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Article:

Saunders, RA and Strukov, V (2017) The Popular Geopolitics Feedback Loop: Thinking beyond the 'Russia versus the West' Paradigm. *Europe Asia Studies*, 69 (2). pp. 303-324. ISSN 0966-8136

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1299114>

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The Popular Geopolitics Feedback Loop: Thinking beyond the ‘Russia versus the West’

Paradigm

1. Introduction

Arjun Appadurai argues that culture should not be seen as a type of substance, but rather a dimension of a phenomena, ‘a dimension that attends to situated and embodied difference’ (1996, 13). The difference to which he refers is a manner of signification, derived from Derrida’s notion of *différance*, or simultaneous deferring and differing (Derrida 1976, 1978). Appadurai’s concept of dimensionality allows him to speak of culture less as a property of individuals or social groups and more as a heuristic practice, or a process of production of symbolic meaning.

It also enables a discussion of the global situation as interactive rather than singly dominated. ‘The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centres and peripheries)’ (Appadurai 1990, 296).¹ Appadurai (1990) identifies five dimensions of interaction and overlapping in the global order, which he terms ‘-scapes’ due to their

¹ An example of such ‘false’ multiplicity and complexity is Lucia Nagib’s polycentric model of world cinemas (2006). On the one hand, like Appadurai, Nagib argues against the binary reading of cultural production (the so-called ‘Hollywood versus the rest’ paradigm). Conversely, Nagib does not supply a multiplicity framework for reading global cultural exchange which, for her, remains trapped in its own durability (‘Hollywood as one among many centres’), thus differing from Appadurai.

fluidity and intentionality (a particular appreciation of landscape depends on how you look, who is looking and at what angle): ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes.

Appadurai's discussion of globalisation and its flows and interactions yields a few important considerations. First of all, globalisation and its cultural value have spatial properties and cultural exchange can be understood as a series of overlapping spaces, each demonstrating a particular dimension/direction. Secondly, an analysis of the configuration and correlation of these spaces reveals ideological concerns and modes of power relations. Therefore, Appadurai's '-scapes' are first and foremost geopolitical interactions insofar as they map relations in physical, political and cultural worlds and their multiple extensions. Thirdly, globalisation includes intertwining and fluid '-scapes' which help us examine dynamics beyond homogenisation and heterogenisation. Finally, his concept of dimensionality invites us to re-consider the question of agency, which we propose to define not merely as a practice of impact but rather as a practice of imagining. Agency is not only a social fact (Appadurai 1996) but also, we propose, a cultural value, or knowledge construction. Our article concerns itself with a series of inter-related theoretical questions. What is the dynamic of cultural exchange outside the framework of unidirectional and multidirectional flows? Is it possible to describe this dynamic as a feedback loop? How do interactions translate into iterations of exchange (and, by extension, shape real-world geopolitical relationships)? What is the structure of agency in the system of feedback loops? How does this type of agency impact our reading of popular geopolitics? And how do these models enable us to think beyond the 'Russia versus the West' paradigm, which is prevalent in the Anglophone discipline of Russian Studies?²

² The prevalence of the 'Russian against the West' paradigm can be evidenced by scrutinising the titles of papers presented at the annual convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, the world largest congress of scholars of the Russian Federation and the Russophone world (see the web site of the organisation www.aseees.org).

Just as Appadurai aimed to consider globalisation outside the binary logic of homogenisation and heterogenisation, so we strive to work ‘in-between’ academic disciplines. That is, we aim to work by deferring and differing simultaneously and querying the established logic of academic disciplines by exploring the dimensionality of the knowledge production process. Popular geopolitics represents a relatively new field of academic inquiry, though one which has a number of analogues in other areas of study, especially the field of imagology (Chew 2006; Leerssen and Beller 2007; Neumann 2009). It developed within political geography to fill a lacuna in the study of geopolitics. This genealogy, discussed below, is critical to understanding the methodologies employed and the artefacts studied by scholars working in the field. However, popular geopolitics is not ‘one thing’, nor is it a static form of intellectual inquiry. Instead, it is a dynamic and protean interdiscipline, one which has much to offer scholars in a wide variety of fields, from the humanities (media studies, languages, literature) to the social sciences (history, political science, geography). Our aim is to demonstrate the politicisation of the popular and its ramifications in different types of discourses, and to interrogate what methodological and conceptual challenges we face if we are to place Russia at one of the centres of this ‘popular geopolitics’. Using analytical tools from popular geopolitics, we put forth a tentative interdisciplinary framework for interrogating Russian popular culture’s contribution to ‘everyday’ geopolitical understanding, both in and outside of the Russian Federation. We do so by engaging critically with the concept of the popular geopolitics feedback loop. Feedback loops by nature are ‘iterative processes’ which create ‘patterns of great complexity through relatively simple processes’ (Sherblom 2015, 369). Whether positive or negative, such loops are vital components to any complex system. In this essay we explore how iterative processes link and shape the popular culture-world politics continuum with a focus on Russia and its ‘Others’ (principally the so-called ‘West’).

Loops were common in early cinema, especially the Soviet montage movement, as a way to organise the moving image and render the effects of rapid industrialisation. This aesthetic principle of early cinema correlated with an economic principle of the time: Ford's assembly line, where workers were compelled to perform repetitive and sequential actions in order to produce desired commodities. Although the loop as a form of narration was eventually rejected in mainstream cinema, it became prominent with the emergence of electronic and digital media. In programming, a loop is a set of statements used in code which puts a task into action until a pre-determined condition is met. If the condition cannot be met, this type of code creates an endless process which overloads computers and may lead to their destruction, a common strategy in virus and hacker attacks. In digital media theory, the concept of the loop is used to define new modes of organisation of information (databases) and new modes of story-telling (narratives). In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich argues that the loop is 'an engine that puts the narrative in motion' (2001, 318) and that loops are used to bring together linear narratives and interactive control. In economic theory, the notion of the loop is used to describe economic systems that produce and re-produce particular economic conditions – so-called positive and negative feedback loops. For example, Jiuping Xu et al. (2014) demonstrate how a reduced standard of living eventually reduces investment, which in turn results in even lower standards of living. For Paolo Urio, loops are the cultural-ideological structure used by 'the dominating group to socialize the different social actors, to transmit to them the behavioural norms, values, fundamental beliefs, social representations' in order to reproduce the social and political structure (2009, 87). In traditional geopolitics, George Modelski (1987) employed the idea of the loop to explain changes in world leadership, the so-called long cycle and hegemonic stability theory. With the end of the Cold War era, his theory was dismissed as incapable of predicting events by Colin Flint, who described it as 'a historical model that interprets a wealth of historic data in a simplified framework' (2012, 197).

