

Excerpt from: *The Representation of Russian Ideology in Season 3 of Netflix's Stranger Things*

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Discussion

Language Stereotypes

To begin I want to address the use of language in the data that was collected. Every single scene with Alexei included language stereotypes due to the fact that Alexei's character does not know English. Therefore, every scene with Alexei required the use of spoken Russian. Additionally, peripheral characters such as Grigori who do speak English, do so with a very thick Russian accent. The presence of spoken Russian, as Hall, van Dijk and many others have established, functions as a means to separate Russian characters from non-Russian characters. When Hopper and Joyce first encounter Alexei and his countryman they hear spoken Russian before they even see who is talking. By doing this, the filmmaker was able to establish that Hopper and Joyce are separate from Alexei. Next, throughout the three episodes, when Alexei repeatedly uses Russian words that sound the same in English. However, Hopper ignores or does not understand Alexei, even with he uses American words because Alexei is not allowed to communicate with Americans in English due to him being the *other*. Additionally, when Hopper introduces Joyce and Alexei to Murray, Joyce makes a big deal about how it's not possible for Murray to be the only Russian-speaker near to Hawkins. There are a few things of note within that claim. One, Murray is the closest Russian-speaker that they know of, but not necessarily the only one that exists. This implies that even if there are other Russian speakers, they are so far outside the community that Joyce and Hopper that Murray, who is also an American, albeit an

outcast, is the closest one they've got. I think it is worthy of note that Joyce is a general store clerk and Hopper is a police sheriff, both of whom are in professions that interact with a significant swathe of the population of Hawkins, but they still don't know any Russian speakers. This can also imply that there are no Russians in America.

Murray is othered for speaking Russian. He was already introduced in season two as being a recluse conspiracy nut and an eccentric. So, the eccentric is the only person near Hawkins, Indiana who speaks Russian (and can rather conveniently be included in a top-secret investigation. In order for Murray to be allowed to know or speak Russian he must be outside of the normal American community. However, because Murray is also not actually Russian, he functions as a conduit between the two ideologies.

The final note on the use of the Russian language is the devicive way in which spoken Russian is fed to the audience. If one were to watch the program without subtitles then all of the spoken Russian would be lost on non-Russian-speakers. However, the Russian in the show was accurate and articulate (not something that can be said about other programs), which allows for Russian speakers to understand the spoken Russian. This others audience members from each other because within an audience group, Russian speakers are getting more information than non-Russian-speakers. Furthermore, if one were to turn subtitles off, one would learn that only some of the Russian dialogue was translated for the benefit of the audience. Therefore, even with subtitles on to get the English translation of the Russian dialogue, not all of the dialogue can be understood. This communicates to me that the othering of audience members among themselves is intentional.

Trait Stereotypes

There are three Russian characters and one quasi-Russian character to look at for this analysis. The first Russian character is the Russian engineer or scientist that is with Alexei when they are found by Hopper and Joyce. We do not know his name; his screen time is limited to trying to explain to Hopper that he does not speak English. He gets handcuffed and gagged and is abandoned by Hopper, Joyce, and Alexei. We do not see him again. In the brief window of time that he is on camera he tries to explain to Hopper that he does not know Russian and the exchange escalates to raised voices. The raised voices could be attributed to the stereotype of Russian being hostile and violent but feels like a stretch.

Grigori is the Russian assassin who targets Hopper and Joyce as they follow their investigation into Starcourt Mall. Grigori is unabashedly modeled after The Terminator, famously played by Arnold Schwarzenegger and known for his thick Austrian accent. Grigori is tall, Hopper refers to him as a seven-foot-tall freak, and he is also menacing. Every scene with Grigori involves heavy violence where he hits, shoots, and beats several characters. Despite the heavy violence, Grigori always has a placid look on his face and seems unaffected by what he is doing. The violence, stoicism, anger, and militarized mannerisms are all shameless Russian stereotypes. I will go so far as to say that Grigori is nothing more than a two-dimensional Russian stereotype personified. Grigori also fulfills the Russian ideology within the series. For instance, when Grigori kills Alexei, he calls Alexei a traitor. Alexei betrays the primary tenants of what Americans think of Russian ideology; anti-consumerism, unfriendly, stoic, and violent. Grigori cannot allow Alexei to live because his responsibility to maintain the mission. Alexei's evolution, however, shifts the meaning of Grigori's actions.

