



What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?: The Strange Case of Verka Serduchka*

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Abstract

The Ukrainian cross-dressing and language-mixing pop star Verka Serduchka (played by male actor Andrii Danylko) is the most controversial product of Ukrainian post-Soviet mass culture. Ukrainian nationalists reject Serduchka as a parody of their nation, while Russians took umbrage at her 2007 Eurovision entry, which allegedly contained the words “Russia goodbye.” This article interprets the character of Serduchka as a jester, who makes audiences laugh at their own cultural stereotypes and prejudices, and at the same time as a representative of Ukraine's living folk culture reflecting an ambiguous national identity of this essentially bilingual country.

Keywords

Verka Serduchka, Ukraine, Russia, Eurovision, identity, pop culture

One of the greatest pop stars in present-day Ukraine and Russia, Verka Serduchka is also the most controversial product of Ukrainian mass culture. People tend to have strong opinions about this cross-dressing, language-mixing character, which is played by a male actor named Andrii Danylko. Ukrainian nationalists usually reject Serduchka as a parody of their national culture. Russian chauvinists recently switched from hearty laughter directed at Serduchka as the representation of their country-bumpkin Ukrainian cousins to boycotting the character as a political Ukrainian and a Russia-hater. Where does Serduchka belong, then? In this essay, I will trace Serduchka's evolving

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connection to Ukrainian culture as reflecting larger cultural processes in the post-Soviet space. I am proposing to see Serdutchka as a jester, who, perhaps unwittingly but very much in line with the Ukrainian cultural tradition, makes audiences laugh at their own cultural stereotypes and prejudices. In contrast to most other commentators, I also emphasize Serdutchka's generally positive, if highly unorthodox, take on Ukraine and Ukrainian folk culture. I go as far as to suggest that Serdutchka's folk-inspired performances may represent the living Ukrainian folk culture of today, a national mass culture in a bilingual country with an ambiguous national identity.

Surzhyk queen

The character of Verka Serdutchka made a grand entrance on the Ukrainian cultural scene in 1995 in television commercials for Privat Bank. The only sentence Verka uttered in this clip positioned her firmly among speakers of surzhyk, or the ungrammatical mixture of Ukrainian and Russian widely employed by less educated Ukrainians, especially in the central and eastern provinces: “Dividendy Pryvat-banku nam polieznishe, chym pianka! [Privat Bank's dividends will be better for us than drinking.]”¹ If the first part of this phrase sounded Ukrainian, the second used Russian words, sometimes modified with Ukrainian suffixes. Verka's very name screamed surzhyk. Although usually rendered in English as Verka Serdutchka, the spelling that the artist employs on his CDs and Web sites, the proper transliteration of the Cyrillic version would be Vierka Serdiuchka – neither the Ukrainian Vira/Virka nor the Russian Vera/Verka, with the family name also sounding like a folksy street nickname derived from the corrupted family name Serdiuk.² Verka's language-mixing persona became a runaway hit, in part because surzhyk was a marker of lower class and low culture, both things that the character clearly parodied early on. Yet, as Laada Bilaniuk notes perceptively, there was also a larger

¹ Oleksandr Hrytsenko, “Vierka Serdiuchka iak dzerkalo ukrainskoi kulturnoi transformatsii,” in *Heroi ta znamenytosti v ukrainskii kul'turi*, ed. Oleksandr Hrytsenko (Kyiv: KT&KD, 1999), pp. 340–61, here p. 341.

² In interviews Andrii Danylko has revealed that Serdiuchka was the school nickname of his classmate and friend Ania Serdiuk, whom he even introduced to the public at his early concerts. See Olga Musafirova and Oksana Goncharuk, “Danilko stal Serdiuchkoi v pamiat' o shkol'noi liubvi,” *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, Dec. 4, 2003, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23171/25154>; (last accessed March 15, 2009).

cultural context of the Ukrainian state gradually imposing linguistic purity on the society in which the mixture or situational use of Ukrainian and Russian was the long-established norm. Perhaps unwittingly, Danylko presented his audiences with a carnivalesque, liberating take on the very real cultural and political tensions caused by the imposition of linguistic correctness.³

