



# Weekend of Patriotic Consumption in Moscow: Mediation, Spectacle, and Entertainment

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A VISUAL ESSAY BY VLAD STRUKOV  
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*Abstract:* This visual essay analyses visual strategies employed by cultural producers to mediate the political discourse about patriotism in the Russian Federation. It uses original visual materials to document the proliferation of patriotic sentiment across different platforms and formats. The essay reveals a complex network of iterations between media and cultural producers wherein patriotism emerges as a visual form of participation, both through consumption and non-consumption, or by staging alternative visions of the patriotic sentiment. In addition, the essay is concerned with the temporal aspect of mediation where patriotism provides an example of sensorial mobilisation of citizens in a specific historical setting.

*Keywords:* Moscow, patriotism, mediation, spectacle, consumption, church, masculinity, art, photography, Petrosian, Serebrennikov,

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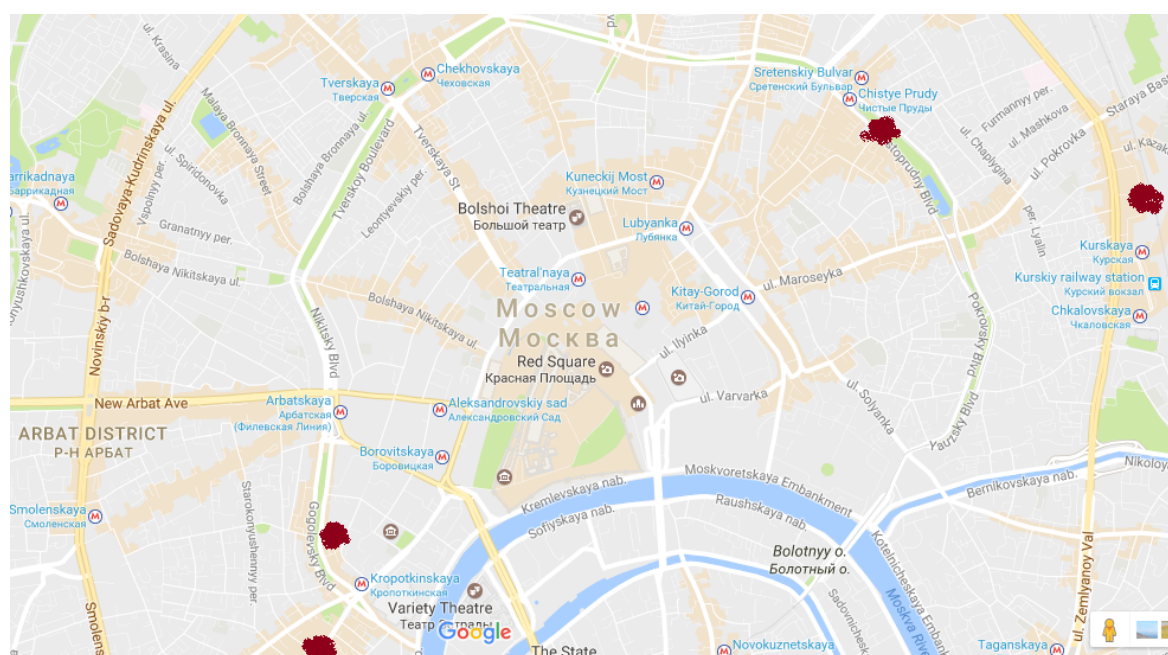
Visuals used in this essay invite the reader to assess the patriotic sentiment as a gesture, or how a sense of belonging is embodied and reproduced visually. The visuals also advance a critical reading of strategies of mediation and urban setting: the mediation of patriotism involves re-formatting urban spaces as spaces of media spectacle. And finally, the visuals emphasize the continuity of styles and formats available from the cultural tradition and also from the global flow of imagery.

