



‘It Was Totally Worth It’: Patriotic Consumption in the Queue to Serov’s Exhibit

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Abstract: Looking at the conception and reception of the recent Serov exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery, this article explores how the show both expresses a desire to popularize a patriotic mode of cultural consumption and reveals present-day socio-cultural anxieties that the economic sanctions have triggered. Exploring the relevance of Serov’s aesthetics as well as the polyphony of the public perspectives on the show, I contend that the success of the exhibit is rooted in the palimpsestic nature of the event. The metaphor of the palimpsest allows for the description of multiple layers of cultural memory mobilized by the show: the nostalgia about Russia’s pre-revolutionary past, the Soviet endorsement of the queue, the pride in the national endurance during World War II. As I argue, the inadvertent popularity of the Serov exhibit demonstrates that ideology is most successful at triggering patriotic consumption in the post-Soviet space when it activates a palimpsest – a production that evokes different, at times contradicting, strata of cultural meaning.

Keywords: post-Soviet media, post-Soviet ideology, palimpsest, cultural heritage, cultural memory, aesthetics of portraiture, Soviet queue

In the winter of 2015-2016, the audience striving to see the exhibition of the Russian realist portraitist Valentin Serov stormed the doors of the Tretyakov Gallery.¹ The show welcomed 486,000 visitors, many of whom spent long hours waiting to get in.² Setting the attendance record for the Moscow exhibitions, the show became a topical news event. Yet

¹ I want to thank my advisor, Lilya Kaganovsky, who helped with shaping ideas, read multiple drafts and gave me guidance and encouragement. I am also grateful to Irina Sandomirskaja for academic generosity and valuable suggestions which helped me to complicate the argument.

² To compare, two other projects of the Tretyakov Gallery from 2015 – a retrospective exhibit honoring the 200 anniversary of Pavel Fedotov and the exhibition of Soviet Hyper-realism – attracted 52,000 and 51, 000 visitors respectively (Source: *The Art Newspaper Russia*, May 2016).

what made the Serov exhibit exceptional was not the numerical record but the mythologization of the queue in the Russian media.

The Channel One news blocks covering the event expressed blatant pride in the audience's enthusiasm. According to one of them, the urge to see Serov's art was so passionate that 'they [people] even broke the doors' (Vse novosti, 2016).³ As the report goes on to show 'the very same door' that the public broke through and focuses on the crowd around 'the Russian Mona Lisa' (Serov's *Girl with Peaches* (1887) [Devochka s persikami]), it becomes clear that the exhibition had transgressed the confines of an artistic event and transformed into a site of contestation about patriotism, national pride, Russian history and culture. At the end of the news story, the camera takes us back to the crowd, where a man from the queue claims that 'our people are prepared to stand as long as necessary'.⁴ A rousing statement evoking militaristic connotations, this comment simultaneously reveals the anxiety about withstanding hardships – a symptomatic sentiment in the context of Russia's economic isolation – and axiological self-isolation.

The phenomenal success of the Serov exhibition in the midst of the 2015 economic crisis signals a trend in art consumption in contemporary Russia, where classical art becomes a national product available for mediation in social networking sites. This case study seeks to illuminate specific features which made the Serov exhibit a perfect vehicle for contemporary ideological attribution. The study looks at the show's conception and reception by analyzing discourses about the exhibition on state TV and social media.

To understand the role Serov's art plays in the mediated construction of Russian contemporary identity, the article first examines the way Serov's work was conceptualized by the Tretyakov Gallery, situating it against the background of earlier visual studies scholarship. Addressing the definitive characteristics of the recent Moscow exhibition, I describe the way in which they activate the concepts of nationhood and patriotism. Further, I look at the layers of cultural memory activated by the exhibition and address the contradiction between the anti-Soviet nostalgia for imperial Russia and the distinctly Soviet chronotope of the queue. Finally, the study examines the 'reception of the reception,' focusing on some of the meme representations of the queue on the internet. Analyzing how the queue itself becomes a media event, the article investigates the controversial symbolic space in which the show operates.

My approach examines the queue as a Soviet anthropological practice and a site of contemporary national pride. This makes it possible to see how the media coverage of the queue both expressed a desire to popularize a patriotic mode of cultural consumption and revealed present-day socio-cultural anxieties that the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West have triggered. Looking at the audience's responses to the exhibition on Instagram and other social networks, I move on to analyzing visitors' engagement with Serov's artwork and focus on elements of his aesthetics that are particularly pertinent for contemporary portraiture representation.

Exploring the polyphony of the public perspectives on the show as well as the relevance of Serov's aesthetics, I contend that the success of the exhibit is rooted in the palimpsestic

³ All translations by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Conveniently, the perfective of the Russian phrase 'to stand in the queue' uses the verb that has a meaning 'to withstand, to hold out' ('vystoiat') and has a militaristic connotation (e.g. 'to withstand the hardship', 'to hold against enemy's push').

nature of the event. The metaphor of the palimpsest allows describing multiple layers of cultural memory mobilized by the show: the nostalgia about Russia's pre-revolutionary past, the Soviet endorsement of the queue, the pride in the national endurance during World War II. As I argue, the inadvertent popularity of the Serov exhibit demonstrates that ideology is most successful at triggering patriotic consumption in the post-Soviet space when it activates a palimpsest – a production that evokes different, at times contradicting, strata of cultural meaning. A cultural palimpsest can help boost patriotism and activate affective response in various social groups, but it can hardly provide a coherent understanding of a nation's cultural heritage and connection with its past.