In this article we use the concept of popular geopolitics feedback loops to define systems of exchange and iteration among (popular) geopolitical entities and subjectivities, which produce meaning and affects and influence our perception of the world as an imaginary geopolitical space. They are distinguishable from other related categories, such as knowledge and opinion, by the fact that—like the software code described above—they tend to re-produce an existing set of connotations and—like economic principles—they lead to circulation of positive or negative values, disabling a more nuanced world-view. An example of a popular geopolitics feedback loop would be a cultural stereotype, which can be either positive or negative and which continues to dominate our perception of a particular country or nation even when information available increases. Saunders has argued that ‘the West’ is most complicit in this process, as imaginative geographies and political imaginaries of ‘Otherness’ are used in both explicit and implicit ways to reify clear (and ultimately constitutive) distinctions between us and them, with the ultimate goal of locating, opposing and casting out’ (Saunders 2017, 74). In our work we wish to demonstrate that the West is not the only system capable of producing its own popular geopolitics loop. We examine the case of the Russian Federation to reveal alternative and competing forms of production of popular imaginaries. We also aim to reveal the complex, multi-centric, non-binary workings of popular geopolitics loops, whereby the action of one actor influences the production of meaning in their loop but also in the loops of other actors. Thus, our ultimate objective is to theorise different types of agency involved in the production of popular geopolitical meaning vis-à-vis the polycentric and networked system of global exchange.

We begin by discussing the evolution of popular geopolitics, specifically the methodological and theoretical aspects of this interdisciplinary. In the second part of the essay we interrogate the viability of employing a popular geopolitics lens to understand the relationship between the popular and the political on the international stage as it relates to the Russian Federation. Our key objective here is to identify important areas of the Russian popular geopolitical realm and explain how they relate to the

Western popular geopolitical realm, forming a global exchange. In part three, we query this binary approach, or the ‘Russia versus the West paradigm’, by examining several pop-culture artefacts and their critical/popular reception. We elaborate on our concept of the trans-regional feedback loop, where Russian and ‘Western’ currents feed into, off and through each other via multiple centres of production that respond to numerous internal and external stimuli. Our argument is that these flows sustain older geopolitical codes and frames, while steadily developing new patterns and dimensions of exchange that ‘explain’ variations triggered by the vagaries of globalisation.

Via these case studies, the goal is to theorise new types of agency which are responsible for producing and sustaining popular geopolitics feedback loops. Our analysis yields a system of four (often overlapping) types of agency—personalised, networked, adaptive and deterritorialised. Each is representative of the wider field of cultural exchange and the transformation of cultural interactions into cultural iterations. Each of our case study subjects has a hybrid structure of agency. However, we focus on a particular aspect of exchange in each case to reveal new models of iterations in the field of popular geopolitics. In our theorisation, space, or ‘–scaping’ (the relationship of places to global economic, political, social and cultural factors), is used as the primary system of identification and consideration. We employ –scaping as a means to narrate and analyse popular geopolitics feedback loops and to re-consider globalisation as a meta-intentionality, i.e., not only the five dimensions in Appadurai’s system but also a cultural value or agency in knowledge construction.

2 The Emerging (Inter)Discipline of Popular Geopolitics: Loops of Theoretical Iterations

It is important to note that popular geopolitics evolved out of critical geopolitics, a fairly narrow niche within political geography, but it is clearly a scion of classical geopolitics. Geopolitics has a rather chequered past given its historical association with Nazi Germany, most notably in the person of Karl

Haushofer, whose student Rudolf Hess went on to become Deputy Führer of the Third Reich until his arrest in Scotland in 1941. Often derided as a form of ‘Nazi social science’ (see Guzzini 2012), Geopolitik was rebranded during the Cold War, with scholars returning to the foundational works of the field, particularly those of American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan and British academic Halford Mackinder. With the advent of global superpowers, nuclear weapons, and the expansion of military power into outer space, geopolitics became a critical avenue of intellectual inquiry for policy-makers, academics, and journalists. However, in the 1970s, French geographer Yves Lacoste challenged the status quo, built on a rather neat division between state/practical geopolitics and elite/classical geopolitics, to call for a greater level of critical inquiry into the how to see the world as it really is (see Klinke 2009), and to recognize that geopolitics is fundamentally about the making of war (Claval 2000). It is with Lacoste and the establishment of the journal of radical French geography, *Hérodote*, that we witness the beginning of critical geopolitics. Following the ‘discursive turn’ in a variety of disciplines, there was a call to engage the totality of geopolitical thought and action, triggering many new approaches to geopolitics by the mid-1990s, spearheaded by the writings of Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996) and Simon Dalby (1996).

