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Making sense of the remote areas: films and stories from a tundra village

Petia Mankova

Department of Social Sciences
Faculty of Humanities, Social Science and Education
UiT The Arctic University of Norway
phone +47 77646604
email: petia.mankova@uit.no

Abstract: Narratives of globalization, conceived of as large-scale political, economic and cultural processes flowing from metropolitan centres, often emphasise loss of tradition and cultural originality in the remote and wild peripheries. All three TV programs filmed for the past ten years in Krasnoshchelye, a remote Arctic village in Northwest Russia where I did anthropological fieldwork, are marked by such sentimental pessimism. Here, I juxtapose them with several local stories, which do not resonate with the melancholic and nostalgic notes of the media. The stories show how with laughter and astonishment new inventions are welcomed and incorporated into everyday life. While the media use first-hand accounts to evoke particular sentiments, the local stories show how any observation contains elements of illusoriness. The sentimental dissonance between mediascape and local imagination brings valuable insights about how globalization is accommodated on different scales and geographic settings.

Biographical data: For many years I have been working as visual anthropologist at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, where I recently completed a PhD in Social Anthropology. My main interests are: remote, rural and tundra communities, Northwest Russia and issues of gender, care, and local history.

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Keywords: arctic periphery, remoteness, media stereotypes, storytelling, sentimental pessimism, laughter, astonishment

In the popular imagination the Arctic summons dreamy visions. The remote countryside even more so. When the setting is a remote village beyond the Arctic circle, the romantic aura grows abundantly. The time when knowledge of remote places was reserved for anthropologists and explorers is gone, and now they are places of a burgeoning tourist industry, NGOs, and private entrepreneurs. Unless we live there, we get our ideas of these places from media such as television and the internet. Although anthropologists rarely engage with media as a source of knowledge, we have to acknowledge that popular conceptions are often produced and shaped by the media.

In the past 10 years, three TV documentaries have been filmed in the village where I did anthropological fieldwork in 1999 and 2012. The roadless village of Krasnoshchelye lies in the middle of the tundra on the Kola Peninsula in the very Northwestern corner of Russia, 150 kilometers from the nearest settlement – the district center Lovozero. In winter time, when the surrounding lakes and swamps are frozen, there is a winter tractor road [*zimnik*] for ATVs and snowmobiles. In the summer months the village is accessible only by a weekly helicopter route. The village is remote and Arctic, and the TV programs emphasize its remoteness in different ways.

As an anthropologist having done fieldwork there, I watched the TV programs with mixed feelings: I could feel the atmosphere of the village, I knew the people, and I became annoyed with the implicit stereotypes transforming geographical distance into cultural gap and exoticizing the small community portrayed on the screen . My initial reaction was to contact directors and producers in order to debate issues in the programs that had made me so upset. Before doing that, I tried to discuss the TV programs with some of the village residents to gauge their responses; in contrast they did not seem upset, shrugged shoulders and had nothing much to say about it. This led me to reflect that I had never heard people from the village talk about remoteness as something special, rather it was part of their everyday life. After brief exchanges with one of the producers and one of the directors of these programs, I concluded that the directors' represented the village from their own point of view. Their stories narrating of a geographic distant place emphasized eye-catching differences. For an anthropologist like me, such representations evoke notions of orientalism and exoticism and not the least of commoditization of the exotic in the context of TV and the expansion of tourism (Kapferer 2013).

In this paper I will juxtapose the films with several local stories. I want to bring forward the voices of the local people regarding how they make sense of their village, and the "exotic" in

their everyday life. The local stories do not address directly, comment or invert the media narratives by offering a counter-narratives, but complement them.

The article aims to show how the idea of remoteness fruitfully exposes the connected separation of global and local, of modernity and tradition. In our commonsensical understanding of globalization, TV and other massmedia are often thought to smooth geographical distance and cultural difference. The TV programs discussed in this article show that, on the contrary, mass media also engage mechanisms of distancing and separating places. At the same time, the village stories show how easily the local people accommodate and incorporate new technological devices and explanations and connect through them to the wider world. In this way, the opposition between traditional and modern becomes obsolete.

The initial reason to parallel these two at first sight divergent perspectives – the objectifying gaze of the mass media and the momentary intimacy of the local stories – lies in a very personal experience.

“Kanal 1”

In 1999 I made a short ethnographic film in the village of Krasnoshchelye. When the film was finished, I sent it to the reindeer herding brigade of the state farm where I had spent several months. I never received any response and was not sure whether the video had actually made it through the postal services. For several years I did not have any contact with them. On my next visit in 2012, I mentioned the video to two women related to a herder from the brigade. Yes, they had received it. I asked what they thought of it? I made several remarks on potentially criticizable aspects of the filming and the technicalities, but their response was initially rather weak. After all, I thought, they might have forgotten it – a video recording in Hi8 quality, showing glimpses of the late 1990s when everything was going wrong¹. But then, one of them laughingly said, “Oh, we have to tell you the story.” The story went like

this: the video was playing on the video recorder in her home. Her brother, a reindeer herder, who had just come back from the tundra and was not aware of the arrival of the package with the videotape, entered the house. Seeing his colleagues on the TV and not realizing that it was the video recorder playing, he cried out: “*Look, First Brigade is on air, on Channel One! I have to call the guys!*” and took the phone in his hands.