I argue that patriotic memory is employed as a form of sensory consumption. At the same time, the patriotic user is conceived as a patriotic prosumer, especially in the realm of affective behaviour which is exploited for political and commercial interests. Thus, the essay provides theoretical framing for the assessment of neoliberal forms of patriotic consumers in the mediated context of the Russian Federation. The essay advances the notion of ‘visual appeals’ (Gussin 2007) by reflecting on the convergence of media platforms and on the convergence of top-down and bottom-up types of patriotism. The essay contributes to the debate

(see, for example, Bergman 2016) about representation versus exhibition of patriotism in the global context. Finally, it critically engages with the notion of ‘social life of feeling’ (Morgan 2012), given to us primarily through visual culture so that the consumer is conceived as an embodied eye. I use the visuals to formulate my ideas and provide verbal analysis where necessary.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Mobile patriotism: Researcher as flâneur

**Image 1.** Google map of Moscow showing the areas where my observations took place. The area of VDNKH is outside the current map.



Source: Vlad Strukov

The discussion is based on my field work conducted in Russia in May 2016.<sup>2</sup> In the centre of the discussion is visual material collected during one weekend (13-15 May) in 2016. The timing of research was chosen to coincide with the celebrations of the Victory Day (9 May) in the so-called Great Patriotic War, which is a Russo-centric interpretation of WWII. On the day a full military parade takes place in Red Square, soldiers march in unison, tanks roll out and guests cheer. This type of Russian patriotic celebration is well-known in the West thanks to news media reports. My intention was to examine a mundane version of Russian patriotic display, i.e., taking place *after* national festivities. In my selection of events I followed recommendations from Moscow friends as well as official media such as *Kommersant* newspa-

<sup>1</sup> In my observations, I followed the procedures of ethical research advocated by my university; however it was not always possible to request permissions from general public, for which I apologise.

<sup>2</sup> In May 2015 I observed Russian ‘patriotic display’ in two major cities in southern Russia, Voronezh and Rostov-na-Donu. The two field trips provided me with a comparative perspective for my study of how urban spaces are used for the show of patriotic sentiment.

per and *Afisha.ru* information portal which publish reviews and advertise relevant events. Geographically, I focused on the centre of Moscow, paying attention to state-sponsored events and exhibitions as well as independent, grassroots activities (**Image 1**). I, of course, was unable to document and reflect on all available events and contexts in Moscow; however I am confident my case studies are representative of the existing trends.<sup>3</sup>

My research journey through Moscow was in the tradition of the urban flâneur (for a discussion of visual aspects of this tradition, see, Rio 2015) whose gaze and other senses engage in the simultaneous participation and analysis. In my usage, the flâneur is a metaphor for the researcher's relationship with modernity and urban life, and it provides an insight into the cultural, social and political contexts for the analysis of the world today (Jenks & Neves 2009; Kato 2006). Here, non-consumption is not only a matter of choice (deliberately choosing not to engage), but also of a random calibration of knowledge (serendipitous non-knowledge). The sections below signify some interrelated concepts underpinning the construction of patriotic consumption: from sensory to participatory to performative consumption, patriotism evolves as a complex form of relation to urban spaces and bigger imaginary spaces of the nation.

## 2. Participatory patriotism: Memory as Consumption

The Russian government promotes patriotism based on the memory of the Great Patriotic War (Oushakine 2009). In recent years it has attempted to construct that memory as a form of (symbolic) consumption whereby Russian nationals are conceived of simultaneously as citizens of the state and consumers. This strategy has been successfully appropriated by Russian businesses and entrepreneurs, both independent and those with a link to the state such as the national bank Sberbank. This demonstrates the hybridisation of traditional, late socialist modes of patriotism and the neoliberal ones: Russian state capitalism feeds effectively on (post)communist narratives and neoliberal frameworks, producing a mixed range of exploitations of cultural memory, patriotism and consumerist desires. In this framework, consumption emerges as a participatory activity, that is, as one through which citizens can reveal and enjoy a sense of belonging.