'Our Everything': The National Artist of the Tretyakov Gallery

Valentin Aleksandrovich Serov (1865-1911) is a prominent Russian artist and master of portraiture. Close to Mamontov's artistic circle and painters of Russian realism, he nevertheless did not belong to a particular movement or an artistic school. An acclaimed portrait painter, Serov executed portraits of leading actors, artists and political figures, including Russian tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II, and their families. He is also famous for intimate portraits of women and children (*Girl with Peaches* being a recognized masterpiece) and casual scenes of Russian countryside. Art historians have appreciated Serov's creative approach for its lyrical realism, effective combination of tradition and innovation and compelling simplicity of form from the beginning of his career in the 1890s till present day.⁵ One thing that distinguishes the recent curatorial take of the Tretyakov gallery from the way Serov had been previously addressed in post-Soviet art historical discourse is the emphasis on his artistic universality.

While scholars had paid sufficient attention to Serov's drawings and landscape and historical paintings before, it was the project of the Tretyakov gallery that stressed universality as the key feature of Serov's aesthetics. This was evident in the conceptual layout of the Tretyakov gallery exhibition: the project presented the artist's landscape paintings, drawings, theatre designs for Diaghilev ballet, and most importantly, his portraits. During the opening address for the exhibition in October 2015, Director of the Tretyakov Gallery Zelfira Tregulova claimed that Serov is 'a rare kind of artist appreciated by all: those who like the Itinerants, those who prefer avant-garde or favor new artistic trends' ('The Opening of Valentin

⁵ Unsurprisingly, different facets of Serov's artistic appeal resonate with different eras. The Soviet school of art history consistently highlighted Serov's ability to render 'the truth of life'. In the 1960s the art historians underlined Marxist undertones and described the painter's attention to diverse social groups suggesting that the social agenda, although tangential, was constantly present in Serov's art (Arbuzov 1968: 12). Such reading of Serov's art, naturally, disappears from the art criticism of the 1990s. Critics become interested in Serov's break from the critical aesthetics of the Itinerants and his ability to embrace 'the unconditional beauty', which is 'admirable as is, without any moral or civic agenda' (Allenova 1996: 7). In tune with the general sentiment of the 90s, the critical reception of Serov emphasizes the artist's potential to bridge the gap between the past and the present as well as between Russian art and Western tradition. Arguing for an aesthetic commonality between Serov and Degas (German 2005) and exploring the evolution of Serov's technique against the background of Impressionism, Modernism and Aestheticism (Petrova 2005; Sarab'ianov 2012), the art criticism of the 2000s highlights Serov's intermediary position between the classical and the modern. Thus, talking about Serov's palimpsestic ability to combine the old and the new Petrova brings up Bulgakov's question, 'Why try to pursue what is completed?' and gives an answer: 'Because nothing is completed' (2005: 19). A similar sentiment seems to underlie the phenomenal success of Serov's exhibition in the winter of 2015-2016.

Serov's Exhibition', 2015). Further on, Tregulova suggests that 'Serov is our everything' ['nashe vsio'], thus drawing a parallel between the artist and the famous national poet Alexander Pushkin, who has traditionally been viewed as 'our everything' within the contexts of Russian literature and culture.⁶ Discussing the popularity of the exhibition on TV Channel Kultura, Milena Orlova, art critic and Chief Editor of *The Art Newspaper Russia*, claimed that showcasing Serov as the main Russian artist was an effective strategy to convince the public that the show was not to be missed (Rossiia K TVkultura, 2016). The parallel between Pushkin and Serov indeed helps to define the latter as 'the national artist', not only making attendance absolutely necessary for a broad audience, but also opening the conceptual ground for discussions of nationhood and patriotism in reference to the show.

The narrative about the Russian national artist revolved around Serov's portraits projecting a specific idea of Russia – 'the Russia that we lost'. Beautiful ladies in sunlit gardens, vivacious faces of peasant children, the royal family, stories about the post-Revolutionary struggles of the Russian elite – all bring to mind the idealistic vision of the last years of the Russian Empire. Each portrait was accompanied by the story of the model's life. Rather than addressing Serov's colour palette and technique, the descriptions included anecdotic sketches of the characters' personalities and biographical information. In many cases their biographies are unsurprisingly tragic as they tell stories of exile, emigration or execution.

In her blog on the Echo Moskv website, Irina Pavlova, a film critic and Art Director of Moscow Film Festival, describes the appeal of the show as 'powerful and very sad'. She further suggests that 'one doesn't see such faces around anymore' and claims that 'this art is now out of fashion' (Pavlova 2016). This language is not unique to Pavlova's blog, but rather is recurrent in many responses traditionally mourning the sovietization of Russian classical culture.⁷ In her article for Radio Svoboda, Elena Fanailova talks about the anti-communist tone in the show's conception, which has become legitimate since 1991 (Fanailova 2016). While the search for the national idea in the Russian pre-Revolutionary culture is not at all new, what makes the instance of Serov special and complex is the fusion of the anti-communist rhetoric with the mythologization of the queue, a distinctly Soviet chronotope.

⁶ In fact, the connection to Pushkin is also evoked in the Russian Museum catalogue from 2012, where a quote from Repin compares the appeal of Serov's art to that of a precious stone 'which keeps drawing you into the depth of its charm the more you look.' This quote is juxtaposed to Brusov's quote about Pushkin: 'Pushkin's clarity is like crystal-clear water in which one can see the bottom of an infinite depth' (Petrova 2012). Yet, the review does not go beyond the mere juxtaposition, emphasizing clarity and depth of Serov's and Pushkin's artistic perspectives. Activating the idea of 'our everything' serves a different function and allows for conceptualizing Serov as the Russian national artist.

