

# Main Themes and Characters of the 1990s in the Cover Versions of Soviet Songs

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## ABSTRACT

The article investigates the aspects of recycling of the Soviet culture drawing on the example of a music TV show "Stariye pesni o glavnom" ("Old Songs About the Most Important Things"). It is traceable that there are main themes that are peculiar to the Russian reality of the 1990s and that are used in the reconstruction of the Soviet era both intentionally and spontaneously. The primary focus is on the features of body discourse, which becomes more and more explicit with each episode and, therefore, diverges from the canons of Soviet morality. This trend of bodily liberation reached its peak when the motif of harem was included in the narrative in the third episode. Another curious feature of the time is gangster characters who "wandered" from episode to episode, disguised in one way or another. The show romanticised the gangsters' image, and the criminal world of the 1990s got its "pedigree" represented by charming, charismatic characters.

**Keywords:** *Soviet culture, popular music, Soviet variety art, television, body culture studies, "Old Songs About the Most Important Things", the nineties, recycling, nostalgia, film music, music clips, harem, gangsters*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on the concept of cultural recycling that implies recurrent ("secondary") demand for various artistic objects of the past after a period of oblivion. This concept has been popular during the three last decades among western researchers which aphoristically claim that "we deal as often with the "remnants of the past" as we do with the inventions of technical progress" [1]. Russian scholars rarely refer to the concept of cultural recycling, although Russian reality demonstrates that this approach is topical. One of the first key examples of symbolic "recycling" of the Soviet culture is the TV show "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" ("Stariye pesni o glavnom", 1995–2001) where Russian pop stars perform covers on Soviet songs.

In spite of their entertaining commercial nature, "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" implicitly reflected upon the problems of the "old" and the "new" societies, looked back nostalgically on the past and mocked it, anxiously revealing the challenges of the present at the same time. In fact, the resort to popular music of the past proved to be the magnifying

glass which showed dramatic changes in people's relationships and cultural values of the Russian nation in the critical period. Strange as it may be, the seemingly entertaining nature of the material significantly stimulated the feeling of the emerging crisis.

My hypothesis is that the true meaning of the phantasmagoria called "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" is defined not only (and not as much) by the Soviet past as by the present of the nineties. Within the framework of the project, one can evidently trace adherence to a rule related to the genre of historical film. The rule implies that the film which shows the events of the past tells us much more about the present than about the past [2].

The "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" TV show revealed the spirit of modernity in its reconstruction of the Soviet age. These "greetings" from the modern age were emerging during all the three episodes of the show, and they got more and more deliberate with time. One of the evident manifestations of this trend was, for instance, fetishism of material things. In the second episode, it was expressed by scrupulous reproduction of interior details of Soviet flats, in the careful attention to household items which were repeatedly shown in close-up. In the third episode, the triumph of material things took the form of

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decorations and outfits from Soviet films being thoroughly copied. The feast of familiar, recognisable details was, on the one hand, formally aimed at making the past look authentic; on the other hand, it met the demands of the new popular culture for luxury that required space to be filled with symbols of material well-being.

Another distinctive feature of the new time which became evident in the reconstruction of the past was the transformation of body discourse. This aspect should be considered in more detail.

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF BODY DISCOURSE

As we know, sexual revolution of the late 1960s that took place in the West only slightly echoed in the Soviet Union. No doubt, it had its influence on the transformation of body discourse in the USSR, including popular culture (particularly in literature and films). However, it is evident that "sexuality of a Soviet person was being formed in the frames of deprivation of a range of forms of getting pleasure which usually defined the conditions and representations of sexual desire in western culture" [3]. In our country, full-fledged sexual revolution started only during the Perestroika period when "attitude to sex became <...> one of the main symbols of new, liberal, pro-Western, anti-Soviet, individualistic, hedonistic mentality that had been suppressed and persecuted by the communist party" [4].

