corruption in the Ukrainian state and police; the low level of Ukrainian army and hospital funding; the greed and incompetence of Ukrainian politi-

cians; the penetration of the Ukrainian rustic culture into the city along with the establishment of provincialism as a new national idea; and the ignorance and vanity of certain media figures and many other prominent people.

The uniqueness of *Evening Kvartal* was its carnivalesque performativity: although most Russian and Western European politicians ignore comedies, between 2007 and 2012, many Ukrainian politicians tried, paradoxically, to use the popularity of *Evening Kvartal* to improve their own ratings: despite the openly satirical focus of the show, many representatives of the Ukrainian political establishment often visited premieres of *Evening Kvartal*. For example, mayor of Kyiv, Leonid Chernovezky

**“THE COMIC SITUATIONS ARISE FROM THE COLLISIONS BETWEEN THE URBAN RUSSIAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY AND THE PROVINCIAL SURZHNIK NATIVE.”**

(2006–2012), often sat in the front row of the auditorium even when *Evening Kvartal* presented very spiteful parodies on the mayor himself. When the actor playing the mayor appeared on the stage, Chernovetsky stood up and gave a bow to the auditorium with a smile. Another famous Ukrainian politician, Uriy Luzenko, was often seated among spectators, and the master of ceremonies would then offer ironic questions in his direction. Thus, *Evening Kvartal*, created a true carnival space in which the distance between the highest officials and ordinary people was erased and the politicians became objects of laughter.

**LET ME BRIEFLY** list other details about *Evening Kvartal*: first, it contained very quick artistic and emotional reactions to the most widely discussed political and social events (following the old Russian saying “news comes in the newspaper in the morning, and should be reflected in the evening couplet”); second, the criticism of authorities was presented from the position of ordinary Ukrainian citizens and their street conversations; finally, presentations of folk opinion on stage created a significant feeling of moral and emotional satisfaction for much of the Ukrainian audience. By conserving a quasi-neutral political position for a long time, *Evening Kvartal* attracted the sympathy of a large part of the audience. The humorous form of expression allowed *Evening Kvartal* to touch on serious topics in a playful style, and mixture of high, official and low, folksy points of view created a carnival atmosphere during its performances.

I take *Evening Kvartal* to be a postcolonial and postmodern phenomenon in Ukraine, one that mixes various forms of ironic, playful, and deconstructive laughter and reflects a contemporary “multiple”<sup>20</sup> Ukrainian identity. Typically, *Evening Kvartal* mocked both the excessive pathos of anticolonial nationalistic protests and the imperial ambitions found in post-Soviet societies. The authors of *Evening Kvartal* tend to articulate the folk skepticism towards both the ruling party and its opposition, and, in their parodies, actively used events from the contemporary Ukrainian life, as well as from the contemporary Russian and even American and Western European public discussions, and created a feeling of the audience’s involvement in a global, multicultural, postcolonial, and postmodern world that was liked by both the Ukrainian intelligentsia and ordinary people.

## Conclusion

I have analyzed the most interesting and popular Ukrainian television comedy shows, and can now summarize some key observations. The 1990s was a period of sharp critique of Soviet values and cultural norms in Ukraine, with the result that the majority of Ukrainian comedy shows were centered on two basic themes: the mockery of Soviet ideals and official norms, and the inclusion in the Ukrainian cultural space of the voices of people

from groups that had been marginalized in the Soviet period. For example, *The Gentleman Show* can be considered the first post-Soviet comedy show in which a Jewish theme in general, and also the specific cultural elements that constituted contributions to the national life, were articulated in an explicit way – not from the margins, but from a cultural core. Another feature of early Ukrainian comedy shows was that the object of the laughter was, as a rule, the Soviet past, though not the post-Soviet national euphoria that followed independence. It can be seen as a manifestation of the anticolonial ideology that the new ruling groups tried to replace the idea of “Sovietness” by the idea of “nationality”.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Ukraine can be characterized as fundamentally involving active searches for a founding national idea. These searches took several forms: the Maidan protests (2004–2005); heated ideological discussions about the value of the Soviet past; and the status of an official state language. All these topics were reflected in the new Ukrainian shows after the two-thousand-aughts, which joined political critique with entertainment. In a situation where many Ukrainians felt the government ignored their views, the public comedies took on the role of a spokesperson, expressing the opinion of

the people in witty and artistic forms (in particular, *Evening Kvartal* in 2006–2012).

Political satire and parodies became integral parts of the Ukrainian comedies after the first decade of the century, and this meant that comedy in Ukraine has not only an entertainment function, but also a therapeutic and resistant function as well: if an individual or social group is subjected to social or political injustice, and is

powerless to change the overall political or social situation in society, then laughter becomes the only tool to manifest an opposition towards the government. For this reason, most of the popular Ukrainian shows manifest an identification with audience’s attitudes about the authorities. Grotesque, burlesque, and eccentric parodies are used widely in Ukrainian pop culture to accentuate the absurdity of many political or social situations in contemporary Ukrainian society, and can restore the feeling of dignity to the audience.

It seems obvious that the most popular Ukrainian comedies of recent years (such as *Verka Serduchka*, *Faina Ukraina*, and *Evening Kvartal*) would manifest the hybrid character of the post-Soviet identity as a result of the contradictions within Ukrainian cultural and political thinking itself: this thinking seeks to stand in opposition to the former Soviet and the contemporary Russian cultural traditions, yet, in the meantime, it focuses on traditions that are attractive and unbearable at the same time, traditions from a Russian culture that plays a role of a symbolic normative Other, whose opinion still remains very important for Ukrainian self-identity.

The same situation existed on the public level the in 1990s

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and 2000s: the post-Soviet audience in Ukraine and Russia had no significant differences in their objects of ridicule and many Russian TV comedy programs were broadcast on Ukrainian TV, and conversely the majority of the Ukrainian comedy shows sought to gain entrance to the Russian TV channels. Hence many Ukrainian comedy projects took into account the interests of both Ukrainian and Russian spectators, and the common language of the shows was Russian, with the inclusion of occasional Ukrainian words or surzhik, which were understandable to a majority of the Russian-speaking audience. Such a situation can be interpreted in postcolonial terms as a display of multicultural, transitive, and internally contradictory cultural identity.

Carnival became an essential part of not only the Ukrainian culture of laughter but also post-Soviet Ukrainian literature and even political life. Carnival in the laughter chronotope obviously has a postcolonial character because of the incorporation of the anticolonial pathos, and also Soviet satire, Jewish anecdotes, West European cabaret, Russian comedies, American travesty shows, and Ukrainian burlesque tradition. The specificity of Ukrainian comedies reflects the evolution of the Ukrainian struggle between anticolonial and postcolonial searches for national cultural identity. The carnival as a space of play and transgression occupies a significant place in the comedy culture of Ukraine, and the most popular shows deliberately use “carnivalization” as a tool to dissolve the differences between the stage actors and the audience, as well as between the actors of the shows and the political elite, the political decision makers. Carnivalization is a way to deontologize ideology (in the sense of Roland Barthes) as the artificial design of the political statements and the social hierarchies. For this reason, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory is the most appropriate to use in analyzing the contradictions of the post-Soviet Ukrainian society and the culture of laughter and comedy. ✘

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