Although still seen as the icon of surzhyk, Verka's character has evolved greatly over time, both socially and culturally. Danylko (b. 1973) first performed as Verka in the early 1990s, when she was first a saleswoman and later, a train car attendant, but always a crass lower-class person from Ukraine speaking a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian. Audiences in Ukraine loved the parody of low culture, while those in Russia also apparently enjoyed laughing at Verka as a stereotypical Ukrainian representing a provincial and accented variant of pan-Russian culture. In 1997, Danylko was invited on Ukrainian TV channel 1+1 to create the "SV Show," a talk-show where his Verka character interviewed various celebrities on the set built as a sleeping car (SV being the traditional Soviet railroad abbreviation for sleeping cars, as well as Verka's inverted initials). In 1998 the show began airing on Russian television (on TV-6 and RTR, later MuzTV) and proved so popular that it ran until 2002.⁴ Over the years, however, the host's persona became glamorized, and the object of Danylko's parody evolved from a low-class Ukrainian woman to something else entirely. If the early Serduchka was a rude and plainly-dressed woman usually wearing a man's jacket and mixing Ukrainian and Russian in equal proportion, Serduchka the show host spoke mostly Russian with occasional Ukrainisms and was dressed as a kitschy female pop star. No longer making fun at the expense of the common folk, Danylko now appeared to be targeting post-Soviet celebrities, both Russian and Ukrainian, as vain and shallow creatures. In order to justify such a social transformation, Danylko and his team came up with the slogan "Verka Serduchka, the Ukrainian Cinderella," which was the centerpiece of Serduchka's official Web site until it closed for reconstruction late in 2008. Serduchka also repeatedly referred to her rags-to-riches story during concerts and interviews.

Indeed, by the late 1990s Verka Serduchka was giving concerts as a singer rather than a stand-up comedian. The first three albums, the inaugural one having been released in 1998, received little notice, but the fourth one,

³) Laada Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005), pp.164-70.

⁴) <http://www.serduchka-club.com/about/biografiya-andreya-danilko> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

Kha-ra-sho! (Good, 2003) propelled Serduchka to the heights of stardom. Mostly cheesy and derivative pop, Serduchka's music owed its success to the character of Verka. Although the majority of Serduchka's songs are actually composed in literary Russian, the most popular ones usually include musical, linguistic, and visual (music videos) references to Ukrainian culture, thus positioning Verka at the intersection of cultures, in the ambiguous cultural space, where people could be amused with her act while actually laughing at very different things.⁵

Ukrainian pop

Attempts to marry Ukrainian folk tradition with mainstream mass culture have rarely succeeded in recent decades, in large part because since the 1970s Ukrainian mass culture has been dominated by Russian-language musical products. Just like Ukrainian books, contemporary songs in Ukrainian have had their audiences, western Ukrainians and patriotic intellectuals in the eastern oblasts, yet this was always a small cultural niche compared to the impressive reach of Russian books and music. Before the 2000s, the last notable success of Ukrainian pop music occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the young composer Volodymyr Ivasiuk wrote the immensely popular song "Chervona Ruta" (Red Rue, 1968), which became a household tune in Ukraine after it was featured in an eponymous musical film starring the young singer Sofia Rotaru (1971), who then created a group called "Chervona Ruta."⁶ Yet, like so many singers who owed their initial success to the successful blending of folk melodies and modern rhythms, Rotaru eventually went mainstream by switching in the mid-1970s to generic pop (later, for a brief period, to rock) and the Russian language. She continued to perform some Ukrainian and Moldovan folk pop on a side, but was known primarily as a Russian pop star.⁷

⁵ When a Western anthropologist asked his Ukrainian interviewees whether Verka was Ukrainian or Russian, 59 percent answered "Ukrainian" and only 8 percent "Russian," but many also proposed other designations, such as "hybrid" or "Russo-Ukrainian" (20 percent) or even "neither" (17 percent). See James Joseph Crescente, "Performing Post-Sovietness: Verka Serduchka and the Hybridization of Post-Soviet Identity in Ukraine," *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2007): 419-20.

⁶ See <http://www.pisni.org.ua/songs/817373.html> (last accessed March 15, 2009);

⁷ On Rotaru, see David MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955-1991* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2001), ch. 6 and Rotaru's official site (in Russian): <http://www.sofiarotaru.com/> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

This is the profile Rotaru maintains to this day. In a 2009 interview, she said, “I do not want my art to be limited by any one language or borders. My mission is to unite Slavic peoples.”⁸ (Ivasiuk, who stayed with folk pop, died under suspicious circumstances in 1979. Ever since his death there have been speculations that he may have been killed by the KGB because of his commitment to Ukrainian culture.)⁹

Later pop singers were never able to approach the degree of success Ivasiuk, and especially Rotaru in her “folk” years, enjoyed with Ukrainian audiences. The Ukrainian language reentered youth musical culture only with the disintegration of the Soviet political order in the late 1980s, when so-called protest rock acquired Ukrainian coloring on the wave of the national cultural revival in the republic. This Ukrainian rock movement, and especially the rock festival “Chervona Ruta,” where only songs in Ukrainian were allowed on the insistence of Ukrainian Canadian sponsors, generated some scholarly attention in the West, but its primary audience was in fact the same as that of Ukrainian books and music in the earlier period – western Ukraine and the Ukrainian intelligentsia in other parts of the country.¹⁰