⁷ The way Serov was perceived by Russian intelligentsia in the 2000s involved one more shade of meaning that does not have a distinct presence in the discussions of the Tretyakov exhibition. As the Echo Moskv radio show from 2008 addresses the relationship between Serov and autocracy, the invited art historian claims that Serov was an exceptionally independent artist who never toadied to the royal power. According to the talk, his character was defined by impeccable moral strength and freedom of conscience. For the intelligentsia of the 2000s, Serov embodied the idea of preserving one's integrity in the relationship with governmental power. Curiously, in *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, Katerina Clark discusses the way Pushkin exemplified a very similar idea for the Russian intelligentsia of the early 1920s. Clark's description of the celebration of Pushkin's anniversary in 1921 illuminates the anxiety intelligentsia felt in the face of the new authoritarian power (1995: 155-157). Thus, figures of Pushkin and Serov remarkably functioned in a similar way in the intelligentsia milieu shortly before the official culture appropriated them as 'our everything'.

The Soviet queue: sign of endurance and patience

For Soviet culture, the queue was more than just a tedious shortcoming of the reality of deficit and a recurrent image in Soviet literature and film. Drawing on Mikhail Epstein's idea of the queue as 'an individual manifestation of the fundamental character of Soviet ideology', Konstantin Bogdanov's anthropological study of Soviet lines suggests that the Soviet focus on futurity made the ability to wait and endure an emblematic feature of everyday life (2012: 78-79). As Bogdanov points out, 'patience is a fundamental requirement of the Soviet project of global social transformation' (2012: 95). More importantly, this perception continues to inform contemporary assumptions. According to sociological tests, 'around 50 percent of the national population still agrees with the statement "life is difficult, but we can wait"' (Levada 1997: 10-17).

The perception of waiting in line for Serov's exhibit was characterized by some defining features of the Soviet queuing experience. Thus, Bogdanov talks about the eternal status of the queue in the Soviet consciousness. He refers to the archetypal Soviet queue – the queue to the Mausoleum – which he calls 'the very apotheosis of the queue, the symbolic promise of prolonged or even eternal life' (Bogdanov 2012: 80). As Bogdanov remarks, one had the impression that 'this queue will not only exist forever, but it has always existed', making the idea of the queue itself structurally eternal in the public imagination (2012: 81). Similarly, the assumption that 'the queue has always been there' is voiced by the people in the Serov queue. When a Channel One reporter asks, 'Why didn't you come earlier to look at Serov's paintings? In fact, the gallery has had a few. Why have you decided to attend this particular exhibition, to stand in this line?' a woman responds, 'You know, in fact the queue has been here all the time – in October, in November, so... It just happened this way' (Pervyi Kanal, 2016). Indeed, because of the history of museum crowds in Moscow one would expect a line (albeit a smaller one) to Serov's exhibit in October when the show just opened. Yet, the assumption that 'the queue has always been there' is telling. In fact, other responses from the crowd transgress the boundaries of the particular event and describe standing in museum lines as a natural experience that has a long history. Thus, a young girl proudly remarks, 'Our mothers queued like this to see Levitan'. When one considers this comment, it is possible to see the line as a universal ritual establishing a connection with the experience of the previous generation who lived and matured in the Soviet Union.

A specific feature of the Soviet queue, according to Bogdanov, is 'the semiotic consumption of the act of queuing itself', which the scholar analyzes in fiction by Friedrich Gorenstein. While claiming that Soviet people would stand in queues for the sake of the experience would be incorrect, it seems convincing that the consumption of the products might be 'essentially indistinguishable' from the consumption of the act of waiting (Bogdanov 2012: 93). Naturally, hardly anyone would stand in a museum queue for the mere experience of waiting. Yet, as some of the responses from the crowd suggest, the desire to see the exhibition is indeed constructed through anticipation and is indistinguishable from it.

In a Russia Today news block, two young girls explain their coming to the Tretyakov Gallery all the way from Saint Petersburg, saying, 'We are from Saint Petersburg and we came specifically for the show. Everyone said we were crazy, especially since there is a three-hour wait. We did not think this was true, though; we wanted to see for ourselves' (Rus-

sia Today na russkom, 2016). While it is questionable whether the girls came for the queue exclusively, waiting in line, in fact, became a part of ‘the Serov experience’, indistinguishable from the pleasure of seeing the exhibition itself. The way queuing becomes a part of the consumption of the show is spelled out even more distinctly in Natalia Osipova’s journalist blog: ‘After the cold and the slight torment of waiting you find yourself in the summer of Serov’s paradise – like the second act of the performance, which is impossible without the first one’ (Natalia Oss 2016).

If queuing was a structurally important part of Soviet sensibilities, it must have offered some gratification to the public. Bogdanov suggests that the queue was a projection of the law, as ‘the organizing ethical principle of any queue is the principle of justice’ (2012: 83). Ideally the concept of queuing presumes that there is equity of distribution based on the mere numerical order, not on social status. Although Soviet queues did not always function according to this rule, they still allowed for uniting different people as one group. According to the blogs, the queue for Serov brought together ‘people in expensive sable furs and those in flimsy autumn coats’ who stood side by side without any social distinction (Pavlova 2016). The audience’s enthusiasm about queuing arguably reveals the common desire for order, security and the promise of justice at a moment of economic struggle. Following the financial crisis of 2014-2015, which was triggered by the economic sanctions imposed by the West, Russia has experienced the country-wide decline of welfare. As a result, the population acutely felt a sense of instability and insecurity with regards to the future.

In his recent study of the queue in the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural imagination, Andrew Chapman describes the allure of the queue for the older generation who remember a time when waiting, although tiresome, ensured that their basic needs would be met (2013: 208). He also registers a recent ‘recasting the practice of queuing as an upbeat cultural activity’ explaining that present-day lines emerge primarily around big cultural events – national gallery exhibitions and religious ceremonies (e.g. the worship of the Virgin Mary’s relic belt at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow in 2011). As Chapman suggests, in the post-Soviet space ‘the act of waiting shifts belief away from the queue as an allocating mediator and places it in the realm of a ritual with higher meaning’ (2013: 205).

