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# REINCARNATIONS OF MISS MARPLE ON RUSSIAN TV: CHALLENGING THE TROPES OF FEMALE AGEING

© Screenshot from *Moscow Murders* (2017-18)

by: Irina Souch, June 14, 2021

'I am already used to playing mothers, God forbid I slide down to babushkas'. Vera Strelnikova (*Suggested Circumstances*, 2009, Episode 1)

The celebrated heroine of Agatha Christie's mystery classics, Miss Marple has inspired a great number of films and television programmes, and not solely in her country of origin. Thus over the last two decades Russian TV viewers have been able to follow the adventures of no less than four female amateur sleuths whose methods were informed by Miss Marple's detective genius. The list contains such series as *Female Logic* (2002), *Suggested Circumstances* (2009) and *Nosey Varvara* (2012). The most recent production, called *Moscow Murders*, was released by Russian network TV-Centre in October 2017. Apart from the title's obvious tongue-in-cheek reference to *Midsummer Murders*, the series' teaser made its cultural lineage explicit by announcing: 'She is not Miss Marple. He is not Sherlock Holmes. And Moscow is not London. But the laws of the genre remain in place'.

[1]

From the very start, *Moscow Murders* prompted diverging responses from audiences. While agreeing on the main character's generic connection to the elderly spinster from St. Mary Mead, viewers were divided in their judgements about her age, occupation and appearance. As Miss Marple's modern incarnation, Ekaterina Vlasova is a quintuple divorcee with a thirty-something son, and is the wealthy owner of a chain of beauty salons in Moscow. Seventy-six-year-old renowned Russian actress Ludmila Chursina portrays the character. Notably, the oft-repeated comments on online forums did not concern the twists in the plot or the series' ironic undertone, but revolved around the questions about whether 'a woman of a respected age' can still be the head of a prosperous enterprise, whether it is appropriate for her to wear extravagant clothes and makeup and, finally, what gives her the authority to meddle in official police investigations. Moreover, by conflating representation and performance, many viewers questioned the very legitimacy of Chursina's portrayal of the lead role,

given the actress' wrinkled face, stiff posture and 'creaky' voice. For example, reminiscing about one of her previous television appearances as a grandmother (*babushka*), a viewer remarked: 'She looked perfect there—as a supporting actress playing a (more) adequate part of a granny... But this businesswoman ... Years have passed and she should accept it'. (Otzovik 2017).



Screenshot from *Moscow Murders* (2017-18). Ludmila Chursina as Ekaterina Vlasova.

Taking my cue from this commentary, in this essay I start by asking why an ageing Russian woman—who is intelligent, thorough and determined enough to outsmart the police in solving complicated crimes—is believed to display 'inappropriate' behaviour. I also ponder why, after passing a 'certain age' threshold, an actress' repertoire should be reduced to auxiliary *babushka* roles. Answering these questions means looking not just at the series and the audiences' responses to it, but also situating the show in a culture that has largely inherited Soviet views on ageing women as frail, passive, dependent, and ready to retire into the invisibility of domestic servitude. In my analysis of four different Miss Marple adaptations, I look into the ways their narratives grapple with this problematic nexus of gender and age to consider how—by

affording older heroines (and actresses) distinct voices and more satisfying opportunities—the popular detective genre is capable of transforming a troubling cultural paradigm to return the ‘grannies’ their autonomy, agency and individuality.

[2]

### **From Beauty to Granny: Discourses of Women’s Ageing in Post-Soviet Russia**

While demographic and medical studies have revealed the nonlinear connection between ageing and chronological age advancing such notions as active and delayed ageing, and individual perceptions of old age may differ considerably,

[3]

the majority of the Russian population believe that the process of growing old starts after 50 or, at the latest, at the moment of the person’s retirement. (Pikuleva 2014: 70)

[4]

To-date, the low pensionable age of 55 for women and 60 for men continues to be experienced as a positive, and not as a factor of social discrimination. (Grigorieva 2018: 7)

[5]

Yet, despite the many opportunities retirement might seem to offer in terms of free allocation of time to social events, leisure pursuits and travel, for retired Russian women passing this threshold implies that they are expected to withdraw from active economic and social participation, recede into invisibility and devote themselves entirely to housework and caring for grandchildren, which is often naturalised as an expression of love. (Grigorieva 2018:11)

This distinguishes Russia from Western countries, where, according to Germaine Greer, ‘this new invisibility, like calm and indifference, is a desirable condition’. (1991: 430) For older Russian women ‘the last age’ is certainly not what Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed ‘a liberation: all their lives [women] were subjected to their husbands and given over to the care of their children: now at last they can look after themselves’. (1970: 488) Instead, retirement entails diminished agency, because grandmothers are conventionally excluded from any form of family decision-making beyond their everyday chores and accounting for the regular household expenses. (Sizova 2017) And although some grandmothers, especially those from middle-class

backgrounds, might resist the assumption that they unconditionally become the household's free caregivers, drawing on newer discourses of femininity that value development of the self (Zdravomyslova 2010), the retrenchment of state supports under the new capitalist order makes many older women experience acutely the lack of choice when it comes to their post-retirement life scenario. (Utrata 2011)

[6]

The reluctance to view ageing women as independent, energetic and ambitious agents is reflected in a cultural imagery that conceives them as solicitous grandmothers, helpless and absent-minded grannies, or as grumpy and useless old hags. Similar to Western societies, contemporary Russian media uphold the standard of youthful and vibrant femininity: for an older woman to be acknowledged as a dignified individual and a social being, she needs “to be” and “to remain” a woman ... “despite” her age’. (Grigorieva 2018: 10) Russian sociologist I.A. Grigorieva even argues that for a woman of a ‘certain age’, keeping her ageing body under control and looking younger than her years equals a social contract guided by stereotypes and implied cultural conventions, rather than by any clear or explicit norms. (2018: 10) As Maria Davidenko puts it, ‘an abstract notion of a “normal” older person acquires ... the meaning of a sane person who can understand and meet social expectations towards appearance and one’s conduct’ (2019a: 11). And so, paradoxically, while relegating any woman after the age of 50 to the category of old and superfluous, Russian society (now increasingly affected by the neoliberal logic of self-governance) appears keen to define an individual woman’s age through her ability to look after herself, to maintain a well-groomed appearance and to ‘compensate the physical flaws with ... the age-adequate verbal and non-verbal means of self-representation ... personal charisma, the virtues of mind and heart ... the skills of effective communication with others’. (Pikuleva 2014: 77) In other words, for an ageing woman to preserve her socio-economic and cultural status and dignity, she needs to artfully camouflage the signs of her physical decline, and thus to conceal her age.