Some Ukrainian rock groups founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s went on to build an impressive following, in particular Okean Elzy and Vopli Vidopliasova, or VV, as it is generally known. The nature of rock music, however, presented challenges to rockers wishing to establish clear links to the Ukrainian folkloric melos. Ukrainian texts in and of themselves did not necessarily mark rock music as “Ukrainian,” although VV’s simultaneous forays into folk and patriotic pop could serve as clear markers of national musical identity. What Ukrainian texts did accomplish, however, was to narrow down the band’s audience to a now wider but still limited Ukrainian-speaking audience. The Ukrainian hip-hop group TNMK, or Tanok na Maidani Kongo (Dance on Congo Square, a reference to the reputed birthplace of jazz in New Orleans) has come up with a more interesting recipe, which is somewhat

⁸ http://newsmusic.ru/news_3_14182.htm (last accessed March 15, 2009).

⁹ See <http://www.ivasyuk.org> (last accessed March 15, 2009); Ivan Lepsha, *Zhyttia i smert Volodymyra Ivasiuka* (Kyiv: Vii’s’ko Ukrainy, 1994); “Pravda cherez 30 rokov? Henprokuratura ponovyla slidstvo pro prychyny smerti V. Ivasiuka,” *Ukraina moloda*, Febr. 11, 2009 (<http://www.umoloda.kiev.ua/print/84/45/47481>, last accessed March 15, 2009).

¹⁰ See Romana Bahry, “Rock Culture and Rock Music in Ukraine,” in *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 243–96; Catherine Wanner, “Nationalism on Stage: Music and Change in Soviet Ukraine,” in *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Mark Slobin (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 136–55, in particular p. 137 on Ukrainian Canadian sponsors and p. 150 on weak interest in eastern Ukraine.

similar to Serduchka's musical language. Mixing hip-hop with jazz, funk, and rock, and often using tongue-in-cheek lyrics, TNMK proved able to engage the Ukrainian musical tradition in a very modern way, as evidenced, for example, by their 2008 hip-hop remix of "Chervona Ruta" featuring Sofia Rotaru herself. In the video, Rotaru appears in a ball gown, while other singers wear eighteenth-century costumes on top of t-shirts and slacks, likely as a visual commentary on their encounter with the Ukrainian "classics."¹¹ Equally important, from its early years to the present, TNMK did not shy away from using surzhyk both to add a comic touch to their work and to challenge, sometimes directly in their songs, the fetishization of "authentic" literary Ukrainian.¹²

During the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, however, TNMK joined Okean Elzy and VV in supporting the Orange opposition, which positioned itself as the defender of national culture. The Orange Revolution gave a new and potent impulse to protest music in Ukrainian, often distributed via the Internet.¹³ Yet it would be a mistake to assume that all Ukrainian-speaking musicians, no matter what their producers' commercial interests and alliances, closed ranks around the oppositional candidate Viktor Yushchenko. In fact, by far the most interesting and successful attempt to fuse modern music with Ukrainian folk motifs came from a performer, who for most of the election campaign supported the official candidate, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, although she switched to the Orange side later on. This was the pop superstar Ruslana (stage name of Ruslana Lyzhychko).¹⁴

Released in Ukrainian in 2003 and in English in 2004, Ruslana's song "Dyki tantsi," or "Wild Dances," was a hit in a number of European countries. With it, Ruslana won a landslide victory in the 2004 Eurovision pop contest and, although her home country could not vote for the song, Ukrainians bought 500,000 copies of the eponymous album. Since Ruslana's Eurovision triumph, literary scholars and musicologists have made some interesting

¹¹ <http://video.i.ua/user/478848/6218/51492/> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

¹² See Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues*, pp. 162-64 on TNMK's clever use of surzhyk's subversive and countercultural function.

¹³ See Bohdan Klid, "Rock, Pop and Politics in Ukraine's 2004 Presidential Campaign and Orange Revolution," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 23, no. 1 (March 2007): 118-37 and Adriana Helbig, "The Cyberpolitics of Music in Ukraine's 2004 Orange Re-volution," *Current Musicology* 82 (Fall 2006): 81-101.

¹⁴ According to Klid, "Rock, Pop, and Politics," p. 122, Ruslana supported Yanukovych until mid-November 2004 and even sang a Russian song with him on a campaign stop.

suggestions about her cultural strategies. Ruslana claimed to have been using the “authentic” (her term) folk tradition of the Hutsuls, the Ukrainian mountain people of the Carpathians, but this was really a rhetorical device that she employed to present her music as Ukrainian – and to glamorize the Ukrainian folk tradition within the idiom of modern show business. The use of traditional drums, and especially Hutsul alpine horns, or *trembity*, early in the performance of “Wild Dances” anchored it in the Ukrainian tradition, but what audiences perceived as Hutsul motifs in the music could in fact be references to a generic southeast European folk idiom. The dancers’ dresses (black leather and fur showing a lot of skin) likewise had little to do with the Hutsuls, but conveyed to a modern viewer the notions of primitive energy, noble savagery, and even sadomasochistic eroticism.¹⁵

