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**Russian Media Theory:  
Is There Any? Should There Be?  
How About These?**

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**Abstract**

This paper makes a bibliographic case for as well as several arguments against the existence of a body of media theory named ‘Russian media theory’. Elements of the Slavic intellectual tradition are briefly surveyed in an effort to accrue eclectic resources for thinking about media in and beyond Russian. As a gesture to the spirit of Peters’ *Speaking into the Air* as well in borrowing and twisting the title of his less well-known co-edited volume on the field’s canon, this article pays special attention to historiographic, geopolitical, and media philosophical objections to the project of Russian media theory as well as to possible ways forward toward transnational thought on the media environment.

**Keywords**

Russian media theory, media history, literary theory, environment, Slavic

“Искусство как прием”

(“Art as Technique,” “Art as Device,” or perhaps “Art as Media”)

--Victor Shklovsky, 1917, author’s translation

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

A critical surveyor of media theory will not be surprised to identify in the literature a persistent scrum of national-linguistic traditions of thought clamoring for attention—German media theory (Geoghegan, 2013; Pias, 2016), Canadian communication theory (Carey, 1986), American media theory (Czitrom, 1982), British cultural studies

(Schulman, 1993) (and empiricism before that), French theory (Cussett, 2016) (and rationalism before that), Italian autonomism, the interwoven Scandinavian schools (including Swedish whispering in this issue), and, perhaps in a sideways differentiation of the Global North from the industrialized West, medial thought emerging in Israel-Palestine (Blondheim, 2007), Japan, and (as this issue develops) in Chinese communication and media as well as science fiction. What role do such nation and translation play in constituting medial thought? Under what conditions should media theorists even want to play along? Surveying the wide range of different accents in which media theory—a prestige commodity meant to prick the conscience of those reworking the global flows of technology, culture, and aesthetics—arrives on English-language shores, the careful global observer might pause long enough to wonder out loud, as this essay does, about the conspicuous silence of material from eleven time zones north of the 45 parallel:

Where in the world is Russian Media Theory?<sup>2</sup>

The apparent absence is especially striking once we consider the ample intellectual lumber ported in by the Slavic tradition: the adjective ‘Russian’ has already gainfully (if also awkwardly) been appended to a long list of schools of thought such as Slavophilism, Marxism, Orthodoxy, cosmism, nihilism, anarchism, realism, symbolism, formalism, futurism, machism, constructivism, suprematism, and others. Whatever the cause of the absence of a Russian media theoretic school, it is surely not because the Slavic intellectual tradition itself is not up to the task! Add to that the well-known fact that the Russian language was both the second most prominent language of science in the twentieth century (Gordin, 2016) and the lesser-known fact that Russian remains, by several accounts, the second most prominent language online, one can no longer postpone the question, so where is Russian media theory? Why has there been no clear attempt to assemble, if not an entire school of thought, even so much as a modest cabin in which one might huddle together to warm thoughts against the cold blowing in from the global North?

Moreover, given that every major national-linguistic tradition of media theory today, even Canada (Russia’s closest neighbor on average), hearkens back to a former or current imperial power, the critical observer should also ask: should there even be such a thing as Russian media theory, and why might one want to embrace or decline such

a thing? Is it not parochial and politically regressive to retreat to a nationally or even linguistically oriented approach to what now appear irreversibly global problems of media and communication when, as media scholar Marwan Kraidy (2018: 337) convincingly argues, the task of any global media studies worth the name is to speak truth to power? When scholars consider the problems of media and communication in, say, the COVID-19 pandemic, can we not see how jingoistic hate, public health communication wrinkles over vaccine hesitancy and safety measures, and other problems effectively retrench public musings to ethno-nationalist politics away from genuinely global contexts? In this light, is not the most obvious truth concerning Russian media theory that, if it exists at all, it should exist only so far as it is first weaned of any claim to nationalist power?

The trouble deepens: once shorn of any toxic nationalist frame (if such is possible), canons, and claims to canons especially, remain infamously explosive. Should one even attempt a project that, in its formation, might reassert colonial hierarchies of intellectual power, marginalize more deserving resources, and even resurrect ancestors better left untroubled? This essay makes peace with those that might do battle over claims to intellectual canon by espousing no interest in naming or defending a veritably christened Russian or Slavic media theory; nor does it principally seek to recover (previously hidden) intellectual influence across the ages and into the current media environment. No exercise in discerning in the distant past the giants on whose shoulders media scholars currently stand, the point of this necessarily speculative essay is somewhat different: it is to assemble the emerging and sometimes miscellaneous resources from the Russian or Slavic tradition that, once reconsidered, might serve in inspiring or guiding media theorizing going forward. It is to say, with a small host of other essays in this issue, how better might media studies orient itself to the world at present except by taking a broader survey of that world?