His surprise evoked much laughter. It was a good story. In the village, such episodes seem to matter more than the representations circulating outside. The enjoyable events and experiences in their own everyday life are remembered and poeticized. My film was not directly criticized, nor praised. It was my story created from a limited stay there. It was paralleled with their stories and incorporated as part of their own narratives. The TV documentaries, therefore, have to be seen likewise; firstly as discrete images, objectifying and ‘fixing’ (Bhabha 1983, 18) the village and the people, and secondly in opposition to the continuous processes of observation, entangled in the everyday practice and narrative discourse of their own lives.

The TV documentary films belong to the mediascape of global cultural flows (Appadurai 1996, 33). Mediascapes are imagined multiple worlds constituted by historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. The films, as part of the “mediascape,” are thus perspectival constructs of an imagination belonging to the global modernity. Although depicting the village as a remote place in different ways, these three media products which I have chosen to focus upon, have much in common. One of these common characteristics is the heavy accent on remoteness. Remoteness is a perspectival construct from outside, not evident at the local level (Ardener [1987] 2012).

The three media programs are the stories of filmmakers traveling a long distance to experience the village in a particular way— a German metropolitan director meets indigenous people, a Russian TV personality defining himself as urban romanticist experiences an exotic

rural setting, and a Komi director goes to a distant place to find something lost a long time ago – a Komi diaspora thousands of miles from their historical homeland. The stories I want to bring forward and consider in reference to the films, are stories of people who live there and their everyday experiences. For the people who live in Krasnoshchelye, the village is an open and unbound place, in dynamic development and continual change and they hardly consider it unique or point to its cultural singularity. In everyday conversations the place surprises them, tricks them (see below) and evokes a different imagination than the imagination manufactured by the media. Their stories understandably are grounded in everyday experiences but reveal a vivid local imagination. Thus, the same setting informs two differently imagined worlds. One of them is the imaginary world represented in the media; the other is the situated local imagination in the stories. Although on completely different scales, both offer narratives which reveal equally important aspects of the impact of global entanglements.

The article begins with a conceptual genealogy of remoteness in a Russian context. Thereafter, I discuss how the TV programs reinforce this remoteness with nostalgia and irony, how anthropology criticizes such representations as imaginary self portrayals, and in the last section I present the stories before rounding up with a discussion upon the politics of storytelling and affect.

Remoteness, films and sentimental pessimism

The village is often defined in the media as *otdalyonka*, a diminutive of “remote area,” and can easily be associated with the notion of *glubinka* – the depths, the remote from the centers areas that have been, and in fact still are, an object of colonialization². The Russian sociologist Il’in describes *glubinka* in the following way:

part of the sociocultural space, relatively isolated from its main flows, characterized by relatively low intensity and density of the flows, limited volume of resources, distanced from the centers of political, economic and cultural activity. The lazy streams of *glubinka* form a social field, with weak attracting forces that open for the more attractive regional centers and capitals. (Il'in 2010, 27)

The American geographer Leslie Dienes describes *glubinka* as “large tracts of virtually dead space that interpenetrate and separate the economically responsible archipelago of the integrated economy” (Dienes 2002, 444). This space is the target of Russia’s “internal colonization” to put it in Aleksandr Etkind’s words, as he adequately explains how Russia has been both the subject and the object of colonization and its corollaries, such as “orientalism” and how “the state colonized its people” (Etkind 2011, 2).

Glubinka is depicted, in a similar manner to any colonial object, in ambivalent terms, as otherness, as both “object of desire and derision” (Bhabha 1994, 67). In a Russian context, the contradiction is pronounced between the remote as conserving the authentic national spirit and the remote as container of latent masses, hampering the modernization of the country. In the Murmansk region this is even more the case. In most representations of the geographical region, this part of the northern periphery is depicted as being backward, and therefore it is a target area of intensive state policies of development and modernization (in fact the early years of the Soviet regime used the term colonization). On the other hand, it is also represented as the homeland of the Sami people, a romanticized image of indigenous alternative counterposed to the corruption of modern development. In her overview of the Murmansk region print press materials, the ethnologist Olga Bodrova outlines six major features of media presentations: the Nature, the indigenous Sami people, the Pomors (Russian old settlers), the idea of *Arktida* (a mythical hyperborean land and cradle of the human civilization), the results of successful colonization, and lastly – existing socio-economic problems (Bodrova 2015). Her categorization corresponds well with the sentiments of the

three TV documentaries putting the village on display. The remote areas bewilder. The films praise the originality of the village, preserved by its inaccessibility, and yet point to existing problems compounded by this remoteness at the same time. Its future is envisaged as doomed to inevitable modernization, industrialization and therefore loss of authenticity.

Films, irony and nostalgia

The documentary *Komi Laplandiya* (37 min) by the Komi director Aleksandr Pivkin was produced in 2010 by the regional Komi TV Channel. In the film Pivkin follows the Komi diaspora in Lapland (Sapmi) briefly showing several Komi descendants in Finland and giving a more detailed account of the Komi on Kola Peninsula where their number is around 2000. The film narrative interweaves the director's monologue with interviews of local people, whose predecessors migrated at the end of the 19th century. Later, in 1921, several Komi families founded the village of Krasnoshchelye. Pivkin mourns over the loss of cultural authenticity, but praises the devotion of the local people to the reindeer herding and the resilience of the 'small people'. For him, as he states in the film, the village is a "God-forsaken corner" where "tractor caravans bring some happiness."