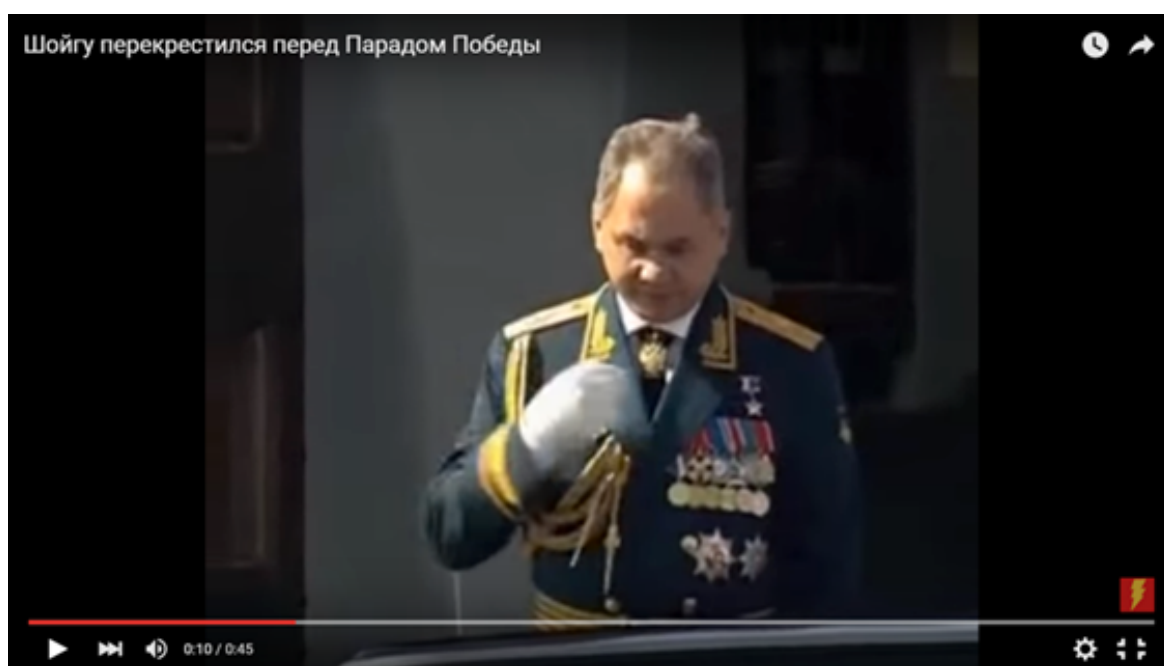
At the centre of the official commemorative events is the military parade in Red Square. The most recent additions to the programme are (a) *the hyper-mediatisation of the event*: it is broad-/narrow-cast on the Federal television channels, on the internet and social media; (b) *the cannibalisation by the state of the grass-roots movement*: the so-called 'Immortal Regiment' [Bessmertnyi polk] initiative is about ordinary Russians carrying photographs of their ancestors that had perished in the war; and (c) *the increased role of the Orthodox Church*: the army officials display their allegiance to the Church in public; this was unthinkable even ten years ago.

The hyper-mediatisation defines the ways in which urban spaces are transformed in order to facilitate the public engagement with (official) memory. On one level, the government employs banners, screens and decoration to immerse citizens in that mnemonic regime. On another, the government exploits other opportunities to promote its agenda less explicitly. For

<sup>3</sup> My corpus includes over thirty events and over a thousand images.

example, the Culture Minister nominated 2016 as the year of Russian cinema and commissioned a number of ‘patriotic blockbusters’ (Norris 2012) such as Nikolai Lebedev’s *Legend 17* (2012).

**Image 2.** *Screenshot* of YouTube videos documenting the military parade in Moscow. Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence since 2012, is seen crossing himself before the launch of the parade. It is noteworthy Shoigu is a member of the Tuva ethnic minority and his religion is Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> Shoigu is also known for introducing in 2009 an amendment to the Russian law, criminalising denials of the Soviet Victory in the War in 1945. I argue his gesture is a symbol of his allegiance to the state, not the Russian Orthodox Church.