In commemorating my father John Durham Peters' co-edited volume (Katz et al, 2002) on the canon of communication theory with a similar subtitle published twenty years ago as well as his lifelong pursuit of seeking out better heresies amid the 'canon-fire', this article asks of Russian media theory: Is there any? Should there be? How about these?

This essay responds with anything but a simple affirmative.

## **Russian Media Theory: Is There Any? (And how would one know if there were?)**

No. There is none to speak of strictly. Save for one German-language edited volume, contemporary theorizing by media scholar colleagues in Russia, a few secondary articles, and my musings elsewhere, I am aware of no previous attempt to define or prop up a tradition of thinking about media per se in Russian or Russia, save for this footnote (Schmidt 2006; Klyukanov 2010; 2019; Vartanova 2014; Kurtov 2019; Peters 2020).<sup>3</sup> Yet at the same time there are, of course, almost countless potential resources adjunct to the ongoing project of constructing global media theory, a few of which the body of this essay annotates, but none that trumpets the explicit designation of Slavic or Russian media theory.

And so from content to epistemology. Instead, the question becomes, if sundry resources in Russian media theory were to go by another name, how might the citation-voyager know when they were looking at something worth identifying by the moniker Russian media theory? As I have suggested elsewhere, it is a probable mistake to identify Russian media theory a priori as that which is necessarily Russian, media-relevant, or even theoretical, since much of the richest resources that speak to contemporary media theoretical questions arrive in the peripheries of Slavic empires, attending to concerns in the language of techniques and receptions (and not to anything so neatly labeled ‘media’ or ‘communication’), and remain happily clueless (as much of the best literature and art often is) of its purchase to would-be theorizers. No a priori definition will do. Instead, I offer, at least as a practical acknowledgment of how I will proceed in this essay, three identifying features—none of which are Russian, media, or theory—that one might often find belong to a larger phenomenon of Russian media theoretic family resemblance.

Perhaps the best definition of a Russian media theory is a resource relevant to medial thinking that passes through the Cyrillic script: the moniker ‘Russian’ here, in other words, is principally linguistic and is not necessarily nationalist, cultural, or even devoted to a particular geopolitical space-time coordinate (e.g., the most fertile grounds for Ukrainian nationalism remains the shchi belt in Canada; many of the most vital servers for VK, a prominent social media platform in Russia, are located in

California while, conversely, after the far-right social media platform Parler was shuttered, many Americans migrated to use Telegram, the encrypted Russian social media platform; the global reach of Russian-speaking information technologists today are likely, on balance, outside of Russia) (Biagioli et al, 2019). In other words, Russian media theory, if it exists, should come to be through an exercise in translation, broadly read across language, geography, history, and culture; to study Russian media theory is not just to parade out once-famous luminaries that frequented the circuits connecting the hinterlands between Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kyiv, Akademgorodok, Istanbul, and Berlin, but also to accommodate previously unconsidered materials from the vast stretches of intermediating linguistic culture crossing arctic, indigenous, permafrost, and maritime climes (Bernstein, in development; Chu, 2021). As I have argued elsewhere (Peters, 2020), the Russian state makes distinctive claims to being the most Northern, Southern (Antarctic), East-Western, and even extraterrestrial of all nation-states.

Second, Russian and Slavic-language media theoretic resources may go under the radar of many more prominent imperial languages because of the consequences of the fraught political economy that has driven the Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet empires. In this, Russian media theory appears poised to offer an aesthetic counterpoint to flashier headline-driving promises of many other spheres of industrialized Western media and technology. The mark of political revolution, once repeatedly tarred by social collapse and reinvention, can offer a salutary effect on taming overbold claims about tradition. At least partly as a function of the need to make do, many media-ready reflections in Russian were penned in what now may appear in retrospect a style of literary realism. Namely, to paint with broad strokes, we might typify with Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* (1953) much of (Russian) realism, whether the groundedness of Chekhov or the imaginative flights of Cosmism, as “conceiv[ing] of everyday things in a serious vein”, with an apparent (if usually factually untrue) “uniformity of the population and its life” while offering “a radical passion [...] for thinking something which is at once amateurish and disconcertingly magnificent” (354). In the style of such realism are normalized and framed the remarkable anecdotes of, for example, Nikolai Fedorov, a Russian Orthodox librarian, who dreamed, from the humble circumstances of a rented attic crawlspace near the Rumyantsev Museum (today Russian State Library) where he spent his monastic life in late nineteenth-century

Moscow with a trunk as his bed and his coat as a blanket, of nothing less than commandeering spaceship planet Earth in the future to fly about outer space and from its ethereal reaches reassemble from the remnants of all human ancestors the literal (Orthodox Christian) resurrection of the human family. As is often the case, Silicon Valley, despite claims of practical can-do solutionism and bold visions of a brighter future, has little on the realist imagination of Russian media theorists—little, except unreal concentrations of investor capital.