Komi Laplandiya is a complex story with several layers. The director's voice over monologue is in Russian and offers a sincere personal account to the audience. Part of the dialogue in the film is in Komi language. In this way the author evokes intimacy with the people he interviews, and the truthfulness of his arguments increases. His travel to a distant place to follow the steps of distant forefathers who had to migrate because of disease is mournful – about the detachment, the historically conditioned geographic separation and distancing from traditional life. He is nostalgic because he feels the Komi culture is disappearing even in this out-of-the-way corner. His nostalgia is accompanied by ironic notes throughout the film, such as his remark that the women in the Komi folklore ensemble (who strive to preserve the Komi traditions) are from all nationalities,

and “sadly enough their number is larger than the audience of their concerts in the village.”

The Tundra Tale is a 90 minute German–Norwegian documentary produced in 2013 and shown at international film festivals and in German cinemas. The German director Rene Harder constructs his vision of life in the village, suggesting that the village is “on the brink,” threatened by the encroachment of the global capitalism. The argument of the film is made through the voice of a local woman – Sasha Artieva. In the film, she is represented as a Sami activist and a politician in the newly established Sami parliament. Her political engagement is depicted as an attempt to save the village and the local reindeer herding from the threat of neoliberal and neocolonial projects of extracting companies. The film follows her everyday life in Krasnoshchelye, and her meetings with both bureaucrats and businessmen in Murmansk and Sami politicians in Norway. The contrast between glimpses of everyday life in the village and the world of state institutions and shiny offices is striking and substantiates the distance that exists between the two worlds. However, more important to me is the mournfulness and the sense of precariousness and fragility the film indicates.

The film opens with an elderly woman, Sasha’s grandmother, carding wool. She tells the camera that she had forgotten the stories she once knew, thus making us understand that these times and people are tied to loss. Throughout the film, we as an audience get to know that the village is under serious threat by neoliberal state–driven extraction projects³. This is Sasha’s main concern as an indigenous politician. However, sporadically some voices in the film express a different view, pointing out that the problems of the village lie in disappearing public services. The local song refrain sung in *The Tundra Tale* is full of determination that despite lacking medical assistance in the village: “we are going to live for long” [*eshche dolgo budem zhit*’]. The film director and the voice over of his main protagonist in her capacity as indigenous politician tell the audience about the grave threat to the village. This

image of the threat belongs nevertheless to “the indigenous voice”(Tsing 2007), a discursive frame for articulation of indigenous identity by activists, community leaders, public intellectuals as I have argued elsewhere(Mankova 2015). In the village where the majority do not identify themselves as indigenous, issues of indigeneity are rarely discussed. The discrepancy creates a sense of dramatic irony. In film and literary theory, dramatic irony is an effect where the audience is given information that makes it understand the implications of a situation better than the characters involved. In *The Tundra Tale* the dramatic irony lies in the fact that the film follows a familiar and recognisable scenario of indigenous people threatened by neoliberal industrialization and inevitable modernization. Such representation creates detachment between the main character, Sasha (who understands) and the rest of the villagers, and reinforces the cultural difference between the villagers and the audience, despite the beautiful small glimpses of everyday life filled with laughter and jokes that are interwoven into these scenes. To my knowledge the film has not been screened officially in the village yet. I showed my copy of the film to some village residents. Their reaction was, “Beautiful reindeer! He got the reindeer so beautifully!”, completely ignoring some distorted social facts (as labeling the village as indigenous Sami one, while the majority of its inhabitants are descendants of the Komi diaspora). This reaction reminded me that I also enjoyed some parts of the film, and that despite my irritation at the partial presentation and the inaccurate details, there were touching moments. When I asked about Sasha, I was provided with a short answer: “Oh, I have known her since she was born,” and the conversation switched to what she currently was doing. The film was made three years earlier, and by the time the film was released she had other matters to take care of. For them, this film was just a small part of Sasha’s life and her story. After highlighting some of the problems I perceived with the film, another reaction was: “What a pity, that after staying here for so long, he did not get the situation better”. The person then went on to assure me that in the village there were enough

stories about him. Again, there was noticeable lack of engagement with the film and its content.

The third TV program about the village was a travel program hosted by Dmitry Krylov “*Neputevye zametki*” broadcast in December 2015. The show, of which the title is a word play between “not-a-travelogue” and “flighty notes” is aired on *Kanal 1*, the state owned TV channel available in all corners of Russia. The program is to inspire travel, encourage tourism, and has been on air for 20 years. The presenter usually chooses more exotic places for the Russian audience and in the introduction he states that on the Kola Peninsula besides the ‘humane and gentle’ prices one can find “the nearest exotic place” [*blizhayschaya eksotika*].

His programs provide more information on his own experiences, and he is forthright about what he personally finds interesting, a well known Moscow-based TV personality, personifying both the pleasure of travelling and the power of objectifying. He addresses the audience directly. In his nonchalant and what may be considered arrogant style, the TV-personality Dmitri Krylov comments with irony on the folklore ensemble who greet him upon arrival at the airport in Krasnoshchelye as totally inadequate or inappropriate for the metropolitan: “They got it wrong and met me like a national legend, I don’t know like Leonid Yakubovich,⁴ that is to say, to the helicopter came enthusiastic pioneers, pensioners and female intellectuals and I didn’t pretend that in Moscow it was in a different way, that I never move without a company of female admirers”. Krylov presents the locals’ behavior as strange, as if worshipping him and treating his arrival almost as though a White God had come to this place. Such direct irony towards the village residents is for those who know the village, ironic in itself. What does not come into the story is that many of the people he met at the airport are not local, but a delegation of young politicians from the Komi republic, visiting the village for the winter festival. However, in order to sell it as an exotic tourist destination

Krylov represents the village to the urban romanticists (as he calls himself and his audience) as a most exotic place by totally distancing himself from the village residents.