[7]

The anxieties about transitioning to ‘old’ age are perfectly exemplified by one of Davidenko’s interviewees’ responses, to which this section’s title refers: ‘[i]t is not fair when a woman is a beauty and then a granny ... I don’t want to enter that last stage [of ageing]’. (Davidenko 2019a: 7)

Reflecting on the role popular narratives perform in structuring public understanding of the relation between a person's social position and their age, Grigorieva observes that the ability of older Russian women to disentangle themselves from collective expectations regarding age-appropriate conduct is only possible with a radical change in the established cultural paradigm that, since Soviet times, has lain at the heart of representational practice. Mirroring their inferior position in society, Soviet literary and cinematic canon has produced few portrayals of elderly women beyond formulaic portrayals of overbearing mothers-in-law, victimised, ancient pensioners, or self-sacrificing mothers. (Grigorieva 2018) While youth is revered, envied and pursued in contemporary novels, films and television shows, most portrayals of ageing women arguably still rely on the Soviet axiomatic beliefs about female senescence. And yet, I suggest that popular television, and especially the detective genre that is usually appreciated by a large community of viewers, has an (often unacknowledged) potential to challenge the dominant assumptions of ageing women as the most passive and, hierarchically, least valued social groups. What is more, television offers older actresses an opportunity to reclaim their visibility on screen.

[8]

Despite my focus on the Russian context, in what follows I imagine Russian (primarily ethnographic and sociological) theory in a dialogue with Western cultural and feminist studies' views on the implications of gendered ageing. This because the stories of older women in contemporary Russia reveal many similarities with the experiences of their Western peers, both in real life and in fictional narratives. In her seminal 1972 essay 'The Double Standard', Susan Sontag demonstrated how 'ageing ... denounces women with special severity,' observing that 'for a woman to be obliged to state her age, after "a certain age" is always a miniature ordeal'. (Sontag 1972) Almost five decades on, older women are still conventionally framed as frail and incapacitated, with sagging bodies and wrinkled faces, and by no means sexually appealing. Lynne Segal echoes Sontag when she writes that "[f]emininity" and "womanliness" have always been firmly grounded in the body, making women routinely aged by culture faster than men; in the media, and frequently elsewhere, they are discarded sooner, silently stamped as undesirable, frightening, or pitiful, decades earlier than men'. (2014: 216) And similar to Russia, in Western popular culture 'men enjoy longer and more vital screen lives than women do' (Lauzen and Dozier 2005: 437) and are usually conceived as vital, purposeful and sexually eligible, while their female

counterparts have to contend with at least partial invisibility, and the positions of self-effacing housekeepers and (grand)mothers. To address these gendered inequities, in recent years feminist scholarship has produced a significant body of knowledge which, along with the Russian research, informs my current endeavour. Besides classics by de Beauvoir (1970), Sontag (1972), Greer (1991) and Friedan (1993), the due critical attention to (the representation of) ageing femininity has been given in Margaret Morganroth Gullett's *Declining to Decline* (1997) and *Aged by Culture* (2004), Kathleen Woodward's *Figuring Age* (1999), Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin's *Age Matters* (2006), Lynne Segal's *Out of Time* (2013), and Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes's *Women, Celebrity and Cultures of Ageing* (2015). Offering a multiplicity of perspectives, these works raise polemical arguments about the inequalities, struggles, paradoxes, and advantages of ageing.

### **Miss Marple as a Popular Role model for Ageing Heroines**

Meditating on her future in her last book, *Love's Work*, Gillian Rose invokes Miss Marple as a role model for good ageing. She highlights the old lady's qualities as follows: 'decrepit nature yet supernature in one, equally alert on the damp ground and in the turbulent air ... that invisible trespass and pedestrian tread, insensible of mortality and desperately mortal'. (Rose 1997: 144) Of course, there might be a huge gap between aspiring to be a Miss Marple, the inquisitive and invincible amateur detective, and actually being one: an old, often lonely woman relegated to the margins of community because of her advanced age, gender and singlehood. Yet, her 'invisible trespass and pedestrian tread' suggests a possibility for conscious rebellion against the stifling cultural norm that pushes older women into social nonexistence, while not losing awareness of the realities of modern life.

The women in the Russian television series differ in terms of their socioeconomic positions and private circumstances, but they have all crossed that imaginary border between youth and 'old age' and, as their stories show, it is Miss Marple they unanimously aspire to be. Before I take a closer look at their motivations, the paths they have to follow to realise this eccentric ambition, and the effects this has on their relationships with others, it is useful to recall the distinctive features of the original Miss Marple to ask what made her such an outstanding character and an inspiration for many generations of female sleuths. Discussing the representation of older women in literary fiction Zoe Brennan argues that the twentieth century female whodunnits,