Russian media theoretical insights are also often squirreled away as convenient exceptions: a third reason much of the Russian media theoretic tradition may remain sidelined in the search for media-theoretic insight is the troublesome assumption common at least among other observers in the industrialized West that Russian and Slavic contributions to matters of culture, art, and technology tend to oscillate between being technically capable and politically tragic. Such exceptionalizing caricatures break apart under scrutiny. This stereotype (which routinely flits between contradictory stereotypes of Slavic culture as alternately technologically backwards and technically brilliant) is not so meaningful in its content (for there are, of course, some seeds of truth and fields of falsehood to that claim in the history of Slavic media, art, and technique) as it is for what the stereotype obscures in the reception of that history: namely, the reception stereotype has the effect of prematurely assigning Russian and Slavic resources, often unexamined, to a perennial marginal status as cautionary tales and contrast case studies to more mainstream narratives elsewhere (Graham, 2013). (I should confess that as the author of a 2016 book called *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet*, my title participates in this tendency at first glance and then plays on it by reversing the cold war analogy to suggest that it is the other nation at hand—the US—that has since deleteriously networked the world.) This marginal status is often enough to stir comparisons for the scholar interested in making intellectual hay out of cultural misrepresentations (by no means a limitation); however the same perennial exception status granted Slavic resources do empiricists and theorists alike no obvious favors: simply put, if the rest of the world often treats Russia and its near abroad as an exception, or in contradistinction from the popular or mainstream ‘elsewhere’, it amounts to perpetually sidelining out of view fifteen percent of the world’s landmass as well as a weighty transnational intellectual tradition.

Anglo-observer biases offer a another and perhaps more nefarious reason that the Slavic intellectual tradition often goes unacknowledged or under-explored in media debates: it is often also not different enough to consciously qualify for the categorical distinctions privileged by English-language observers. Consider the category of race, for example: namely, despite the peoples of the former Soviet Union hailing from hundreds of ethnicities and languages, the belief in English-speaking cultures that Russians as a whole are a white ethnicity (or sometimes implicitly nearly-white or off-white) means that their resources are racially similar enough to be included in (often unstated) racist self-definition of the West while not being sufficiently different enough to belong, as would much of southeast Asia, outside of an implicitly racialized West. For this reason, as historian Sean Guillory has recently suggested, the American political center deftly employs the threat of Russian hackers rather than the threat of Southeast Asian or native US information technologists as a boogeyman for policing both margins to the American political right and left with an enemy white enough to fear openly—in this view, Russians present the image of a convenient enemy appearing sufficiently white to be criticized without triggering American centrist race consciousness but not white enough to be considered properly democratic or liberal (Guillory, 2020; Stanley, 2015: 152-154). Russians, in this problematic view, (wrongly) appear homogeneously white enough for moderate Americans to oppose openly without racial self-reflection. Similar points could be made about the strangely convenient sexism and classist media portrayals of Russian women and workers in the Western media depictions of Slavs, figures often either too feminine or too much the Stakhanovite to merit the full trust of observers outside of the West. It follows, then, that Russian elites benefit from exploiting and playing into media narratives of the constitutive Enemy Other against which both national identities claim *raison d'être* exception—a curiously common exceptionalism that benefits both the American center and the Russian elite. (Perhaps all nationalisms belong to the same transnational epiphenomenon that tends to serve the state status quo).

Instead of sidelining Russian and Slavic sources as convenient exceptions from outside, an alternative explanation may be offered that explains some of the challenge facing those who seek to incorporate or mainstream such resources: namely, many Slavic-language intellectual resources often display a remarkable degree (and centuries) of contrarian character and internal heterogeneity. What may appear a cramped school

of orderly thought from the outside may encompass a lush rainforest of difference within, and while all intellectual traditions must be somewhat fractally defined, it is a premise of what follows that the degree of internal dissension and argumentative difference (or what I later call “disassociative heterophily”) within the Slavic intellectual tradition is often large enough to make the tradition appear incoherent from within close view and thus simultaneously reducible or forgettable upon encounter from an outside observer. The degree of nested internal differences is the stuff of legend: in the differences between Lenin and his closest right-hand man, Aleksandr Bogdanov, lies nothing less than worldwide revolution; or that Nikolai Fedorov would shun the embrace of Leo Tolstoy at the height of the latter’s prophetic popularity, despite their agreeing on almost everything, is no surprise to surveyors of their history of ideas, politics, literature, as it is in contemporary link structures in Russian-language online sites, where worlds of political and intellectual difference inhabit what may appear at first glance the pettiest of distinctions (Etling et al., 2010). These three characteristics, among others, pose obstacles for the articulation of Russian media theory as such.