By the mid-1990s national popular culture found itself in an ambiguous situation. On the one hand, it did not have a systematic experience in broadening of the horizons of sexual expression, our country lacked the experience that had been forming in western popular culture for thirty years. On the other hand, many years of suppression resulted in rapid expansion of "world standards" of body discourse that neither the society nor the expressive means of the popular culture were prepared for. People in national show business were learning the aesthetic rules of naked body demonstration "by rule of thumb", not having the experience of working with camera, light, body physiognomy, visual metaphors and so on. This resulted in rather crude, primitive and to a great extent anti-aesthetic outcome, mainly in films and music clips.

The "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" TV show turned out to be at a symbolic crossroads in terms of body discourse. As a child of contemporary popular culture, the show could not but demonstrate a new level of body liberation. At the same time as a project aspiring to reconstruct the past, it could not completely neglect the moral norm of the Soviet time. As a result, just like every compromise, "Old Sings About the Most Important Things" showed rather quaint forms of combining two polar concepts of attitude to the body.

Thus, in the first episode of the show most female characters were dressed in colourful dresses below the knee, they had fringed shawls on their shoulders and thick artificial braids, often not matching the colour of their own hair, on their heads. Nonetheless, such outfits resembled nothing else but "village" stylization, as one could now and then see fashion items from the nineties: lace-up boots (Lada Dance), nylon stockings with garters (Natasha Korolyova), low necklines (Irina Otiyeva, Larisa Dolina). Female body got its sexuality as if unintentionally, accidentally; it did not strive to be provocatively attractive (as it was common for music clips of the time), although, no doubt, there was hidden sensuality in it. Bright make-up, soulful poses and exaggerated gestures played an important role in it.

In the first episode, male body was much less sexualized than female body. Baggy Russian shirts, sweatshirts, caps and big boots prevailed among the outfits. The only character in whose clothing and movements masculine attractiveness was especially emphasized was Bogdan Titomir. His flared corduroy trousers were adorned with a belt that had disproportionately big shiny buckle that was "stumbled upon" either by the artist's hands or the camera. In addition to this, the artist actively moved his hips and held a "rampant" electric guitar in his hands, trying to look like a tough rock star<sup>1</sup>. However, this character was meant as a phenomenon that was alien to the village scenery, a character who had popped up not even out of the urban environment, but from an utterly different epoch<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, in the first episode, body discourse was revealing itself within the frames of inconspicuous, not always conscious conflict between the need to stick to the style of quasi-Soviet epoch that was being reconstructed and the urge to keep up with the fashion, meet the requirements of contemporary popular culture. Body discourse demonstrated ludic element of the reconstruction and the fact that it was more important for the show makers to play, to have a chance to "wink" at another epoch rather than retain authenticity in its portrayal.

The second episode of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" approached the problem of authenticity of the "picture" in a much more meticulous way. It was this very episode, as it was mentioned in the introduction, that reproduced the material aspect of the 1960s in a very scrupulous way. Almost in every set-up the show makers lovingly reproduce the interiors of Soviet flats (wallpaper patterns, curtains, furniture, TV and radio sets), thoroughly copy TV studio settings

<sup>1</sup> On the function of a guitar as a phallic symbol refer to: [5].

<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that Bogdan Titomir performed "Chervona Ruta" composed in 1970 while the time frames of most songs from the first episode covered 1930s-1950s.

("The 13 Chairs Tavern", "Little Blue Light") and the outfits of film characters.

Similarly, body discourse is constructed in accordance with the epoch. However, elements of other epochs and cultures now and then appear in the reserved dress code and gestures. For instance, the look and the bodily movement of Anzhelika Varum refer to the image of a pin-up girl. This style of semi-erotic illustrations played an important role in American popular culture of the 1930s-1940s, being an essential part of military patriotic propaganda [6]. Anzhelika Varum is dressed in a light "doll-like" dress with a low neckline, strikes seductive poses directly adopted from pin-up iconography. Moreover, just like many pin-up models in the posters of 1940s, she is holding a wind instrument. However, if horns in the hands of pin-up girls used to symbolise calls for military action, then the clarinet that Anzhelika Varum is pretending to play can be easily interpreted as phallic projection.

