

# **MENTY AND THE PETERSBURG MYTH: TV COPS IN RUSSIA'S 'CRIME CAPITAL'**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

My article examines popular conceptions of criminality, justice, and the law in contemporary Russia, as reflected in the television police procedural "Streets of Broken Streetlights," which is filmed on location in the city of St. Petersburg. In recent years, St. Petersburg has earned the reputation of Russia's "Crime Capital." My manuscript explores how this reputation--deserved or not--is the most recent embodiment of the myth of St. Petersburg in the Russian popular imagination. St. Petersburg has always demonstrated both Russia's ideals and its disappointments when those ideals are not realized. The city's new reputation as the "Capital of Crime," although inspired by actual events, is also a cipher for the exasperation and insecurity many Russians have experienced in the ongoing period of economic and political transformation unleashed in the late 1980s.

Since its founding in 1703, the city of St. Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad has possessed an enduring mythos in Russian culture. As Katerina Clark (1995) argues, "The myth of Petersburg, sometimes referred to as the Petersburg theme, has been an obsession of Russian intellectual life since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. There is scarcely a major writer, historian, or thinker who has not examined the meaning of Petersburg" (p. 4). The features of the Petersburg myth have changed over time, incorporating official legends of the city's miraculous appearance in a northern marsh, popular beliefs in its imminent demise, and literary images of "the most premeditated city on the globe" (in the words of Fedor Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*). Nonetheless, the notion still endures that St. Petersburg possesses a singular identity, both part of and apart from Russia. Joseph Brodsky (1986) called Petersburg "a challenge to the national psyche" (p. 75). During the 1990s, several high-profile murders (such as the November 1998 shooting death of reform democrat Galina Starovoitova) as well as widespread accusations of corruption in the city government contributed to the creation of a new reputation for St. Petersburg: "Crime Capital of Russia." Popular culture simultaneously contributes to and draws from the myth of the crime capital. The criminality of St. Petersburg was a central theme in the feature film *Brat* (*Brother*, 1997) and in several television serials, including *Banditskii Peterburg* (*Bandit Petersburg*, 2000-) and *Ulitsy razbitykh fonarei* (*Streets of broken streetlights*, 1998-2001).

Criminal activity is not unique to St. Petersburg, among Russian cities. Statistically, the city of Vladivostok, in Russia's Far East, demonstrates a higher crime rate (Glasser, 2002). In 1999-2000 crime rates fell in Petersburg while they grew in other regions of Russia, especially in the Urals and western Siberia (Rokhlin, 2001). Indeed, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia as a whole was confronted with an escalating crime rate. As Louise Shelley (2000) has noted:

In the post-Soviet period, every form of crime has increased. This includes the offenses that are a threat to daily life, the serious organized crimes that affect all sectors of the economy, and the pervasive corruption. Between 1986 and 1996, despite the reduced capacity of the law enforcement apparatus to act against crime, the recorded offenses doubled. The national total increased from 1.3 million in 1986 to 2.6 million in 1996. The most serious increases in crime were in the categories of premeditated murder, premeditated assault, armed robbery, and theft” (p. 100).

Compounding the situation is a police force that was ill-prepared to confront the rise in crime, weakened as it was “both by internal corruption and competition from the private sector” (Shelley, 2000).

Although criminal activity is a problem throughout the Russian Federation, St. Petersburg bears the reputation as a city especially plagued by crime, from petty street thefts to gang warfare to corruption at the highest levels of city government. Like any myth, the concept of St. Petersburg as Russia’s criminal capital is an admixture of factual events, statistics, and sometimes-exaggerated perceptions. Many published accounts bolster the perception that crime and corruption are big problems for this second city. As Fred Weir (2003) reports, a survey of 40 Russian regions conducted recently by the Berlin-based Transparency International and Moscow’s InDem Foundation revealed that “St. Petersburg has one of the highest rates of ‘endemic corruption’” in Russia (p. 23). Moreover, the St. Petersburg police force has earned a reputation for corruption. Not only are the numbers of unsolved crimes chronically underreported of, according to Aleksandr Gorshkov (1998), but, as recently reported in the *Washington Post*, Petersburg city police officers have been known to “routinely stop foreign tourists late at night, demand their documents, and extort money from them” (Glasser, 2002).

