

“Not in the Margin Anymore”: The Transnational Turn in Contemporary TV

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While US televisions may be donating increasing time to international formats, American network television continues to influence narratives across the globe. A striking example of this comes from Russia, where the popularity of American television has extended into an increase in the number of American formats adapted into Russian shows over the last fifteen years. These adaptations include versions of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Married... With Children*, and *The Nanny* and even *Full House*, many of which lasted several seasons and drew high ratings. This trend certainly constitutes a symptom of international distributors trying to tap into foreign markets, allowing them to sell essentially pre-packaged shows with what might seem like a guarantee of success due to their pedigree in their original incarnations. Of course, this is not a phenomenon that is particular to scripted television, as many unscripted and reality shows from foreign countries, and especially the United States, have made their way to Russian screens, such as *Big Brother*, *Top Model*, and the *Idol* series. However, the transposition of scripted series often require a greater degree of nuance to modify their relatively more complex scenarios for local audiences.

Russian television channels have traditionally had a high proportion of scripted shows compared to European and North American countries. Despite this, dubbed foreign shows have typically not gained traction in the country. Faced with a huge appetite for local programming, it is not surprising that producers have turned to transnational formats to fill gaps in the scheduling. For older shows in particular, the costs can be quite cheap as producers not only have entire narratives to adapt but also sets and production design for a relatively minor rights fee. Within scripted television, there have also been adaptations of soap operas and other foreign language properties, but American sitcoms make up a large percentage of the overall adaptations.

For MIPCOM in 2006 alone, Warner Bros International Television announced Russian adaptations of several shows, including *Full House*, *Suddenly Susan* and *Perfect Strangers*, the last of which repositions the foreign cousin as coming from an ex-Soviet republic to live in Moscow. They maintain the element of culture clash, even though two members of the CIS should arguably have more in common than the US and a remote Mediterranean island, at least in the propaganda of the Soviet Union and to a certain extent in the pan-Slavic narrative of the Russian government. Then VP of format licensing and production, Denis Leroy described these stories as ‘universal,’ translating easily to countries with a need for local and recognisable stories.

Despite this, the chosen formats have mostly been adapted from narratives that are drawn from a very traditional cross-section of American television sitcoms or which take place in particular American contexts. The transposition of middle class American

city life and suburbia onto the post-Soviet context prompts telling changes in the shows in order to stitch the two worlds together, often with an overt satirical edge. These changes, and what remains unchanged, only serve to enhance the levels of absurdity and hyperbole found within the original texts. As a form of transnationalism, this trend is particularly interesting within the Russian context, which so long closed its borders to foreign and particularly Western culture during the Soviet regime.

Many of the Russian adaptations have copied their production design nearly verbatim from their sources, which is a tactic that cuts down on cost, as studios do not have to pay designers to create new spaces, but also can be jarring to a Russian viewer, as Russian urban dwellings and what corresponds to suburban areas rarely resemble those found on American televisions. For example, the Bundy's two-storey house with a large living room does not remotely resemble anything that might be found in a Ekaterinburg Soviet-era apartment block such as the one that the Bukins, the Bundy analogues, are clearly shown to live in. The size and layout of the apartment is attributed to Gena Bukin, the stand-in for Al, having demolished a wall to take over part of the adjacent apartment in a shoddy bit of construction, and is mined for humour throughout the series, one of the few differences from the original throughout the first few seasons.

In terms of a transnational flow of narratives, the trend currently on display in Russia presents a problematic view of formats. While they have allowed for Russian producers to create local content that makes use of local talent, the finished products are too often transpositions of the original texts. Nevertheless, what changes and what remains the same in these disparate cultures can not only highlight the differences between the two, but also shed light on some of the driving forces of transnational formats and the persistent influence of American narratives.