Overall, Ruslana’s recipe for exoticizing and glamorizing the reinvented folk tradition worked extremely well with both foreign and domestic audiences. Her recognition in Europe may have also played a role in her success at home, where she was the first Ukrainophone singer in decades to enjoy success with the Russian-speaking mass listener. Yet it was a curious success because the residents of central and eastern Ukraine could not really identify with the Hutsul tradition of the extreme west; Ruslana’s mixing of Ukrainian and English must have sounded no less exotic to people who are more accustomed to the Russo-Ukrainian *surzhyk*. Except for one dancer’s Cossack-style shaved head with a scalp lock, “Wild Dances” had nothing to do either musically or visually with the history or folk tradition of east-central Ukraine, by far the largest and most populous part of the country.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian folk music was very much alive and well in east-central Ukraine. The songs performed by various professional and amateur groups were, of course, sanitized and nationalized versions edited by patriotic composers and transmitted back to the countryside by modern media. But along with the constructed Ukrainian national culture there was a living one, which was constantly evolving, mischievous, and averse to linguistic purity. For example, visitors to countryside discos in Poltava oblast in the late 1980s – the time and place where Andrii Danylko was coming of age – enthusiastically

¹⁵ See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXgaOTOCsU> (last accessed March 15, 2009). For a subtle analysis of Ruslana’s take on the Hutsul tradition, see Marko Pavlyshyn, “Envisioning Europe: Ruslana’s Rhetoric of Identity,” *Slavonic and East European Journal* 50, no. 3 (2006): 469–85 and David-Emil Wickström, “‘Drive-Ethno-Dance’ and ‘Hutsul Punk’: Ukrainian-Associated Popular Music and (Geo)Politics in a Post-Soviet Context,” *Yearbook of Traditional Music* 40 (2008): 61–88.

danced to a version of the Ukrainian folk song “Choboty z buhaia” (Bullskin Boots) complete with occasional Russian words, muffled obscenities, and generally irreverent content.¹⁶ Eminently danceable, this “unofficial” folk-pop hit of countryside dancing parties during the late Soviet period may have more to do with the origins of the Serdutchka phenomenon than the entire previous tradition of using folk elements in a musical idiom that was not itself based in folklore. In other words, Verka Serdutchka may have come straight from the Ukrainian village not just as a character but as a cultural happening as well.

Serdutchka the Ukrainian

Like most people moving from the Ukrainian-speaking countryside to Russian-speaking cities, Verka the character does not so much mix the two languages as use them situationally – something linguistic anthropologists would call “code-switching.”¹⁷ Ever since Verka the lowly train attendant became Verka the pop star, the proportion of surzhyk in her utterances diminished considerably. It is even less prominent in her songs. In fact, what Ukrainian and Western commentators often take for examples of surzhyk in Verka’s texts in most cases would not sound “right” to people who speak it. Surzhyk is, of course, not a random ungrammatical mixture of Ukrainian and Russian but a “fused lect,” with its inner logic of mixing and corrupting words.¹⁸ Passages that sound like “authentic” surzhyk are actually rare in Verka’s songs; much more common is occasional code-switching from the predominant Russian to Ukrainian or “surzhyk” aimed to establish the character’s ethnic identity or achieve a comic effect. Rarer still are songs in Ukrainian, although they are well worth analyzing for the cultural strategies the performer employs.

Serdutchka’s first hit album, “Kha-ra-sho!” (2003), was also the only one featuring two songs with predominantly Ukrainian lyrics. “A ia u hai khodyla”

¹⁶ There are many versions of this folk song, originally a wedding dance song, all of them equally robust and irreverent, usually with another word inserted in the text where an obscenity is an obvious rhyme. See, for example, <http://ketrin-in-ua.mylivepage.ru/wiki/496/2118> and a karaoke version at <http://karaoke.kerma-nn.ru/Singles/song9744.htm> (both last consulted March 15, 2009). In 2007 a new “ethno-disco” band, “Choboty z buhaia,” was created on the initiative of Oleh Skrypka, the soloist of VV. See http://pidkamin.ridne.net/choboty_z_bugaya (last accessed March 15, 2009).

¹⁷ Bilaniuk, *Contested Tongues*, p. 121.