of which Agatha Christie's work is part, creatively resignified the biased images of elder women's pastimes and behaviours to the extent that they helped to 'manipulate pejorative stereotypes of ageing and refer to more archetypal images to produce heroines who are wise, independent and irreverent'. (2005: 135) Senior resident of the small village St. Mary Mead, Miss Marple 'blissfully gardens, gossips and tracks down murderers'. (Jones 1975: 108) Such, at first glance, atypical combination of activities of course requires an unusual personality. To demonstrate this, in *The Body in the Library* Christie produces her most evocative (and oft-cited) description of her heroine as 'an old lady with a sweet, placid, spinsterish face and a mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity and taken it all in the day's work'. (2000: 103) Already this characterisation challenges the cultural assumptions of a woman who is old, plain looking, and lives alone, implying that 'behind the fluffy, frail exterior and the rather meandering, inconsequential talk, is an astute, shrewd and knowledgeable woman whose expertise places her in the center of social occurrences rather than at the excluded margins'. (Makinen 2010: 423) Merja Makinen notes that the textual focus on appearance and the seemingly insignificant small talk, 'all point to an awareness of elderly femininity as a form of masquerade, a performance that lives up to expectations in order to gain its own advantages'. (2006: 58) Indeed, Miss Marple reveals herself as a genius performer, who strategically uses her air of unobtrusiveness and impartiality to move freely between different social layers of the community, keeping her ears open, observing, and committing to memory the trivialities and details of the local mores.

[9]

It is exactly her status as the elder spinster, unburdened by familial attachments and responsibilities, that renders her a fair degree of physical and psychological freedom, which prompts Claire Mortimer to see her as a personification of a female trickster, 'an ambivalent figure, whose characteristics are plastic and volatile, adapting to social, cultural and temporal contexts'. (2016: 315) Christie empowers the character with the ability to penetrate any social group, play close attention to the dress habits, facial expressions, quirks and gestures of others, and gain invaluable information through the 'inferior' form of communication: gossip. Miss Marple is successful not in spite, but rather because of her age and 'feminine intuition,' which is so condescendingly ridiculed and dismissed by professional male investigators with their inflexible reliance on protocols, rational thinking and tangible evidence.

Unsurprisingly, these indispensable—for a sleuth—qualities are what the Russian television heroines aspire to emulate, even though they hardly resemble the famous English spinster. They have different cultural background and social status, live in a megapolis, are well educated, agile, have been married, have (now adult) children, and are still not deprived of a ‘love interest’. However, I would argue that besides the obvious aim to bolster the spectatorial pleasure by contemporising and situating the plots in the familiar-for-viewers geographic environment, the four series’ cultural work lies in the very act of allowing each of these women to ‘become’ Miss Marple for a short moment. Playful as it seems, this operation denaturalises and, in some instances, even reconfigures a number of the most tenacious stereotypes regarding women’s age in Russian society. In what follows, I aim to pinpoint such instances by highlighting the most notable features of each narrative. I present them in the order of their chronological release, not least because of many intertextual references they contain, but also because the online viewer forums tend to compare the more recent series to their predecessors in terms of plot complexity, aesthetic qualities and, importantly for my inquiry, the leading actresses’ ages, appearances and performances.

### *Female Logic*

*‘You shouldn’t be so condescending toward pensioners. Sooner or later you will become one of them’.* Olga Tumanova (*Female Logic*, Episode 5)

*Female Logic* consists of five 90-minute episodes, conceived as full feature films. It was produced and aired by the TV Centre channel

[10]

in cooperation with Mosfilm studios in the period from 2002 through 2006. The series’ main character Olga Tumanova (Alisa Freindlich) is an editor at a large publishing house in Moscow and an avid reader of detective novels. To challenge her own investigative acumen she has a habit of tearing out the last pages of new books, preferring to untangle the mysteries by herself. In the first episode, Olga has an altercation with her superior (unsurprisingly caused by her unwelcome inquisitive attitude) who prompts her to retire. Convinced that, given her longstanding service and expertise, the company director would never want to let her go, Olga is taken aback when he signs the necessary papers without giving them a second thought. Too energetic to settle for her new status as a pensioner, she soon becomes engaged in the police investigation into the mysterious murder of her neighbour. This, as with each

subsequent episode, follows a classic Christie plot structure, wherein the heroine ‘happens’ to be in the vicinity of the crime scene, gathers the subtle clues, and gently steers the police in the right direction to help them finally expose the culprit in the presence of all other suspects.

Upon its release, *Female Logic* prompted largely enthusiastic reactions on popular Internet forums.

[11]

This Russian Miss Marple, as Olga was immediately anointed, had everything to convince viewers of her qualities: life experience, an independent and sharp mind, and a certain amount of determination to pursue the solution, even when all police leads turned out to be dead ends. However, her most significant trait was identified in her alluring air. As one of the female fans asserted, ‘just looking at her you forget about age and [passing] years cease to be so frightening. You reach a kind of internal balance’. (Kinoteatr 2017) What catches one’s attention in the numerous comments—and this is something that all four series share—is that their authors seem to ‘naturally’ equate the character with the actress who plays her. Alisa Freindlich (or Alisa Brunovna, as many viewers call her, adding a patronym to her first name as a token of respect) is almost unanimously acclaimed for her well-groomed appearance, charisma, and especially for her infallible ability to outshine her young female scene partners, both in relation to personal style and acting ability.

[12]

When the first episode was broadcast Alisa Freindlich, born in 1934, was already considerably older than her heroine (whose age could be estimated at between 55 and 60), and at the time of the final, fifth episode’s release she was well over 70. And yet such was the popularity of the actress that viewers did not tire of watching the pensioner sleuth indulge in complicated mind games and the dangerous pursuits of various perpetrators, which involved climbing over high fences, running up and down stairs, and breaking into abandoned buildings. Olga Tumanova is shown to be not only physically fit (defying the stereotype of ageing female feebleness), but also a rather attractive woman with an immaculate haircut and manicure, sporting well-tailored clothes accessorised with elegant scarves, jewellery and purses.

To emphasise her timeless natural charm, one scene includes a dialogue between Olga and a casual acquaintance, a rich forty-something woman who, to point out the beneficial effects of minor surgical interventions and regular visits to spas, challenges her to estimate how old she is. Used to flattering comments, she is taken aback when Olga correctly guesses her chronological age. Notably, the camera does not conceal traces of cosmetic surgeries on the woman's face, whereas Olga is filmed with a soft-focus effect to eliminate age-related blemishes and imperfections in her appearance.