Source: Rossiia 24 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29kcLy37IhY> 10.08.2016)

It also produced public advertising reminding citizens of the achievements of Russian and Soviet cinema such as one in the Chistye prudy boulevard (**Image 3**). This part of Moscow was the site of OccupyAbai oppositional protests of 8-16 May 2012; however, the government has attempted to re-claim and re-conceptualise this space with the help of public advertising. This is evident in (A) *the selection of films* (predominantly patriotic melodramas and war thrillers); (B) *the setting* (next to the statue of Aleksandr Griboedov who was not only an important nineteenth century playwright, poet and composer, but also a statesman and diplomat, thus the choice of location legitimises contemporary Russian government through a mnemonic framework), and (C) *the style of the displays* (the Soviet-era billboards that intrude into the public space).

<sup>4</sup> According to the government official media source (<http://izvestia.ru/news/541110> 15.08.2016)



**Image 3.** View of the Chistye prudy boulevard.



Source: Vlad Strukov

**Image 4** shows film stills from Nikolai Lebedev's 2002 spy thriller and war melodrama *The Star* [Zvezda].



Source: Vlad Strukov

In addition to conspicuous promotion (and therefore inducing conspicuous consumption), the Russian government achieves its aims by delegating some of its functions and responsibilities to co-opted individuals and institutions who are technically outside the framework of the state (Strukov 2016c). However, it cannot control how its own agenda can be subverted in the context of consumption. For example, The Night Wolves [Nochnye volki] are a Russian motorcycle club with origins in the alternative cultural scene of the perestroika period; however recently it has become part of the government patriotic agenda including participation in pro-government rallies and the separatist movement in Ukraine. This style of engagement has been employed *critically* by other cultural producers.

For example, **Image 5** shows a biker outside the Moscow VDNKH exhibition centre. Like the Night Wolves, he is engaged in the display of uber-masculinity; however he is there to promote a very different kind of bike tours. In other words, he is one of those workers with precarious labour arrangements, who, in the neo-liberal setting, uses the identity of the ‘patriotic biker’ to appeal to potential consumers. The advertised tour includes visits to Russian ancient towns along the so-called Golden Ring, thus offering consumers an opportunity to display their patriotism through mnemonic consumption.



Source: Vlad Strukov

Moscow space is filled with conflicting regimes of memory, including most recent events. For example, the Moscow VDNKH exhibition centre has been re-branded as a new cultural space, however its Soviet legacy dominates the visual and mnemonic fields. Therefore, exhibitions staged at VDNKH will always be considered in relation to the politics of the actual space and the memory of the USSR. This strategy of (critical) engagement with the (post-)Soviet past through multi-layered visual discourses and multi-directional mediation of experience was evident in the exhibition of Aleksandr Petrosian’s photography (16 June-31 July). He is a St. Petersburg-based visual artist who is active on social media and whose artistic lens has provided a visual critique of contemporary Russia, especially everyday life in St. Petersburg. His personal exhibition was named ‘Kunstkamera’ after the first museum in Russia, established by Peter the Great and completed in 1727.



Petrosian's photograph (**Image 6**) documents the events of 2007 when Russian citizens in major cities staged a protest against the Russian government [Marsh nesoglasnykh]. It employs a set of dichotomies—'citizens vs police', 'women vs men', 'guns vs flowers', 'agitation vs relaxation', and so on—which presents a metaphor of the divided society. In the context of these political events, the Russian national flag in the foreground and the view of the Orthodox cathedral in the background affirm the incomplete process of nation building in the Russian Federation. The photograph functions as a piece of memory work reminding the spectator of protests and revolutionary movements of the past century.