¹⁸ For an excellent analysis of surzhyk, see Bilaniuk, *ibid.*

(I Went to the Forest) actually uses a children's verse by the Ukrainian literary giant Lesia Ukrainka (1871–1913), although for contemporary listeners to recognize the text they would have to be people who in Soviet times went to elementary schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction. Musical references are to children's musical evenings of the 1970s; this is a rare Serduchka song featuring a piano as the principal accompanying instrument. There are no Russian or surzhyk elements in the text. It is a simple story about a child who sees a sleeping hare and wants to touch it. The song also includes a refrain in English and German: "La-la-la-la, love me / La-la-la-la, feel me / La-la-la-la, kiss me / La-la-la-la, give me / auf Wiedersehen." If this text were more recognizable and held sacred status in Ukrainian culture, one could see this song as Serduchka's blasphemous attack on the Ukrainian literary classics, much in the way many patriotic intellectuals reacted in the late 1990s to Verka's rendition on the SV Show of Taras Shevchenko's famous poem "I Was Thirteen" as a street person's lament.¹⁹ Yet the musical idiom and the fact that it is a children's poem establish a different system of references. Instead of an affront to the Ukrainian classics, an allusion to Ukrainian-speaking childhood and the 1970s can be read into this song.

A second Ukrainian song from this album, "Liuta bdzhilka" (The Angry Bee) provides a rare example of Verka's code-switching from a predominantly Ukrainian text to surzhyk before returning to literary Ukrainian. After the Ukrainian first stanza, in which only the name of a Soviet holiday (May 1) is song in Russian and the word for buzzing or humming is a Russian word with a Ukrainian ending, the second stanza features typical surzhyk models, whereby the speaker uses Ukrainian-accented Russian terms for the concepts a Ukrainian speaker is likely to use with Russian-speaking officials: "familiia" (family name), "po otchestvu" (patronymic, here a hybrid of the Russian and Ukrainian words), and "v miru ia Danilka" (my real name is Danylko, "v miru" being a Russian ecclesiastical term used to indicate the surnames of monks and nuns, used here for comic effect). The only deviation from literary Ukrainian in the third stanza occurs in the first sentence, "Ia malenka bdzhilka / I zvaty mene Maia / Ia narodylas, khto ne pomne, / Piervago maia." If the beginning ("I am a little bee and my name is Maia. I was born") is perfectly Ukrainian, "khto ne pomne" ("for those who don't remember") features a Russian verb with a Ukrainian ending and the last two words, "Pervogo maia" ("on the first of May") are in Russian. Overall, this transition sounds very

¹⁹ See Hrytsenko, "Vierka Serdiuchka," p. 345.

natural, because this particular verb is indeed often used in such form by surzhyk speakers and because the names of Soviet holidays were also habitually used in their Russian form. Finally, the song ends with two separate refrains, one in Russian and another in Ukrainian.

Such songs were exceptional in Serduchka's repertoire, however, likely because the linguistic identity projected there did not fit with that of the pop music consumer in east-central Ukraine and Russia, where Danylko was making most of his money. "The Angry Bee" presented Ukrainian linguistic identity as the norm and surzhyk as a deviation from it, whereas Danylko's target audiences would see Russian as the norm and surzhyk as a comic deviation, if not a parody of Ukrainian identity as such. In his later albums, therefore, code-switching is rare, usually from the Russian base, and can be either to literary Ukrainian or to surzhyk (since the Russian-speaking listener is unlikely to distinguish between the two). Yet, no matter what the language, there is actually nothing in the texts to suggest the character's negative attitude to Ukrainian culture and identity.

A particularly controversial song, "Gulianka" (A Party) from the album "Chita-Drita" (2003/2004) can serve as a good illustration of the two points just mentioned. The music starts solemnly, as if it were an anthem, then the sound of broken glass follows, and the melody devolves into a fast dance tune based vaguely on folk rhythms. Amid party banter, Serduchka sings in Russian about the joys of partying, drinking, and singing. The refrain, however, features one line in Ukrainian: "Songs flow, wine flows / And the glasses clink in unison. / *Ukraine has not yet perished* / If we [can] party like that." "Shche ne vmerla Ukraina" (Ukraine Has Not Yet Perished) is both the title and the first line of the Ukrainian national anthem, so its very insertion into a Russian dance song may be considered sacrilegious, but does the text really project a negative image of Ukraine? A vibrant and joyful place, where people know how to party well, even if they do not always speak Ukrainian, are not exactly the associations that the Ukrainian national anthem normally evokes, but this is not ill-intentioned grotesque either. After all, in the last refrain the Ukrainian words change – Serduchka sings, "*You will live, Ukraine* / If we party like that."