Consumer patriotism: Queueing for an art exhibit in modern Russia

Queueing for an art exhibit (not a material commodity) allowed for patriotic oppositions of what was presented as Russian spirituality vs. Western consumerism. One of the memes which appeared on the internet shortly after the queue had become a trending piece of news presents a juxtaposition of the Serov queue on the right and the 1990 queue to the first McDonald’s on the left.

Image 1. Internet meme juxtaposing the line to the Tretyakov Gallery in 2016 and the line to the first McDonald's in Moscow in 1990.



Source: Yaroslav Cohen, 'Why Russians Are So Crazy about Artist Serov', for *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, *Rbth.com* (2016).

The message of the image clearly emphasizes patriotic cultural consumption in the country's present and downplays Western patterns of consumerism adopted in the 1990s. The queue to Serov is seen as a return to Russian national values which are in conflict with the West and are presented as incompatible with consuming things foreign. What makes this appeal contradictory is not only Serov's aesthetics, heavily influenced by the Western art, but also a striking similarity between the two queues in the picture. Both queues reveal the anxiety of people's longing for security, order and justice.

The opposition to the West is also apprehensible in the choice of the classical artist. Traditionally, in the international arena Russia is associated with Malevich, Kandinsky and the Soviet avant-garde, while the school of Russian realism gets less attention from both foreign curators and art historians. Yet unsurprisingly, neither Malevich nor Rodchenko are brought to the forefront to represent the national tradition in Russia. One of the distinct features of the avant-garde culture is its desire to break with the past (Papernyi 1996: 41). This ambition to radically break with any tradition hardly makes the avant-garde a perfect exemplar of national heritage (not to mention the challenge of national identification with something as abstract as *Black Square*). Russian classical art not only provides more tangible subjects, but has also been traditionally concerned with history, landscape and the plight of Russian people. Thus, the Constructivists and the Suprematists remain the face of the Russian art for export (for instance, they get referenced in the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games in Sochi 2014), yet it is classical painting represented by Serov, Aivazovsky and Shishkin that currently gets the spotlight as Russian national art and is exhibited at major retrospective art shows of the Tretyakov Gallery.

But of course, it is not the art of the 1920s that is seen as an opposition to Serov's realist aesthetics. As a new national poster child of the Russian artistic tradition, Serov is counter-opposed to 'another art', represented by Petr Pavlensky, a radical artist who at the time of exhibition was under trial for the arson of Lubyanka door. One of the images inspired by the exhibition features the portrait of Vera Mamontova, Serov's famous 'girl with peaches', next to a photo of Pavlensky.

Image 2. Collage featured in the online article 'Girl with Peaches vs. Guy with Balls' juxtaposing Serov's *Girl with Peaches* and Petr Pavlensky's performance.



Source: Roman Antonovsky, 'Piat'desiat ottenkov Serova: devochka s persikami protiv mal'chika s iaitsami', for Ridus.ru (2016).

Entitled 'Girl with Peaches vs. Guy with Balls', the article featuring the picture alludes to Pavlensky's earlier performance which involved the artist's nailing his crotch to the pavement in Red Square. The meme renders Pavlensky's radical performance in a comical light. Rather than evoking boldness and potency, in this context the title 'the guy with balls' suggests impropriety. In the established relationship of parallelism between Pavlensky's naked body and Serov's famous painting the latter is showcased as a masterpiece. The former, following this logic, is left with the role of the profane object.

Although TV blocks covering the queue never bring up Pavlensky or contemporary art directly, the opposition is vaguely present when a museum worker explains the success of the exhibition saying, 'I think in the end it is just what people love, what is understandable, close to heart, what touches people' (Russia Today na russkom, 2016). Serov's 'understandable

art', thus, is counter-opposed to the shocking art of radical performance critiquing the order instead of inspiring patriotic consumption.

The two memes – one contrasting American fast-food and Russian art, another – juxtaposing Serov's 'Mona Lisa' with Pavlensky's 'inappropriate' naked body – clearly evoke the oppositions employed by the contemporary Russian rhetoric of nation-building. The export sanctions imposed by the West, naturally, caused the reciprocal import sanctions as well as restrictions in the consumption of foreign goods. Yet the patriotic rhetoric does not only denounce the consumption of foreign products. The economic embargo also triggered the desire to separate oneself from what is seen as licentious Western sexual norms. Thus, oppositional art is presented as 'improper' in contrast to the timeless and moral classical art. The current shift towards Russian 'spirituality' [dukhovnost'] and traditional values manifest themselves in the appreciation for the classical art represented by the Serov exhibit.

The Patriotic Rhetoric and the Loss of Meaning

A wave of rousing official rhetoric sent a clear message about the 'right' kind of national art directly supporting a patriotic mode of cultural consumption. The Russian TV covered the queue for Serov in an overtly patriotic tone, channeling pride at the eagerness of Russian people to see the exhibition. The event, in fact, was newsworthy: after the incident with breaking through the doors, Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defense, Emergency Management and Natural Disasters Response (EMERCOM) sent a brigade to monitor the scene. The brigade put up a tent with heaters for those who were freezing in the cold and offered psychological help to those who were tired of waiting (mainly, people with children). Covered by major television channels, the queue is represented as a site of patriotic pride, yet the rousing rhetoric leaves little space for understanding why the excruciating wait is 'totally worth it'.