Screenshot from Female Logic (2002-2006) Olga follows up on a lead in a murder inquiry.



Screenshot from *Female Logic* (2002-2006). Olga entertains Streltsov.

Through glossing over the external traces of ageing, the series seems to support the cultural assumption that to remain visible, a woman of advanced age needs to maintain a well-thought-out, 'ageless' self-presentation.

[13]

And yet, Olga's visibility is much more informed by her personal qualities, reminiscent of those described by Francine du Plessix Gray in her essay 'The Third Age.' When becoming socially opaque, Gray suggests, there exists the possibility to 'acquire instead a deepened inward gaze, or intensify our observation of others, or evolve alternative means of attention-getting which transcend sexuality and depend ... upon presence, authority, and voice'. (1996) Not easily intimidated or ignored by the arrogant police, capable of exploring her own agency, Olga can and does have impact on others, and is visible to them and herself.

Unfortunately, the narrative also contains an unresolved contradiction. It is clear that Olga does not wish to withdraw to the status of a pensioner or a self-effacing mother whose only purpose of life is to cook fresh meals and iron shirts for her adult son. To add an extra dimension to her personality, in the first episode Olga reunites with her

former boyfriend, now high-ranking secret service officer Andrey Streltsov. Witty, smart, and energetic Olga apparently needs to be 'completed' by finding love. And as much as Streltsov is prepared to invest in romance (he treats Olga to candle-lit dinners with flowers and a holiday at a seaside resort; he invites her to an opera performance, and pauses at the entrance to admire her slim figure in a little black dress) he also continuously criticises her temperamental disposition and downplays her investigative abilities. Feeling entitled by his profession, he never misses a chance to point out the inferiority of her 'female logic' and 'occasionally stupid' decisions, according to his male rational thinking. Even when time and again a (much younger) police inspector is forced to acknowledge Olga's contribution to the case at hand, it is the sceptical Streltsov who 'outshines' her either by procuring the last crucial piece of evidence, or by suddenly turning up on the spot to apprehend the culprits. It is telling in this sense that the image on the series' DVD cover shows Streltsov's full-size, domineering figure behind Olga's sympathetic face. As the series progresses, the heroine's priorities gradually shift: instead of solving mysteries she is often shown waiting for Streltsov's phone call or visit, cleaning the apartment and preparing his favourite meals in anticipation.



Female Logic (2002-2006). DVD Cover.

[14]

It can be said that *Female Logic* owes its popularity to exactly this paradox. It asserts the possibilities of reclaiming potency and finding fulfilment for the ageing woman, while at the same time it interpellates her back into the late-life romance, domesticity and culturally approved position of the housekeeper who, moreover, tends to be guided by emotions and therefore needs to be ‘protected’ by a powerful man. The series unsettles but does not ultimately unseat gender and age hierarchies. No matter how educated, capable and good-looking the heroine appears to be, her credibility and fulfilment as a woman of pensionable age are made dependent on the benevolence of a strong patriarchal figure.

### ***Suggested Circumstances***

‘Young policeman: I recognise you! I grew up watching your films!

Vera: You, men, are so strange. You give compliments as if you were brainless’.

(*Suggested Circumstances*, Episode 1)

*Suggested Circumstances* (2009) is a miniseries consisting of five 90-minute episodes released on the largest state-run Channel One. It starts when actress Vera Strelnikova (Marina Neyolova) is called up by the police as a witness to the murder of a famous director who only the day before offered her a leading part in his new film, and who also once was her lover. Using her approved rehearsal technique, Vera visualises possible crime scenarios and assists the police inspector Vadim Gorelov in solving the case.

[15]

While initially sceptical, Gorelov comes to value Vera’s gift, and the subsequent episodes show them effectively working together, and even becoming close friends.



*Suggested Circumstances* (2009). Official poster by TV Centre.

[16]

Sixty-two-year-old Marina Neyolova, who enjoyed a long and successful theatre and film career, was jubilantly welcomed by viewers in her new role on television. As with Alisa Freindlich, the audience saw her ability to confidently outplay her younger counterparts as proof that ‘the real talent does not yield to either years, or circumstances’. (Ruskino 2009). And as in the previous case, the series’ lovers

entertained animated discussions around Vera Strelnikova's countenance, speech, temperament and choice of clothes (some viewers, for example, disapproved of the skinny jeans and tight t-shirts she donned in the first episode, finding them age-inappropriate) tending to confuse the character with the real person. What makes this series different, though, is the fact that its heroine is also an actress of mature age. As such, it brings to relief the issues of female ageing and stardom, both within and outside the diegesis. Deborah Jermyn argues, in relation to Hollywood stardom, that 'women "of certain age" in mainstream film see their roles run out long before their male counterparts do' (2012: 3) and 'where Hollywood *has* produced a handful of much cited depictions of older women, these have most memorably taken the form of portrayal of *ageing female stars* ... in which ageing itself is rendered as a horrifying process of inexorable decline'. (2012: 4, emphasis in original)

When placed in a Russian context, Jermyn's argument leads to a number of intriguing observations. Indeed, whereas Marina Neyolova had already been (and indeed still is) absent from the big screen for some time (the TV series provided her a fresh opportunity to reclaim the hearts of her old fans, and to win new ones), her fictional counterpart Vera Strelnikova is a much sought-after actress, respected within the industry and admired by the public. In fact, her celebrity status proves indispensable when it comes to sleuthing: it opens doors, instils immediate trust, and makes her privy to confidences inaccessible to the police. As a Miss Marple incarnation, she is a trickster *par excellence*, not because she is 'an elusive and devious figure at the margins of society' (Mortimer 2015: 315) who uses deceit to subvert existing social order, but because impersonation and disguise belong to her daily professional routine. Of course, the flipside of fame is that she cannot conceal her age: time after time we see her flinch when someone enthusiastically mentions her past achievements. The diva image comes with a set of cultural expectations. To meet them, Vera is repeatedly shown eating healthy food, applying facial masks and putting on sophisticated makeup. In an ironic reference to many Western actresses who engage in expensive transnational advertising campaigns for mature cosmetic lines as a way to ensure their public visibility, one scene sees a young female fan ask Vera what anti-ageing products she uses, to which the heroine, obviously annoyed, replies that they are all domestically produced. To an extent, the narrative appears to suggest that the older female star should not be reduced an exoticised body: instead, it is Vera's professional accomplishments and charisma which make her capable of being readily noticed.