In all three media presentations, sentimental pessimism and dramatic irony are used to distance and objectify the village. The sentimental pessimism suggests that the people from the village cannot counteract the inevitable processes they are exposed to. Simultaneously, the TV programs show dialogues, moments of everyday life and beautiful scenery. Fascination, admiration and melancholy are showcased alongside each other. These emotions, together with the testimonial style of the narration, can be seen to narrow the distance between the audience and the village. This contradictoriness between creating distance and compressing distance lies in the nature of storytelling, as Michel de Certeau acknowledges. Stories might function as both bridges and frontiers (de Certeau 1984), a discussion I will return to in the last section of the article. Yet, the anthropological critique of such sentiments reveals epistemological problems. The historical imagination at the heart of such visual products enacts hidden ideologies, and as anthropologists have argued disguises these ideologies with emotional and aesthetic devices.

Anthropological critiques of global imaginations and mediascapes

As I highlighted above, the films engage irony and mournful melancholy. Philosophers, cultural scholars and anthropologists have pointed out that melancholia and nostalgia emphasize separation from the real world. The remoteness of Krasnoshchelye in the media programs becomes a product of such separation. As I described above, such feelings direct the audience to feel compassion for people who apparently cannot understand the global processes they undergo. In such a way, they create distance towards the people they depict. Such emotional approaches have been criticized by anthropologists for expanding the beam of Western domination. In his article "Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*" (1993), Marshall Sahlins

discusses how earlier anthropologists have traded naiveté for melancholy, and heightened sentimental pessimism. He argues that this pessimism proliferates ideas of Western domination in subtle intellectual and ideological ways, and makes the conquest complete. Renato Rosaldo in a similar manner, looks at cinematic representations of distant people describing the *imperialist nostalgia* that through aesthetic means makes domination look innocent and pure. He reminds us that “nostalgia at play with domination ... uses compelling tenderness to draw attention away from relation’s fundamental inequality” (Rosaldo 1989, 120). The testimonial style of personal narratives in the TV programs creates the illusion of veracity and intimacy, of knowledge about the remote to which the audience easily could be seduced. In this way, the audience perceives the TV narrators’ perspective as most truthful. However, such a view implies a single totalizing perspective for development based on Western premises. Postcolonial critiques suggest such representations tell more about the authors and the target audience, than of the people and place they describe.

All three films demonstrate overwhelming fascination with nature, and the pre-industrial and pre-modern look of the village and its isolation, as an island, cut off from the mainland. The fascination the documentaries radiate is a fascination with an imaginary they have created and continue to recreate. Such representations are products of a persistent geography of imagination, placing the village into what Trouillot called ‘the savage slot’, but as many scholars have acknowledged *the savage slot* is nevertheless an inverted self-image (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, Trouillot [1991] 2003). Such dominant regimes of representations, according to Stuart Hall, work through “imaginative geography and history where the mind intensifies its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it, and what is far away” (Hall 2000, 711). The melancholy of Pivkin, the dramatic irony of Harder and the direct irony of Krylov are part of their TV stories; they are not part of the

village but constructions in the imaginary worlds of the mediascape. They do not belong to the film directors as individuals, nor to the place.

The remote places hold elements of “spatial melancholia.” Asking whether melancholy emerges from the self or from the setting, Yael Navaro–Yashin (2009) has introduced the notion of “spatial melancholia” for an environment or atmosphere that discharges such affect. For the filmmakers the emotions were not only discharged by the environment, but also by the character of the media. In personal correspondence, the Komi director Alexander Pivkin reflected on this point in general. He acknowledged that in his endeavors to disseminate knowledge, his voice might become domineering and sometimes he uses emotions to ease the burden of his own responsibility. Sometimes he uses emotions just to compensate for lack of material. In *The Tundra Tale*, the beautifully filmed shots of nature and the village can be seen as a contrasting stylistic device reinforcing the emotional charge of the threat. According to its Norwegian producer, however, the beautiful images would not be realized without the professionalism of the cameraman. In such a way, the “spatial melancholia” has to be seen as a heterogeneous construct comprised through the individual narrator perspectives and experiences, through the descriptions of the particular setting and through the possibilities opened with the medium.

A second line of anthropological criticism points out that the images circulating in the mediascape might do harm to people. Distancing and labeling places as remote make the local people entrapped, less capable of movement and action, “tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it”(Clifford 1988, 5). Postcolonial studies have shown how such definitions from outside become internalized and enacted. Noel B. Salazar (2009, 3) in his work on tourism describes how: “People in the margins often have little (economic) choice but to accept and to adapt to the tourismified identities and cultural views that are created for them”. Likewise, Harald

Prins has pointed to the *primitivist perplex* of the North American Indians – when the romantic exoticism, as embedded in white ideology, meshed quite well with indigenous concepts of self–understanding (2002, 72).

On the other hand the mediascape is not only a site of domination but also a site of resistance. Anthropological works on the indigenous appropriation of media have brought valuable insights for engagements of local indigenous people with visual media and how they subvert dominant modes of narration and discourse. Michelle Rajeha has introduced the concept of visual “sovereignty” to denote the role the indigenous people have come to play within the films they become part of. The visual sovereignty shows in “flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype” (Raheja 2007, 1160).