Serduchka's music videos, likewise, may at first sight appear to project a derogatory attitude towards Ukrainian culture and identity, but a closer analysis dispels this impression. Thus, the video clip for the song "Hop-Hop" begins with traditionally-dressed women sitting around a table and singing, a capella, a song with a folkloric melody about unrequited love. Unexpectedly, though, this fragment ends with a muffled obscenity: "If they don't love us, so

good-looking and beautiful, if they don't love us, to . . . with them! [*to khai idut na . . .*].” The melody then changes abruptly to a fast dance tune, if still vaguely folkloric, this time carried by musical instruments. Serdushka (also dressed as a Ukrainian peasant woman) joins in with a humorous song almost entirely in Ukrainian, with only a few surzhyk inserts, calling on the women to party instead of lamenting their fate. The visual narrative features a beautiful young woman dodging kissing attempts by two males sitting around her and a drunken male villager kissing a roasted pig. Then entire party, all dressed in embroidered Ukrainian shirts, joins Serdushka in a fast group dance.²⁰ If there is a parody here, it is one of an ossified “folk culture,” purged and edited by folklorists, which is opposed by a popular culture in Ukrainian, which is very much alive and irreverent.

Another music video, although almost entirely in Russian with a couple of skillful surzhyk inserts, still manages to project a positive image of the Ukrainian countryside, as well as that of a national musical tradition. Taking its name from a popular folk dance, “Chita-drita,” the video begins with Verka (dressed as a pop star) arriving in her native village in a sparkling new car, an old Soviet Volga GAZ 21 model, thus suggesting that the visit takes place in the Soviet past – a generic reference here because this model was discontinued in 1970 and the rest of the clip’s imagery is from the 1980s rather than the 1960s. As Verka unpacks the gifts, she asks that the television be switched on for the kids, referring to the TV set as “Elektronik,” a name melding the 1980s Soviet television set brand (Elektron) and a popular children’s TV film from 1980 (*The Adventures of Elektronik*). The program on TV also suggests the 1980s, but late into that decade, because the host invites everybody to dance the Lambada (also known in English as Zouk-Lambada), a Latin American dance that became popular in Western Europe and the Soviet Union after the release in 1989 of the French pop group Kaoma’s video called “Lambada.”²¹ Thus, it is the generic late-Soviet past rather than any specific moment in time when the TV is switched on.

Verka, however, gets all worked up by the host’s suggestion and proclaims in Russian, “Losers (*lokhi*) dance the Lambada, but we dance the Chita-drita.” She then jumps into the television screen head first and teaches the host to dance the Chita-drita. The refrain is indeed based vaguely on the folk dance Chita-drita, and Verka dances against the background of a Ukrainian carpet

²⁰ See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpJ44NV6m-E> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

²¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zouk-Lambada> (last consulted March 15, 2009).

hanging on the wall. Other “Ukrainian” visual clues also provide interesting material for analysis. One male character is an archetypal folkloric “Ukrainian,” mustached and dressed in a full Cossack traditional costume complete with baggy red pants, as if he belongs to some Ukrainian dance group, but the other two middle-aged males apparently represent Ukrainian intellectuals of the late Soviet period – they are sporting traditional embroidered shirts under formal jackets and wearing thick-rimmed glasses suggestive of the 1970s. (However, Verka tells one of them that he looks like Chikatilo in those glasses – a reference to Andrei Chikatilo, the infamous Russian serial killer, a Ukrainian by origin and a schoolteacher by profession, whose arrest was big news in 1990).²² At first, the two “Ukrainian intellectuals” look bewildered, but towards the end they are obviously enjoying themselves, approving Verka’s performance.²³ It is tempting to interpret these two village intellectuals as Serdushka’s tongue-in-check answer to her Ukrainian critics.

The Eurovision scandal

Soon, however, Verka was to acquire new critics on the opposite side of the post-imperial cultural spectrum – among Russian patriots. In 2007 Serdushka was selected, amid significant controversy, as Ukraine’s representative at the Eurovision song contest. Most of the opposition came from Ukrainian patriotic quarters, where the character was seen as denigrating Ukrainians on multiple levels – their folk culture, their linguistic identity, and the national feminine ideal.²⁴ In April 2007, some nationalist groups organized protest rallies against Serdushka’s selection to represent Ukraine. Western mass media, which did not take the Eurovision nearly as seriously as Europe-leaning Ukrainian patriots, saw the nationalist opposition to a cross-dressing and language-mixing pop singer as curious, so this news was reported widely, including BBC News and *Time* magazine. Even the *Kuwait Times* quoted the

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrei_Chikatilo (last accessed March 15, 2009).