Screenshot from *Suggested Circumstances* (2009). Vera in her bedroom wears a cosmetic face mask while discussing possible murder scenarios with her daughter.

And yet, in the private space of her apartment Vera is more self-conscious of her age, and corrects her twenty-something daughter Asia when she hints at her romantic interest in the fifteen-years-younger police inspector:

Vera: No, I am a Miss Marple ... that meddling granny invented by Agatha Christie.

Asia: But he looks at you in such a way, I would not be afraid of age.

Vera: I am not afraid of age. I begin to forget how scary it is.

Asia goes on to suggest that changing her hairstyle and colour will do wonders for how she looks. When Vera refuses, saying that she feels fine as she is, Asia calls her conservative and stubborn 'because of old age.' To mitigate the disturbing implications of this comment, the dialogue has a comic resolution with mother and daughter having a pillow fight. Although the scene might be read as an attempt to emphasise Vera's 'girly' qualities and reluctance to accept age-related limitations, it also promotes a balanced, matter-of-fact attitude toward ageing. This idea is confirmed when, soon

afterwards, Vera points out its advantages, such as knowledge and caution: 'When young, one is capable of heroic and dangerous deeds ... later one becomes more judicious.' It is exactly because of her mature age that the heroine does not succumb to panic in front of a dead body, can communicate empathy and sense of importance, can listen, ask the next question and hear a train of thought, all of which makes her particularly suitable not only for acting, but also for detective work. And so at the end of the series Vera, who, in the first episode, was appalled by the very idea of playing a grandmother in a film, perceiving it as traumatic and grotesque (witness the epigraph to this essay), is delighted to hear that she is going to be one in real life. She comes to see this as a favourable condition that makes her life richer and adds one more exceptional dimension to her personality as a star and a detective.

### ***Nosy Varvara***

Police inspector: Your age?

Varvara: You do not ask ladies this.

Police inspector: Your education?

Varvara: Can't be higher.

Police inspector: Your main occupation?

Varvara: Babushka'.

(*Nosy Varvara*, Season 1, Episode 6)

After her retirement, former schoolteacher Varvara Slutskaya arrives in Moscow to join the family of her married son Roman. Varvara is a sworn fan of Agatha Christie's whodunits, and has an inquisitive mind and a strong penchant for interfering in other people's affairs. When a few days later she finds a female neighbour dead in the elevator, and she sets out to investigate. After having assisted the local police with solving this and a number of other mysteries, Varvara becomes an indispensable, albeit unofficial, addition to the team.

The first eight 50-minute episodes of the TV series *Nosy Varvara* (2012-2015) broadcast on Channel One

were promptly recognised by viewers as the Russian ‘Miss Marple mysteries,’ perfectly fitting into the gallery of other popular representations of ‘the adventures of sharp-witted old ladies’ (Generalov 2012). Interestingly, at the time of the series’ inception, actress Yelena Yakovleva, born in 1961, was not only far from being ‘an old lady’ but not even close to the official retirement age. Yet, she saw the new role as a welcome deviation from her previous work. Yakovleva, who could already build upon her extensive experience in the detective genre (from 1999 until 2011 she had played police inspector Anastasia Kamenskaya in the popular serial TV adaptation of the bestselling thrillers by the Russian author Aleksandra Marinina), described *Nosy Varvara* as a ‘kind, funny, ironic [story] about the life of a big family’. (Quoted in Vokrug TV 2012) Arguably, the makers’ decision to cast the actress as a sleuthing grandmother was exactly motivated by the wish to capitalise on her earlier success, while focusing on a heroine of a much older age and different career, who however could emulate the famous detective Kamenskaya in terms of investigative acumen and social engagement.

[18]



Nosy Varvara (2012-2015). DVD Cover.

[19]

To fit the ‘old lady’ image, Yakovleva wears her hair in a bun, and sports practical clothes in subdued colours and sensible, low-heeled shoes. As could be expected, viewers did not leave these styling choices unscrutinised, this time declaring them too boring and conservative. My purchase here, however, is again to consider whether ‘playing Miss Marple’ helps to open a space for subverting conventional standards of age-appropriate conduct. In the series, Varvara does not share Miss Marple’s unattached status, but she also does not seem to regret leaving behind her independent life to become a full-time *babushka*. Each episode invariably features her cooking, cleaning, ironing, taking care of two grandchildren, and being in command of the entire Slutsky household with unwavering efficiency. And yet, while in interview the actress downplays the detective plot in favour of the family narrative,

we soon discover that being a grandmother is not Varvara's true aspiration, and nor is she prepared to completely acquiesce in her invisible 'auxiliary' servicing and nurturing position.

[20]

Her heart lies in sleuthing: she feels listless and distracted when there is no new mystery to solve. As a former teacher she seems exceptionally well-suited for this employ: she never writes addresses or names down, relying on her perfect mnemonic abilities (which defies the stereotype of 'elderly' forgetfulness), she never tires of learning, be it a cake recipe or the practical applications of social media, and she can simultaneously exude authority and empathy to make people confide in her and take her advice to heart.



Screenshot from Nosy Varvara (2012-2015).Varvara and police inspector Ivan Bolotnikov discuss a murder case.