The resort to American popular culture is formally justified by the style of music that is playing, for Anzhelika Varum is singing "Our Neighbour"<sup>3</sup> – a song that Soviet people of the late 1960s used to dance twist to, which was considered "enemy's" dance. Nonetheless, with the help of pin-up, the show makers are trying to make the Russian sexual revolution "legitimate". As a matter of fact, Anzhelika Varum as a pin-up girl plays the role of the wife of a "new Russian" – she is a sexy woman in a good shape that does not know how to entertain herself. The interior of her flat is literally full of gilded cages with birds. Symbolically, the character's flat turns out to be the cage, too – a splendid ceiling-high Christmas tree, big windows, magnificent curtains and a red grand piano. At some point the spectators see a chain of children in party suits, following their mother in a "conga line". Completely alien to the style of original pin-up, these children symbolise the ideal of family values that the new social class – Russian businessmen – possess. In their opinion, a wife should look like a top model and radiate motherly virtue at the same time<sup>4</sup>.

Throughout the entire second episode of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things", this kind of allegedly unintentional "rise" in the explicitness of body discourse in the reconstruction of the Soviet times can be seen on multiple occasions. For example, at the end of "Jamaica"<sup>5</sup> performed by Valery Meladze, the Christmas tree suddenly transforms into a palm tree with two girls in bikinis. In the next shot these two pictures are edited so they start to intertwine and flicker like Christmas lights, which, with the Hall of Culture in

the background, literally produces a surrealistic effect. In the same way, as if unintentionally, in the piece performed by Philipp Kirkorov, his shirt happens to be unbuttoned a little bit more than needed, which reveals the artist's torso with massive golden chains on it (another feature of the "new Russian" style). To make the artist even more attractive in a manly way, his image is completed with an electric guitar, which makes an obvious phallic connotation. Finally, all the norms of body demonstration of the Soviet culture are swept away by the image of Natasha Korolyova in the character of Anna Sergeevna – the temptress from the "Diamond Arm" movie (1969. dir. by L. Gaidai). All of Korolyova's poses are deliberately exaggerated and much more sexualised, the original version seems extremely chaste in comparison with them, and the reconstruction seems vulgar. The scene is made vulgar not only by the shortness of Natasha Korolyova's dressing gown, her tasteless colourful make-up, cheap prostitute's poses, but also by her accent.

Thus, the second episode is an attempt to "have it both ways" in terms of body discourse. On the one hand, the show makers try to make fashion details as authentic as possible in their reconstruction of the outfits of the Thaw period. On the other hand, they go far beyond the Soviet epoch in a number of aspects, in particular, in terms of geography (the resort to foreign culture including American), physiognomy (the extent of body demonstration and explicitness of poses) and history (references to the characters of the nineties).

The third episode of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things", although formally dedicated to the Soviet 1970s, did not strive for authenticity in its depiction of this historic period. Its main storyline was not the Soviet age itself, but its music and cinema heritage which got chaotically mixed in the show. By that time, the show makers stop aligning with the Soviet age, thus making the project a paraphrase based on not so much Soviet as popular world culture. In spite of the fact that the scenes and characters from Soviet films are used as the main storyline, they are perceived as some decoration that can be freely adjusted and changed.

With such approach, it is only logical that the canons of Soviet body discourse stop being observed even on the formal level. The appearance of a naked body is no longer justified by the composition and the storyline since it becomes an essential part of a music TV show. It is in this context that the young frontman of "Boney M" devotedly demonstrates his fit torso. For a duet with Gloria Gaynor, Larisa Dolina chooses a transparent dress, which is much more provocative than the outfit that the American super star has chosen to wear. The paradox is that as decades have passed, Russian pop culture is way ahead of the American culture in terms of body liberation. In this "undressing race" the show makers attempt to abuse the most sacred

<sup>3</sup> Lyrics and music by B. Potyomkin.

<sup>4</sup> Similar female characters can be seen in the clips of the 1990s – early 2000s. Refer to Tatyana Ovsienko "My sun", "A woman's happiness"; Kristina Orbakaite "Da-di-dam".