## **Russian Media Theory: Should There Be?**

Arguably not. Especially given the internal heterogeneity described above, the normative case against the existence of a so-called singular Russian media theory strikes me as compelling enough for reasons even beyond unwittingly ceding power to categories in the service of imperial nation-states. Namely, in light of the three features above, we may now be closer to sensing why the search for anything so coherent or singular as ‘Russian media theory’ may be a fool’s errand compared to the proverbially sure result of any such search: namely, the positive case for the plural, that there exist many, many Russian media theories.

Before one can even begin to annotate resources useful to the media scholar, let us begin with the foundational question: it must follow that there exist many Russian media theories since there exist many terms to talk about something resembling media in Russian. I’ll briefly list four here, although there are still others: first, the calque from the Latin *media*, or in Russian (1) ‘медиа’, which has gained traction especially since

post-Soviet transition; second, the more classically twentieth-century plural term for ‘media’, namely, variations on the term for ‘means’ средства (sredstva) or (2a) ‘средства коммуникации’ (the means of communication), (2b) средства массовой коммуникации (the means of mass communication, often simplified into the acronym СМК), or more commonly still (2c) средства массовой информации (the means of mass information, or СМИ), where this collective second sense imports a sense of the ‘the’ behind ‘the media’ in English: so are signaled the institutions that make the mainstream news; third, the much broader sense of ‘intermediary’ (sometimes ‘agent’) or (3) посредник that serves in mechanical, financial, and legal contexts (similar to ‘Vermittler’ in German); and finally, the more artful Russian formalist notion of приём (‘priyom’), an often untranslatable term meaning variously reception, device, technique, maneuver, and more, such as in Viktor Shklovsky’s famous 1921 article “Art as Technique/Device” or “Искусство как прием”. Suffice it to note here that one need not even search for plural theories to have already arrived at plural understandings of media in Russian; one troublesome word in English more than suffices. The meaning most plain and basic to me follows in the second sense above. Namely, средства (‘sredstva’)—the first word in the phrase for media, ‘the means of mass communication’—means ‘the means’, which shares an obvious root with the term среда (‘sreda’), which also means ‘environment’ or ‘surroundings’ (the word also means ‘Wednesday’). As I’ll develop below, среда and средства, or the environment, the middle, and the means offer a more robust and transnational alternative understanding of how, in Russian and other languages that build on John Durham Peters’ (2015) concomitant argument in *Marvelous Clouds*, media function as environments and environments as elemental media.

## Russian Media Theories: How About These?

I offer below no Russian media theories per se, so much as clustered annotations in the search for theories in the subjunctive case.<sup>4</sup> This section is less concerned with whether Russian media theory may or may not exist, than with what would they look like if they did. My experiment here is to discover whether a more humane interweaving of literary, philosophical arts, and technology resources can sustain media theorizing today in Russian, among any number of languages. What follows are three

annotation clusters on (1) media philosophies and literature, (2) world techne and infrastructural media, and (3) the computational return of new media in the Slavic canon.

The first cluster, on media philosophy and literature, raises in a new light two points fundamental to media and communication theorizing: the role of the body as media, and in particular the vitality of secondhand witnessing. Namely, media theorists might do well to first turn to the proto-feminist writings of the Decembrists and their command of the paperwork aristocracy which raise fascinating questions about the embodied power of women engaged in authoring the scripts that define secondhand witnessing. For example, a constellation of feminist actors ranging from Natalia Dolgorukova's *Personal Notes* (1810) to Vladimir Soloviev's "The Question of Women's Rights" (1897), to Anna Akhmatova's *Midnight Verses* (1965), to Svetlana Boym's "Framing the Family Album" (2008), and Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl* (1997) and *Secondhand Times* (2013) constellate powerfully embodied witnesses of history through secondhand media. No survey of witnessing media should proceed without first foregrounding the long-sidelined voices of women writers.