While reports of crime and corruption in the city could lead observers to conclude that Petersburg has a crime problem, the designation “crime capital,” which suggests that Petersburg is the core of criminal activity in Russia, stems from more entrenched cultural forces. Petersburg has always demonstrated both Russia’s ideals and its disappointments when those ideals are not realized. Clark (1995) notes the significant role Petersburg plays in Russian culture as “an idea, an ethos, an ideal, and above all ... a language of clichés that Russians have deployed in debating the country’s way forward” (p. 6). Therefore, the cliché “capital of crime,” although inspired by actual events, is also a cipher for the exasperation and insecurity experienced by Russians both inside and outside Petersburg in the ongoing period of economic and political transformation unleashed in the late 1980s. Indeed, in public perception, the notion of “criminality” extends to practices that, while technically not illegal, challenge common notions of proper and just behavior. As Victor Sergeev (2001) asserts, in the immediate post-Soviet period:

The legal confusion created by poorly designed and implemented reforms opened up unlimited opportunities for organizations, interests, and individuals powerful enough to profit from the new situation. From the start, the Russian public viewed much of what had been legitimized by the new order as criminal, especially the process of privatization” (p. 159).

Following from John Storey’s (1996) description of myths as “stories we tell ourselves as a culture in order to banish contradictions and make the world explicable and therefore habitable”

(p. 57), the myth that Petersburg is Russia's crime capital focuses Russians' widespread fears of disorder and chaos onto a particular locale.

Although *Streets of Broken Streetlights* is a television series about the work of *militsonery* (police officers) in St. Petersburg, it does more than merely depict Petersburg as Russia's crime capital. The series explores several avenues of the myth of Petersburg, including its celebrated architecture, its unreal and phantasmagoric quality, and its status as the cradle of Russian literature. Although the television cops seem awash in crime week after week, references to the enduring Petersburg myth send the implicit message that the city, which has endured floods, revolutions, blockades, and benign neglect, will also survive this infiltration by criminals.

Filmed on location in and around St. Petersburg, *Streets of Broken Streetlights* has received both critical and popular acclaim. In 1999 it won two *TEFI* awards in the categories of best dramatic series and best new television program. (The Academy of Russian Television presents the *TEFI*, which is similar to the Emmy). *Streets of Broken Streetlights* not only enjoys a substantial television viewership, but is also a popular title on the Russian home video market, where it is distributed under the title *Menty*, Russian slang for "cops."

The series has garnered praise for the quality of its scripts as well as the acting of its ensemble cast. Many of the earlier story lines were adapted from the books of Andrei Kivinov, recognized by Anthony Olcott (2001) as "one of the most talented of the new Russian mystery writers" (p. 73). Kivinov (a pen name for Andrei Pimenov) served in the Russian *militsiia* or police force before leaving to pursue his writing on a full-time basis, and so his police thrillers—as well as the scripts they inspire—are known for their technical accuracy. In contrast to detective fiction, which features an autonomous romantic hero along the lines of Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, the genre of the police procedural, represented by television programs such as *Hill Street Blues* and *Law and Order*, features a team of police described by Larry Landrum (1984) as "in but not of a world characterized as rampant with crime" (p. 96). Landrum notes that this "team-centered" dramatic format allows for "tighter, faster-paced dramatic elements" as it downplays the rational and deliberate process of investigation (p. 94). It also emphasizes the accomplishments of the investigative team over the work of any one detective.