The major highlight of the scene was arguably the field-kitchen the Moscow Military-Historic Society deployed to the museum entrance. Dressed in historic military costumes, the representatives of the society cooked buckwheat and stewed meat following the army recipes of the Great Patriotic War period. Offering a warm meal to children, students, elderly people and everyone else, the costumed army men held a trivia game, testing the knowledge of Russian history and inviting the public to their historic exhibitions. A cameraman of Channel Russia 24 captures the military chef stirring the buckwheat with a ladle as the reporter claims that after 'this kind of food one could go for spiritual food' (Rossiia 24, 2016). Constructed as a topical media event, the exhibition is inseparable from the queue, which is presented as a patriotic phenomenon.

In the Channel One video the chef promises to feed everyone so that 'people have enough strength to wait standing until the end' (Pervyi Kanal, 2016).⁸ This heroic discourse continues when another representative of the society mentions the Leningrad Blockade: 'Our nation's longing for art and beauty has always been very strong: even in Leningrad during the Blockade people would create outstanding pieces of art and music. This is why our people are ready to wait for many hours in cold weather to see it all. It is totally appropriate' (Russia To-

⁸ In the original, 'chtoby sil khvatilo dostoiat'.

day na russkom, 2016). Like every reference to the Great Patriotic War, this remark about the Blockade is bound to arouse patriotic feelings in the audience, yet it also sounds symptomatic in the context of the present-day economic blockade. This comment reveals the patriotic agenda of inspiring people with pride for their national culture and touches upon the anxiety of being cut out of the world. The way to withstand the hardship, as the speaker suggests, is through art. The queue, thus, becomes a metaphor for the perseverance of Russia against political and economic struggles.

A couple of comments from the crowd emphasize this patriotic appeal. The reports show people claiming 'We won't give up!', 'We are ready to wait standing until the end' and finally, 'Our people are prepared to stand as long as necessary'. Taking these responses out of context and including them as random separate phrases, Russian media projects the idea that this exhibition is not a regular art event - it is, in fact, the evidence of Russia's cultural endurance against all odds.

While the audience might have had good reasons to wait hours in the line for Serov, we do not learn much about them from the TV reports. The responses that get into the news rarely provide any explanation beyond the recurrent 'it is totally worth it'. What is worth waiting for and why is often left unexplained. Thus, when the reporter asks a young girl whether she knew about the queue and was scared of waiting for so long before she decided to come, she responds, 'On the one hand, I was scared, but on the other hand I wasn't, because I understand that in the end it is worth it' (Pervyi Kanal, 2016). Her answer sounds optimistic, but also strangely unsatisfying, as do the random outbursts claiming 'We will not give up' coming from the crowd. Although mass media is interested in rousing statements more than motivations, the absence of reasoning creates an impression that this communal drive is irrational and hard to explain.

In her account of Serov's success, Irina Sandomirskaia draws attention to the loss of meaning associated with the appropriation of Serov's art as cultural heritage. Using Jean Luc Nancy, Sandomirskaia talks about different structures of appropriation and opposes patrimony and legacy, effectively employed within a capitalist paradigm, to the act of inheriting under communism. As Sandomirskaia explains, patrimony establishes belonging through the idea of generational continuity. Thus, patrimony defines heritage as something that has been passed over by 'the fathers.' In the case of legacy, the organic continuity is substituted by a legal bond legitimizing power. In contrast to both patrimony and legacy, the act of cultural appropriation within a communist paradigm is based on taking over of the past as 'bona vacantia - a piece of property without an owner'. In fact, this kind of symbolic appropriation is similar to the communist practice of taking possession of aristocratic estates (Sandomirskaia 2016).

As Sandomirskaia contends, from the point of view of political economy, the latter structure invariably leads to 'the symbolic enslavement of the subject by the object of preservation' – a sentiment that can help explaining the recent hysteria over Serov when the masses became obsessed with the exhibit they were trying to possess. Sandomirskaia's analysis concludes that this obsession is a symptom of 'a culture whose institutions of patrimony and legacy all take their origin in the occupation and further management of bona vacantia, the abandoned estate of some unknown meaning that disappeared without a trace, and a meaning whose presence will be preserved as missing - forever' (Sandomirskaia 2016).

A meaning preserved as missing is precisely what comes through in the recurrent response 'it is worth it', a convenient ideological cliché where the mysterious 'it' is never revealed. Using Nancy's terminology, the state media tries to present the event as a site of patrimony through the connection between World War II and the resilience of the queue (our grandfathers valued art despite the Blockade, and we do, too). Evoking nostalgia for 'the Russia that we lost', the exhibit aims at establishing the relations of legacy. Yet neither of these connections helps to define Serov's place within contemporary cultural heritage or explain the mass obsession with the exhibit. Although the state media tries to present the event through structures of patrimony and legacy, the emptiness of 'it' and the irrationality of the mass drive expose a failed attempt to occupy the space of meaning which 'disappeared without a trace'.

Serov's Aesthetics in the Era of Social Media

Although conceptually conflicting, the nostalgia for Russia's great imperial past and the yearning for the Soviet security fueled public interest in the exhibit. Yet the sensational appeal of the show could not have been anchored exclusively in the nation's past. As I argue further, Serov's aesthetics of portraiture is curiously in tune with the way we currently expose and perceive identity on social media.

In the promo campaign for the show, the Tretyakov gallery highlighted several rarely exhibited portraits from foreign collections as well as Serov's most famous works – *Girl with Peaches* (1887), *Girl in the Sunlight* (1888) [*Devushka, osveshchennaia solncem*] and *Portrait of Princess Yusupova* (1902) [*Portret Kniagini Yusupovoi*].⁹ This focus was effective, as Serov's mastery of the portrait genre seemed particularly compelling for the audience; portraits, in fact, were prevalent in the snapshots people put on Instagram. What made Serov's portraiture resonate so strongly is arguably a certain kind of a visual mode – a mode of identity representation particularly appealing to a contemporary viewer.