<sup>5</sup> Music by T. Valli, lyrics by D. Seren, G. Seren.

images – Soviet cartoon characters. In one of the "lead-in" episodes we see the Hare from "Well, Just You Wait!" – a make-up artist powders his snout with a cute pink brush. In the next shot the same brush is used to do the same with a naked girl posing in the bathroom. All of that is shown on the go, as if it is working process, something to be taken for granted. This substitution of a character from a children's cartoon is meant to be an innocent joke, however, it actually has a shocking effect.

Another theme of the third episode of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" which is closely related to body discourse is the harem line. It was used at the end of the second episode for the first time already, when Igor Nikolayev performed a cheerful hit in the style of VIA, accompanied by ballerinas making elegant pas. The absurdity of such match was probably justified by the desire to demonstrate the broad spectrum of Soviet achievements which, no doubt, included classic ballet. Besides, this type of art, in contrast to VIA, still remained the calling card of the country in the nineties, too, maintaining the cherished "continuity" within the frames of the TV project.

In the third episode, characters from various cultures are put in the harem setting where a male artist is surrounded by a swarm of seductive women. The frontmen of "Ivanushki International" as village boys from the time of Ivan the Terrible sing and dance in a ring with girls in pseudo-Russian costumes. Valery Leontiev sings "Hafanana" <sup>6</sup> in African dialect surrounded by Indian dancers in saris. Vladimir Presnyakov as either Petrukha or Ivan Sukhov from "White Sun of the Desert" is relaxing in the company of beautiful Oriental beauties. Maxim Leonidov as a careless offspring of the tsar spends his time surrounded by girls who hit him with sauna switches and then dance cancan in splendid dresses of the 18th century. Finally, Valery Meladze appears as a suffering lover, sinking in the bodies of Brazilian carnival dancers. In short, the harem line is included in the depiction of various cultures – not only oriental, but also Old Russian, Indian, European, Latin American. Moreover, it happens outside parallels with song lyrics, in contrast, it happens as if by contradiction. For instance, harem could be suitable for "Rasputin" <sup>7</sup> by "Boney M", however, it is often included in tender VIA-ballads about love for the one <sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Lyrics and music by Afric Simon.

<sup>7</sup> Song authors: F. Farian, F. Jay, G. Reyam, (H.J. Mayer). Its storyline is based on the lovefulness of a Russian courtier, which, of course, has an extremely indirect relation to the figure of Grigory Rasputin.

<sup>8</sup> For example, "Ivanushki International" perform a song called "The love of Alyoshka" (S. Dyachkov, lyrics by O. Gadzhikasimov, 1970, VIA "Happy Guys"), Vladimir Presnyakov

The degree of female nakedness in the harem line increases gradually. From baggy pseudo-national sarafans ("Ivanushki International") through bare belly (the piece with Vladimir Presnyakov) and low necklines (the piece with Maxim Leonidov), the show makers reach the extravaganza of Brazilian carnival (the piece with Valery Meladze).

What can this constant resort to harem in the context of a New Year show which is dedicated to the reconstruction of the Soviet age tell us? Firstly, the crowded harem demonstrates the scale of the show, makes the picture look luxurious. Secondly, the harem legitimises the demonstration of the naked body, "justifying" the explicitness of the body discourse by the peculiarities of "another" culture <sup>9</sup>. Finally, it becomes an unconscious manifestation of the shift in moral norms, when monogamy is no longer the only form of relationships. Now, in contrast, it is implied that a successful man should be surrounded by many women, be a collector of attractive female bodies. This trend, no doubt, stems not from the national customs of the Soviet Union, but is caused by the conjecture of the modern age with its beauty contests and the shifted paradigm of understanding of female body.

Thus, throughout all the episodes of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" one can trace the transformation of body discourse. In the first episode, the resort to the Soviet age became the reason for playful interpretation of the forgotten moral norms. The characters tried to behave decently, although in many details of their behaviour one could notice much greater sexual liberation than they were trying to demonstrate. In the second episode this explicit body discourse receives its own place in genre scenes. The sexuality of the new age is displayed not so much in the Soviet as in the Western pop culture of the past. By the third episode, all the conventions are swept away, and the Soviet age is perceived as a fantasy screen which is used by the modern time as a cover for the new level of body explicitness which is ecstatically demonstrated.