In *Streets of Broken Streetlights*, the members of the investigative team function as a collective. Although a pair of detectives might team up for a given episode, these alliances are fluid, in contrast to classic American cop shows where the partnerships are fixed and regular (think Friday and Gannon on *Dragnet*). Although the show emphasizes the accomplishments of the team, each of its members possesses distinct personality traits. The intellectual and moral core is Captain Larin (Aleksei Nilov), whose name, as Sergei Fomin (1999) notes, evokes Tat'iana Larina, familiar to the Russian audience as the celebrated heroine of Aleksander Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (p. 22). Senior Lieutenant Dukalis (Sergei Selin) is distinguished by his physical strength and his childishness. Lieutenant Volkov (Mikhail Trukhin), the youngest member of the team, is chiefly responsible for juvenile offenders. Major Solovets (Aleksandr Polovtsev) leads the group of adventurous investigators and often acts as a buffer between them and the police leadership. Iurii Kuznetsov plays the perpetually exhausted

Lieutenant-Colonel Petrenko, a dedicated representative of Russian law enforcement who serves as a cultural bridge to Soviet times. Behind his back, the cops in his precinct call Petrenko “*Mukhomor*” (“toadstool,” a colloquial term of insult for an old person), but they respect him all the same. A popular character in early episodes was Kazantsev, nicknamed “Casanova.” Played by Aleksandr Lykov, the womanizing Kazantsev disappeared from the series after the first season. Introduced in the middle of the first season, the newest member of the collective, and its only woman, is Senior Lieutenant Abdulova, played by Anastasiia Mel’nikova.

*Streets of Broken Streetlights* appeals to its audience both because of the universality of its fundamental good-versus-evil plot and because of its specificity as a story about the contemporary Russian condition. Calling crime a “highly symbolic activity,” Judith Grant (1992), in her exploration of American police dramas, observes that fictionalized television portrayals of crime fascinate viewers because they explore meaningful themes such as “law and morality” and “rebellion and the re-establishment of state control” (p. 67). In other words, crime shows captivate their audiences with enduring myths that would seem to transcend national distinctions. On the other hand, notes Joan Neuberger (1993), “Crime and the outrage it provokes always acquire meanings specific to their place and time” (p. 1). That particularity helps to explain why Russian television, despite the dominance of imported Anglo-American and South American serials, manages to produce its own programs about crime and crime fighters. Russian viewers turn to domestic police dramas on the small screen for the same reason that Russian readers choose domestic crime fiction over imported translations, according to Viktor Miasnikov (2001): “They need faith in the power of the state and in the dependability of the army and security organs” (p. 56).

### ARCHITECTURE AND AUTHORITY

Even as *Streets of Broken Streetlights* appeals to a Russian audience nationwide (and in emigration, thanks to satellite television and videos) it draws upon the enduring mythos of a specific Russian city: St. Petersburg. Although the series has employed various directors (which contributes to an unevenness of quality and continuity), the episodes consistently and deliberately feature the city’s imposing architectural ensemble, not merely as a backdrop, but as a key element in the story. As Fomin (1999) argues, “the atmosphere of the place of action plays a role in the plot development of any self-respecting detective mystery. The place of action itself gives rise to crime” (p. 24). In the episode “Dark Beer, or the English Lesson” (*Temnoe pivo, ili urok angliiskogo*, 1998), the investigative team is searching for a serial killer. Finally, the cops find a key piece of evidence allowing them to launch a citywide search for their chief suspect. The next scene, which highlights the dragnet, is presented without dialogue or sound, but to the accompaniment of a frantic musical theme: *militsonery* (Russian police officers) stop a young man who fits the assailant’s description in order to check his documents (fig. 1).



Figure 1. The segment begins on location with an establishing shot of the Triumphal Arch. Then the camera zooms in on two officers questioning a suspect.

