When the Russian pop duo t.A.T.u. - engineered by a British producer - landed a number one hit in the western charts, it seemed that Russian youth (culture) had not only been looking West but arrived in the West. Here is a manufactured Russian girl band whose music and images are tailor-made for the global music industry demands and, of course, for the taste of the mainstream (youth) audience. No other Russian musician has had comparable success in the West.

In this excellent book, five authors look at post-Soviet youth culture and, in particular how Russian youth perceive “the West”. By juxtaposing the West - western products, musics, lifestyles - with local youth cultural practice in a discursive and methodological way, the researchers have managed to paint a vivid picture of the Russian youth scenes.

The key question analysed in the book is how globalisation has impacted Russian youth culture. After the collapse of the communist system, western global media and products entered the emerging Russian market with full force. For some theorists, the demise of the socialist systems was in fact a result of cultural globalisation (p. 217). “But” the authors ask in their conclusion, “have global media and commercial worlds fulfilled their promise? Do the new media in Russia engage young people in a global consumer-based youth culture? And how has access to the global media reshaped their images of the West? ” (p. 217). The findings of the empirical research, which was given precedence in this publication over theorising the issues, suggest that Russian youth in the post-Soviet era do not only find themselves liberated from economic and political constraints but have been thrown into an unsettling globalising world in which many of the old certainties have landed upside down. With consumption not having lost all of its connotations of a “negative western characteristic”, the “retreat to Soviet markers of consumption must be understood at least in part as a response to an unnerving experience” (p. 219). This is to say that Russian youth, and in particular the youth surveyed in two provincial cities on the Volga (Ul’ianovsk and Samara), have developed selective consumption attitudes and practices vis-à-vis western products.

While they embrace and consume a variety of products they remain critical of western values and keep them clearly separate from Russian culture. This leads the researchers to interesting thoughts about “hybridisation” and “creolisation” in the wake of globalisation. During this time of transition there are still “residues of ‘communist’ ideology [continuing] to shape cultural engagements with the West” (p. 220). Maybe not so much communist as Soviet or traditional Russian is the practice of the “well-constructed myth of [Russia’s] ‘difference’ and ‘uniqueness’ that is able, as in the case of Japan, to diffuse the power of American culture” (p. 221). Going even further, the youth surveyed constructed narratives of Russia through their engagement with images of the West.
Although such a tradition is not unique to Russia, it is distinctive because the discussions “are conducted as if Russia were outside this cultural orbit” (p. 222).

In fact, the main conclusion of the authors is that in the Russian youth scenes one cannot talk of hybridisation and certainly not of a homogenisation of global culture. Although cultural globalisation is almost one-way in direction West to East and core to periphery, the researchers found that Russian youth considered Russian culture to exist alongside the Western or global culture, rather than being swallowed up by it. Thereby they are practising a distinction between the global and the local, and consuming global culture locally. The “young people were happy to consume Western (“other”, “global”) culture, while remaining confident that that which was Russian (“ours”, “local”) would remain untarnished by global intrusion” (p. 225). Taking this thought a step further, drawing conclusions from this ethnographic fieldwork for the situation in Russia generally, Pilkington suggests that “Russia’s response to globalisation continues to throw up challenges to Western hegemony” because its understanding of self and local defies the rules of the globalisation process (p. 226).

Two statements from interviews make this dichotomy and Russian uniqueness, if not superiority, clear: “There is music for the soul and for the body […] for the soul it is probably Soviet rock, rock from the beginning of the 1980s and [from the period] 1989-91”; “[techno] is not music for the soul […] it doesn’t help me, not at all”.

Apart from the theoretical and empirical work, methodology is also discussed in some detail (mostly in the detailed appendix), which is very interesting and useful for other researchers. A team of three Russian and two British researchers, who are obviously used to collaborating, conducted extensive fieldwork in three Russian cities (Ul’ianovsk and Samara on the Volga and Moscow) during the late 1990s. The research was primarily qualitative: interviews, focus groups, expert interviews. The participants in focus groups or group interviews were asked to respond, among other things, to ads of western products, western video clips, clips from western movies. Quantitative data was drawn from a small representative survey and a textual analysis of youth media was also carried out.

As a methodological framework the researchers drew “on ‘post-subcultural’ approaches to the study of youth cultural practice in the West” (p. 222) and formed two main categories of youth: alternative (“progressive”) and mainstream (“normal”). This allowed them to map “the whole youth cultural scene in Russia” and to place “musical and stylistic practice within broader life paths” (p. 223). The term “post-subcultural” denotes that at the end of the 20th century the markers of a subculture were no longer valid, i.e. identification with a specific musical style that entailed a concomitant fashion and life style. The maps, which are presented as diagrams, give a good picture, showing the diffuse and partly overlapping scenes. On the other hand, they could suggest an oversimplification of Russian youth culture when the situation is actually very complex and even contradictory. The research was focused on the provincial cities and Moscow youth was surveyed as something like a control sample.

The main author in the team is Hilary Pilkington, an eminent researcher on Soviet and Russian youth culture. She wrote the more theoretical chapters with comparative analysis, embedding the empirical research in social and cultural (youth) theory and drawing conclusions from the findings for western academic discourse. The bulk of the chapters discusses the empirical material: “The Place of Youth in Russia’s New Media and Information Space” by Elena Omel’chenko and Ul’iana Bliudina; “Images of the West in the Youth Media” by Moya Flynn and Elena Starkova; “Young People’s Images of the West” by Elena Omel’chenko and Moya Flynn; “‘Progressives’ and ‘Normals’ – Strategies for Glocal Living” by Hilary Pilkington (with Elena Starkova); “The Dark Side of the Moon? – Global and Local Horizons” by Hilary Pilkington (more on everyday cultural practice in the different youth scenes); “Style and Music in Russian Youth Cultural Practice” by Hilary Pilkington and “Living with the West” by Hilary Pilkington and Elena Omel’chenko (on the perception of the West among Russian youth).

While looking at Russian youth culture in the post-Soviet period, the main issue of this project is also a broader and more theoretical one – the processes of globalization, which are examined in the dual discourse of globalization and localization (or “glocalisation”, as Robertson (1995) put it). The title question “Looking West? ” has thus to be answered with both a “yes” and a “no”. While the youth are looking West they are not consuming “the West”. Globalisation has had its impact on Russian youth culture but it has not led to homogenisation of culture or to abandoning Russian values. On the contrary, Russianness and essentially Russian values have experienced a boost from recent developments.

By looking West the youth form a particular narrative of their local, their own, culture, which remains separate
in their eyes. While pinpointing this misconception in respondents’ statements the authors / Pilkington appear slightly too optimistic themselves concerning the happy coexistence of different cultures. Global flows of culture are much more closely intertwined with the global flows of economics than they suggest. And the book itself reflects this “looking West” in its style and conception, which is very much Western.

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