Out of this flurry of activity emerged a distinct subfield of critical geopolitics which sought to interrogate popular culture as key site of knowledge production, effectively establishing a third plank of geopolitics to complement those of the state and academia. Joanne Sharp (1993, 1996) pioneered this new frontier of analysis with her interrogation of the long-running American publication *Reader’s Digest* and how it influenced the U.S. Cold War imagination. She was soon joined by other geographers seeking to link the popular to the political, including Klaus Dodds (2003, 2005), who engaged James Bond films to analyse their role in the narration of post-Imperial Britain, and Jason Dittmer (2005, 2007, 2012), who explored Captain America and how a comic superhero makes the United States’ place in the world. Geographers, however, did not hold a monopoly on the rapidly

growing field of study. In fact, they were quickly joined by a host of International Relations (IR) scholars employing similar methodologies and approaching their subjects from common theoretical orientations. The more prominent studies which overlap with popular geopolitics include Jutta Weldes' (1999) research on the television and film series *Star Trek* and its impact on the notion of 'benevolent empire' in the (post-)Cold War context; Cynthia Weber's (2005) analysis of filmic mediation of American identity at war; Iver Neumann and Daniel Nexon's (2006) explanations of the Harry Potter book and film franchise explain and reinforce world politics; and more recently, Daniel Drezner's (2011) efforts at using zombies to advance IR theory. This confluence scholars from different fields turning their critical gaze to 'low cultural products' such as films (Crampton and Power 2005), television series (Buzan 2010), song lyrics (Boulton 2008), comic books (Dunnett 2009), political cartoons (Dodds 2007), tabloid journalism (Debrix 2008), radio broadcasts (Pinkerton and Dodds 2009), video games (Salter 2011), stand-up comedy (Purcell, Scott Brown, and Gokmen 2010), and social networking sites (Saunders 2014b) to explain how the world works reflects the genuinely—even radically—interdisciplinary nature of what has come to be called 'popular geopolitics'.

So where does popular geopolitics come from and where is it going? The discipline is strongly influenced by Edward Said's (1979) trenchant concept of Orientalism and his intellectual excavation of colonial discourse and 'world-making' rooted in works of literature, art, and other forms of both high and low culture. Scholars working in the field of popular geopolitics start their inquiries with the recognition of the power of imagination in determining (geo)political realities on the ground. In many ways, this is a powerful reassertion of the fundamentals of geography, the ancient science of 'describing' or 'writing' the 'world'. Popular geopolitics unabashedly affirms the ocular-centrism of dominant geographic understandings. By exploring 'ways of seeing' (Cosgrove 2008) that go beyond maps and physical surveys, scholars of popular geopolitics engage a variety of geopolitical phenomena outside

the realm of policy and practice, from the aesthetic (Bleiker 2001) to the emotional (Pain 2009) to the humorous (Ridanpää 2009) to the fantastical (Ruane and James 2008) to the cinematic (Shapiro 2008).

So how does one do popular geopolitics? The scholarship of popular geopolitics (and critical IR research in the vein of the works discussed above) employs a fairly wide set of methodologies and foci (see, for instance, Weldes 1999; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009; Dittmer and Gray 2010; Scharf 2013). The most common modalities identified in these studies are:

- Analysis of institutions and processes involved in production
- Analysis of the ‘geopolitical moments’ present in media representations
- Analysis of the ideological structure of the text and its possible meanings
- Analysis of the reception of that structure and those meanings and their potential transformation by their audience

In the case of institutions and processes, the gaze of the scholar focuses on the cultural producer and the environment in which the text is crafted. The importance of movie studios, television networks, publishing houses, video game developers, and other culture industries is a major part of the interrogation. Methods in such projects often involve interviews with cultural producers, data collection related to funding sources, and/or interrogation of supporting apparatuses which enabled the project. Research on the ‘geopolitical moments’ in a given text (or set of texts) is a very common approach to popular geopolitics. Such work is typically done in conjunction with research on the ideological structure of popular-cultural texts, as discussion of the former is often difficult to separate from interrogation of the latter. Lastly, popular geopolitics is gravitating towards audience studies, while also looking carefully at how political elites ‘use’ popular culture for their own ends. This is perhaps the

most underdeveloped modality of analysis, yet the one which generates the greatest level of enthusiasm among researchers active in the field. Our own contribution in this essay seeks to go beyond this schema. Through case studies we identify new ways of conceptualising flows of ideas via geopolitical popular culture, and theorise how these transmissions feed into and alter a complex system of self-perception and ideas about (geopolitical) Others.

3. A Popular Geopolitics for Russia? Surveying the Complicated Terrain of Competing Systems of Knowledge Production

A weakness of the field as it has evolved so far is that popular geopolitics is—for the most part—American/Western-centric, with an overriding focus on dominant power structures and their extension and maintenance. In common parlance, popular geopolitics has got ‘First World Problems’. In our view, this state of affairs begs two questions relevant for this special issue: ‘Is Russia ready for popular geopolitics?’ and ‘Is popular geopolitics ready for Russia?’ Given the parameters laid down in the previous section, our argument is that the time has come for popular geopolitics to move beyond its adolescence as an (inter)discipline, and that an expansion into the Russian/post-Soviet/Eurasian realm is a natural outcome.³

³ Certainly, we do not wish to imply that Russia is only realm where such expansion could (and should) occur. Given the global enthusiasm for Japanese popular culture (J-pop, anime, manga, Pokémon Go, Shinjuku cosplay, etc.) and Japan’s pivotal role in the Pacific Rim, a similar lacuna exists within the field of popular geopolitics. Arguments could also be made for expanding analysis to include China, India, Turkey, Brazil, and other states that generate their own popular culture gravitational forces.

Perhaps more than any other geolinguistic region, the Russophone realm (with Russia, and Moscow in particular, at the nodal core) represents a geographical-political-linguistic-cultural-economic force that is comparable with that of the Anglophone world (dominated by the culture producing industries of Hollywood, but girded by those situated in the likes of New York, Chicago, London, Toronto, Sydney, Johannesburg, Dublin and Wellington). As a former and aspiring global superpower, a member of the BRICS group, a top-tier energy producer, and a resurgent diplomatic and military force in European and Asian international politics, Russia shares a number of the hallmarks of the U.S. and the United Kingdom, hitherto the major foci of studies of popular geopolitics. Russian-language media production is robust and increasingly diverse, reaching a total population of more than 250 million; there are significant populations of Russophones in more than two dozen countries (see Saunders 2014a).