Different characters repeat this sequence twice more in other areas of central Petersburg. What makes this fairly routine procedure remarkable is that each establishing shot begins with a slow pan across a well-known Petersburg landmark: the Triumphal Arch, the Cathedral of St. Isaac, and Falconet's monument to Peter the Great (known popularly as the Bronze Horseman after the poem by Pushkin). Not only are these monuments visually impressive, but each was constructed as a symbol of the authority and might of the Russian Empire: the Triumphal Arch (1814, reconstructed 1827-34) commemorated Russian victories over Napoleon in the War of 1812, while the massive and majestic Cathedral of St. Isaac (built 1818-58) symbolized Orthodoxy as the imperial religion. Falconet's equestrian statue of Peter the Great, which Clark (1995) names the "*locus classicus* of the Petersburg myth" (p. 5), has been burdened with layers of meaning, but the dominant symbol is of Emperor Peter's authority, vision and will. The fact that these monuments were created by a regime that no longer exists does not subtract from their symbolic wealth. If anything, their status as imperial Russian monuments endows them with an unironic significance not enjoyed by monuments of the Soviet period and imparts greater national meaning to the series. The composition of this scene implicitly affirms the work of the Russian police as it carries out the enforcing function of the state against the backdrop of these monuments.

In contrast, when "bad guys," rather than cops, appear against the setting of Petersburg's rich architectural ensemble, they appear out of place and in conflict with this great city. For example, the episode "Third from the Left" (*Tretii sleva*, 1998) opens with three men meeting near one of the Egyptian Sphinxes that were brought to St. Petersburg in 1834. In this establishing scene, the characters have yet to commit a crime, but their rough language and ignorant demeanor already betrays their criminal profile to the audience. Approaching the sphinx, one asks dismissively, misreading the text of Petersburg's rich cultural history, "What's with this creature (*chuchelo*), huh?" A more knowledgeable member of the gang attempts to explain the sphinx's significance to the others and asks them the famous riddle: what walks in the morning on four legs, in the afternoon on two, and in the evening on three? Without venturing a guess, his companion replies, "Who the hell knows? (*Da khren ego znaet*)." Whereas the shots of the Triumphal Arch and the monument to Emperor Peter I affirmed the authority and power of Russian law enforcement, this ironic opposition between the stately sphinx and the ignorant young men exposes them as criminal "types." This reductive, iconic image of the

Petersburg “thug” affirms and justifies the work of the police even in the absence of criminal activity. The young men in this scene are not continuing characters; they are transient outsiders to the plot of the series and to the Petersburg setting. Although they may be residents of the city, the scene implies that they have less claim to this city than do the imported Egyptian sphinxes.

This opposition of ill-mannered hooligans and Petersburg’s rich cultural facade, introduced in the opening scene in a visual form, returns later in the same episode in a verbal form when Dukalis tells Kazantsev a crude joke:

Wanna hear a joke, Volodya? A guy’s standing outside St. Isaac’s Cathedral and, to put it politely, he hears nature’s call. Another guy comes up to him and says, “Hey, brother, how do you get to the Hermitage [Museum]?” “To the Hermitage?” says the first one, the one who’s taking a whiz. “Listen, whaddya need the Hermitage for? Piss here!”

This bathroom humor matches the personality of the earthy and jovial Dukalis. However, far from identifying himself with the heroes of his anecdote, Dukalis instead distances himself from that “type,” for whom museums and cathedrals are not testaments of the human spirit, but convenient places to urinate. Although there is nothing criminally devious about the characters in Dukalis’s joke, they are implicated, along with the men at the Sphinx, as being uncultured (*nekul’turnyi*) in a city that prides itself on its cultural legacy.

“Looking for High-Risk Work” (*Ishchu rabotu s riskom*, 1998) repeats this visual contrast between criminals and St. Petersburg’s cultural richness. The title comes from a “work-for-hire” classified advertisement placed by Grisha, a young man recently demobilized from the army who wants to take his girlfriend on a long-promised trip to Paris and falls for the temptation of easy money. Ugriumov, a wealthy restaurateur who is running for a seat in the city legislature, hires Grisha to kill his unfaithful wife. Ugriumov and Grisha meet for the first time at the Bronze Horseman statue, more precisely, at the rear of the statue. The camera, which is placed behind the statue, focuses on the horse’s rear, then tilts down to the granite base of the monument to reveal Grisha (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Well-known Petersburg landmarks often comment negatively on would-be criminals. This scene begins with the camera focused on the rear of Falconet’s equestrian monument to Peter the Great, then the camera tilts down to the hired gun standing at the granite base of the statue.