²³ See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPcD9GXef04> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

²⁴ See, for example, “Lviviany prosiat’ Yushchenka izoliuvaty Serdiuchku,” *OBOZ.ua*, March 13, 2007 (<http://obozrevatel.com/news/2007/3/15/160792.htm>), “Ivan Zaiets: Ukraina na Ievrobachenni povynna buty predstavlena naikrashchymy vykonavtsiamy, a Serdiuchka do nykh ne nalezhyt,” *ZIK*, Febr. 13, 2007 (<http://zik.com.ua/ua/print/2007/02/13/64023>) and “NRU: Vierka Serdiuchka – han’ba Poltavy,” *Korespondent.net Ukraina*, May 22, 2007 (<http://ua.korespondent.net/showbiz/293240>, all last accessed March 15, 2009).

head of the youth wing of the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, Vasylyl Popovych, as saying that “Verka Serduchka shows the post-imperial inferiority complex that some Ukrainians still suffer.”²⁵

Aside from Serduchka herself, however, there was little in her song entry that could give offence to patriotic Ukrainians devoted to traditional ideals. The music was generic pop; Serduchka and her backup dancers did not wear Ukrainian costumes or switch to surzhyk in order either to project or parody a Ukrainian identity.²⁶ Instead, Danylko performed in a futuristic silver costume with a metallic star on his head, probably suggestive of Verka’s star status. Rather, Russian nationalists immediately took exception to the song, and that was because of its lyrics. Entitled “Danzing Lasha Tumbai,” the song combined English, German, Russian, and Ukrainian phrases, but lacked a coherent story line. What mattered was the way the singer pronounced the English refrain, “I want to see lasha tumbai,” which on at least one occasion during the Eurovision performance sounded like, “I want to see Russia goodbye.” (Serduchka’s nonsensical claim that “lasha tumbai” was Mongolian for “whipped cream” was denied by the Mongolian Embassy in Moscow.) The song also featured some pro-Ukrainian statements in Ukrainian, which the character exclaims rather than sings: “Ukraine is cool, Ukraine is super” and “Dance, Maidan,” the last being a reference to Kyiv’s Independence Square, the main venue of the pro-Western Orange Revolution. To Russian nationalists, this sealed the image of Serduchka as a pro-Ukrainian Russophobe.

Russian disillusionment with Serduchka was even greater because so many patriotic Russians, who had trouble acknowledging Ukrainians as a distinct nation, used to enjoy her gigs as a parody of Ukrainian culture. They were now facing the painful discovery that Serduchka was really on the Ukrainian side, meaning that previously she had made them laugh at their own stereotypes rather than laughed with them at the Ukrainian culture as such. The jester’s removal of his mask caught them completely unprepared, hence their angry overreaction. Some Russian TV personalities issued calls to boycott Serduchka, which were picked up enthusiastically in the Russian blogosphere. By the

²⁵ See “Nationalist Controversy,” *Time*, May 10, 2007; Helen Fawkes, “Eurovision Act Angers Ukrainians,” BBC News, April 2, 2007 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pt/ft/-/2/hi/entertainment/6516927.stm>); “Ukrainian Drag Queen a Front-Runner at Eurovision,” *Kuwait Times*, May 13, 2007 (http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid+NTIzMTk2NzY1). All web sites last accessed March 15, 2009.

²⁶ See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkoU3lJymj4> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

summer of 2007, Serduchka's concerts in Russia and appearances on Russian TV decreased dramatically. Danylko's invitation to the popular "Novaia volna" song contest was cancelled, and his performance at the annual pop show "Slavianskii bazaar" was edited out of the televised version aired in Russia.²⁷

Painful as it was for Danylko's revenues, the Russian boycott forced the Ukrainian establishment to change its attitude to the artist. In a sense, the 2007 scandal "imposed" on Serduchka the identity of a political, if not cultural, Ukrainian. Verka did not become the favorite singer of President Yushchenko and nationalistic intellectuals, but at least she could no longer be dismissed as simply a pro-Russian parody of the Ukrainian national culture. Perhaps, she could even be useful as yet another Ukrainian "victim" of Russian imperial attitudes. In 2008, the Yushchenko administration awarded Danylko the coveted honorific title of "People's Artist of Ukraine."²⁸

Post-ethnic Serduchka

Following the Eurovision scandal, Danylko started exploring new political and cultural identities for himself and his character. He contemplated a run for the notoriously corrupt and splintered Ukrainian parliament as a candidate from his own party called "Against All" or, after the revelation that this name was already registered by another political group, "For Us." Some pollsters were giving his party two percent of the vote, but in the end Danylko did not run.²⁹ In 2008, a Ukrainian media ranking of Ukraine's 100 most influential people listed the character of Verka Serduchka in the 98th place, ahead of the former President Kuchma, who was number 100.³⁰ At the same time, late in 2008 Danylko (in the character of Verka) returned to the Ukrainian television to host Verka Serduchka's Show, a much tamer version of his SV Show

²⁷ See the transcript of the radio talk show on Russia's Svoboda Radio: "Boikot Verke Serdiuchke: Podelom li?" <http://www.svobodanews.ru/Transcript/2007/07/10/20070710120002013.html> (last accessed March 15, 2009) and Marta Dyczok, "Ukraine's Changing Communicative Space: Destination Europe or the Soviet Past?," in *Contemporary Ukraine on the Cultural Map of Europe*, ed. Larissa M. L. Zaleska Onyshkevych and Maria G. Rewakowicz (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2009), p. 382.