Still, the epigraph to this section also suggests that the amount of energy invested in combining the job of a granny with the mental and physical challenges of detecting does not, in itself, alleviate the awkwardness of the age-related issues. Presented as the only viable alternative to invisibility, it is the cultural imperative of youthful

appearance, 'despite old age', that motivates Varvara's self-imposed dietary regime (no pastry, no alcohol and only boiled water after six o'clock), which she transgresses with abandon when not observed by 'interested' others (she is shown to raid the home fridge at night, and indulge in a large slice of homemade cake at a neighbour's house). The narrative obviously struggles with imagining any role an 'older' woman in Russia can perform if she rejects conformity to the grandmother/housekeeper role. Is it admissible for her to stay dynamic and socially involved, and what kind of goals can she pursue outside the tasks invariably prioritised by cultural imagery? Varvara's strategies to deal with these conundrums are informed by her optimistic stance and trickster repertoire. Refusing to be discouraged by the dismissive remarks of the young police inspector Ivan Bolotnikov (who, to complicate matters further, used to be her pupil at school) she either puts on a naïve face and agrees with his orders, only to ignore them immediately after, or tactically retreats to recalibrate her steps.

As an ironic, light-footed narrative, *Nosy Varvara* reveals itself as a self-referential successor to *Female Logic*. Like Olga Tumanova, Varvara tends to explain her investigative abilities by her innate curiosity and irresistible desire to meddle in other people's affairs. Of course, as Olga Tokarczuk recently remarked, 'poking one's nose into everything' is a quality that for centuries has belonged to 'the reservoir of misogynist scripts,' allowing patriarchal society to position (older) women as 'inferior, weaker, less capable, or in some other way handicapped'. (2021) And so, owning up to this 'character flaw' can in itself be considered an act of resistance to people's typical perceptions—something Varvara seems to succeed in doing more convincingly than her self-conscious predecessor does. *Nosy Varvara's* romantic storyline also contains an implicit reference to the previous series, in that Varvara's neighbour, the retired counter-espionage officer Gennadii Viazmin, shares his professional past with Tumanova's gentleman friend Streltsov. In this instance, though, the plot is rid of the stifling patriarchal overtone. Contrary to the highly patronising, self-important Streltsov who, moreover, plays a decisive role in all investigations, Viazmin visibly enjoys his retired life indulging in Buddhist meditation, world art and Japanese cuisine. And whereas Streltsov treats his lady friend as a damsel in distress, Viazmin willingly accepts the role of Varvara's sidekick, following her instructions, and sincerely admiring her social engagement and mystery-solving acumen, despite her self-relativizing streak. The following dialogue makes this clear:

Viazmin: You probably always hear from people that you are not the police, or the prosecutor's office.

Varvara: Oh, yes, I am also not a law enforcement officer or, even, a private detective. Yes, people tell me that, I am nobody.

Viazmin: No, I do not agree ... You are somebody who does not allow us to forget that caring [about others] is better than any prosecutor's office.

Varvara (visibly embarrassed): Shall we have dinner?

Superficial as the differences with *Female Logic* might appear, they make Yakovleva's heroine emerge as a multi-dimensional and more empowered individual. Whereas Olga Tumanova comes in the end to prioritise romance over the challenges of sleuthing, Varvara is profoundly invested in her investigative exploits, and prefers comradeship to romantic involvement.

### ***Moscow Murders***

*'I am past the age when I should worry about what other people think of me. Better let them worry what I think of them.'* Ekaterina Vlasova (*Moscow Murders*, Season 1, Episode 5)

*Moscow Murders'* (TV Centre, 2017-2018) main character Ekaterina Vlasova owns an impressive business: a chain of beauty salons and spas named 'Catherine the Great' (an obvious tong-in-cheek reference to the infamous Russian empress). Ekaterina is an astute, strong-willed and uncompromising woman, whose authority is equally recognised by her family, friends, employees, clients and competitors. When, in the first episode, she incidentally sees a man falling to death from an office tower, she has to convince the police inspector Shilov that it was murder and not suicide.

Dissatisfied with his investigating methods, she declares him incompetent and lazy, and resolves to take matters into own hands.



Moscow Murders (2017-18). Official poster by TV Centre.

[21]

Whereas the official TV Centre page informs viewers that 'Ekaterina is a lady of advanced years, with old-fashioned ideas about conscience and the borders between good and evil' (2017), some other streaming sites offer much less affirmative descriptions. The site 'Turbo Serial,' for one, explains the heroine's sudden interest for sleuthing as caused by the boredom she must constantly feel: '[t]he enterprise works by itself, the money fills the accounts ... [so] the old pensioner finds herself in need of new experiences and seizes the chance to try her hand at detection.' (2017) What catches the attention is that, by calling Ekaterina a bored pensioner leading a leisurely existence, the author of the review hints that the very idea of an ageing woman running a thriving, big company is ludicrous. Such an opinion can be explained by the dominant negative attitude towards female entrepreneurs in Russia, along with the division between 'male' and 'female' professions which are built upon the long-established stereotypes with regard to women's deficiency in managerial, entrepreneurial and political skills. Running their own business entails financial (and psychological) independence and is perceived as 'diverting' women (especially those of middle and advanced age) from their traditional tasks of 'hearth keepers' and carers. (Kolobova 2016: 58) The series clearly challenges these gender- and age-related cultural assumptions. Just like the entry on the 'Turbo Serial' site, many other online comments exude feelings of distrust towards Vlasova, criticising her managerial style

as despotic, her relations with others as condescending, and her investigative strategies as contrarian and driven by emotion. Yet a more attentive narrative reading repudiates these assessments.

In fact, it is usually the inept middle-aged police inspector Shilov (and some of his colleagues) who see Ekaterina as a self-centred and unempathetic individual. This is not surprising since, to Shilov's dismay, Ekaterina never feels intimidated by his denigrating remarks, such as: 'you have read too many detective stories', 'go back to your manicures and shampoos' and 'you don't have any experience.' Instead, she calmly retorts, 'I have intuition, and experience will come'.