Second, the Russian intellectual tradition of nihilism—Turgenev, Soloviev, Dostoevsky, Chernyshevsky, and their passive, active, and revolutionary nihilisms, respectively—strike me as a resource for potentially repositioning the troublesome subject-object position at the heart of media theory. Namely, nihilism, even in its fullest evacuation of metaphysical and moral meaning, implicitly acknowledges that the dash in the subject-object duality is more, not less, than either combined: nihilism, especially the politically rowdy Russian variety, distills, perhaps, to nothing but an uneasy subject-object media position. Media, however, persist in offering more than an either-or choice between user and used, actor and acted upon. In a brief portrait of the Russian Orthodox, nihilist, and anti-positivist thinker, Vladimir Sergeyvich Soloviev, for example, makes a telling aside about the major media system of Russia in 1895, the post office, in noting that "in general, the difference that exists between humble and proud people is that the former dispatch registered letters, and the latter dispatch letters that don't reach their destinations" (Soloviev, 1895: xx). The success of one's subject position does not just depend on a binary media operation: rather the proud are made humble by media subject positions that turn, and return, a sender into a

receiver. Surely contemporary readers may find resonance in that quip to the modern curse that is inbox overload or the vanity void that is social media; elsewhere Soloviev also refreshes an old truism: who the media scholar imagines as the active subject or passive object, the user or used, the sender or sent, the self or other, cannot be reduced to any such clean binary choice for all actors in media systems exist outside of that system too. The medial dash that frames the subject and the object into being, for Soloviev, promises an ecumenical restlessness that resists nihilism's attempt to collapse the subject.

In a second cluster around the themes of world techne and infrastructural media, the media theorist might be interested to rediscover various techniques and environments for sensemaking. What Ernst Kapp called "Organprojektion" in his 1877 *Grundlinie einer Philosophie der Technik* (Principles of a Philosophy of Technology), the formalist Viktor Shklovsky perhaps improves on in his 1923 *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*, essay #30 when he writes: "A tool not only extends the arm of man, but also makes him an extension of himself" (115). He continues: "What changes man most of all is the machine [...] the machine gunner and the contrabassist are extensions of their instruments [...] subways, cranes, and automobiles are the artificial limbs of mankind" (115). The Soviet censure had the good sense to acknowledge, if the misfortune of then censoring, the potency of such media theory that spoke directly to the industrialized 'new man' imaginary powering many post-revolutionary Soviet luminaries. Other sources that speak to the ways media techniques and techniques as media are hard to separate could include Nikolai Chenyshevsky's "The Aesthetic Relationship of Art to Reality" (1853), Andrey Bely's *Petersburg* (1913) on the prose patterns and anthroposophic cities, Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Device" (1917) on art as materialist technique, Pavel Florensky (who often appears by analogy Russia's C. S. Peirce) and his masterwork *The Reverse Perspective* (1920) on (religious) icons, and Yuri Lotman's "Painting and the Language of Theater" (1979) on the necessity of copy metadata (without talking about metadata).

In the service of infrastructural media, or the relationship between environments and media, one might begin by excavating the corollary between the Russian and then Soviet first principle of sredstva: namely, for Marx and then later the Soviet state socialism, the Mittel-medium in "Produktionsmittel" (or the means of production) in

German that marks no less than the first term in socialist critique from which Lenin first translates “sredstva massovoi proizvodstva” (or the means of mass production) and then its gripping parallel “sredstva massovoi informatsii, or SMI” (the media). The political economy vocabulary of Marxism-Leninism rereads media as the means for mass communication; of course, it is no revelation in any language that the media cannot easily be separated from the means of production, but this fact is self-evidently fused in the generative phrasings of Russian revolutionary rhetoric.

There is also an obvious tradition of thinking, with Slavic inflections, about the planet as a cosmological medium. To mention only the trinity of the cosmists (which oversaw a curious continuity from Russian Orthodoxy to Soviet revolution): the founding cosmist Nikolai Fedorov offers in his posthumously published *Philosophy of the Common Task* (1906), a treatment of the planet Earth as an Orthodox medium for restoring the kinship of humanity. The eminent geophysicist Vladimir Vernadsky, in turn, outlines the earth in *The Biosphere* (1926) as a solar medium, alongside whom Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the father of Soviet rocketry, offers a vision of our planet as a cradle in “the Future of Earth and Mankind” (1928). Common throughout is the scaling out of the medium to the level of the collective environment; for a much later example, the Soviet science fiction author and physicist A. Dneprov’s “The Game” (1961) offers a curious and collectivist anticipation of John Searle’s Chinese Room thought experiment framed not through the individual cubicle (or closet) of the Turing Test but out in the open collective environment of what he calls the “Portuguese (soccer) field”. In each case, the collective scale at which media appear as environments and vice versa appears so obvious in over a century of cosmic-collectivist language that, despite long warranting it, it has not yet demanded its own theorizing.