### III. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE GANGSTER'S IMAGE

In addition to the sexual revolution, the 1990s are closely associated with the heyday of the criminal world. One would think that the genre of a New Year show does not mean the resort to such complex, topical,

performs "There is no one like you" (Y. Antonov, lyrics by I. Bezladnova and M. Belyakov, 1970, VIA "Singing guitars", "Happy Guys"), Valery Meladze sings "My shiny star" (V. Semyonov, lyrics by O. Fokina, 1973, VIA "Flowers").

<sup>9</sup> In the like manner, through depiction of "Eastern immorality", 19th century artists of Western Europe "constructed the discourse of accusation of the East in terms of infirmities that Europe did not want to admit having" [7].

painful theme, but the time "speaks" for itself, often beyond the will of the show makers.

The "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" have almost no references to illegal activities and completely no manifestations of violence. However, some details that imply that the criminal world is very close appear within the frames of the project. For instance, the characters often use nicknames created from their surnames when they address each other, and not their real names: Makaronych (Andrey Makarevich), Malina (Alexander Malinin), Gazik (Oleg Gazmanov). Such unceremonious nicknames directly refer to pseudonyms (street names) of the representatives of the criminal world, they are an essential part of the code language for "cronies". Another similar example occurs in the second episode of the show when a new character tries to join regular customers of "The 13 Chairs Tavern" - pan Racketeer. One can clearly see the attributes of a gangster in his look (shaved back of the head, a golden watch and a chain); he is also characterized by exaggeratedly "dumb" facial expression and an "'assertive' line of behaviour" [8].

Besides the small scenes, there are charismatic characters with criminal manners in all the three episodes of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things". Each of them sings a song which gains the second wave of fame after the project. Initially unrelated to the criminal genre, two out of three songs become the music symbols of new criminal mythology.

The gallery of semi-criminal characters is opened by Garik Sukachev with the song "I will recognize my beloved one by his step". This song does not have a known author<sup>10</sup>, and its music genesis belongs to the street folklore of the early 20th century. It is an example of a popular in the post-reform Russia vocal act which "simply tells the story about the 'complications of love' in the language everyone understands" [10]. In terms of the plot, the song has something in common with a heart-rending romance, at the same time, there is no death theme which is characteristic of this genre. The persona takes a roundabout approach to the subject by describing the foppery of her vis-a-vis, and then confesses that their separation is inevitable, bewailing her unenviable fate of an abandoned, forgotten lover.

In Garik Sukachev's version, there is significant digression from the original lyrics. Firstly, the artist repeats the first verse at the end of the song, which relocates the focus from the tragedy of separation to the description of the dandy look of the beloved one. Secondly, he modifies the clothing details so that they

become elements of absurd mysterious dress code<sup>11</sup>. However, within the frames of the TV show, these phonetic mistakes are used with good effect by the character performing the song. Sukachev is portrayed as a convicted person who returns from the prison camp, which is evident from the number sewn on his sweatshirt. The artist shows the manners of a complete convict through the way he is holding a cigarette, the sharp look in his eyes, assertiveness in communication. As a result, the strange combination of "a hat on a panama" and a strange model of shoes "nariman" transform into some kind of subcultural fashion described using corresponding criminal slang.

No less important for the transformation of a heart-rending romance into a gangster song is the way it is performed. Sukachev sings rhythmically free, with many agogic deviations, with constant "hard-driving" syncopation in the accompaniment. He sings on behalf of the character who has a devil-may-care attitude, who can do whatever he wants. The rollicking performance conveys the feeling of freedom, the long awaited freedom, surprisingly well. There is a subtle contradiction between the frothy dandy from the song and the character performing it – the man who has been through serious hardships and who considers this clothing details to be mere jesting. At the same time, Sukachev's character desperately misses this careless life that he, as it seems, used to have and that is long gone.