[22]

What makes her refreshingly different from the previous Miss Marple incarnations is her critical disposition and the directness with which she articulates her motivations: she does not 'tolerate shoddiness' and despises 'cowardice, weak character and the lack of talent.' As a rich woman she is still allowed to retain some power in the world, entertain unconventional ways of thinking, and make things happen, whereas her extensive life experience and open-mindedness helps her to discern vital clues in witness statements, CCTV footage, and the material evidence assembled by the police.

The series' poster portrays the flamboyantly dressed and stern looking Ekaterina alone against nocturnal skies with the iconic St Basil's Cathedral facing a modern office tower, with what appears to be a revolving globe in-between. With the background ostensibly symbolising the heroine's eminence and the global reach of her cosmetic empire, the image can be perceived as highlighting her egocentric and unapproachable stance. Yet, I prefer to read it as a sign of liberation from the suffocating patriarchal patronage upon which *Female Logic's* protagonist Olga Tumanova was made dependent, and which the women in the two other stories still implicitly felt. A quintuple divorcee, and now consciously single, Ekaterina emphatically relies on female solidarity: repudiating the contemporary post-feminist discourses of female age-related rivalry, she forms a very productive and harmonious team with her middle-aged employee Tatiana, and her twenty-something personal assistant Dasha, supported by a large and diverse circle of female friends and clients.

[23]



Screenshot from *Moscow Murders* (2017-2018). Ekaterina Vlasova and Dasha at work with Vlasova's son Igor in the background.

Thus, as the narrative moves forward, Ekaterina emerges as a character who is not only capable of confronting the drawbacks of her age, but who can also artfully capitalise on the advantages it offers. As to her appearance, it is reminiscent of Helene Cixous' seminal description of the monstrous woman in "The Laugh of the Medusa," which emphatically suggests that '[y]ou have only to look at the Medusa straight to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing.' (1997: 355) Epitomising the distorted image of femininity, the grotesque face of Medusa possesses a deadly power: its ugliness can destroy the beholder. Whereas Cixous grants the monstrous woman an exciting chance to triumph through overwhelming the opponent by her looks, age, and gender, Teresa de Lauretis later comes to relativize such liberating potential by pointing out that 'to look at the Medusa "straight on" is not a simple matter, for women or for men; the whole question of representation is precisely there.' (1984: 199) As appealing as this empowering possibility is, it can be foreclosed by 'real, historical and material complicities'. (de Lauretis 2003: 199) And this is exactly the problem that the series lays bare, on the levels of both representation and performance. Whereas in the fictional world Ekaterina's actions are ridiculed as old-age eccentricity by the male police officers who avoid crossing the 'scary' lady's path, in real life, Ludmila Chursina's face, haircut, voice, and wardrobe

are reviled by many viewers as grotesque: they reveal the range of affects (from astonishment, to hilarity, to unease, to fear) the ageing female star persona can unleash within old-fashioned audiences. Yet on both levels, the series also tentatively offers a critical promise, since Ekaterina clearly operates as a role model not only for Dasha, but for her clients of different ages, and even for Shilov's own daughters, while Chursina's acting audacity and her style (which remarkably resembles the style of the celebrated *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, born in 1949) is openly admired by many female viewers who explicitly identify as millennials and are therefore unacquainted with the actress' past career.

### **Conclusion, or the Challenge of 'The Town's Crazy Woman'**

As I argued at the beginning of this essay, ageing Russian women increasingly struggle to reconcile the pressures of neoliberal regimes of active ageing and self-preservation with traditional social expectations about appropriate appearance and conduct. A fifty-something respondent in an ethnographic survey vividly articulated the fear of 'stepping out of line' as a risk of becoming 'the town's crazy woman'—a titular character from an immensely popular song by a Russian pop star Masha Rasputina. (Davidenko 2019a: 11) However, in the song, the 'crazy woman' is a trickster who uses her unquestioned condition to enjoy untamed, eccentric and, in the eyes of many, laughable behaviour. She declares herself free of the myriad of norms, rules, and codes designed by the patriarchal society to keep women under control. Olga Tokarczuk recently wrote that eccentricity is a feminist tool par excellence: eccentricity can be 'posited as a spontaneous, joyful rebellion against everything that's established and regarded as normal and self-evident. It is a challenge flung in the face of conformity and hypocrisy'. It is also 'one of the modes allowed to an old woman when she's not playing the role of a kindhearted granny'. (Tokarczuk 2021)

Following the 'female logic', the *babushkas* in the four Russian productions all indulge in eccentric behaviour, taking their cues from the infamous English spinster. And therefore, these women arguably fit in the group of female characters (and actresses) Kathleen Rowe discussed in her 1995 book *The Unruly Woman*. Identifying advanced age, the refusal to become invisible, and the desire to author one's own existence among the habitual tropes of female unruliness, Rowe argues that these features can be productively reframed to serve as 'a source of potential power'. (Rowe 1995: 31)

This again explains why the fictional Miss Marple, whose actions undermined the potency of the reigning patriarchal structures of her time, functions as a figure of inspiration for considering the entrenched cultural notions of the present.

And so, despite being conventionally labelled as light entertainment products, the series I have discussed see their work as part of lived social reality, in that they consciously address one of the most vexing popular assumptions, or, to use Susan Sontag's seminal terminology, the 'double standard' (1972): that of inequity of ageing parameters for women and men. In the four different stories, these standards provide a fertile breeding ground for controversy, and are replayed, varied upon, opposed, ridiculed or ignored, albeit within the limits of the ironic detective genre. Featuring older women as talented and motivated sleuths allows ideas about age-appropriate appearance and conduct, or about these women's social and individual aspirations, to break through cliché. Admittedly, these narratives do not make long-lasting stereotypes disappear, but they certainly set out to help the characters (and with them, the viewers) gradually realise the import of their thoughtless dissemination. By carefully administering them in what Mireille Rosello calls 'homeopathic doses' (1998), the series appear to foster an optimistic belief that Russian society is capable of dealing successfully with a certain level of age and gender stereotyping when it is not directed against an abstract conception of ageing women, but concerns real-life people who occupy social and cultural space—a space which is also the viewers' own.