²⁸ *Fakty*, Aug. 21, 2008, p. 4; *Segodnia*, Aug. 21, 2008, p. 5.

²⁹ Andrei Okara, "Kak Andrei Danilko i Verka Serdiuchka ne stali deputatami Verkhovnoi Rady," APN, Aug. 28, 2007, <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article17676.htm> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

³⁰ *Gazeta po-kiivski*, Aug. 22, 2008, p. 8.

from the 1990s, which featured mostly reverent interviews with Russian pop and film stars, and very few elements of surzhyk or attempts at political humor. Verka was now dressed as an ethnically neutral pop star, often wearing her Eurovision headdress with a large shining star.

Serduchka's songs and music videos also changed after the Eurovision controversy. The image of a Ukrainian peasant woman disappeared along with Ukrainian musical references and the language games, which had positioned the character on the Ukrainian-Russian cultural divide. If Serduchka mixed any languages in her album "DoReMi DoReDo" (July 2008), they were more likely to be German and English than Ukrainian and Russian. Musically, Serduchka was no longer within the ethnically marked "world music" trend, but rather was undergoing a transition from generic pop to pop-punk. Danylko's producers now targeted audiences in France and Germany.³¹

Two songs from this album, however, may be viewed as a commentary on Verka's recent troubles in Russia and her new political identity. Both use text sparingly, though, each consisting of one or two sentences repeated over and over again. In the first case, it is "I am [the] Eurovision queen / I am [the] Eurovision queen" with the refrain "Russia tumbai." There is no doubt about the refrain's first word – in this song Serduchka is clearly singing "Russia" rather than "Lasha," which makes the use of the forcefully pronounced "tumbai" instead of "good-bye" even more powerful, almost a carnivalesque replacement of a swear word. In the second case, the entire song consists of a single phrase, "Mikhail Gorbachev / Thank you very much!" with an insert from the traditional Russian song "Kalinka" towards the end. Of course, Gorbachev remains extremely unpopular in Russia as the person who "destroyed" the mighty Soviet Union, but this is precisely the reason why people in the rest of the world remember him fondly. Post-Soviet countries other than Russia also trace their independence to the Soviet collapse, yet another reason to thank Gorbachev.

In other words, Serduchka reemerged after the Eurovision scandal as a post-ethnic cultural figure with a political agenda and commercial orientation towards Europe. Danylko did succeed in making his way back to Russian TV and the concert circuit, but his reputation there is forever tainted. Forced to position himself on one side of the Russian-Ukrainian political divide, Danylko has lost the opportunity to play on the cultural ambiguities that served as Verka's main attraction early on. He abandoned the Ukrainian image

³¹) *KP v Ukraine*, July 10, 2008, p. 20.

and folk motifs because Russian audiences no longer trusted him as a performer of enjoyable parodies, and his Ukrainian audiences (now including some members of the political and cultural establishment) could perceive these gigs as offensive. This is unfortunate, because Serduchka's "ethnic" image with all its built-in ambiguities would have been a healthy critical antidote to the cultural and political "certainties" of the late Yushchenko period in Ukraine and the Putin/Medvedev era in Russia.

One possible way of analyzing Verka Serduchka's fall from grace in Russia is to argue that since the Orange Revolution the two countries have drifted apart "psychologically," that the post-Soviet and Russian-speaking cultural community is disintegrating.³² In other words, it has become impossible for entertainers like Danylko to straddle the cultural border while remaining popular with both Russians and Ukrainians. Logically, however, this would have to result in Serduchka's popularity collapsing in Ukraine, not in Russia. It would be Ukrainian audiences, with their new-found national consciousness, that would reject a parody act targeting their nation. What happened instead was Serduchka's rejection in Russia as a renegade jester, who revealed his (or her) true views after playing for years to the audience's stereotypes. I am not suggesting that from the very beginning Danylko had an elaborate plan to undermine the Russian stereotype of Ukrainians (shared also by many Ukrainians), but, like many gifted comedy artists, he could be guided in the evolution of his character by audiences' reactions. National self-parody can develop from the notion of inferiority imposed by an imperial master to triumph over a stereotype, when the indigenes reclaim it in a spirit of irony.³³ Perhaps, this is exactly what was happening to Verka Serduchka until politics led to the erasure – hopefully, not a permanent one – of the character's ethnic dimension.

³² Ilya Khineiko, "The Little Russian: Verka Serduchka," *Current Politics in Ukraine*, May 22, 2007, <http://ukraineanalysis.wordpress.com/2007/05/22/the-little-russian-verka-serduchka/> (last accessed March 15, 2009).

³³ See David Goldie, "'Will Ye Stop Yer Tickling, Jock?': Modern and Postmodern Scottish Comedy," *Critical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2000); 7-18, here 11-13.