Sukachev's convict became a key figure not only for the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things", but also for the popular culture of the 1990s. First of all, the criminal present got its history in the Soviet past in the form of a rather charming, charismatic character. It is not an accident that this song started being broadcasted at once and is still Garik Sukachev's calling card. Later this image was used in numerous films, series and pop songs (from "The Thief" by Pavel Chukhrai (1997) to the "Black Bimmer" hit by Seryoga (Sergey Parkhomenko)). It is from this very moment that the trend to romanticise the image of a gangster starts, the gangster who, despite his seeming brutality, tends to be very sentimental deep inside and is, actually, a good person.

In the second episode of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" Alexander Malinin, who had been building his image through the aura of nobility culture of the 19th century before that, plays the role of

<sup>10</sup> On the history of the song refer to [9].

<sup>11</sup> I will compare it with the original version performed by Yuri Morfessi: "I know my beloved friend by his step/ He wears grey trousers/ He wears a panama hat/ His shoes have *riepas*"(ukr. special insoles that make a sound when one walks, which was fashionable at the time). In Sukachev's version, the character wears "a hat on a panama", which is absurd; instead of usual trousers – "riding-breeches" which refers to military uniform; and "nariman shoes" are a phonetic mistake.

a semi-criminal person. In the show he transforms from an aristocrat into a fraudster with a reference to Ostad Bender – a tilted cap, a red scarf, thin moustache, black and white shoes, striped shirt that can be seen under his suit, and careless manners. He is accompanied by several zanies who help Malinin's character perform tricks like dancing on the bench, throwing a penknife, beating people and so on. All of this is performed with the song "No need to frown, Lada" playing<sup>12</sup>. This popular twist of the 1960s turns into a type of a criminal song performed by a street gang as a love serenade under the window of the beloved one.

In comparison with Garik Sukachev's character, the character of Alexander Malinin looks like an "underling". However, both of them have a strong artistic and brutal element in them<sup>13</sup>. They both have criminal record<sup>14</sup> and win over by their charisma. In the long run, Malinin's initial image of an aristocrat helps his character who is meant to be a potential representative of the new criminal elite.

In the third episode of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things", one could notice a strong line of social stratification in the interpretation of the song from "The Sandpit Generals"<sup>15</sup> movie. To understand how significant the transformation of the song meaning is, one needs to refer to its genesis.

In the middle of the 1970s, Soviet cinemas started to show the American movie called "The Sandpit generals" about the hard life of Brazilian homeless children. The Soviet stage at once covered one of the main music themes from the film. However, if in the original version the storyline was based on the dialogue of a fisherman going to the sea and his wife, then the Russian text became a paraphrase on the plot of the movie itself and was a monologue of a homeless child presenting a claim to the ruling class for his hard life.

It is very symptomatic that the Russian text turned out to be extremely distant from the original and transformed into a sentimental story about social inequality. There was political implication in it since in this version a foreign song could go through censorship and become immensely popular on the Soviet stage. According to Sergey Zhuk, it was these films telling the story of "indigenous Americans fighting against the greedy white imperialist Americans" that the Soviet people of the 1970s based the ideas of "imaginary

America" on. The researcher emphasises that film music played an important role in the creation of the US image [11].

In the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things-3", the line of social inequality is displayed through a *mise en scene* from "Hello, I'm Your Aunt" movie (1975, dir. by V. Titov) where a TV presenter Valdis Pelšs and the frontman of the "Neschastniy Sluchay" ("The Accident") band Alexey Kortnev mocked the famous dialogue between false Donna Rosa with Colonel Chesney. The artificiality of their love story was opposed to the movements of the street gang played by the members of the "Neschastniy Sluchay" with the same Alexey Kortnev as their leader. The kids walk on the reinforcing elements of the decorations and are symbolically in a higher position than the fake bourgeois couple from the film.