The opening shot of the horse’s anatomy comments ironically on Grisha’s character and his criminal plans. Another interpretation of this unlikely meeting place suggests that, paradoxically, Ugriumov and Grisha try to avoid the all-seeing gaze of Emperor Peter, an iconographic representation of authority, by standing directly behind him. Ugriumov seems

uncomfortable throughout the scene and as the pair walks away from the statue, Ugriumov takes one final, furtive glance back toward Peter (and the camera eye).

Ugriumov, who has a flair for drama, stages his second meeting with Grisha at another meaningful Petersburg locale: a monument to the Decembrists, military officers who participated in the abortive coup against Emperor Nicholas I in 1825. In contrast, their third meeting, where Ugriumov has promised to give Grisha his payment, is held in the lot of an abandoned factory. Instead of the well-known and well-kept public spaces, an anonymous scene of industrial debris appears behind the offenders. Ugriumov has a practical reason for arranging the third meeting in a junk-filled lot: he plans to have his men kill Grisha at the conclusion of the deal. But this setting carries symbolic weight as well. Writing about sense of place in the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, Yi-Fu Tuan (1985) discusses the interrelationship between the human psyche and the cities humans inhabit: "We are to ourselves modern metropolises with orderly and clean streets, but in their midst lie twisting lanes and dark alleys about which we know little and which are the breeding grounds of fear, anxiety, and inadmissible passions" (p. 56). This interpretation suggests that while Ugriumov was planning the murder of his own wife, this unthinkable act was to him an exercise with a rational solution, reflected in the orderly locales where he held his meetings with Grisha. The scene of waste and chaos in the third meeting reveals Ugriumov's true nature as a despicable character.

### PETERSBURG LEGENDS

In addition to its emphasis on the look of the city, the series engages with the Petersburg mythos as well through characters' remarks about the city's distinctiveness. For example, experienced criminals frequently tell the newcomers to their gangs, "This is Petersburg, not Sverdlovsk" (or Murmansk, or any number of places). Using the familiar nickname for Petersburg that marks the speaker as an insider, experienced criminals tell the newcomers, "You don't understand *Piter*, it's a big city." Although the motif of a big-city expert giving a lesson to a neophyte from the provinces is a stock feature for this genre, more unusual and telling are how characters compare Petersburg to other large metropolises.

In the episode "Instinct of a Moth" (*Instinkt motylka*, 1998), Volkov, the junior cop, searches for an elusive master criminal who seems to disappear through the very ground when cornered. Trying to discover more about Petersburg's literal and figurative underworld, Volkov pretends to be a newspaper reporter in order to conduct an interview with a member of a satanic cult. At first, the cult member talks to Volkov quite openly about his beliefs, but his attitude quickly changes when the young cop-as-reporter asks him a naive question: "Do you practice your black masses underground?" The satanist replies with indignation, "Petersburg isn't Moscow" (*Piter ne Moskva*); his use of the colloquial nickname *Piter* marks him as an insider to the city and as one of its adherents in the centuries-old rivalry with Moscow. Drawing on the familiar motif of Petersburg's illogical construction on a marshy river delta, the satanist proclaims dramatically: "It was built on a swamp, and it will sink away into the swamp. It's a rotten city" (*gniloi gorod*).

In the episode "Kisses, Larin" (*Tseluiu, Larin*), Larin and Kazantsev watch through a window as OMON, the Russian paramilitary forces, round up the members of a criminal group.

For the time being one man is allowed to go free for lack of evidence against him, which prompts Kazantsev to wonder aloud whether the other members of the gang will punish him. “In Chicago they’d lower your feet into a barrel full of cement and then—splash—into the Hudson River. With us, it’s more severe” (*U nas pokruche budet*). Even while slipping up on the details of American geography, Kazantsev makes his point: St. Petersburg criminals have their own brand of justice that is even more drastic than that of the quintessential American crime city.