Russian is one of the most prominent languages in cyberspace and Russian internet usage continues to see dramatic growth (see, for instance, Strukov 2012). Russia possesses a large global news media footprint thanks to its Russian-language television networks and the *Russkii Mir* ('Russian World') programme (Ryazanova-Clarke 2012), as well as its rapidly expanding presence in satellite television through RT, a major international news network that offers content in multiple languages (English, Arabic, Spanish, German and French) as well as country-specific programming (U.S. and UK). Russian and Russophone video game production (*Tetris*, *Rage of Mages*, *Day Watch*, etc.) and social networking sites (*Vkontakte*, *Odnoklassniki*, etc.) are also quite robust, with Russian software programmers enjoying worldwide recognition for innovative products.

Continuing a strong tradition in literature, contemporary Russian fiction enjoys a wide readership across the Russophone realm as well as in translation. Moreover, Russian-language magazines are to be found in kiosks and bookstores from Berlin to Riga to Limassol. Sequential art and comics in Russia, despite ideological restraints imposed during the Soviet period (and before), also represent an area of sustained and highly regarded pop-cultural production which is often acutely political in nature (Alaniz

2010). While comparatively weak in terms of global cinematic blockbusters, Russia's auteur film directors, e.g., Aleksandr Sokurov, Andrei Zviagintsev, Aleksei Popogrebskii and Boris Khlebnikov, enjoy critical acclaim world-wide and compete successfully at international film festivals. In some cases (as will be discussed below in the case of Timur Bekmambetov) they achieve global fame through work on transnational productions. Our indicative list of fields where Russian cultural production is particularly strong is meant to suggest that Russophone culture makes a significant contribution to world-wide cultural exchange, perhaps even surpassing—at least on a holistic level—India, China, Brazil, Germany, Mexico, Egypt, and all other pretenders to the position below Anglophonia.

From a geopolitical perspective, this cultural presence is extremely important. Russia—as the successor state to the USSR—is deeply invested in image production and maintenance across different types of global ‘-scapes’. This is particularly true when it comes to employing the popular for purposes of the political in the international realm. In fact, recent scholarship demonstrates the growing relevance of spaces of popular culture (sport, blogs, film) in intraregional rivalries between Russia and Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Georgia, and other countries (see, for instance, Trubina 2010; Bohlman 2012; Gaufman and Walasek 2014). Consequently, the pop-cultural production of video game developers in Yekaterinburg, film directors in Moscow, novelists in St. Petersburg, and Russian-speaking software programmers in Tel Aviv impact how the world is perceived, conceived and lived (Lefebvre 1991). When Russian cultural producers sculpt a reality, this is not simply something that stays within the (admittedly vast) national borders of the Russian Federation; instead, this ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ of everyday geopolitics travels through a complex network of globalised agency.

Just as Captain America teaches boys in Boise, Idaho, how to be a ‘hero’ in the face of jihadi terror, so does Daniel the Imp Slayer [Danila Besoboi] help millennials living in Vladivostok navigate their way

through a changed post-Cold War worldscape. Just as the Twilight series teaches young Mormons in Utah how hold back the seductive forces of darkness (while abstaining from sex outside of matrimony), so does Bekmambetov's Night Watch series guide denizens of the Russian capital through the moral collapse of their city, while reminding them of Russians' chosen place as last guardians against the coming apocalypse. Just as Grand Theft Auto IV introduces a new generation of Latino youth in Los Angeles to a world where they just might be the existential enemy that will bring about societal collapse, so too does Metro: Last Light present a dystopia where the denizens of Russia see themselves turned into anti-civilisational wraiths that are there just to be slaughtered by a first-person shooter avatar.

These examples are meant to illustrate the complex forms of cultural exchange which, as we argued in the introduction, is never binary and unidirectional but instead iterative, producing folds and feedback loops. In this regard, popular geopolitics acts as a sort of rejoinder to cultural studies regarding the recognition that Anglophone popular culture defines the West against a Russian 'other' and many other 'others'. Other popular cultures construct their own systems of 'others' as well, where some perceptions may overlap or there may be gaps in discourse through which new exchanges become possible. Thus, feedback loops alternatively maintain and upend historic equilibriums associated with national image. Consequently, we call for a new way of thinking about how Russian popular culture relates to, reinforces, and reconceptualises geopolitical meaning in the country's immediate region (eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and northeast Asia) as well as farther afield (i.e., Russia's relationship with the European Union, the Middle East, the Americas, etc.). These spatial constructs are always 'the detours, locutions and syntax' (Derrida 1978, 23) of cultural exchange which enables differing and delignating agency.

4. '-Scaping' Agency: Personalised, Adaptive, Networked, and Deterritorialised Agency

In order to engage with these disparate popular-cultural products, we differentiate between forms of agency and explore how the cultural producers behind these artefacts engage with the idea of ‘Russia’ and its geopolitical relationship with external actors in a globalised milieu. While we focus on the originality and creativity of the individuals involved in constructing these ‘world-images’ (Weltbildern) and ‘world-formations’ (Weltbildungen), we also consider the spaces and means of these products’ dissemination and how globalised ‘flows’ feed back into understanding(s) of Russia’s place in the world. We start by accounting for each type of agency and we conclude by interrogating the network of exchanges and the type of feedback loops they produce.