In the third cluster of notes referring to what we might call the computational return of new media (or the persistent recurrence in digital media criticism), we see themes outlining an alternative genealogy for understanding how, through Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet formal scripts and inscription devices, the information age is now pulsing with unruly symbol sciences. For example, in 1830’s “Silentium!”, the poet Fyodorov Tuchevev performs a kind of reading meant to reduce noise in both titular connotation and poetic syntax. Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Evgenie Onegin* (1833) gives heroic weight to a series of improbable characters, especially Tatiana, that follow random paths through

the traces of texts, thus outlining and anticipating in literature the random walks of Markov chains and statistical projections so central to machine learning today: her tradition of reading traces and marginalia remains sublimated in the algorithms buoying contemporary online texts of *Eugene Onegin* today. Vissarion Belinsky, in his famous (1847) “Letter to Gogol”, uses punctuation as a kind of early phonography to inscribe sound and silence amid unrest and revolution. Leo Tolstoy narrates in “Sevastopol Story in December” (1855) war with, as Katherine Reischl has developed in her *Photographic Literacy*, almost photographic precision. The Soviet revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky also compresses poetry into telegraphic, and even pre-literate, writing for the masses in “A Cloud in Pants” (1915), as Carlotta Chenoweth develops more fully in her book project *The Illiterate Text*. Mayakovsky’s short-lived peer Velimir Khlebnikov anticipates what we might today call future-casting in that then-revolutionary new medium “Radio of the Future” (1921). Literary theorist Vladimir Propp then develops a standalone sense for ‘mediation’ in the role of hero narration in his (1928) *Morphology of the Folke (Fairy) Tale*. Many other medial scripts lie ready to be reread.

Computational media have never been straightforward. Against this literary background, we might animate other texts central to a more scientific and equally medial understanding, as the Slavic tradition is wont to do, of how to compute unreasonable differences. As a bridging masterwork, consider what is effectively Raskolnikov’s *Entscheidungsproblem* in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866). Indeed, the etymological roots of the words de-cision in Latin, *ent-scheid* in German, and *ras-kol* in Russian line up to press the distinguishing question, as Raskolnikov asks looking in the rational distorting mirror of his own humanity: does two and two sometimes make five (at least for especially large values of two)? How, in soulcraft and symbols alike, may cutting a whole produce an unreasonable difference more or less than the sum of its parts? Calculating in the face of unreasonable difference also urges Andrei Markov (the mathematician of Markov chain fame) to famously inaugurate formal natural language processing in his “Statistical Investigation of Eugene Onegin” (1913) where the aforementioned random walks happen both in forests (in Pushkin’s prose) and Fourier series (in Markov’s analysis). This tradition is carried on by the theorist of modern probability Andrei Kolmogorov in his (1962) “Study of Mayakovsky’s Rhythmics”, which computationally isolates Mayakovsky’s improbable (and

telegraphic) pith. The semiotician Yuri Lotman then outlines scripts and programming alike as twinned humanistic sign systems in *Semiosphere* (1984), whose positive contrary can be seen in Larry Page and Sergei Brin's articulation of link homophily in "PageRank: Bringing Order to the Web" (1998), the paper that seeded the heart of Google Search, and whose negative corollary can be seen in the veritable link heterophily in Pussy Riot's "Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Chase Putin Away" (2012).

To summarize these brief cluster sketches, the interpretive ambiguity of the subject-object in every media environment parallels the turbulence of what Pankaj Mishra finds in the nineteenth century, and the Russian feminist and nihilist traditions in particular. Gender criticism of paperwork machines: namely, the secondhand witnessing language in Anna Akhmatova, Svetlana Boym, and Svetlana Alexievich offers reminders of the feminist powers of their polymathic observation, of the ethnographer poet, of the bystander witness—a tradition predating figures as diverse as Mary Magdalene, the social receipts of kabbalah, the Decembrists' feminist command of aristocratic paperwork, and modern-day protest witnessing. So too is it curious that the Marxist-Leninist phrase for the 'means of mass production' is only a word away from their phrase for mass media, suggesting that long have media, whatever those may be, also appeared revolutionary means of mass information production. In Russian, the root of the word 'means' remains particularly revealing: среда (*sreda*), a term that invokes both the spatial sense of 'environment' as well as the day of the week Wednesday; in the Russian word, 'sreda', we see a clue to how many media operate as environments that oscillate between being the causal ground and then the temporal middle (Wednesday). The root of media, traced through nineteenth-century cosmist 'sreda' environmentalism, are wilder than anything Silicon Valley transhumanism has conjured yet, as Anya Bernstein (2019) has recently chronicled in her treatment of over a century of Russian transhumanist and cosmist attempts into immortality.