The last purely Russian character is Alexei. Alexei is intelligent and he exemplifies it in the scene where he tries to warn Hopper that the Jeep is about to explode, in the scene where he

explains the complex structures and functions of the secret underground lab, and when he nonchalantly references Plank's Constant to Murray. Alexei is not violent. Despite being kidnapped, held in handcuffs, and physically assaulted by Hopper, Alexei does not cause physical harm to anyone or anything on the show. Alexei is friendly. He is kind and open with Joyce, his bickering with Hopper is reactive, and Alexei even befriends Murray by the end of his arc. Alexei is emotional or not-stoic. Alexei is extremely emotive and despite how little time he was featured on the show, scenes with Alexei and Alexei himself quickly became an internet meme because of how emotive he is. Alexei enjoys American food, American cartoons, and looks forward to American freedom. While Alexei himself does not fulfill the epitome of anti-Russian stereotypes, Alexei is constantly otherved by other characters, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

Finally, the quasi-Russian character is Murray. I have already addressed that Murray is an outlier character. Murray is enraged when Hopper and Joyce first bring Alexei to his home and refers to Alexei as an "enemy of the state" repeatedly. However, once Murray accepts that Alexei is in his house, he warms up to Alexei and even shames Hopper for bringing the wrong Slurpee flavor back for him. A particularly interesting example of Murray being stereotyped as Russian despite being an American is in the scene when Alexei finally explains that the Russian scientists are re-opening the portal to 'The Upside-Down.' In this scene, Murray tells Hopper he doesn't have whiskey, but does have vodka. Here we see Hopper, who has spent the better part of two episodes calling Alexei "Smirnoff," take two shots of Stolichnaya Vodka with Murray before going back to deal with everything on his plate. The fact that Murray only had Russian vodka once again alludes to Murray being unlike Hopper and Joyce and also acts as a transition. Both men imbibe a Russian alcoholic beverage as they steel their nerves to go fight a bunch of

Russian scientists and military personnel to save Hawkins, Indiana. They literally absorb the Russian essence and in the next scene Hopper suddenly pivots towards Alexei as an ally.

Murray is also the one who calls Hopper and Joyce out on their sexual tension, not Alexei. This particular scene underscores the anti-Russian stereotype of sexual impropriety. Typically, this stereotype is attributed to Russian women as Lawless (2014) points out the lack of sexual morals of Bond girls. However, in this case, Murray draws attention to something the audience has been aware of for two and a half seasons. Murray challenges American modesty, the standard in which two American characters would go the entire duration of the show without fulfilling their sexual desires out of high moral propriety. Murray is able to do this because he is the other, just not as other as Alexei.

Othering Stereotypes

As I established in the previous section, Alexei as a character fails to convey typical Russian stereotypes. However, the characters around Alexei, specifically Hopper, constantly rely on Russian stereotypes in their interactions with him. Hopper stubbornly calls Alexei “Smirnoff” which is an arguably more Russian-sounding name and alludes to Russian alcoholism as a stereotype even though there are no scenes of Alexei drinking alcohol and there are several of Hopper doing so. Hopper refers to Alexei’s’ countrymen as his comrades, which on the surface can seem as though Hopper is merely using the correct term. However, since Hopper does not put in the effort to call Alexei’ by his actual name, when juxtaposing these two pieces of information against each other, it is clear that Hopper uses terms like ‘comrades’ to underscore that Alexei is not a member of the in-group.

In a peripheral scene, Grigori hunts Hopper, Joyce, and Alexei after they escape the abandoned house and commandeer a car at 7-11. He sees Todd reporting his car as stolen and the

store clerk fills in the story about a crazy guy who stole the car. The clerk calls Grigori Khrushchev several times. By doing this the clerk draws attention to Grigori's accent and others him immediately, establishing that even the clerk of a 7-11 is aware that Grigori is Russian and that this makes him different. Grigori responds to this with stoic violence and anger, slams the clerk's head into the counter, and demands that the clerk tell him the full story.

Russian and quasi-Russian characters in *Stranger Things* are othered in gradients. Murray is othered along with Alexei and Grigori but because he is, after all, a born American, he is not othered to the same extent as other characters. Due to his fluctuating status, Murray is able to call out American stereotypes and other Americans in rebuke of the othering that he experiences. While at the carnival with Alexei, Murray cynically says that the carnival is rife with 'fatty foods, ugly decadence, rigged games' and these are meant to perpetuate consumerism. "That, my friend, is America." This conversation feels as though Murray is talking about the carnival, but in reality, he is warning Alexei that America is an illusion created to fund the rich. In essence, Murray is communicating that American and Russia are not different. The audience can only accept this information because Murray, a known cynic and conspiracy theorist, is the one who says it. If the other calls out the hegemonic ideology it is easier to accept or ignore.

Limitations

As I've mentioned throughout the paper, Alexei's story arc is only a small part of a much bigger season that is centrally focused on American and Russian relations. The scope of this paper is only of Alexei's story and there is certainly space to do more research on the story of *Stranger Things* season three.

Being of Russian origin, it is also very plausible that despite taking precautions and spending years studying anti-Russian and Russophone stereotypes there may be a level of implicit bias in the research.