

Revisualizing *Anna Karenina*.¹

Within the ample corpus of visual adaptations of Lev Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (1875-77), the comic book *Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy* (artist Katia Metelitsa and producer Grigorii Bal'tser), published in 2000 by the World of the New Russians, is unique (Figure 1).² First and most obviously, its comic book format distinguishes it from its screen predecessors—despite some basic similarities between the two genres—reactivating the high-culture/low-culture tension that originally characterized nascent cinema's relation to venerable literature but that film's growing prestige gradually erased.³ Second, it is blatantly postmodernist, packed with allusions to modern cinema and television (e.g., cult films such as Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* [1994], Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996), James Cameron's *Titanic* [1997], the TV cartoon *The Simpsons*, and the Russian talk-show *Ia sama* [By myself]), to virtual reality (e.g., the scene of the race is depicted as a computer game), and to the lyrics of such musical idols as *Beatles*, *Rolling Stones*, *Kino*, and *Nirvana*. In this context, whatever traits the comic does share with film versions take on significantly different values. Third, its post-Soviet identity is likewise aggressively evident in its insistent representation of the nation's new capitalist reality: Western cars, chic interiors, designer clothes, credit cards, and cell phones. Less blatant but most provocative/subversive of all is the subtext of Metelitsa's transposition of Tolstoy's novel, sacrosanct in Russian and Soviet logocentric culture, to the previously banned 'frivolous' genre of comics—namely, a legitimization of the New Russians' identity vis-à-vis not only traditional Russian but also Soviet culture.

On the one hand, *Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy* elevates and legitimizes the only quasi-class to have emerged in post-Soviet Russia, and, on the other, it popularizes through radical, irreverent revision one of the cornerstones of what is traditionally perceived as 'true' Russian Culture. And in this demystification of a canonized text, the New Russians gain more visibility and stature.⁴ This "double function" and straddling of genres make for a potentially subversive originality. Not only does the comic book deploy the characters and imagery from the film *Pulp*

Fiction (e.g., the “foot massage” discussion reanimated in Anna’s dream [Figure 2] and the “dancing contest” scene enthusiastically reproduced in the volume’s popular-culture genres [Figure 3]), but it also reconceives the novel itself as a pulp fiction. At the same time, a particularly cinematic structure embraces the whole project. The author Metelitsa not only exercises various cinematic techniques, but also introduces herself as a scriptwriter (p. 2).

Like the *Anna Karenina* films before it, the comic is a graphic narrative consisting of a sequence of juxtaposed images and so to some degree seems a natural extension of the cinematic approach.⁵ Likewise, the experienced reader/viewer is accustomed to various visual liberties and experiments with Tolstoy’s text.⁶ Nevertheless, because comics have an irregular status as an art and because their circulation and reception in different cultures varies, a comic-book transformation of Tolstoy’s novel seems destined to evoke diverging reactions in Western Europe, America and Russia.⁷ Western Europe (as well as Japan) has a longer tradition of approaching comics as a respectable artistic genre. As Art Spiegelman, the author of the sensational comic book *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1986), wittily observes: “In France, a cartoonist is one step below a movie director. In America, [a cartoonist] has only slightly more status than a plumber” (quoted in Bongco 14). Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen echo this distinction in their analysis of Franco-Belgian and Anglo-American research trends in scholarship on comics, noting regretfully that the “two traditions hardly inspire each other, and a dialogue between them has been almost non-existent” (9).

The West European is likely to be the least perplexed reader of Metelitsa’s text not only because comics is a more reputable genre on the continent than in the States, but also because it recently enjoyed success in a similarly literary publication: *Gemma Boverly* by the English cartoonist Posy Simmonds (1999), the transparent title of which unequivocally evokes in the reader an association with Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), the French “counterpart” of *Anna Karenina*. In both Simmonds’ and Metelitsa’s adaptations, the original narratives morph into graphic novels, while the modern environment substitutes for the nineteenth-century setting.

Meanwhile, despite the still marginalized position of comics within the American artistic hierarchy, the tradition of rendering most literary classics into comic-book form could make an American reader receptive to this rendition of Tolstoy's masterpiece. Primarily targeting the action/adventure genres, the Gilberton *Classics Illustrated* started publishing well-known literary texts in the form of comics in 1941 (e.g., James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* [1826] or Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* [1844]).⁸ Moreover, lack of familiarity with the original, the predominance of visual images in contemporary cultural practices, and continual recycling of "obsolete" themes by all possible means could work to make the Russian experiment palatable to the American reader.