The series often depicts Petersburg as a fantastic and unreal place where anything is possible. The debut episode “Nightmare on S. Street” (*Koshmar na ulitse S.*, 1998) establishes this motif with a subplot in which the Russian Federal Security Service (the FSB, a successor agency of the KGB) monitors the office of the investigative team with a hidden microphone. This creates a hierarchy in which the “regular” police (Ministry of Internal Affairs or MVD) are victimized by the “spies” of the Federal Security Service. The audience can more easily root for the St. Petersburg cops if it sees them as “just one of us” and not a part of a distant, omniscient, and historically brutal power structure. Like a good underdog, the investigative team unwittingly supplies the eavesdropping FSB with nothing but misinformation. In one scene, the cops use a fake polygraph machine—an old radio fitted with red and green lights that light up when the investigator presses a hidden button—to extract a confession from an uncooperative suspect. The eavesdropping FSB agents are amazed that such a poor precinct can afford such an expensive piece of equipment. Nothing is as it first appears. In “Contrabass” (*Kontrabas*, 1999), a key witness and avid winter swimmer insists that Captain Larin meet her after her workout in the icy Neva River near the Peter and Paul Fortress. The scene is more than a gratuitous portrayal of a girl in a bikini against a pretty winter background; it also affirms that in Petersburg, the unusual is part of everyday life. The episode “Cardiac Deficiency” (*Serdechnaia nedostatochnost’*, 1999) illustrates particularly clearly Petersburg’s reputation for the commonplaceness of the unreal. The opening scene takes place in a dim room, in a realm between sleep and wakefulness. One character awakes and asks his companion the provocative question: “Why are you here? You’re dead.” As it turns out, the addressee is the dead man’s identical twin, who poses as his late brother in order to avenge his death. The theme of doubling and mistaken identity is enforced by minor characters in the episode, including a woman dressed as Marilyn Monroe, a Lenin impersonator who commits suicide out of disillusionment with post-Soviet society, and a transgendered restaurant director.

### CAPITAL OF CRIME

Although not its central focus, Petersburg’s not wholly deserved reputation as Russia’s capital of crime is addressed in the series. In the episode “Corpse from the Zoo” (*Trup iz zooparka*, 2000) Lieutenant-Colonel Petrenko’s superior rebukes him for allowing another in a string of contract killings to happen on his watch: “Again Petersburg, again a businessman.” Despite infrequent references to criminal gangs who have infiltrated Petersburg from Tambov or Chechnya, *Streets of Broken Streetlights* does not place the blame for crime solely on outsiders or newcomers. The perpetrators of the crimes in the series tend to be Petersburgers, following one of the rules named by Marina Galina (2001) in her discussion of crime fiction: “A good, old-fashioned crime develops within the community, not outside it” (p. 94). In fact, the episode “Intrusion into Personal Life” (*Vtorzhenie v chastnuiu zhizn’*, 1998) addresses the convention of blaming crime on exploitative outsiders. The vice-director of a company arranges the murder of

his director and one-time friend. This vice-director—a native of Petersburg and an ethnic Russian—tries to play on assumed attitudes of chauvinism and racism by planting false evidence: an answering machine tape where a man with an accent typical of the Caucasus region threatens the director. The cops, however, recognize that the tape is a phony and eventually get the real culprit to confess.

While the show's powerful masterminds of the criminal world tend to be city residents, victims of crime are often outsiders or recent arrivals to the city, especially if they are poor, young, and unsuspecting. In "High Voltage" (*Vysokoe napriazheniie*, 1998), a young salesman of decorative tiles comes to Petersburg with the hope of making a big sale. Because hotel rooms are out of his price range, he is happy to find a cheap one-bedroom apartment to rent. Unfortunately, the inexperienced outsider does not realize that a Petersburg gang has an extra set of keys to his apartment, and can get access to his large amounts of cash on the night after he closes the deal. In other episodes, the victims are petty criminals lured into the crime world almost unconsciously. As Olcott (2001) notes, crime in the Russian *detektiv*, or whodunit, "tends to be depicted as an omnipresent danger to which the criminal succumbs because of weakness, or because of bad decisions made earlier" (p. 81). For example, the episode "Seductive Dreams" (*Charuiushie sni*, 1998), based on a book by Kivinov, features a crime gang that pays young student nurses to administer fatal doses of medicine to their elderly patients in order to acquire their desirable apartments. Albert, the ringleader, entices Inga, an unsuspecting recent arrival to the city, to join his group after he overhears her desperate long-distance telephone call home to her mother. Because Inga is far from home, with neither apartment nor money, Albert's promise of a job easily tempts her. At the episode's end, Lieutenant Dukalis advises Inga to leave Petersburg as soon as possible: "It's high time you went home." The episode's dominant message is that Petersburg is no place for an innocent creature like her.