Media, in this view, appears as the unstable means for flitting focus between fore and ground, subject-object and syntax, cause and consequence, environment and actor. Other insights may be found in rereading literature as media, such that one might observe Vissarion Belinsky's proto-phonographic punctuation, Tolstoy's photographic style, and Vladimir Mayakovsky's telegraphic style (for a semi-literate

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Soviet population of former peasants) also as means by which literature bespeaks media that shape it. So too has this essay suggested resources for reinterpreting the computational revolution in the meta-mathematical figures of Bely's Petersburg, the cryptographic frequency analysis in Markov (as in Markov chains behind AI and natural language learning), analysis of Pushkin's *Onegin*, as well as Kolmogorov's stochastic studies of Pushkin, Lotman's semiosphere (Umwelten) and the attending symbol sciences driving formidable Russian schools of symbolism, formalism, semiotics, and cybernetics. So too does the Slavic tradition offer preludes to critical algorithm studies through the etymological and ethical parallels between Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and David Hilbert, Alan Turing, and their common decision problems (*Entscheidungsproblem*), among others. Still other resources help not congeal so much as reveal centrifugally more submerged icebergs of intellectual wealth, including Alla Efimova's and Lev Manovich's annotated collection of thirteen essays in their 1993 *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture* (eight years before publishing *The Language of New Media*) as well as, again, Ulrich Schmid's 2005 edited volume including twelve secondary essays on *Russische Medientheorien*.

But, unless our environment is urgently attended to and cared for, all such icebergs risk breaking apart. Situated as part of the thawing global North, the search for Russian media theory is more than just a burning question with a growing pile of notes: what can transnationally inclined media theorists do to combat and contextualize climate change writ broadly? Google emitted fifty kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> in the time it took to read this sentence. The carbon footprint of cloud computing is now equivalent to that of the economy of Norway and growing quickly. How are we to proceed in the face of the towering costs of the industrialized West, and the global North in particular? If neglecting eleven time zones north of the 45<sup>th</sup> parallel appears an intolerable option, media scholars must accommodate its translational Slavic resources and insight as well as countless attending central and northern European, Chinese, Japanese, Canadian, American, Arctic, indigenous, and maritime resources that make up Eurasian media theoretic traditions. How have media technologies sped what McKenzie Wark (2015), after rereading Andrei Platonov, calls the "carbon liberation front", and how might a postcolonial turn in media theory intervene to slow our uneven global catastrophe? How is the twenty-first century to understand the previous? How do we now live in the wake of a century of the *spetsi* [technical specialists]? Might Russian elites—with

extractive petro-economy, growing income inequalities, major northern-flowing river systems, and thawing northern sea route—even be positioned to (at least relatively) benefit from climate change, even as, in Thane Gustafson’s (2021) recent analysis, the population of Russia itself suffers catastrophically from the thawing methane fields of Siberia and other climate crises? Does this perverse situation not disincentivize pressing conversations about the environment and media, both public and scholarly? A more broadly conceived melting global North project could bring vitally needed Russian-language resources into a more global conversation. After a twentieth century spent worrying about the East and West, a new orientation now presses upon the coming mid-twenty-first century: how will the world unite to mitigate what is coming and already at hand from the thawing North and South?

Perhaps what is at hand, literally, is not a bad metaphor for shepherding this exploratory essay toward a conclusion: hands offer telling and subtle asymmetries of our embodied and fragile environmental condition. It is possible, for example, that right-handedness abounds because, over millennia of cultural and practical orientation—a literal orient-ation toward the east—humans in the mid-latitudes in the Northern hemisphere (30 to 60 degrees latitude) have tended to favor the sides, the East and the South, where the sun rises and shines the longest. Perhaps, in a return to Vernadsky, our bodies reflect the ineluctable spin of the planet: the patterns of the biosphere turn with the geosphere. Might Russian media theory, once reclaimed, help reorient the global North? Or might we, after tasting its tantalizing possibilities, still reasonably insist on declining Slavic media theory?