At the same time, and ironically, it is doubtful that the comic book *Anna Karenina* by *Leo Tolstoy* would appeal greatly to a general Russian audience, which most likely would evaluate the work according to a set of 'authentic' literary values and, consequently, in terms of decline and degradation. Such a negative, even hostile, reception would stem not only from the logocentrism of Russian/Soviet culture but also from the absence of comics as a medium in the Soviet cultural landscape. In the post-Soviet era, comics becomes one of the ideal training grounds for exercising wisecracking and ridiculing absurdities of life brought by the new reforms. José Alaniz, who has dubbed comics in Russia a "stalled medium," introduces the works of Vladimir Sakov's Tema studio (organized in 1988) that demonstrate loyalty to the literary tradition of "the little man and the state" (14-16). In his continuing series *Prikliucheniia Kapitana Donki* (The Adventures of Captain Donki), Sakov parodies Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (1308-21) to foreground injustices of contemporary life in Russia. The comic book features policeman Donki's "picaresque adventures in a modern-day Heaven and Hell of decidedly Slavic cast" (15).

The Soviet state condemned comics as a harmful semiliterate genre, which, besides retarding its ambitions for total national literacy, testified to unworthy practices in an alien bourgeois culture. Perceiving pictorial texts as less controllable than verbal ones because of the

illusory nature of images, the authorities censored so rigorously as to regulate even the number of illustrations allowed per page!⁹ In his article, Alaniz cites state edicts of the 1930s that limited illustrations to 50 percent for very young children and to 10 percent for older children capable of abstract thinking (8). And predictably, the literature for adults excluded all visual “assistance.”¹⁰ The overall ban on visual enhancement disappeared only with the collapse of the Soviet system, with exceptions like the occasional comic-book images to be found in the children’s periodicals *Murzilka* and *Veselye kartinki* (Joyful pictures) or in propaganda posters incapable of reconciling Russian readers to comics as a legitimate vehicle of adaptation, comparable, for example, to the film.

Unabashed by such dismissiveness in the past, the artist Metelitsa assigns her work to the genre of *komiksy*; but perhaps the term *graphic novel* is as fitting for her work and more likely to win over her native audience. The graphic novel, a longer narrative than the comic book, appeared at the end of the 1970s (after Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* was published in 1978), primarily as a marketing device intended to reach a wider public “by associating them [adult comics] with novels, and disassociating them from comics” (Sabin, *Comics* 165). The new term connoted a qualitative change—comics “dressed up” as appropriate intellectual reading for adults—that materialized in both creators’ and readers’ enthusiasm for more narrative and in a greater visual sophistication in the product.

Whereas this shift confers greater respectability on the graphic novel, not all art scholars recognize a genuine difference. For example, in *The Language of Comics*, Mario Saraceni states: “In fact, the distinction between ‘comic books’ and ‘graphic novels’ is nothing more than a matter of labels, and has barely anything to do with content or with any other feature” (4). By contrast, Roger Sabin, in *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, suggests that the graphic novel is a weightier achievement: “Thus, in the creative sense, we can say that the graphic novel is to the comic what the prose novel is to the short story” (236). And Eisner elevates the sub-genre even more after acknowledging its embryonic state: “. . . [The graphic novel] could provide a

dimension of communication that contributes—hopefully on a level never before attained—to the body of literature that concerns itself with the examination of human experience” (142).

Given the particular history of bans on comic in the Soviet Union, Metelitsa’s ironic perspective renews the original connotations of that term as a rubric for the first comic-strip “funnies.”

Meanwhile, in stressing an association with the literary source, the term “graphic novel” likewise seems apt for Metelitsa’s approach, which retains the novel’s adult focus on adultery—and expends considerable artistry and sophistication in so doing.

What might further earn the label of “graphic novel” for *Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy* is its exclusive edition, which, unlike comics, targets a select audience. The high-quality print and glossy paper, the hard cover of the book, and limited distribution hardly characterize it as “disposable entertainment,” designed to cater to the general public. Indeed, its ironic sophistication, various allusions and references, and high price make the slim volume accessible only to New Russians, uncharacteristically well-to-do Russian intellectuals, and Western readers intimate with Russian culture and reality. Located at the cutting edge of experimentation, the comic book strives for *épatage* within its rather conservative technical execution and its restrained visual “lexicon” (except for its distinctly bright colors and collage technique).