In the three TV programs, one can find traces of such visual sovereignty. On many occasions this sovereignty accompanies the story of the filmmaker in various ways. Sometimes it might reiterate a statement already made by the filmmaker; sometimes it takes on a different meaning. The inside perspective on remoteness comes to the audience in the films. In *Komi Laplandiya* we hear Vassiliy, the reindeer herder, articulate his fear for the building of a road that will make the village a “transit place” [*prokhodnyy dvor*] putting it in very emotional terms: “If there is a road, there is no life!” [*Est doroga, net zhizni*]. In one of the local *chastushkas* ⁵ used in the film *The Tundra Tale*, the villagers sing: “(Politicians), you are far away!” [*Dalekiye vy, ot naroda*]. The strong emphasis on “you” implies that the remoteness is also a question of perspective. These small comments show a resistance to internalize the ascribed remoteness, and the envisaged problem of extinction or threats. The illusory continuity of the films disguises such inconsistencies.

While a detailed discourse analysis of the films and the interplay between inside and outside perspectives might complicate further our understanding of mediascape, my intention was to

focus on the production of locality(Appadurai 1996) and look at local, empirically grounded vernacular forms of historical imagination, and address them as equally significant constructions.

Anthropology and Remoteness

While anthropologists have debated over the conceptual framework of remoteness as a representational issue, empirical studies within the discipline relate remoteness to questions of mobility and movement across spaces. In a Russian context, such studies show how people engage and deal with remoteness in their day-to-day life through modes, means, and infrastructures of transportation, which have further contributed to understanding *glubinka* as colonial space in relation to the state. Several have focused on the physical infrastructure and how technology has changed indigenous lives.

Konstantinov (2009) addressing the roadlessness on Kola Peninsula shows how the two ways of travelling to the remote areas (the mechanized transportation and the reindeer-draft) are essential for the perceptions of personhood and identity among the reindeer herders. In his analysis he distinguished between two perspectives. The *overcoming perspective*, implying the statist notion of “conquering the North” with snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, is urban and intrusive, and reflects colonial state-driven impulses. The use of reindeer, on the other hand, or the *accommodating perspective* is indigenous, attuned to the environment, but predestined to change and modernization in the long run. However, as Konstantinov shows, these two perspectives are co-existing, and heroic narratives of speed and the desired change to mechanized forms of travelling are complemented with new forms of anxiety.

Other studies have explored local narratives as responses to the state-induced spatialization. Tatiana Argounova – Law (2012) shows how the narratives of the road of the

Lake Yessei Yakuts and the Evenki people in Olenek help to alleviate disruptions in their identity, caused by prohibiting a traditional route between two settlements that landed on different sides after an administrative border was drawn in the 1950s; in short – when the state colonized their homeland. Caroline Humphrey, in a similar vein, asserts that: “Roads are the connections of rural people to the state that register in imagination the fears and disappointments in this relationship” (Humphrey 2015, 14). She shows how the spatial concepts and feelings tacitly subvert the static authority of the center. Otto Habeck and Ludek Broz in a recent edited volume on the Northern mobilities argue that “indigenous accounts of Northern mobilities question and complicate the older – yet still pervasive – frontier narratives of Terra Nullius, ‘out there’ to be traversed, appropriated and conquered” (Habeck and Broz 2015, 515). Thus, the vast remote areas in the North of Russia are not only the subject of colonization with its disruptive effects upon local identities; they are also sites of resistance.

All of these accounts reveal both the recurring seizures and the emotional aspects of movements and travel, and problematize the colonization process – previously in relation to the Soviet state, which started major infrastructural and social engineering projects, but also today in the context of ongoing neoliberal reforms and new forms of centralization. This article continues in the same spirit and describes storytelling as accommodation, creativity and resistance. Nevertheless, my primary objective is to turn attention away from the metropolitan ideas of remoteness and show also that the wilderness, the peripheries, have their intensities of affect that exist in parallel; not only within mediascapes, but within their own local imaginary sovereignty.

The idea of remoteness is intimately associated with the idea of mobility. John Urry claims that “Experiencing place as landscape, as something to tour, is our destiny.” He writes that when traveling, the emotions we experience are “all judgments from afar, abstract and

mobile”(Urry 2005, 82). They fix a particular moment in time at a given place. The view from afar presupposes that the subject has travelled to a destination: as is the case with the TV crews. However, Kenneth Olwig argues there is an alternative to the fixed view on the landscape. Following Tim Ingold, he distinguishes between two different senses of landscape linked to two different ways of seeing: the one “derives from a monocular perspective that is fixed and distant from the body”. The films discussed embody such a sense of landscape. They imply a sense of appropriation fostered “by the possessive one-eyed gaze of the surveyor”, where *glubinka* is seen from the center. The second “involves binocular vision, movement and knowledge gained from a coordinated use of the senses in carrying out various tasks” (Olwig 2008, 81). Following Olwig’s argument, they enact a sense of belonging to the land “fostered by movement with both eyes wide open”. He suggests that the landscape is not a stage / surface, but a “woven material created through the merging of body and senses that occurs in dwelling” (Olwig 2008, 84-85). This model could schematically explain some of the differences between the stories and the TV programs. The stories tell of close and concrete experiences, the TV programs on the contrary speak more of stereotypes of otherness and difference. As anthropologists we should be attuned to both of them.