## **Conclusion: Declining Russian Media Theory, Twice?**

At this moment there is raging across the English-language humanities and social sciences a ferocious intellectual scrimmage for media theoretic insights: in fact, this has been happening at least since World War II, but the heat has been building with generations of contributions from so-called German, French, Canadian, American, and (as a 2017 volume from Steinberg and Zahlten has it) Japanese media theory, among others. Yet from this conversation, Russian-language materials go strikingly silent. If media and communication theory is understood, again, as a prestige

commodity—a preoccupation among the jet-setting few whose consciences are pricked by both the riches and the ruins wrought by the media technologies unleashed by the industrialized economies they live in—why then is there so much ample intellectual lumber from the century in which Russian was the second most popular scientific language in the world—the constructivists, the formalists, the cosmists—and yet no obvious cabin fit for rethinking the modern media environment and, with John Durham Peters, the environment as media that bears a Slavic label?

By annotating a few of the many constellations in the transnational Slavic tradition, this essay seeks to set aside the western, often imperial preoccupation with technology and to see behind and through it the question of the technique, and by implication the technical as a principal preoccupation of all humanities, and media culture, history, and texts especially. If English-language media theorists could defamiliarize, renormalize, and eventually accommodate only one technique from the Slavic tradition, this essay hazards the suggestion, borrowing from the language of molecular separation, that ‘disassociative heterophilia’ is commonplace in media environments. In other words, a willingness to link to the other—and thereby to conceive of the other initially as a contrarian position through dissociative discourse that leaves the intellectual record not as a coherent tradition, not as self-naming schools, but as an archipelago-like burst amid an ocean of lonely ideas—that all of this is distinctive, if of course not peculiar, to the Russian media theoretical tradition as well as, perhaps, central for the humanities and social sciences to reclaim the explosive rise of the artificial techniques of difference-making (such as the intersection of the semantic difference in language, the binary bits of computation, or the gaps that constitute networks). The stakes for doing so, again, are not small: the Soviet century was a century of *spets* (or *spetsialisti*, ‘specialists’) in ways that reanimated the long nineteenth and twentieth-century concentration of so much knowledge, power, and industry and, with it, the existential stakes of uneven ecological collapse. It is high time to harken to and learn from its lessons.

As a personal comment in a special issue inspired by work done by my father, I hope this speculative essay has performed a passing compliment to the task modeled in his intellectual work in more than name: namely that one might reclaim and improve heresies through commentary (two classical, even medieval, genres of scholarship).

What better way to recover communication and media theory, as Peters' *Speaking into the Air* (1999) makes profoundly possible for the field, than by looking elsewhere? As the historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, only by looking away from something can we begin to see it in context. For example, the French Revolution does not appear to be the French Revolution until after we can see it in the context of the founding of America and the Spring of Nations in Europe. The first step toward sitting at the transnational media theory table, as John Peters' work illustrates in its sheer synthetic range, is to step back, draw back the chair, and look away from the current media environment and its pressing problems in order to prepare in the backroom a fuller feast of transnational literature, art, culture, and history. By 'declining Slavic media theory', we may also decline the English term media in search of the many non-equivalent terms in other languages, such as, in Russian at least, the relationship between *sredstvo* (the means), *sreda* (the environment), and the phrase for *mass media*, 'sredstva massovoi informatsii'. To acknowledge 'declining Slavic media theory', one may also follow the obvious historical trendline of the decline and spread of many Slavic prestige commodities in Eurasia into global flows over the last fifty years. Perhaps the delta of resulting scholarship is best navigated by stepping back, looking away, and seeking insights from the timeless techniques that animate media environments by another name. To wit, perhaps a concluding line to capture what it might mean to search for Russian media theories by indirection is to reverse Viktor Shklovsky's formalist approach to "искусство как прием" or art as technique: namely, this essay calls instead for the collective search for "прием как искусство" or media techniques as art. Namely, if in so doing we must decline Russian media theory, once as a subject altogether and then again as a grammatical object fit for declension and rich reinterpretation, may we at least do so while reclaiming a more ecumenical relationship to techne as art and artifice likely to set a more sustainable transnational table for future feasts of media theory on techniques as art.

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## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Note that for the purposes of this essay, I refer to "Russian" as a sometimes catch-all term for what must become, of course, a more nuanced and differentiated notion of variously pan-Slavic and also non-Slavic media theoretic traditions in the Near Abroad. See also Peters (2020) and Schmid (2005).
- <sup>3</sup> There are also several other scholarly works by Russian media and communication scholars on this topic that I have commented on in my aforementioned *Digital Icons* essay (2020), although little of it has survived translation.
- <sup>4</sup> In the Russian language, subjunctive actions are fittingly expressed in the past tense with the marker "byi": if something would be in the Russian future tense, it would also have had been.

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