Similar to earlier cinematic adaptations (e.g., Goulding’s *Love* and Brown’s *Anna Karenina*), the graphic novel focuses exclusively on the story of Anna’s adultery, thus stripping the literary text of everything ‘irrelevant’ to the Karenin-Anna-Vronsky love triangle. However, the reasons behind the content’s substantial paring down to the Anna-Vronsky line in the films and the comic book diverge. Whereas the former – by actively erasing its literary predecessor’s individuality – reasserts the myth of adultery that bolsters the nineteenth-century novel of adultery, the latter disintegrates it.¹¹

The myth of the unfaithful wife comprises two archetypes: the lustful wife (with the emphasis placed on female sexuality) and the amorous spouse (with the emphasis on the emotional aspect of the relationship). Anna is both. Curiously, a comparison of the first and final

version of Tolstoy's novel shows the replacement of an unattractively concupiscent Anna by the tragic, loving Anna. Both archetypes may be traced to ancient myths about Venus, whose amorous activities parallel those of Jupiter. Within the tradition of carnivalesque folk laughter and the picaresque novel, the adventures of the lustful wife are traditionally depicted in comic tones and rarely incur punishment: for example, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1470), Nikolai Gogol's *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki* (Evenings on a Farm Near, 1831-32), and Aleksandr Afanas'ev's *Zavetnye skazki* (Indecent Tales, 1872). Nineteenth-century literary texts treat female adultery from a perspective that is primarily moral (religious) and tragic (comparable with the canon of ancient tragedy), usually portraying retribution for the committed crime as inevitable.¹²

Most novelistic examinations of adultery contrast their female protagonists with their parodic or reduced 'doubles,' who conform to the prototype of the libertine. The libertine's paradigm rarely intersects with that of the ostracized 'fallen' wife.¹³ With rare exceptions, libertines, including the female pupils of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, so generously represented in the Tolstoyan *beau monde*, remain unpunished, as if by virtue of their light-hearted amorality.¹⁴ Unlike Anna, Stiva Oblonsky, Betsy Tverskaya, and Vronsky suffer no retribution.¹⁵ Authors and the worlds they create mete out punishment to those adulteresses with a conscience, however intermittently awakened.

Parodic revision of Tolstoy's novel inevitably tends to disregard the generic conventions of the adultery novel that dictate an operatic conclusion: the agonizing death of the adulteress. Metelitsa's adaptation retains the key motifs and episodes of the myth of adultery with a twist appropriate for a New Russian epoch: an unexciting marriage to an older man (emphasized through metonymic use of invariable attributes: the old-fashioned hat, glasses, cell phone, greenish skin, and cracking sound of fingers); the first meeting of the future lovers (however, Anna's legs attract Vronsky's primary attention); initiation into the affair through dance (unavoidably, tango displaces waltz); the symbolism of horseback riding and train (though this

train comes alive in Anna's imagination, while the horses become inanimate in virtual reality); adulterous letters (deployed as a fuel that keeps the engine of the family scandal running); hallucinations and symbolic portents (chiefly generated by Anna's excessive use of morphine and cocaine); the boredom and banality of adultery; the heroine's confused mental state before her 'unnatural' death, and so forth. Metelitsa's triple ending (as described by Tolstoy's narrator in the novel, as imagined by Anna in her delirium, and as envisioned by Vronsky in his dream), played out in the last fifteen pages, not only confuses the reader, but also registers the inappropriateness of the original tragic outcome and the perplexity it may evoke in the modern reader. Ultimately, the original story fails to sustain its logic when provocatively put on the edge of postmodernist irony.