Having appeared in the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things-3", "The Sandpit Generals" struck the nerve of social inequality, however, not the foreign, but the Russian inequality that became evident in the mid-1990s. Nonetheless, the paradox is that the song was sung on behalf of the gang which was no longer a victim, rather the legislator of social stratification in Russia. The song became a golden hit in the new "criminal" music (as well as the soundtracks from "Gangster Petersburg" and "Bimmer"). It is symptomatic that in the "Brigada" series (2002, dir. by A. Sidorov) it is this very song that is sung as the hymn of the brotherhood at the wedding of a mafia boss.

One could argue about the legitimacy of such inheritance of a difficult childhood and unintentional criminality by the film gangsters<sup>16</sup>. However, this song probably started the new trend of poetization of orphanhood – one could remember the image of Shura (Alexander Medvedev) and the song "Homeless child" by "Hi-Fi". Thus, romanticization of the criminal world got new lines, connected by the theme of social inequality.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A thorough analysis of one of the key entertaining music shows of the 1990s has shown how complex the interaction between the past and the present in it is. Starting as an experimental mock homage to the lost epoch, the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" have unexpectedly brought to life the nostalgia for the Soviet culture and created the canons of its

<sup>12</sup> Music by V. Shainsky, lyrics by M. Plyatskovsky.

<sup>13</sup> Sukachev's character, instead of joining the festive dinner that his wife (Lada Dance) has prepared for him, takes her to bed. And Alexander Malinin at the end of the song says a sacramental phrase: "Love is not something simple. You need to make love".

<sup>14</sup> If the audience understands it by the number on Sukachev's sweatshirt, then in Malinin's image we understand it by a tattoo with the sacred name "Lada".

<sup>15</sup> Music by Dorivak Caymmi, Russian lyrics by Y. Ceytlin.

<sup>16</sup> According to Viktoriya Sukovataya, the "Brigade" ("Brigada") series is based on a gangster saga. However, if the characters in classic American films of the genre ("The Godfather" by F. Coppola, "One Upon a Time in America" by S. Leone) were initially outsiders of the American culture and had no alternative to criminal activity to earn a living, then "the characters of the "Brigade" are absolutely free to make their moral choice, and neither religion, nor nation or race limit their initial choice" [12].

interpretation. Scrupulous reproduction of material details which allegedly make the picture authentic has become an essential attribute of most retro projects. At the same time, historic distance between the epochs was kept by a great deal of irony which was always a part of the producers' approach. In addition to irony, the present "revealed" itself by various "alien" details and lines, and the further on, the more deliberate they became. Moreover, the show always had things that occurred unintentionally and "gave away" the time. In short, all of this has helped to create an artistic text that has many layers in its meanings and that has in many ways defined our perception of the Soviet and post-Soviet time, 1990s in particular.

Many profound researchers of Russian culture and society were trying to explain this phenomenon of colossal popularity of the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" and their influence on social mentality. For instance, Boris Dubin came to the conclusion that this project and the mania for retro series that followed emphasised not the fact of saying goodbye to the past, but reconciliation with it. "This reconciliation with the Soviet," he continues, "and, at the same time, with your own self, the way you are, is one of the main characteristics of the Putin period in Russian collective life" [13].

Those researchers who were trying to reflect on the success of the show, as the saying goes, without delay, were no less shrewd. For instance, Ekaterina Shtern defines the root causes of the resort to Soviet culture as an opportunity to neutralise the distinction between the mass art and the elite art by the creation of the art "for all" [14]. One should admit that in many ways the producers managed to do that since the "Old Songs About the Most Important things" were probably the last New Year show that the whole country was watching.

In her turn, Tatyana Cherednichenko recorded rather controversial relationships between the past and the present that occurred in the reinterpretation of Soviet songs. According to her, these "songs on the post-Soviet stage help to magically restore the link between epochs broken by 1991. And yet at the same time they demonstrate the inevitability of this break since they are just symbols of their own past" [15].

Nonetheless, it should be admitted that we rewatch the "Old Songs About the Most Important Things" today with a deep sense of nostalgia, although not only for the Soviet times, but for the 1990s. Thus, the project turns out to be a quaint reflection of several historic periods at the same time.

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