From the pertinent theatricality of Princess Yusupova's full-dress portrait to the psychological precision of the portrait of Serov's friend and fellow artist Konstantin Korovin to the lyrical vitality of *Mika Morozov* (1901) and *Girl with Peaches*, Serov's portraits remarkably vary in their tone and manner. Yet all of them present an intricate balance between the transparency of an intimate portrait and the 'life-for-show' air of a ceremonial portrait. A master of both genres, Serov did not entirely separate these two different perspectives.

Thus, in line with the genre of the ceremonial portrait, the artist captures Princess Yusupova in the salon environment that reveals her status of the fashionable lady.

⁹ The curatorial focus on the portraits was a significant departure from the concept of a less prominent Serov exhibition held by the Russian Museum in March 2015, only 6 months before the Tretyakov Gallery project. The Russian Museum show celebrated Serov's 150th anniversary and was called 'Serov, not a portraitist'. Highlighting graphic pieces from the collection of the museum, the exhibition also included book illustrations and historic and religious paintings, as well as caricatures. The omission of portraits was presented as a way to show 'Serov through his own eyes', without the canonical works commissioned by the 19th century Russian elite (Rossiia K TVkultura, 2015). The show received favorable reviews in the media and enjoyed remarkable success, though it can hardly be compared to the sensational reception of the later Moscow exhibition.

Image 3. Serov, Valentin. Portrait of Princess Zinaida Yusupova (1902).



Source: Wikimedia, Public Domain.

Scholars often point out the theatricality of the setting (Allenova 1996: 43; Sarab'ianov 2012: 65). Yet, as art historian Elizabeth Valkenier suggests, Yusupova's posture is relaxed despite the stifling atmosphere of the lavish drawing room; she 'leans back, very much at ease with herself and the world' (Valkenier 2001: 175). The natural elegance of her demeanor and the pensive and delicate look in her eyes add an intimate touch to this ceremonial portrait.

Yet even the most intimate of Serov's portraits are characterized by a carefully planned *mise-en-scène*. In her article 'How to Look at Serov' written shortly after the opening of the

Tretyakov gallery show, art historian Galina Elshevskaja points out the orchestrated ambience of the portrait of Henrietta Girshman (*At the Mirror*, 1907 [U zerkala/Portret Genrietty Girshman]). The painting captures a fleeting moment – the woman just got up from her dressing table and turns to the viewer, adjusting her scarf.

Image 4. Serov, Valentin. *At the Mirror* (Portrait of Henrietta Girshman), 1907.



Source: Wikimedia, Public Domain.

Image 5. Serov, Valentin. *At the Mirror* (Portrait of Henrietta Girshman) (1907). Fragment.



Source: Wikimedia, Public Domain.

Yet, as Elshevskaya suggests, Girshman's posture and the gesture of her hand are a little showy (2015). The model looks very much aware of the observing gaze of the painter whose silhouette is reflected in the mirror.

Serov was known for dedicating a lot of time to setting up 'a plot' for a painting; he would observe the model's behavior to come up with a *mise-en-scène* and then insist on playing it out, an approach that oftentimes required numerous and time-consuming sittings (Allenova 1996: 38). The situation of dramatization itself and the way the model was accustomed or unaccustomed to theatricality structured Serov's aesthetic perspective, which was always based on a careful balance between the intimate and the ceremonial, the genuine and the staged.

A similar balance between the candid and the performed to some extent characterizes the contemporary visual culture of instant digital photography in the era of social media. As taking pictures requires less and less effort and preparation (no need to go to a photo studio or even carry a photo camera), the images that speak to us have become more spontaneous – the settings are more casual and the *mise-en-scène* is less orchestrated. At the same time, the practice of instantly sharing pictures via social media provokes constant awareness of the gaze of the other: looking more casual, our portraits have hardly become less staged. This expectation of documenting everyday life 'for show' arguably creates a visual mode of staged spontaneity akin to Henrietta Girshman's mirror scene. As I contend, one of the reasons accounting for the popularity of Serov's portraiture is the relevance of the type of portrait he produced. Balancing the intimate and the ceremonial, his aesthetics speaks to a contemporary eye. The mixture of sincerity and orchestration characterizing Serov's approach curiously corresponds to the way identity gets represented in the era of the digital image and social media.

Instagram pictures from the exhibition, in fact, support this reasoning. Although taking photos at the show was forbidden, according to a Russia Today report, 'people were stealthily trying to get a precious shot and take a snippet of the joyful with them' (Russia Today na russkom, 2016).¹⁰ The images with the hash tag 'serov' on Instagram include snapshots of the museum halls and Serov's landscapes, yet roughly seven out of ten images capture portraits. Often a picture features a female visitor engaging with a piece of art, either looking at it pensively or imitating the posture and the demeanor of Serov's model. In both scenarios women are acutely aware of the *mise-en-scène* whether they construct it (by picturing themselves looking at a portrait) or mimic it. While the practice of taking pictures imitating characters of paintings is neither new nor exclusive to this particular exhibition, it is quite comprehensible in the context of Serov. The Instagram pictures of beautiful girls engaging with portraits of stunning 19th century models appear to be quite effective: the desired effect of a visual parallel with Serov is successfully achieved. In these shots, Serov's vision is doubled and emphasized by the camera of an iPhone.

The perspective inviting the audience to identify with Serov's characters is suggested already in the exhibition promo video that half a million people watched on YouTube. The video starts with a small girl dressed as Vera Mamontova telling the story of *Girl with Peaches*. The *mise-en-scène* repeats the setting of the painting, immersing the viewer in the

¹⁰ In the original, 'posetiteli to i delo iz-pod poly pytaiutsa sdelat' dragotsennyi snimok, chtoby unesti s soboi chastichku otradnogo'.

space of imitation from the start. The viewer, naturally, is intrigued by the striking likeness a contemporary girl can bear to the iconic representation of Mamontova.