The 87-page narrative consists of predominantly rectangular panels with straight-edged borders printed on both sides of a white page.¹⁶ Although the size of the panels varies within almost every page, the panel border remains inviolate: the characters stay inside the frame. This lack of open (non-frame) panels—a sign of the artist's controlling power—equally keeps the characters from unleashed action, and the readers from unnecessary imaginative steps. Simultaneously, employing a variety of pictorial techniques stimulates the viewer's mobility. The pages that reflect a collage-poster technique, and thereby disrupt the successive arrangement of the panels, do not justify the audience's expectations and are examples of challenges to the reader (Figure 4, 5). The images superimposed on the main picture compel the readers, while turning the pages, on the one hand, to react quickly to their unexpected combinations (e.g., the sign located in the Russian countryside that points to Italy), and, on the other, to slow down in order to activate their associative memory. By subliminally forcing the speed of the viewer's mental activity through displaying the moving images of car and train, the pages (or the artist) play a trick on the viewers and challenge them as their opponents in a game of charades. The abrupt change of spatial points of view (comparable to point-of-view shots in cinema) that the author favors not only decentralizes the stable position of the readers with the book in their

hands, but also transforms such readers/viewers into a rotating camera, not unlike the result of Anna's dissolving morphine drops (Figure 6).¹⁷ The viewer is forcibly transferred onto the page. The non-successive display of the differently sized panels subverts the habit of viewing the page from left to right, top to bottom, and prevents a syntagmatic reading of the page.

Although the preponderance of close-ups in Metelitsa's adaptation attests to the artist's reliance on a reader with enough visual literacy to deduce or remember the invisible "off-screen" material, the book differs from most modern comics by using gutters that do not challenge the readers' imaginations, and that rarely require them to reconstruct the story through off-panel contents.¹⁸ Instead, visual omissions, temporal ellipses, and informational gaps usually occur between the pages. Occasionally and not surprisingly, the page-to-page transitions presuppose the readers' familiarity with Tolstoy's original plot. For example, the page depicting a shameful episode at the opera (in the Bol'shoi Theater!) immediately follows the page displaying a collage of the lovers' trip to Italy.¹⁹ The succeeding page shows Dolly's visit to Vronsky's estate—but with a significant change in that the women's meeting begins with a game of tennis.²⁰

Although visual images dominate this World-of-the-New-Russians comic book, Metelitsa also deploys the traditional constituents of comic-art speech representation: dialog and thought balloons, as well as captions that transcribe the narrator's voice (ostensibly Tolstoy's). However, by using the same lettering to render the characters' and narrator's speech, she equalizes various discourses and blurs the different personalities expressed through the words, and thereby ultimately relegates verbal discourse to the background of the graphic novel, transforming the *words* into superfluous "illustration." The discrepancies between the meaning of the words and the images, the gradual disappearance of the verbal discourse from the panels, and an abundance of onomatopoeia expressively handwritten in various colors all emphasize the supremacy of the visual that may be read without verbal direction-support: in this way Metelitsa simultaneously discredits the traditional authority embodied in Tolstoy's narrative voice and the Soviet authority of the prohibition against visual enhancement. When words and pictures

actually harmonize, their collaboration implies ironic juxtaposition (e.g., the one-panel page showing Anna's labor presided over by an insidious doctor reminiscent of Sigmund Freud, who relieves her sufferings with morphine injections [p. 51]).

The deliberate misuse of quotes subtly supports this visual-cum-verbal hooliganism. For instance, the authors misattribute the epigraph "Mne otmshchen'e i az vozdam" (Vengeance is mine. I will repay) to Aleksandr Pushkin, whose significance for Russian culture arguably exceeds Tolstoy's. For the Soviet people, Pushkin's poems known by heart fulfilled the function of the Biblical text. Therefore, a Biblical verse may legitimately be ascribed to Pushkin within the "World of the New Russians," where idolatry of such cultural icons makes them interchangeable. The ostensibly 'innocent' attempt to provide the customer, possibly a foreigner, with an English translation contributes to the playful mood of the comic book. The presence of the translation and simultaneously its inaccuracy, omission (p. 38, 39), or intentional distortion (p. 6) allow one to conclude that either adequate translation was not the authors' priority, or the English language was used exclusively as an additional 'flirtatious' stroke. Moreover, several commentaries inscribed in the graphic novel target the reader familiar with both languages. For example, the panel depicting the car radio displays a line from a famous *Rolling Stones*' song, "I can't get no satisfaction!" with a Russian version of it: "Kak by tebe povezlo, moei neveste!" (How lucky you would be, my bride!) The Russian line does not translate, but comments on, the consequences of perpetual male dissatisfaction, opening it up to folk laughter.