4.1 Personalised Agency: Bekmambetov and Russia as an (Invisible) Aesthetic

We begin with the ‘personalised agency’ of the director Timur Bekmambetov (1961-) and his cinematic franchises. Born in Atyrau (Guryev), in the eastern part of the Kazakh SSR, Bekmambetov is of Kazakh and Jewish heritage. As a teenager, he moved to Moscow and then to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where he studied visual arts. In the late 1980s, he served in the Red Army in Turkmenistan, an experience that would inform his directorial and writing debut *The Waltz of Peshawar* (Peshavarskiy vals, 1994). In 1999, he founded his own film company, Bazelevs, and soon gained national—and later worldwide fame—with his neo-vampire action films *Night Watch* (Nochnoi dozor, 2004) and *Day Watch* (Dnevnoi dozor, 2006). The international success of the *Night Watch* series turned Bekmambetov into hot commodity in Hollywood, resulting his role as director, producer or writer on a number of big-budget English-language films, including *Wanted* (2008), *9* (2009), *Apollo 18* (2011), *The Darkest Hour* (2011) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), as well as continuing to work on Russian cinematic projects such as *The Irony of Fate* (Ironiia sud’by, 2007) and *Tsar Christmas: 1914* (Elki: 1914, 2014).

Bekmambetov's career exemplifies the personalised agency of cultural feedback loops. Guillermo del Toro (b. 1964, a Mexican, American and Hispanic director) and his impact across the Anglophone and Hispanic worlds is a comparable case. However, it diverges from the Cold-War era narratives of personal success and geopolitical impact, or what we call uni-directional loops, whereby the assumed binary geopolitical structure of the world is re-enforced in artistic oeuvre through a rejection of one geopolitical segment and/or nostalgia for the other. More specifically, Bekmambetov is not a political dissident like the world-famous auteur film-maker Andrei Tarkovskii (b. 1932 in the USSR and died in 1986 in France). Nor is he an ideological reformer like Andrei Konchalovskii (b. 1937), who first emigrated from the Soviet Union and had a successful career in Hollywood, then returned to Russia in the early 1990s and, along with his brother Nikita Mikhalkov, became an advocate of Russian state patriotism (see Norris 2012). Instead, Bekmambetov uses his personal brand as a film director and producer to create a dark view of the world, informed either by supernatural (vampires, alien invaders, etc.) and/or science and technology gone awry (murderous robots, super-powered villains, etc.) (see Image 1: The destructive march of machines as depicted in 9 [2009]). His agency allows him to challenge dominant discourses both in Russia and the USA. For instance, *The Darkest Hour* is quite reminiscent of a number of dystopian video games set in Moscow (see below) though employing familiar tropes from Hollywood disaster films,⁴ while *9* sculpts an apocalyptic scenario abetted by a strange form of totalitarianism-cum-capitalism that could only have been birthed in the neoliberal West, despite evoking certain elements of Soviet-era military performativity. Likewise, Bekmambetov includes a 'living mural' scene in *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (see Image 2: Bekmambetov's depiction of slavery as the forge of civilisation) in which painted figures come alive to retell the global

⁴ However, as Saunders (2017) has pointed out, *The Darkest Hour* markedly differs from most other Western disaster films set in Moscow, as the Russian capital is there to be saved, not destroyed for the pleasure of the viewing audience.

history of slavery (and vampires role in the ‘peculiar institution’). Herein Bekmambetov re-tells the American foundational myth—that of slavery and quest for freedom (Saunders 2015)—while also re-working the Slavic myth of subjugation and revolt. Bekmambetov thus contributes to Anglophone popular culture from the perspective of Russophone popular culture and makes a return to the latter whilst speaking on behalf of the former, with markers of geopolitical discourse present at each level of iteration.

Moreover, Bekmambetov’s films provide audiences with a sense of hybrid cultural -scapes (Bhabha 1994), or what we call two-directional loops. The artistic output generates a sense of a more fluid geopolitical construction of the world, in which Russophone culture exists as a particular transferable aesthetic. For example, Bekmambetov re-works the famous bullet time effect introduced by Lana and Andy Wachowski in their 1999 film *The Matrix*. Originally, the bullet time effect—achieved by placing still cameras in a formation around the moving subject and rolling them simultaneously—allows the filmmaker to slow down or stop the diegetic time while making the audience aware of their own time being unchanged. Space becomes untethered from time, an effect that was first used to manipulate the attention of the spectator by Sergei Eisenstein in his *Battleship Potemkin*.⁵ In his 2004 *Night Watch* Bekmambetov uses the bullet time effect to convey a sense of the third space—the so-called Gloom—which underpins the visible world and is available to the chosen few (Strukov 2010). Thus, bullet time effect emerges as a conceptual -scape which re-defines and re-loops cultural flows to eschew binary structures. In his 2008 *Wanted* this effect is used ironically to depict the conspiracy of the corporate world of multi-nationals. The convergence of time and space is symbolised by the notion of weaving: the ability of the main character to slow down the flow of time is perceived as an ultimate protest against the conspiracy and dominance of private capital, which consistently puts emphasis on

⁵ The origins of the montage movement and its effects are outside the scope of this paper.

acceleration. Since it was introduced by Bekmambetov, this textured, ‘woven’ type of the bullet time effect has appeared in several Hollywood blockbusters, most recently in the Marvel Comics films *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (dir. by Brian Singer, 2014, incidentally starring James McAvoy like in Bekmambetov’s *Wanted*), in which the character called Quicksilver (Evan Peters) is able to re-organize space during a gun shot, and in *Deadpool* (dir. by Tim Miller, 2016), in which Bekmambetov-style effects provide the film with an ironic atmosphere of the global apocalypse similar to the geopolitical imperatives of *Day Watch*.

4.2 Adaptive Agency: Bulgakov and Russia Reinterpreted and Re-enacted

Bekmambetov’s case demonstrates how personalised agency enables a specific aesthetic which is utilised as a critique of the dominant discourse on the global cinematic screen. In this regard, (in)visibility is an important factor, as Bekmambetov’s bullet time effect has not been labelled as a ‘Russian’ device and rather exists as a visual contraption for the universal struggle against tyranny and injustice. Our next case emphasises how geopolitical spaces are linked to experiences of trauma which are interpreted through different media as a common Western, pan-European narrative from an identifiable Russian source, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (1928-40; 1967). It also showcases the performative nature of popular geopolitics through the working of de-territorialised communities of fans/co-producers who respond to a particular master-text. If Bekmambetov’s personalised agency sustains a transfer from uni-directional to two-directional loops of exchange, the adaptive agency of *The Master and Margarita* regulates formative grassroots relationships whereby loops of exchange exist in proximity to but without the support of / interference from the government, state or capital. What brings the two cases together is their common interest in alternative spaces (for example, the Gloom in *Night Watch* and apartment 50 in *The Master and Margarita*) and the blurring of boundaries between good and evil. These third, in-between –scapes of popular geopolitics are

enabled via multimodal channels of exchange, whilst performative practice reveals the responsive mode of the feedback loops.

Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is an example of how a cultural text may evolve into a global transmedial franchise (Jenkins 2003). Since its publication the novel has inspired numerous adaptations and re-interpretations on the world stage, screen, waves, in art galleries and 'real life'. The novel, with its rhizomic structure, extends its own network across media, social groups and regions. In doing so, it articulates a geopolitical concern—it invites readers, viewers and users to participate in the process of de-Stalinisation, that is, it urges them to re-interpret Bulgakov's satirical portrayal of Stalin's Moscow as a global enterprise and as a transnational struggle against authoritarianism (though other possible readings are plausible). The Bulgakov franchise re-brands Moscow and by extension Russia; it re-conceptualises the user as a participant in working through the trauma of totalitarianism and makes it a global, not exclusively Russian experience. A graphic novel authored by Polish-British artists Andrzej Klimowski and Danusia Schejbal (2008) articulates such concerns in a medium which has been unpopular, and in fact, stigmatised in Russian visual culture—the comic book. Thus, it re-introduces *The Master and Margarita* into Russian culture, but within the framework of a medium which is considered non-Russian/Western, thereby blurring the boundaries between geopolitical spaces and media-specific art forms (see Image 3: The cover of *The Master and Margarita*, showing one of its main characters Woland, an impersonification of the evil. Screenshot of the The Guardian website (<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/gallery/2008/jul/07/masterandmargarita>)). Here, the cross-cultural adaptation and transmedial extension of *The Master and Margarita* is a hallmark of the transnational feedback loop of cultural exchange. The novel extensions can be read as areas of geopolitical concern through a spatial, '-scaped', reading of the original anti-totalitarian text, which itself is a postmodern pastiche of global cultural heritage.

Our other example in this category is a ‘real life’ re-enactment of Bulgakov’s novel in Minsk, Belarus (2009-onwards). Participants create Facebook profiles to interact before the re-enactment takes place in the streets of Minsk (see Image 4: Screenshot of a YouTube video, documenting the Bulgakov-inspired role play games in the city of Minsk, Belarus. (http://vk.com/video-24096014_162349152)).

Participants come together to take part in a role play based on characters and conflicts in *The Master and Margarita*. Their game play serves as a means to celebrate Bulgakov’s oeuvre and simultaneously challenge the authoritarian regime in Belarus by evoking the anti-totalitarian stance of the novel. This project relies on networked forms of geopolitical spaces that stretch across countries and continents insofar as these re-enactments belong to the global protest movement which followed the 2008 financial crisis and austerity measures. In this milieu, *The Master and Margarita* is seen as a global counter-narrative of the (capitalist) apocalypse. On the one hand, by bringing Bulgakov’s anti-Stalinist novel to Belarus the participants make a political statement about the regime in a country where oppositional demonstrations are banned. On the other, this pop-culture invocation of *The Master and Margarita* adds Minsk to Bulgakov’s list of global civilisational centres such as Moscow and Jerusalem, thus creating a geopolitical yet deterritorialised notion of continuity and faith. Finally, this case demonstrates the performative aspect of popular geopolitics, whereby political spaces are created through a performative gesture—in this case, a transmedial adaptation of Bulgakov’s novel.

4.3 Networked Agency: Masiania and Rhizomic Russia

Our first two cases indicate how different types of agency structure feedback loops. In addition to uni-/multi-directional, performative and grassroots loops, they also reveal the relationship of exchange nodes to the imaginary centre. In the case of personalised agency, it is a relation of transfer from one centre to another, and subsequent iterations between these and other nodes. In the case of adaptive agency, it is a relationship between peripheral spaces or marginal –scapes, and an attempt to overcome

simultaneously the previous geopolitical order (the Cold-War era divisions in Europe) and the current popular geopolitical order, where the self can only speak from a peripheral, de-centralized perspective. Our next case involves networked, rhizomic (Deleuze 1987) loops of exchange and agency. We turn our attention to the folds of social connections enabled by the internet, where what Russia is and where it goes in terms of popular geopolitics is strongly influenced by the transmission of 1s and 0s, as well as personal/political connections developed and sustained in digital universes.

The Masiania Macromedia Flash (flash, hereafter) animation project was created by Oleg Kuvaev (1967-), a painter, graphic artist and digital designer who lived in St. Petersburg during the 1990s but emigrated to Israel in the late 2000s. It centres on a roughly drawn, large-eyed heroine named Masiania (from Russian 'Mariia'), whose adventures critique the peculiar nature of urban life in Russia, while also commenting on deeply moored aspects of a society getting over its Soviet 'hangover' (see Image 5: Masiania, an unruly ruler of Russophone internet, appearing in one of the first videos. Her clothes are in the colours of the Russian flag. Courtesy of Oleg Kuvaev.). Kuvaev claimed that Masiania was the first non-commercial flash animation project in Russia (Strukov 2004). However, it derived its aesthetics from the extremely popular U.S.-made South Park and pre-empted Salad Fingers (<http://www.fat-pie.com/salad.htm>), an animation series created by British cartoonist David Firth (2004), which gained rapid internet popularity in 2005 using forms of dissemination similar to Masiania. Both Masiania and Salad Fingers were ranked as top pop culture internet phenomena for 2005 in their countries. Like Bekmambetov, Kuvaev deploys personified forms of agency which enable him to work across the Russophone world and launch and re-start his project from different locations (St. Petersburg, Moscow and Tel Aviv). However, our interest is in how digital networks supplied by the early internet era enabled a cultural feedback loop and constructed a specific geopolitical vision.