The Moving Stories

For the local people, many of the everyday tasks such as access to medical care, shops, and legal services is equivalent to passing through the tundra. Such movements are often considered routine and beyond the importance of historical processes. As I discussed above, globalization studies often focus upon long distance mobility and circulations. Nevertheless, the small everyday movements are even more important. As Otto Habeck (2013) shows, the process of sedentarization in Central Siberia consisted of different scales of movement. He describes not only changes in settlement relocation measured in hundreds of kilometers, but

also the transition from tent to apartment involving changes in minute movement patterns such as sitting, squatting and lolling. The latter had deep consequences for the people and their perception of space. Globalization, therefore, can be seen in the same way: as circulating global cultural flows and at the same time as small, minute, everyday movements. It is not only migrations which carry significance, but also the small moves in everyday life. They provoke their own imaginations. Whilst the TV programs imply that mobility is travelling on a large scale (the filmmakers have visited the village as an end destination), the local stories are of everyday passing through, of everyday movements. They are different scales of movements and mobility. Therefore, they do not contest directly the geography of destinations, but are closely connected to local knowledge. The day-to-day activities sometimes turn into events-stories to be told, shared, laughed at. Nonetheless, there is place for mystification, imagination, demystification. Such stories are constitutive of their everyday life. Against them, the external representations fixing a static image through the TV programs seem transient and insignificant. The local stories do not tell of the periphery and do not consider the village peripheral; its remoteness is not necessarily a drawback. They narrate the small movements which reveal global processes. Only on a few occasions do they address the outside world directly.

The local folklore ensembles often sing a *chastushka* for the tourists with the refrain “Put aside America and Europe – there is no more stunning village than our Krasnoshchelye” [*Oi La Oppa, Amerika, Evropa, a ot Krasnoshchelye nashe net nigde po krashche.*] For the outsiders it alludes to the fact that the women who sing have probably never been outside the village and demonstrate a local patriotism. Put into the humoristic genre of *chastushka* the lyrics nonetheless mock the idea of beautiful “scenery” from the glossy advertisements of the tourist companies (and the travel reportages as Krylov’s). In their stories they are ironical, more open, more inclusive and more playful. Their storytelling does not offer counter-

narratives– they are alternative narratives, not totally denouncing the hegemonic images but overlapping with them. In this way, I wish to complement the tendency present in the TV programs, of stressing the disrupting effects of recent history, the mourning, anxieties, fears, and vulnerability, with the laughter, excitement and astonishment I encountered on various occasions. The stories interweave experiences of looking and of landscape, and address issues of discourse and voice, sense and information. To put it in Olwig’s terms – the stories ‘heft’ to the landscape.

The Mega Flash

One late evening with beautiful Northern Lights, I was drinking tea and chatting with Vassiliy, a retired reindeer herder. In the conversation, initiated by my remark that when I saw the Northern Lights for the first time I thought it was radioactivity, he recounted the following story. One winter night he was driving his snowmobile in the tundra. The weather was cold, the sky dark, the stars bright. He was alone, nobody around. He had the tundra, the road, the stars all to himself. Then all of a sudden the whole area was lit as if by a flash. The light was like a gigantic camera flash, “as if somebody was taking a picture” . There was no chance that anyone was around. The light came from the skies as if the skies had opened up, and then the light disappeared as suddenly as it came. It was not the luminous play of the Northern Lights, it was tens, hundreds, thousands of times stronger, he explained. He was flabbergasted. Born in 1958, he is not a religious man, and usually was very silent. I had known him for many years and we could sometimes joke with each other. I was about to make a sarcastic comment that “the skies opened and then the Holy Spirit came down to you”, when I realized that he was actually excited. I kept quiet. He continued to talk. He was eager to understand what it was. For a long time we discussed different possibilities – could it be the Northern Lights, or

could it be the lights of his snowmobile reflected in the icy snow? He reiterated this had happened only once. He had spent his life in the tundra, the probability of the snowmobile as an explanation was impossible. Moreover, he had not heard about anyone in the village who had experienced the same. We almost concluded that it was probably a meteorite, because when meteorites go through the earth's atmosphere and burn, they cast a lot of light. Yet, after a tiresome attempt to get my mobile internet connection working, we found out that it might have been the sun's reflection of an iridium satellite. His astonishment whirled with the multiplicity of the different possibilities. Explaining his experience in the empty tundra with the rationality of the new technology did not make it less amazing. Astonishment points to the recognition of things one does not know, and reveals deeply felt emotional engagement and attentiveness. It is powerful. The intensity of his astonishment when he told me the story, stopped me from slipping an adverse comment in our conversation and surprised me.

The story of the reindeer herder is about the enigmatic multiplicity of possible explanations. Astonishment is an affect exposing, in this case, his emotional engagement with the tundra. His astonishment was open, inclusive, and critical. It revealed intelligence, ways of knowing and a sense of aliveness. Several anthropologists acknowledge astonishment as epistemological practice – tracing its origin to the Peircean “abductive method” and the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, who translated the *thaumazein*, the initial wonder fundamental of all philosophy, with “to be astonished” (Ingold 2011, Sennett 2008, Jackson 2013). Tim Ingold argues that “the kind of astonishment that comes from treasuring every moment, as if, in that moment, we were encountering the world for the first time, sensing its pulse, marveling at its beauty, and wondering how such a world is possible” should be part of the scholarly epistemology, because it is “how everyone knows the world” (Ingold 2011, 64-66). While local, traditional knowledge generally tends to be represented as a static unitary system, the above story shows how easily the local explanations embrace new elements and

are constantly reinvigorated; they stand in contrast to the sentimental pessimism of the TV programs. The meteorites and the iridium satellites just confirmed their (the local villagers) belonging to a wider world as metaphors, or bridges, in de Certeauan sense.