The video does a perfect job of rendering the balance between the genuine and the staged, characteristic of Serov's portraiture. On the one hand, we get to see 'Vera' moving and telling her story. On the other, the video animates the painting while emphasizing the staged nature of the setting. During the course of the video, the girl does not look directly into the camera acting as if there is a fourth wall between her and the audience. Yet, much like the girls pensively looking at Serov's painting on Instagram, she is clearly aware that she is being observed.

As Vera talks, we see the hand of a make-up artist applying the last strokes of face powder and adjusting the girl's hair. The character tells a story about the tedious sittings that she had to endure while Serov was executing the portrait and describes the way the artist would strengthen her motivation: 'But Valentin Aleksandrovich would often tell me: "Please, be so kind, sit still. I will make such a lovely portrait of you, you won't even recognize yourself. Such a beauty you will be!" How could one say no?' ('The Official Teaser...', 2015). This dream of an ideal representation, one in which 'you won't recognize yourself', speaks directly to the contemporary desire of appearing perfect before the gaze of others fueled by social media. Indeed, how could one say no?

The parallel between Serov's aesthetics and contemporary photographic portraiture was, in fact, verbalized in one of the Channel One TV blocks covering the exhibition. Standing in front the *Portrait of Nadezha von Derviz with Her Child* (1888) [Portret Nadezhdy fon Derviz s rebenkom], a young mother with a baby claims: 'His portraits give me goose bumps as he conveys the essence of a person. You see it and you can tell how this person lived, what they felt, what they were thinking. It is not at all like nowadays: you come, you take a picture, you "make" a face, and that's it' (Vse novosti, 2016). Although the woman argues for a contrast between Serov's pictorial mastery and contemporary representations rather than talking about similarities, the juxtaposition of the two illuminates the way a contemporary audience understands portraiture as a genre: it was 'more authentic' in the past when it took time and effort. What the woman is really saying is not that Serov's portraits are 'different' from present-day images, but that they are better. Featuring portraits which are similar but better than the images we share on social media made the exhibit a perfect material for Instagram circulation. Despite the ban to take pictures, the tag 'serov' became trendier as the queue got longer. The public fascination with Serov's art spreading via social networks was yet another reason that made the event a perfect vehicle to channel patriotic ideology. The official rhetoric had a ready answer to the question of why these portraits 'are better': they are a part of our cultural heritage.

'Extracting' Serov: The Layers and Fragments of Cultural Palimpsest

As the voiceover of Channel One suggests that 'even celebrities are eager to wait all day long in order to connect to the beautiful', the camera captures the famous Russian actor Leonid Yarmolnik (Vse novosti, 2016). Standing next to one of Serov's landscapes, Yarmolnik claims, 'What a queue... We did not have such long queues even to the Mausoleum... This is

what patriotism is – this landscape has everything, everything that a person loves and everything they see. You want to look through Serov's eyes at this world, this nature, our Motherland' (Vse novosti, 2016). Yarmolnik's choice of Serov's landscape as a painting that 'has everything' is not accidental. Michael Epstein has an interesting way of addressing what he calls a 'Russo-Soviet Topoi' – a Russian-Soviet spatiotemporality that is connected with the way Russians experience their country and history (2003). As Epstein claims, a particular feature of the Russian understanding of the legacy of their land is the enormity of space that often 'swallows up anything temporal' (MacFadyen 2008: 3). This predominance of space over time makes the connection between the Soviet and the Russian love for their land easy.

Yet what makes the appeal of the event so effective is not 'swallowing up anything temporal', but rather combining these temporalities and activating very different cultural codes. 'The Russia that we lost' in the royal family portraits, the queue that is longer than 'the primal queue' to the Mausoleum, the ahistorical love of the Russian landscape and a very contemporary vision of human identity (casual, but staged) – indeed, this show 'has everything'.

In his study of Russian contemporary cultural policy, Ilya Kalinin draws a parallel between the country's focus on the excavation of natural resources and a turn to the 'extraction' of Russian cultural resources – a newly inspired interest in Russian classical culture. As Kalinin suggests, contemporary Russian 'cultural production is reduced to the extraction of cultural heritage from the depths of national tradition (poets' places of births, places of military glory, labour records and scientific achievements begin to serve in the same way as mineral deposits)'. Thus, culture becomes 'a resource of the articulation of the national idea: national traditions are regarded as spiritual sources and the access to them has to be preferably monopolized by the state (or its subsidiary branches)' (Kalinin 2015). The interest in Serov – a master of Russian realist school of painting – is a part of this extraction which is exercised by the state museum system and is facilitated by Russian media. What made this project sensationally successful is, however, not a mere extraction of cultural heritage but the activation of different and sometimes opposing – cultural layers.

To understand how this multilayered structure works let us consider another instance of laminated cultural 'extraction' – the St. George Ribbon [Georgievskaja Lentochka]. Analyzing practices of remembrance in contemporary Russia, Serguei Oushakine focuses on this celebratory project commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War.¹¹ As Oushakine describes, the ribbon had a long military history. An element of St. George's Cross, the major award in Imperial Russia, it was banned and forgotten after the October Revolution until 1943, when the same pallet was used for the Soviet Order of Glory. In 2005, black-and-orange became the color scheme of the World War II remembrance project which became famous under the title 'the St. George Ribbon' despite the fact that 'the religious undertone did not go seamlessly with the Soviet war' (Oushakine 2013: 287). According to Oushakine, in this case 'the familiar sequential order of the linear narrative is replaced (or, at least, dominated) by the logic of palimpsest, which allows the retention of incompatible or contradictory meanings within one framework' (2013: 286).