Masiania appeared in the pre-social networking site-era, so Kuvaev's flash series was disseminated via viral marketing on existing networks (Strukov 2004). Users would attach his animated films to e-mails and their recipients would then send the clips on to their friends and acquaintances. The circulation of the films came to reveal an increasingly global loop of personal contacts, knitted together in the rapidly expanding space of Runet (Russian language internet). Political orientation functioned as the dominant parameter of who would (and obviously, would not) gain access to Masiania's latest adventures. In many ways, this sort of networked internet activity and content distribution presaged, or 'pre-scaped', the development of Facebook and other SNS games and activities. Geopolitical identity was (and is) relevant, as it 'pre-scaped' the contemporary internet dominated by transnational corporations, with alternative voices finding empowerment through direct communication such as messaging. Masiania charted the socio-political dimension of Runet and revealed its geopolitical concerns in relation to its Anglophone and other 'others'. This is evident in the structure of the Masiania network and the clips' aesthetics. For example, on the one hand, Masiania is rooted in its local milieu, St. Petersburg, and the visual language of the series re-produces the architectural style of the Russian northern capital. On the other, Masiania tells a global story of a young individual trying to secure a position in a world where the neo-liberal economy is triumphant. Therefore, the story of Masiania and her friends is a story of the new structures of precarious labour which depends on global networked agency (see Image 6: Masiania and her friends in a comic strip based on the original video. Courtesy of Oleg Kuvaev.).

Conversely, we can read this local-global dichotomy as a paradigm of the feedback loop, whereby the so-called local context is a product of global iterations of visual language—the Western architectural style, Japanese anime stylistics, and Bollywood gestures. The character of Masiania is used to demonstrate how Russia—and more broadly Russophone agency—simultaneously contributes to and challenges the new neo-liberal order. Thus, the networked agency of Kuvaev and his Masiania evidences structural shifts in the geopolitical order, where spaces are imagined and –scaped not only as

global spaces of competition and contestation but also of collaboration. Since Masiania's re-location to Israel, the project's geopolitical concerns have become more pronounced. Masiania, by occupying and critiquing from a third realm (Bhabha 1990), polemicalises with both Russia and the West. The impact of Masiania is rooted in the personal appeal and lately authority of Kuvaev, who symbolises the values of the early, 'free', unregulated internet. His vision queries the neo-liberal concerns of free markets. Finally, Masiania constructs Russia as a borderless space which blankets that of the West and the Middle East through its networked agency. In this system, Russia—through the character of Masiania—emerges as a global trickster (Lipovetsky 2010) whose role is to adopt and adapt Russian geopolitical visions in intermedial spaces of cultural feedback loop. The original ideological, technical and communicative structures that shaped the 'primitive' Masiania remained important moving forward, influencing 'her' evolution even as 'she' became an international superstar. Thus, we see Masiania's 'Russia' as a protean entity that can bubble up through various apertures in a transnational rhizomic fabric, being constantly revised and 're-scaped' depending on individual spatial, temporal and political situations.

4.4 Deterritorialised Agency: Metro 2033 and the Ruination of Russia

The case of networked agency—Masiania and rhizomic Russia—re-enforces our assumption about the fluid structure of feedback loops. These loops can be 'unhinged', dislocated and re-wired, depending on shifts in personal and cultural circumstances, which may have an impact on the geopolitical distribution of content by establishing new points of equilibrium in the iterative -scapes of internet users. Our final case study helps us consider how these new points of equilibrium are found in imaginary locals. Our concept of deterritorialised agency refers to dislocated spaces, or 're-scaped scapes', not to the fact that this form of agency may lack a territorial linkage. Unlike the third, alternative spaces of Bekmambetov's films, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Kuvaev's

Masiania, our last case exemplifies the production of a ludic space of geopolitical imagination, which refers to itself through simultaneous deferring and differing (Derrida 1978, 1976) and brings into being spatial constructs qua cultural exchange, thus producing delignating feedback loops.

The popular video game *Metro 2033*, released in 2010, is based on Dmitry Glukhovskii's eponymous novel (2005). Set in a post-apocalyptic future where nuclear fallout has mutated a variety of species, the action revolves around the plight of Artiom, a subterranean Muscovite unaffected by the radiation, who seeks to survive in a hostile, dystopian world. Game-play mostly occurs within Moscow's famous metro system; the VDNKh station is Artiom's home base which he seeks to protect from harm (see [Image 7: A still shot showing actual gameplay of Metro 2033 featuring the inhabitants of the underground world offering guns and protection.](#)). After passing through various zones populated by swarms of aggressive mutants and controlled by hostile camps, including Sovietesque 'Red Line', U.S. style-free market 'Hansa', and the neo-Nazi 'Fourth Reich', Artiom must decide whether or not to launch missiles from a base known as D6 (supposedly part of Moscow's apocryphal parallel subway line Metro-2). These missiles are meant to destroy a mysterious threat known only as the 'Dark Ones'. A sequel to the game entitled *Metro: Last Light* was released in 2013. The follow-up focuses on Artiom's guilt about destroying all the Dark Ones, who had come to make peace not war, and explores a variety of issues associated with biological warfare and power relations among the political factions controlling underground Moscow. *Metro 2033* was developed by 4A Games, a Ukrainian company, in conjunction with Dmitrii Glukhovskii (see [Image 8: The official cover images of Metro 2033 used for international promotion of the game. Courtesy of Metro-Wikia](#) ([http://ru.metro.wikia.com/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Metro_2033_\(3\).jpg](http://ru.metro.wikia.com/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Metro_2033_(3).jpg))). While the author collaborated on the game's sequel, it does not bear any resemblance to the narrative of either *Metro 2033* or *Metro 2034* (2009). The founders of the game developer, Oles Shiskovtsov and Aleksandr Maksimchuk, had previously worked at GSC Game World, the firm behind the popular