The two following stories are also about astonishment, but resolve the astonishment into another form of affect: laughter.

The Mysterious Forest

Two mature women in their sixties, went berry picking in the vicinity of the village. Both of them were born in the tundra, grew up in reindeer herding families, and live in the village. Although sometimes they spend their summer holidays in the south visiting relatives, berry and mushroom picking remain an essential part of their summer activities. On this occasion, having walked for a while through the forest around the village, the two women reached a clearing with a lot of berries. After picking enough berries they decided to head home but discovered that the forest had enfolded them. They could not get out of it; they walked around and around but could not find the opening and the small path they had taken earlier. They could not see how to get out, they were lost. (In my notes I scratched that this was one more proof of the women losing their knowledge of the tundra). “Thank God they had phones with them!”. They had to call their brother and ask for help. They told him where they had gone – he knew the exact place, asked them to stay there and picked them up in 15 minutes. By then, the path had amazingly reappeared, yet they were positive that the path was not there a short while ago. Interestingly, the cellular phones were as much a part of the story as the magic closure of the path.

As we were sitting chatting, I shared a similar experience I had had. Several months after my fieldwork I attended a seminar in Krasnoshchelye, organized by the local administration. We were accommodated in the only house that functions as a hotel in the

village. It lies on the outskirts of a small forest, quite far away from where I used to stay in the village. On the first evening I went to visit old friends. It was getting late; the lights were soon to be off (as electricity is provided by a local diesel generator from 6 am to midnight) and they asked Aleksey to follow me, so that no-one (stray dogs or drunk people) might scare me on my way back to the guesthouse. I knew Aleksey well from before. He is in his thirties, and I have never inquired about his diagnosis, but he has a light intellectual disability. Burly built, he helps his relatives with heavy physical labor, while they assist him with everyday tasks. He did not know where the guesthouse was, so we walked and talked as I led the way. When we came to the field in the central part of the village, I suggested a short cut through the field and then through the forest (following the snowmobile tracks) I had walked en route to their house. After tramping for a while through the forest, we arrived at somewhere other than the guesthouse – in the industrial part of the village at the old workshops. I could not understand how, when we had turned to the left from the main road, we had found ourselves on its right side, close to the river. Somehow we had crossed the main road without noticing it. I could not figure out what had happened. After concluding that it was a magic forest, we walked from the workshops to the main road and followed it to the side-road without any further shortcuts. The two women listened to my story. My bemusement was met with a smile and mild laughter. Yes, they had heard about our night walk. Aleksey had caught a cold the day after. He had recounted that I was walking fast and he was sweating, although it was minus 30 outside. He had taken off his scarf and hat and opened his jacket. On his way back he lowered the tempo and did not put them back on; therefore he got cold and sick the day afterwards. To these women, it was no surprise that we got lost on the snowmobile tracks. Obviously, I did not pay attention to where we were walking as I rushed ahead. Poor boy; as a mother I ought to know better.⁶

The different layers of meaning aside, their storytelling claimed astonishment, while my astonishment was in the end banalized and laughed at. Their storytelling is part of what Stuart Hall calls “imaginative rediscovery” of identity constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (Hall 2000, 707). In the moment of storytelling they rediscover the presence of the nature, the tundra encapsulating the village and also their place in it. While at first I considered the fact that they got lost symptomatic of their ‘detachment of the tundra’, I realized that it points also to the opposite – it was a rediscovery, achieved through the storytelling. This wondrous place does not detach them from the rest of the world, as the TV programs show – it attaches them to the rest of the world even by actualizing the use of new technologies into their lifeworlds and incorporating these technologies into their stories.

Sea Lions

Such stories often accompanied the tea drinking. Once, after the rehearsal of the folklore ensemble a woman told us the following story: she was sitting at the window and got a glimpse of something black swimming in the river. She could not figure out what it could be – from a distance it looked like a sea lion swimming down the river, but sea lions or fur [*morskoy kotik*] were unlikely there. It was a hundred kilometers to the sea. There were indeed stories that seals had been following the salmon upstream, but it was very unlikely in this part of the river. Initially, she thought that she had been fooled by her sight. Several days later however, when she was strolling with a friend she saw it again, a black round head in the water! It looked like Nessie, the Loch Ness monster. Ten minutes later, they saw a man coming out of the river and then they recognized him – the carpenter building the church. He is a diver and was wearing a wetsuit. He is not a local man, and as the locals do not dive they could not imagine it as an explanation. The mystery was solved with laughter. The story,

however, was as much about her bemusement at blending imagination with rationality and sound pragmatism, and excitement with laughter. The nature in the village could be as mysterious as outside the village. However, in their imagination they incorporated strong references to Western European popular mythological creations such as the Loch Ness Monster. These elements are not unusual. They are layers of engaging with the place, establishing routes and making connections with the outside world. Further illustrations of this can be seen when the state-farm bought two powerboats in the 1990s. The locals named them *Santa Maria* and *Santa Barbara*, the latter after the popular American TV series, the former apparently after the vessel used by Christopher Columbus. Ironically these names suggest their local pointlessness, as the boats in practice were generally useless – they could be used only during the short periods of high water during the spring.