Within her emphasis on visual reading, Metelitsa avoids excessive detailing of the characters' faces, instead relying on the straight and curved lines of eyebrows, mouth, and eyes for expressions and inviting the reader to interpret these lines' symbolic meaning through their continual repetition. The external resemblance of the comic book characters to renowned actors likewise equates the process of seeing with recognizing/reading faces. In order to avoid confusion (or conversely), the graphic novel opens with a "reference list of personages," which enables us to correlate the visual image with Tolstoy's characters (pp. 4-5).²¹

The bifocal title *Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy* highlights the parodic nature of the adaptation. By incorporating the author's name into the adaptation's title, Metelitsa and Bal'tser underscore their intention to re-examine the mythological reputation of the text and its creator rather than the text itself. Whereas the 1990s' trend of including the author's name in the titles of cinematic adaptations carried with it the assumption of their being sanctioned "as authoritative, faithful to the author because of their very presence within it" (Cartmell 26), Metelitsa openly declares her confrontation with the myth and its mediator, Lev Tolstoy.²² The use of different languages within the same title underlines the rift between the heroine's afterlife and her creator's intentions. As though an *enfant terrible*, Anna escapes the novel from which she emanates, reappears on the pages of the comic book, and finds herself involved in a new myth-generating text.²³

Simultaneously, the parodic essence of comics (if one accepts this thesis) may also result in offering an existing text anew to an ever-growing global cultural discourse.²⁴ For example, the 2000 volume of *Drawn and Quarterly* introduces the witty comic *Crime and Punishment!* by R. Sikoryak. Inspired by Fedor Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and particularly by its protagonist's (Rodion Raskolnikov's) internal torments, the cartoonist cleverly revisualizes the Russian plot by means of the American classic *Batman* comics. Drawn in the authentic 1940s' comic technique, the Superhero's costume so eloquently exteriorizes Raskolnikov's moral dilemma that one has no cause to doubt the unnaturalness of this artistic amalgam. Although the presence of Dostoevsky's portrait in the upper right corner of the cover page might suggest his dominant role in the work, Sikoryak treats the stories of Batman and Raskolnikov so even-handedly that he blurs the line between the parodizing and parodied narrative. Whereas such a perfect conjunction of two mythical texts (literary and comic) proves that comics is an integral language, the example of *Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy* supports a contradictory thesis—that comics represents a partnership of separate constituents.²⁵

In disregarding the inviolability of the nineteenth-century novel authored by such a universally-acknowledged literary colossus as Lev Tolstoy (rigorously guarded by Soviet official discourse and Russia's collective consciousness) and in eliminating the restrictions traditionally observed during the adaptation of such classics, Metelitsa and Bal'tser expose the verbal 'highbrow' original to modern popular culture's influence. As a result, the concluding panel of the comic book—a mouse's body cut in half on the track—reanimates a Soviet-era anecdote, and thus satirizes the novelistic tragic dénouement in a printed format: graphic novel (Figure 7). At the same time, the mechanisms of myth production that operate within mass culture revive the imaginary Anna as a myth and juxtapose her figure with the non-imaginary vocalists Viktor Tsoi (*Kino*) and Kurt Cobain (*Nirvana*) (Figure 8). The shared fate of a premature end unites and equates populism's favorite rebels. The comic book emphasizes Anna's independent existence in the collective consciousness and her transformation into a cult figure, a martyr unjustly murdered by her creator. The visuals underscore what some readers and critics even before the New Russians era have regarded as Tolstoy's punishing function in Anna's suicide: she throws herself under the train named "Lev Tolstoy" (p. 75), and graffiti brand him a "bloody killer" (Figure 8).

A spirit of playfulness pervades the graphic novel *Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy*. The book employs a wide range of means to assist readers in switching to an unusual reality, and transforming them into players whose activity bridges the gaps of the postmodernist adaptation. By depicting the race scene as a computer game, the graphic novel *Anna Karenina* visualizes and brings to the fore, first, the connection between the old- and new-era games, and second, the one between comics and a game (Figure 9).²⁶ One of the main markers signalling the work as game is the presence in the graphic novel of easily identifiable personages, mostly actors hidden behind their cinematic doubles (e.g., the brief appearance of Viacheslav Tikhonov from Tat'iana Lioznova's *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* [Seventeen Moments of Spring, 1973] and Bruce Willis in Michael Bay's *Armageddon* [1998]). The degree of anticipated familiarity varies:

Count Vronsky acquires the appearance of John Travolta as Vincent Vega; Anna, to an extent, recalls Sophie Marceau, who portrayed the heroine in Bernard Rose's 1997 film version of *Anna Karenina*; Karenin, in his sinister, impenetrable glasses, is reminiscent of party bureaucrats.²⁷ Interestingly, the features of these visualized characters are capable of mutation (e.g., Vronsky is reincarnated as Tarzan on the Italian seashore [p. 58], and as Captain Pronin at the train station leaving for the Serbian war [p. 81]), yet they continually remain recognizable.²⁸ The graphic novel does not simply reproduce the famous actors (masks) but actually replays their popular characters while adjusting their behaviors to Tolstoy's characterizations. For example, the ball scene evokes Vincent's passion for dance (p.19) that is central to John Badham's film, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), which, in its turn, relies on John Travolta's professional skills as a dancer.

The game-oriented strategies of the new adaptation justify linking the graphic novel to *lubochnaia* literature.²⁹ In his article "Khudozhestvennaia priroda russkikh narodnykh kartinok" (The Artistic Nature of Russian Folk Pictures), Iurii Lotman highlights the similarity between the theatrical audience and *lubok's* "spectators." These spectators perceive the pages as though it were a theatrical act, and imitate the theatrical audience in constructing a united space with the actors on the stage. The non-standard ways of arranging the pictures within the page (frequently not in a linear sequence of simultaneity) and the juxtaposition of textual and pictorial material invite certain reactions on the part of the readers: they are called on to act rather than simply view. Unlike book illustrations, the *lubok's* visuals presuppose an active audience's participation in the 'spectacle.' In a manner comparable to Socialist Realism as opposed to Sots-art, they intend to switch the readers from the passive mode of observing to the active mode of game-playing.

This feature forms the basis of perception in comic books, and partly explains the special appeal of the genre to various audiences. It may also explain the prohibition of the genre in the Soviet era, when official discourse privileged distanced observation of a spectacle rather than direct involvement in it.³⁰ The former stance was especially imposed on adult audiences, since

the state sought to eliminate all *balaganshchina* as a sign of ignorance and capitalism. By contrast, the World of the New Russians does not hesitate to enter the “public square,” precisely because it permits carnivalesque upside-downs, and only there may rogues tell the truth through jokes.

For its rogue’s costume, the World of the New Russians chooses the traditional forms of folk art, which allow for a playful combination of Old Russian traditions and a new social group of *nouveaux riches*. The publisher’s choice of the comic book as the adaptation-medium is hardly accidental. First, though non-existent as a genre in the Soviet era, this visual-cum-verbal genre may trace its antecedents to such early cultural phenomena as the Russian *lubok*, and thus claim national cultural legitimacy. Moreover, like the Gzhel’ and Palekh items in the World of the New Russians store on the Arbat, a “tongue-in-cheek emporium” (Goscilo 8), the choice of a revered nineteenth-century literary text as the “model” for a contemporary revision authenticates the New Russian enterprise of inscribing its identity in the “museum” of Russian culture. Second, precisely because for a long time they have been perceived as the quintessence of illiteracy, or literary bad taste, comics are uniquely suited for the purpose of appropriating one of the ‘sacred objects’ enshrined within the Russian cultural legacy. Not incidentally, a comic version of Pushkin’s *Pikovaia dama* (The Queen of Spades, 1833) became the next publication on Bal’tser’s agenda.

The invitation to laugh at a new class that appeared in a previously supposedly classless society is doubly deceptive. First of all, it is laughter at oneself.³¹ ‘Oneself’ may refer to the whole nation, which channels its inability to reconcile itself to today’s financial and ‘spiritual’ discrepancies into an emotional investment in the New Russian identity—an investment that perversely consoles the masses as much as did their earlier investment in Russia’s sacred literary heritage. It may also refer to the expanding group of prosperous politicians, business(women), and artists, to which the author and publisher of the graphic novel belong—both of them evidently not only aware of the protective qualities of self-irony, but also committed to their

'missionary' role in reshaping Russian culture by opening it up for new Western trends and incorporation into the stream of global culture. When describing Bal'tser's personality, Helena Goscilo observes that his "self-reflexive humor and far-roaming imagination, so typical of postmodernism, in no way impinge on his earnest dedication to immortalizing New Russians' contribution to a momentous period in the nation's history" (9).