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. game series set in the ruins of Chernobyl. Like S.T.A.L.K.E.R., the landscape of game-play is based on real places and spaces in the former USSR. However, these 'zones' become a palimpsest for re-writing the past and present, as well as presenting a (possible) dark future where mutants rage and society has collapsed due to the privations of a nuclear exchange. The hoary politics of World War II (with various groups situated as futuristic effigies of Nazis, Americans and Soviets) gird the narrative, further extending the notion of 'deterritorialisation', or post-spatial space, or 're-caped scapes', or 'meta-scapes', as each of these camps possesses some fraction of Moscow's geography, marked stylistically as global spaces of the post-apocalyptic world. The game-play of the Metro series and its visual style are presented as digital folds, or 'digital baroque' (Murray 2008), which reveal rhetorical, emotive and social forces inherent in the cultural exchange of the global era. The folds are loops of exchange where global iteration indicates new spaces of knowledge production, with visual projections, non-linear temporalities and a global landscape of nuclear devastation (see [Image 9: An irradiated and lifeless landscape from Metro 2033](#)). Like the other cases discussed above, Metro 2033 re-introduces a global geopolitical agenda into the Russian context and eventually sends it back through gamers' interactions and fan art available for free consumption on the internet. Thus, Metro 2033, with its visual origins in the stylistics of Stalinist Moscow, constructs a Russophone global narrative of survival. Here, '-phone' relates not only to the spoken language but also to the visual style encoded and disseminated on global networks by millions of users engaged in free digital labour, fostered by the neo-liberal economy of precarious employment and constructing their own geopolitical visions.

These case studies represent a variety of popular-geopolitical dimensions or vectors. They range from highly personalised engagement with geopolitical visions and codes, to networked, consumer-influenced content, to geography-centric re-imaginings of classic works of fiction, to virtual realities that have different meanings in different spaces and places. They also reveal the structure of agency

that enables us to speak of Russian geopolitical visions outside the established ‘Russia-versus-the West’ paradigm. Such agency translates unidirectional flows into loops of cultural exchange, where patterns of interaction evolve into patterns of iteration that impact on our reading of Russian and global popular geopolitics. In the last example, we have shown how Russian space can be completely delinked from ‘reality’, yet at the same time reinforce long-running geopolitical animosities as a realm for a tripartite battle for world supremacy between the communism (USSR), fascism (Nazi Germany), and liberal-marketism (USA). The geopolitical imaginaries of the video game *Metro 2033*, unlike *Masania* or other language-bound media, are easily untethered from their country of creation (Russia/Ukraine). They can become popular around the world, with their ‘meaning’ becoming malleable, often unpredictably so.

Thus, the four case studies help us put forward the notion of the popular geopolitics feedback loop. On one level this structure of iteration often reaffirms old equilibriums (that is, existing understandings of self, space and place). On another, it leads to new equilibrium points in terms of geographical imaginations and subjectivities and also in terms of different types of self-other, self-self and other-other relationships that are possible in the new globalised era of communication. The suggested types of agency reveal the complexity of these iterative patterns and also theorise new types of –scapes beyond Appadurai’s concept of five –scapes: ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, finanscapescapes and ideoscapescapes.

5. Conclusion: Cultural Feedback Loops and the ‘-Scaped’ Agency of Popular Geopolitics

As we have attempted to show with this selection of case studies, geopolitical moments abound in Russian popular culture. However, there is much more here than a simply us/them dynamic focused on the West as Russia’s ‘other’ (or the inverse, for that matter). Ideological apparatuses are certainly at

work in all these cases of geopolitical world-formation, and as a consequence such popular cultural production is neither innocuous nor irrelevant with regards to geopolitics. As cultural producers, the ‘individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which “depend” the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject’ (Althusser 2006, 102). As the idea of Russia is (re)sculpted through original pop-cultural creations, it is (re)layered with geopolitical meaning. With the breakdown in (b)orders that characterize the post-1991 world system, the production, transmission, reception, and recycling of Russian popular culture is increasingly relevant to how Russians view themselves and are viewed by others. Given that Appadurai neatly delimited his various ‘-scapes’, his analysis of popular culture (qua mediascapes) only scratched the surface of the meta-trends which are the foci of popular geopolitics.

Using methods and theoretical orientations drawn from cultural studies and international relations, we have shown that pop-cultural production can and should be studied from a popular geopolitics perspective. Our centring on Russia reveals a transitional multi-directional network of intermedial superimpositions, problematizing the east-west paradigm which still prevails in academic discourse. By tapping the burgeoning reservoir of popular geopolitics literature, Russian/Eurasian studies can greatly benefit, both from extending the gaze of social science scholarship to the popular and by more deeply imbricating cultural studies analyses in quotidian geopolitics (particularly with regard to how geopolitics ‘gets done’). In the cases above we have endeavoured to demonstrate that agency emerges as a spatial practice which, to paraphrase Appadurai, has ‘a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order’ (Appadurai 1990, 296), revealing patterns of iteration and structures, or ‘-scapes’ of popular perceptions of the geopolitical world-order. In certain cases, these popular geopolitics feedback loops create virtuous cycles that rework existing world-images and stabilise emergent world-formations (e.g., Metro 2033). In other instances, the feedback loops generated by flows of pop-culture become highly

disruptive, prompting cascading and competing notions of ‘reality’ and leading to new (dis)orders of understanding (e.g., Masiania. Lastly, some artefacts create hybrid zones of reflexivity that enable nuanced and protean negotiations of identity to flourish (such as the works of Bekmambetov and the real-world performances of The Master and Margarita). While diplomatic relations between Russia and its Western counterparts are certainly strained, there seems to be no slowing in the amount of Russia’s pop-culture production aimed at domestic, trans-regional, and even global distribution, quite the contrary. With the increasing complexity of the various feedback loops discussed above, interrogating the intersections between popular culture and geopolitics as it relates to Russia is imperative.

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