*Source:* Vlad Strukov

### 3. Patriotism as a Consumer Spectacle: Politicised spirituality and calligraphic communities

Since 2010, the Russian government has actively promoted ‘dukhovnost’ (‘dukhovnye skrepy’) as a specific Russian identity rooted in spirituality and religiosity and being superior to the ‘corrupt’ West. It has been argued that this form of belonging overlaps with the traditionalist stance of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>5</sup> At VDNKH, alongside Petrosian’s critical survey of patriotism—literally in the adjacent pavilion—there was another major exhibition providing a more conservative take on Russian identity and history. Entitled ‘Russia: My Personal Story’ [Rossiia—moia istoriia], the exhibition was organised by the Patriarch Committee for Culture and supported by Moscow City Government. Of all contemporary exhibitions at VDNKH, this was the grandest, most spectacular and expensive show, a spectacle of Russian history, patriotism and religious identity. Its aim was to re-define the exiting canon of Russian history and culture by emphasizing the role of the Orthodox Church in the establishment and advancement of Russian statehood over many centuries. Its uncomplicated message—the Church has always been the bedrock of Russian civilisation while different political regimes have emerged and failed—was conveyed through the use of the multi-media spectacle including interactive displays, film projections and a dazzling array of mediated artefacts. The exhibition did not feature any authentic historical objects; instead it offered for conspicuous consumption remediations (Bolter and Grusin 1999) of Russian history with the view of altering existing discourse through media manipulation. Russian history had been presented as a type of a media-rich theme park where often confusing versions of patriotism were articulated.

**Image 7** shows the entrance to the exhibition space, and **Image 8** reveals the constitutive parts of the Russian Federation with the date of each town and administrative unit indicated. Crimea is shown to have joined the country in 1855 which helps the organisers avoid most recent controversies.



Source: Vlad Strukov

<sup>5</sup> For representative publications see issue 14 of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*.



**Images 9 and 10** show two types of historical ‘chronologies’; the first is an historical timeline entitled ‘The history of Russia from the Rurik’s to Putin’, and the second one—a schematic overview of popular Russian dishes ‘Tasty history of Russia from the Rurik’s till the present day’ (some were available in the exhibition café). The two billboards were displayed in close proximity to each other, thus suggesting that Putin can be consumed—in this case—as an historical, discursive and remediated concept.<sup>6</sup>



Source: Vlad Strukov

**Image 11** exemplifies the use of multi-media displays to promote patriotism wherein patriotism emerges as an intermedial construct, or a discursive selfie inviting the visitor to consume it as a self-image, not as a context for critical examination.



Source: Vlad Strukov

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the chocolate Putin see Goscilo 2013.

**Image 12** showcases participatory forms of patriotism alongside immersive consumption. The instructor—the man in the yellow shirt—is teaching a free course on Orthodox calligraphy. His instructions—the movement of the pen—are delivered with the help of a camera which mediates his actions on the television screen for instantaneous consumption. Note the Sochi Olympic logo on the cap of the man in the foreground.



*Source:* Vlad Strukov

#### 4. Performative patriotism: Who is happy in Russia?

In another cultural cluster in Moscow—the area around the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour where Pussy Riot staged their infamous performance—two art centres, The Media Art Museum and the Moscow Museum for Contemporary Art, headed by two of the most distinguished art curators in Russia, Ol’ga Sviblova and Vasili Tseretelli, respectively, offered their own visions of Russian patriotism. Each institution had various temporary exhibitions and each employed the narrative of Russian space exploration as a means to ignite in the visitors a sense of pride.

Sviblova’s exhibition was a good example of her collaborative work with Russian state corporations, which is indicative of the merging of interests of Russian cultural producers and state-owned enterprises. The former require sponsors to maintain their high quality work; the latter, in the age of austerity and scepticism about the role of the state, require the cultural sector to articulate a friendly, more exciting image of the Russian state and its business. The government—in this case the Moscow government—functions as a broker between these industries and discourses, benefiting from both.

**Image 13.** (Equally, as my previous case shows, the Moscow government wishes to broker between the public and the Russian Orthodox Church.)



Source: Vlad Strukov

**Image 14** is a multi-centre narrative where the view of the interior of the launch station is mixed with views of other spaces, creating a spatial palimpsest.