At the risk of over-theorizing one of the projects of the World of the New Russians, I argue that this product was designed and executed as a museum piece intended for a specific place within a new epoch adapting some of the nation's most cherished traditions. Accordingly, from the very outset it disqualifies itself from the possibility of becoming a "best-seller," though selling and buying are, arguably, the chief occupations of the New Russians. Ultimately, then, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy goes against the grain of most adaptations, which are undertaken with the hope of reaching "best-seller" status and the financial rewards that such a status normally promises.



Notes

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1. The first version of this paper was presented at the 2003 AATSEEL conference in San Diego.

2. Tolstoy's novel remains a cinematographic favorite: it has been screened almost thirty times.

The first Pathé version appeared in 1911 and has not survived. The release of a new and long-awaited adaptation (for Russian television) by Sergei Solov'ev is slated for the end of 2004.

Inbetween, the numerous other versions included: two films starring Greta Garbo, the silent Edmund Goulding's *Love* (1927) and Clarence Brown's *Anna Karenina* (1935); two versions starring British actresses, the 1947 version with Vivien Leigh and the television production from 1985 with Jacqueline Bisset; Russian adaptations, including Vladimir Gardin's film of 1914, the filmed performance of the Malyi Theatre with Alla Tarasova as Anna in 1953, Aleksander Zarkhi's *Anna Karenina* (1967) with Tat'iana Samoilova, the 1975 film-ballet with Maiia Plisetskaia; Bernard Rose's recent film *Anna Karenina* (1997), the product of international cooperation, and others.

World of New Russians Publishers is part of a bigger enterprise that professes the policy of creating "freakish, silly, and funny souvenirs," the hybrids that inscribe the New Russians into the works of traditional art.

3. Virginia Woolf described silent film and literature as, respectively, predator and prey (269-70). Covertly, these terms remain in some discourses that analyze the "pulping" function of the popular culture genres.

4. The contributors to the 2003 January issue of *The Russian Review* focus on different facets of the New Russians phenomenon and of the shifts in their public perception and self-representation.

5. Their independent development notwithstanding. The first recurring American continuous comic character “Yellow Kid” appeared in 1896. The return of the speech balloon inside the frame – the tradition that was interrupted in the seventeenth century – constitutes an essential characteristic of this comic strip. Winsor McCay, the author of a renowned strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (first published in 1905), created the basis for the formal language of the modern comics. The relevance of his technical innovations for the early comics may be equated with D.W.Griffith’s contribution to the early cinema.

At the same time, films and comics are related, especially if one agrees with Scott McCloud that “before it’s projected, film is very-very-very-very slow comic” (8).

6. For example, Rose’s *Anna Karenina* attempts to restructure the entire visual “hypotext” (Gérard Genette) of *Anna Karenina*. Levin’s philosophical quests occupy a privileged position in the cinematic plot. He transforms into the narrator (the audience hears his over-voice reading from Tolstoy’s diary in the film’s opening scene) and even Tolstoy himself by the end of film. The narration ends in Iasnaia Poliana, and Levin-Tolstoy signs the last page of the novel, projected onto the screen, as “Lev Tolstoy.” Thus, the structure of the film is a series of concentric circles (embracing the lives of the individual characters), the largest being Tolstoy’s. His story encompasses and merges with that of Levin, who tells Anna’s story, which is the innermost of the three circles.

7. In his breakthrough book *Understanding Comics*, McCloud suggested to use “comics” with a single verb (9).

8. In 1947, “in a search for a classier logo,” Gilberton displaced the initial title of the series *Classic Comics* (*Sabin Comics* 79).

9. And in fact the Soviets were not the only ones to censor comics. One can compare the concern of the censors about the potential of comics to lead youth astray to the biggest crisis in the comics’ development in America (and to a lesser extent in Great Britain) following the release of Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). The author denounced the

imagery of horror and violence found in comics as a leading cause of increased juvenile delinquency.

10. Will Eisner's statement that "the reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit" (8) disagrees with a still viable perception of the pictorial images being crutches for a handicapped reader bereft of imagination.

11. Rigorous precision would require that the genre be defined as the novel of female adultery, given the narratives' preoccupation with specifically female characters' transgression against the marital bond. The dearth of fiction tackling male adultery as its central issue, however, renders such a distinction unnecessary.