¹¹ In the course of this initiative, hundreds of thousands of black-and-orange ribbons were distributed in the streets. People were encouraged to attach them to lapels, bags and car antennas 'to mark their respect and gratitude toward veterans'. For more information about the project and Serguei Oushakine's reading of the practice, see: Oushakine, Serguei (2013) 'Remembering in Public: On the Affective Management of History', *Ab Imperio*. Vol.1: 269-302.

In a similar way, the logic of palimpsest underlies the appeal of the Serov exhibit. Like a manuscript that was washed off and reused but still retains traces of writing from different time periods, the art show activates different layers of Russia's non-linear past. Anti-communist, but embracing the Soviet chronotope of the queue, telling the story of the old Imperial Russia, but resonating with contemporary portrait visuality, this event has a palimpsestic structure, uncovering multiple layers of cultural memory.¹²

Possessing the richness of a cultural palimpsest, the media event of the Serov exhibition also activates the challenges that a palimpsest so often presents for its viewers. Like an archaeological palimpsest, the event not only uncovers different historic layers but also shows them as fragmented and lacking coherence. The historical contexts activated by the show are not drawn together by any tangible chain of signification. Thus, the nostalgia for Imperial Russia is in no way connected with the Soviet resilience during Blockade; neither can it shed any light on the relevance of Serov's aesthetics for the contemporary eye.

However, neither the show nor the St. George Ribbon became less popular with the crowds because of the absence of semantic coherence. As Serguei Oushakine points out, 'semantic ambiguities of the ribbon, important as they are, did not affect its immense popularity' (2013: 287). Although 'memorial linking in this case produced neither symbolic linearity nor historical clarity', the lack of historical accuracy and clarity can arguably account for the project's unprecedented success. Indeed, the absence of a coherent narrative allows refraining from 'any resolute political or historical differentiation' (Oushakine 2013: 286). In case of the Serov show, fragments of cultural layers leave enough space for fantasies about the dignity of 'the Russia that we lost' and the social security of the Soviet queue (which could always guarantee fair access to goods only in the realm of fantasy). Targeting a broad audience and leaving room for multiple cultural fantasies, the show enjoyed incredible success.

Yet the fragmented structure of the cultural palimpsest complicates the task of meaning-making and understanding the event. Despite the attempts to establish relations of legacy and patrimony, media representations picture the queue to the Serov exhibit as a mass ornament triggered by an irrational drive. Breaking the doors of the gallery renders a serious conversation about Serov's artistic legacy absurd, as do field kitchens with buckwheat and stewed meat cooked according to the war-time recipes. While the media fervently tries to represent the queue as a site of national identification and belonging, the audience tries hard to read through the gaps of the cultural palimpsest in search of the constructive meaning behind their own obsession.

¹² It is important to point out that the notion of palimpsest has been used in Memory Studies in a way which is different from my employment of this term. In studies of trauma, the idea of palimpsest has helped to illuminate the relationship between different traumatic histories, in particular, the connection between the Holocaust and decolonization (but also the effects of African American discrimination, 9/11 attacks, etc.) Thus, in *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*, Max Silverman talks about histories of racialized violence in post-war France and convincingly shows how different temporal traces (e.g. the Holocaust and the tortures during the Algerian War of Independence) become superimposed and interact with each other, constituting a palimpsest (2013: 3). While the interaction of layers is key for Silverman, it is not as important for the functioning of cultural memory in post-Soviet Russia. My understanding of palimpsest in reference to Serov exhibit is more in line with Serguei Oushakine's reading of the St. George ribbon project. In both cases, I believe, there is no 'chain of signification which draws together disparate spaces and times' (Silverman 2013: 3); in fact, in both cases the connections between the evoked contexts are largely absent. Yet the absence of semantic connections between the layers is the original characteristic of the palimpsest as an archaeological artifact. As I explain further, an archaeological palimpsest presents fragments which are superimposed graphically, but hardly interact on the level of meaning.

‘Wouldn’t it be better if the good old could shine through the new?’

Well-known and rarely exhibited, ceremonial and intimate, royal and bucolic, Serov’s portraits attracted a broad audience: people who appreciate him as an exquisite 19th century realist, those who remember *Girl with Peaches* in Soviet textbooks and those who saw pictures of their friends on Instagram. Yet the show offered more than just the aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment of self-identification with Serov’s characters. Turned into an event of national importance, the exhibition conveyed a patriotic agenda alongside anxieties about withstanding hardships. Saturated with a militaristic tone and the rhetoric of patriotic consumption, the official discourse surrounding the exhibition is a response to present-day insecurities connected with economic isolation. Yet the rousing official rhetoric is hardly the magical drug that made the event so appealing. On the contrary, the popularity of the exhibit is arguably grounded in the multiplicity of cultural associations undermining rather than constituting a straightforward and coherent narrative about the show.

The relationship between the past and the present has been a continuously contested terrain in post-Soviet culture, one which resists unequivocal interpretation. This complexity and capacity to target everyone makes it an effective resource for modern ideology that aims at shaping patriotic consumption. As the example of the Serov exhibit has demonstrated, contemporary ideology works best when it activates a cultural palimpsest superimposing different temporal traces of the nation’s past on the present-day aesthetic and axiological desires. While a cultural palimpsest is effective as a site of patriotic affect it is yet unclear whether it can be also a site of constructive meaning.

Thinking about the lessons of the old Masters and the new modernist trends, Serov wrote, ‘Wouldn’t it be better if the good old [khoroshee staroe] could shine through the new?’ (Petrova 2005: 28). Bringing together different layers of the old that resonate so strongly with the new, the story around the 2015 Serov exhibit leaves us with the same question.

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