Source: Vlad Strukov



The exhibition at Sviblova's Museum offered a conservative, linear reading of Russian patriotism; the Museum's swanky spiral shape emphasised the aspirations and achievement of the Russian state. The exhibition in the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art presented a more playful exploration of the legacy of the Soviet space programme. Displayed in the spacious rooms of the nineteenth century mansion, the exhibition featured original concept work for Russian animation, including *Belka and Strelka*. The film was released in 2010 and was the first Russian 3D animation feature.<sup>7</sup>

The exhibitions in the Media Museum and the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art provided contexts in which to engage with the notion of patriotism in both ludic and critical ways. They mediated different understandings of patriotism using a range of strategies including commodification of patriotism through its mediation. The museum-goer was conceived of as a creative consumer who was eager to respond to the choice of media forms, contexts and narratives, each of which aimed to re-consider Soviet cultural legacy for the twenty-first century.

The museums and art centres were not alone in their attempt to employ participatory strategies to present Russian patriotism. In his Gogol Centre, an extremely popular alternative cultural space in Moscow, Kirill Serebrennikov, an internationally renowned theatre and film director, provided a theatrical mediation of patriotism, bringing the audience into the spectacle through direct engagement (vodka and pickles were offered in exchange for an interesting story). The show was based on Nikolai Nekrasov's nineteenth century poem *Who is Happy in Russia?* [Komu zhit' na Rusi khorosho, 1874] which has been a compulsory element in school curricula in Russia (and previously in the USSR). The poem was written as a critique of the tsarist regime and has been used by successive governments to remind the reader of the exploitation experienced by the nineteenth century folk. Serebrennikov 're-discovers' the poem's contemporary relevance: its melancholic tonality and 'in-your-face' attack on the ruling classes attain unprecedented significance and surprise the audience. In the first part of the performance, Serebrennikov strips the actors of their clothes as he strips the notion of patriotism of all its ideological connotations. In the second part, he re-dresses the actors and provides patriotism with a postmodern attire: the viewer becomes acutely aware of the consumerist connotations of patriotism available in contemporary Russia where one is expected to display pride through consumption.

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<sup>7</sup> See my discussion of the film in Strukov 2016a.



**Images 15 and 16.** Serebrennikov's dressing and undressing patriotism: gendering the nation and staging a spectacle.



*Source:* <http://gogolcenter.com/events/performance/details/komu-na-rusi-zhit-xorosho> (12.06.2016)

The performance concludes with the actors lining up at the front of the stage. As they stand facing the audience, male actors start putting on T-shirts featuring a patriotic slogan. Each actor puts on about a dozen T-shirts thus creating a consumer spectacle of patriotism. Here affective action is mixed with global visibility (the T-shirts were made in China and printed in the EU), emphasizing the continuity of visual styles and wearable formats. Patriotism attains a sensory quality as it serves as an overlay on the skin (T-shirts). Thus, Serebrennikov critically explores different kinds of patriotism where cultural memory is made available for sensory consumption. His actors reflect on the nature of the visual image—it is both a representation and an exhibition—as it creates a sense of belonging among the members of the audience whilst the consumer is constructed as an embodied eye. The T-shirts worn one on top another represent the layers of temporalities of the patriotic sentiment; the T-shirts emerge as symbols of social (im-)mobilisation (with a dozen T-shirts on, the actors can hardly move).

**Image 17.** (Non-)wearing patriotic T-shirts: the naked truth of (non-)consumption.



*Source:* Vlad Strukov

## Conclusion

Visuals presented in this essay assess patriotic consumption as a participatory gesture (through action, gaze, and so on) and showcase how a sense of belonging is embodied and re-produced visually. The patriotic user is conceived as a patriotic prosumer, especially in the realm of affective behaviour which is exploited for political and commercial interests. Shifting from display to engagement, various patriotic displays and events in Moscow illustrate a complex, hyper-mediated form of belonging in a system which combines elements of local tradition and neo-liberal globalisation. Finally, Russian 'patriotisms' vary from a nationalistic sentiment to a critical exploration of the sense of belonging through visual means.

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