Local Imagination: Laughter and astonishment

The two elements of the stories: the astonishment and the laughter move the narrator and the listener closer together. As I described with the films, nostalgia and dramatic irony create distance. They were part of large-scale movements and mobility and global cultural flows, implying long-term historical processes. The local stories were resolved with laughter, normalizing the “miracles”, the uncanny, mysterious situations and experiences. As Mikhail Bakhtin acknowledges, laughter is demolishing distance:

Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it could be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic and into the hands of free experimental fantasy. Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization. (Bakhtin 1981, 23)

The stories show that laughter and astonishment are ways to know the world at the local level, they are very different from the nostalgia and the irony of the mediascape. They represent the locally situated imaginary world, and the local ways to know the world. As such, they state familiarity, engagement and local belonging evolving momentarily, in a very short period of time. In the storytelling they mystify and then demystify matters of life. They promote conviviality and wellbeing, and bodily relief from ‘the uncanny’ whatever it was. For Michael Jackson, the “comedic restores a sense of agency”, it returns us to a community of others, allowing us to see that we are part of the world, not its center (Jackson 2002, 181). Thus, the stories highlight that imaginary remoteness is an inadequate concept in this context. The astonishment and the laughter move between the ordinary and the extraordinary moments in everyday life and combine manipulation and enjoyment.

The stories from Krasnoshchelye appear as stories of small miracles of nature. They remind us that modern technological advances (satellites, cellular phones, wetsuits), are becoming part of what is considered ‘wild nature’ and thus cross the one-way barrier of remoteness. The stories are vehicles; they link the particularity of the place with universal images. They narrate of practical intelligence, but also of the strange, the unfamiliar that has to be accommodated. Bhabha (1994) tells of the constant redrawing of the home and the world. The stories become such redrawings with their trickiness, know-how, but also astonishment, bewilderment, emotional relief and laughter. Such stories of everydayness are often “repressed” in the official media discourse and global flows of cultural imaginaries. This reminds me of an additional motivation to write this article. *The Tundra Tale* opens with Aunt Panya, an 85-year-old woman carding wool, saying that she has forgotten all the stories. I have known her for almost 20 years and I know that she has her stories. They are not exotic fables or tales, but everyday stories of hard work, enjoyments, of daily hardships and happiness.

Conclusive remarks

In this article I have outlined what Michael Jackson calls the ‘dual potentiality’ of stories – the potentiality to either reinforce or degrade the boundaries that normally divide seemingly finite social worlds from the infinite variety of possible human experience (Jackson 2002, 25). I juxtaposed the visual media narratives with local stories. The film narratives are reinforcing and separating, even detaching, whilst the stories in contrast degrade the boundaries. This was a heuristic move. In reality, they are not so different. The films also offer moments of laughter, and have elements that counterwork the distancing mechanisms. The stories can also exclude, such as the ironic interpretation of when I “got lost” in the forest. Such opposition is productive, as it allows us to see how moods and affects become incorporated in our imaginations, but also how unstable they are. They also show that there are different imaginations.

The local is a compartment of the global, as the films show. The stories show how in everyday life the global becomes part of the local. While the TV documentaries maintain the cartographic hegemony of the centers through global cultural flows, the local stories are de-centering existing spatial relationships. In juxtaposing the audiovisual representations and the stories, I wanted to complicate the image of the remote places, implicitly following Doreen Massey’s definition of the spatial:

as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. It is a way of thinking of ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations. (Massey 1994, 4-5)

In this paper, I have presented two types of social translations of a geographical setting into meaningful reality related to different scales of movement and mobility. Such social translations always contain and are dependent on imaginary and illusory elements produced and appropriated, modified and conveyed through emotions and sensations, stories and visual narratives. While the films reflect an aspect of the imaginary, the constructed, the stories play with the real and illusory. While the films employ colonial nostalgia and sentimental pessimism, the stories are filled with astonishment and laughter. Mass mediation and storytelling, TV programs and the stories, are not opposing, and not interdependent, but concurrent and simultaneous links between the global and the local. Therefore, as anthropologists, we should be attuned to different scales of movement and different constellations between the real and the imaginary in our analyses.

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¹ The period of the 1990s is often given the name “*likhie*” in the media. It is translated into English in different ways: as roaring, troubled, tumultuous, “the '90s of abandon” envisaging political and economic crises, lawlessness, chaos. In the village of Krasnoshchelye, the problems were constant lack of products in the local stores, irregular helicopter transport and reduced regime of the electricity due to lack of diesel supplies to the village (Mankova 2004)

² Although the two terms have slightly different connotation (*glubinka* is not necessarily geographically separated as *otdalenka*), in the local media *otdalyonka* and *glubinka* are often used as synonyms.

³ I argue elsewhere that the film is a political project, expressing what Anna Tsing (2007) calls “the indigenous voice” rather than the village reality – making it a question of conflict between the indigenous population and the extraction companies. The population of the village is represented as indigenous Sami (while only a minor part are Sami), and the threat refers to the plans of development of Shtockman field in Barents sea, and the mining projects in the Khibiny mountains. Because of geographical distance, neither of them would affect the village directly or the reindeer herding in the village.

⁴ Leonid Yakubovich is a very popular Russian TV actor and host.

⁵ *Chastushka*, is an improvised and spontaneous Russian traditional folk song addressing and commenting on problems of the day in a rhymed, rhythmic verse. As they explained them to me: “In the morning in the news, in the evening in rhyme” [*Utrom v gazete, vecherom v kuplete*]

⁶ A personal note: While their gentle rebuke fits into a broader frame of critique on my care-taking abilities (as I had my three children and my husband with me during my fieldwork – they, observing how often I checked whether the kid’s socks were wet, had concluded that I was not a good caretaker), I have to admit that I was slightly bothered by the fact that I was to blame for the boy’s cold.