12. Theodor Fontane's *L'Adultera* (1882) offers one of the few exceptions. Although a reduced punishment overtakes the novel's protagonist Melanie (in the form of the older daughter's hatred), she ultimately finds happiness in a fulfilling second marriage.

13. Flaubert has his tragic Emma traverse the stage of libertinism, when she undergoes a transformation triggered by Rodolphe's cruelty and flight. After her long sickness she is reborn as a libertine, ready in her next liaison to mirror her teacher's techniques.

14. For example, Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). On the literary tradition of *libertinage* and its relevance to Tolstoy's novel, see Helena Goscilo "Tolstoy, Laclos, and the Libertine."

15. Tolstoy briefly portrays a suffering Vronsky toward the novel's end, but the terms of that suffering are highly ambiguous.

16. An exception is the page that displays a sequence of Anna's distorted (and therefore oval-shaped) visions of Vronskii and the ephemeral lovers generated by her jealousy (p. 67).

17. In his article "The Superhero with a Thousand Faces: Visual Narratives on Film and Paper," Luca Somigli scrutinizes the "imaginative takes" of the comic book based on Coppola's *Dracula*, which were inspired by its cinematic source (281-83).

18. Gutters are the blank spaces between the panels.

19. None of the previous *Anna Karenina* adaptations neglected to include the episode of Anna's visit to Serezha on his birthday. Only the artist's infatuation with the Anna-Vronsky love story and her reluctance to interrupt its dramatic rhythm may explain such an unprecedented omission.
20. Metelitsa's decision to change the setting of this episode may be influenced by other products from Bal'tser: laquer boxes showing various scenes from the life of *nouveaux riches*. In his article, Harley Balzer parallels the shift in the public perception of the New Russians to the evolution of their images purveyed by the World of the New Russians, and illustrates his argument with several images. One of the boxes depicts New Russians playing tennis (33).
21. Not unnecessary, the offered assistance helps the reader to remember that a blue bunny (!) substitutes for Anna's son, and a pink one for Anna's daughter.
22. Examples of 1990s adaptations include *Bram Stoker's Dracula* by Francis Ford Coppola (1992), *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* by Kenneth Branagh (1994), and *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* by Baz Luhrmann (1996).
- In his article "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest," André Bazin stresses that novels are mythmakers (23).
23. Bazin describes the similar journeys of the famous characters: "[...] [a] character acquires a greater autonomy, which might in certain cases lead as far as quasi-transcendence of the work" (23). Compare Metelitsa's treatment to Woody Allen's short story "The Kugelmass Episode" (1975), which eliminates the boundary between fiction and life. Emma Bovary satisfies the sexual desires of today's Professor of English, who, thanks to a magician, enters the pages of the French novel (cleverly, before Rodolphe's appearance). The heroine's prolonged stay in New York turned out to be a less pleasurable experience for the protagonist.
24. In his article "Weird Signs. Comics as Means of Parody," Ole Frahm suggests reading comics as a parody on the referentiality of signs. He writes: "The parody of comics, therefore, is to be found in the constellation of, on the one hand, the stabilising of a common object of

reference of the signs and, on the other hand, its destabilising character because of the material heterogeneousness of the signs” (Magnussen 189).

25. McCloud’s antinomy discussed by Robin Varnum and Christina Gibbons.

26. The ninth part of the graphic narrative is devoted exclusively to this episode, and this fact transforms it into the climactic moment of the comic book.

27. In its interpretation of Karenin, the graphic novel follows Zarkhi’s cinematic version, which reads him as an automaton, deprived of human feelings.

28. Captain Pronin is a descendant of Major Pronin, the protagonist of the Thaw-era animation film *Spy Passions*.

29. In her book *Fol’klor. Lubok. Ekran*, Neia Zorkaia discusses at length the interconnection between *lubok* and modern visual culture.

30. Alaniz stresses that *samizdat* “remained the only viable option for a surprisingly high number of these practitioners of a quasi-banned form” (8). The phenomenon of the Russian underground comics of the 1960s may be compared to the American Underground “comix,” which appeared in response to the restraints of the Comics Code of 1954. On the history of the Comics Code in the US, see Amy Kiste Nyberg’s book *Seal of Approval* (1998).

31. The tears shed on the pages do not contradict this laughter, since their over-abundance turns the tragedy back on itself and allows it to perish through its own devices.

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