## Notes

[1]

Here and thereafter translation from Russian into English is mine.

[2]

Although female characters resembling Miss Marple regularly appear on popular television, I focus on these four productions for a number of reasons. Firstly, their heroines are played by very well-known and celebrated film actresses of 'pensionable' age; secondly, each narrative contains explicit references to Christie's famous spinster; and, thirdly, because these series appeared in succession each new production reflects on and, in some instances, contests the ideas brought up by its predecessor.

[3]

Recent sociological surveys in Russia demonstrated that various respondents perceive ageing thresholds as varying from fifty, to fifty-five, to sixty years. (Pikuleva 2014)

[4]

I am keen to point this out because, depending on socio-historical and cultural frameworks, as Lynne Segal observes, what one determines to be 'old age' can vary from mid-30s to late 70s, and, nowadays the moment of becoming old is strongly informed by social factors, such as class, economic position and health. (Segal 2014: 215; see also Krekula 2009. For Russian context, see Davidenko 2019a, 2019b).

[5]

In October 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law a pension reform envisaging a gradual increase in the retirement age in Russia to 60 years for women and 65 years for men as of 1 January 2019. The transition period will last until 2028. Source: Russian News Agency TASS, <https://tass.com/society/1038728> (last accessed 1 August 2019).

[6]

Along with the reduction of financial and institutional resources for pensioners during the post-Soviet transition to market capitalism, the image of ageing women disseminated by today's media is one of a social group that requires additional economic expenditure to cover the growing need for care and medication. The same discourse conceives of the ageing male population as a socially valuable resource for a considerably longer period of time. To a great extent, these views derive from the Soviet discourses of professional labour and social participation. Throughout the Soviet epoch, housework and child rearing were not recognised as quantifiable labour, but as something that pertained to the private, domestic sphere. (Grigorieva 2018)

[7]

Again, this reiterates the neoliberal discourses of 'successful ageing' generally conceived in terms of productivity, which is strongly associated with youth and midlife as the productive phases of the life course. (Roanova 2010)

[8]

In this I follow Deborah Jermyn who, based on her examination of British television programming, contends that 'it is often TV fiction which arguably continues to afford [older women] the greatest (albeit still greatly delimited) opportunities'. (2013: 76)

[9]

Reflecting on older women's perceived 'opacity' Akiko Busch even argues that this 'diminished status ... can, in fact, sustain and inform—rather than limit—our lives. Going unrecognized can, paradoxically, help us recognize our place in the larger scheme of things'. (2019)

[10]

TV Centre has the fourth largest coverage area in Russia, after

Channel One

,

Russia-1

and

NTV

. It is owned by the administration of the city of

Moscow

.

[11]

Here and further, I refer to viewer responses on Afisha, IMDb, Otvovik, Kinoteatr, and Ruskino.

[12]

I was not able to find any available data on the Russian online forum's demographics. It is arguable that the viewership of this type of programme primarily consists of older audiences who are familiar with the actress' career, and are more likely to identify with her persona and the characters she has played. However, I would like to stress that despite the traditional view of television as a 'feminised' medium, it is not exclusively retired women who watch serialised detectives, because some of the forum participants explicitly self-identify as young and/or male. Moreover, as Deborah

Jermyn notes, recent research on the make-up of TV audiences in the UK has shown that there exists no considerable difference, gender- or age-wise in time spent in front of the small screen. (Jermyn 2013: 75)

[13]

The ‘invisibility’ of an ageing woman is certainly not an exclusively Russian phenomenon. American writer Ayelet Waldman, for one, once told an interviewer how, after turning 50, she started experiencing difficulties being noticed both as a professional and a human being: ‘I’m not some gorgeous woman who’s used to owning the male gaze, but I have a big personality ... and I’m used to being taken seriously professionally. And, suddenly, it’s like I just vanished from the room. And I have to yell so much louder to be seen [...] I just want to walk down the street and have someone notice that I exist’. (Copaken 2015)

[14]

Poster retrieved from IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2925408/> (last accessed 10 August 2019).

[15]

Vera imagines each possible scenario as a scene from a classic film noir, with a lot of dark shadows and dramatic sounds. Apart from referring to her professional background, the black-and-white shots enhance the feeling of suspense, and allow the heroine (and viewers) to focus on the subject without being overwhelmed by the multiplicity of colourful quotidian details.

[16]

Retrieved from <https://www.tvc.ru/channel/brand/id/112> (last accessed 2 February 2021).

[17]

The subsequent two seasons were produced by TV Centre Moscow.

[18]

The playful self-referentiality of the series, which sets it apart from the other three productions discussed here, is made apparent through the poster details: sporting her most mischievous look, a fedora of sorts, and a coat slightly reminiscent of Sherlock

Holmes' cape, Varvara is surrounded by the requisites of a classic sleuth: a magnifying glass, a manila case folder and a dog suggestively wearing metal-rimmed glasses and a deerstalker hat.

[19]

Retrieved from <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/100341/foto/> (last accessed 2 February 2021).

[20]

It is worth noting that featuring Varvara as a former schoolteacher is not incidental. Since Soviet times, teaching and medicine have been predominantly female (and hugely underestimated and underpaid) professions through their obvious association with the notions of care and upbringing. Accordingly, even today, women often conventionally account for the roles of doctors and teachers in popular narratives.

[21]

Retrieved from <https://www.tvc.ru/channel/brand/id/2946> (last accessed 29 January 2021).

[22]

In the end, it is exactly such bits of 'trivial' knowledge about good nail care, or the correct smell of a particular brand of facial cream, that help Ekaterina resolve many mysteries.

[23]

When the investigation calls for male assistance, it is always readily provided by Ekaterina's loyal driver Ivan and her rakish but respectful son Igor.

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