One exception to the general rule that crime is not an import to St. Petersburg is demonstrated by the episode "Sasha Walked along the Highway" (1999; the Russian title, "*Shla Sasha po shosse*," comes from a well-known tongue-twister). Anna, a young refugee from Tadjikistan, arrives in Petersburg, where she is enslaved and prostituted by her fellow countrymen. This Tadjik gang also victimizes Katia, a native Petersburg girl, whose mentally unstable mother sells her to the criminals. The location of the gang's headquarters highlights its lack of a permanent foothold in Petersburg: the chief operates from a trailer at the edge of a market on the outskirts of the city. Despite the unsavory nature of this Tadjik group, the series does not create, in general, a dichotomy of East vs. West. In "School of the Spider" (*Shkola pauka*, 1999), our investigative team learns that female criminals are using an extremely rare and effective form of unarmed combat called the "spider method" to subdue and rob their male victims. What is the source of this method? An athlete named Zubarev, having learned the spider method from a Chinese master in Kazakhstan, opened a gym in St. Petersburg to teach what he considered a legitimate mode of self-defense. One of Zubarev's students mastered the method and then established a rival gym in order to train prostitutes to use it as a weapon against their clients. Thus, while the spider method is depicted as an exotic import from the East, the police do not demonize the newcomer Zubarev or his martial art. Rather, the spider method becomes a criminal activity only after it is co-opted by the local Petersburg prostitutes, whom the cops call "the girls on Old Nevsky Prospect."

## LITERARY CHANNELS AND CORRIDORS

*Streets of Broken Streetlights* explores not only Petersburg's famous architectural landmarks, but also its grungy courtyards, cavernous hallways, and dimly lit stairwells. Naturally, such areas are not unique to the urban geography of St. Petersburg, but they have appeared so frequently in narratives about the city that they have become part of its mystique. Svetlana Boym (1994), recalling her own childhood in Leningrad, describes the courtyards and hallways of apartment buildings as a strange realm between public and private: "the space that belongs to everybody and to nobody but that creates discomfort in both public and private existence" (p. 141). Not surprisingly, stairwells, courtyards and the warren-like back alleys of Petersburg function frequently as the locus of crime in the series. Humans pass through these spaces, but do not linger there, which means that such spaces generate victims, but not eyewitnesses. These realms also function symbolically as landscapes of the mind.

In "Looking for High-Risk Work," the hired gun Grisha has a nightmare about how he will carry out the murder of Mrs. Ugriumov. He lurks in wait for her in a dimly lit apartment entranceway. When Mrs. Ugriumov enters the building, the camera suddenly shifts to Grisha's point of view. We watch the heels of Mrs. Ugriumov's shoes, as Grisha would watch them, as she slowly ascends the staircase. Unseen by Mrs. Ugriumov, Grisha approaches his intended victim from behind and strikes her with an ax.

The ax in this nightmare scene is an unmistakable reference to Raskol'nikov's murder weapon in Fedor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, one of the most emblematic works of Petersburg literature. Therefore, this scene draws upon another aspect of Petersburg's mythos: its repute as the source of Russian literature. Brodsky (1986) asserts that "it is with the emergence of St. Petersburg that Russian literature came into existence" (p. 76). Just as it depicts well-known works of architecture and statuary, *Streets of Broken Streetlights* situates itself within the Petersburg cultural tradition through frequent citations of classic literary works.

The plot of "A Cure for Boredom" (*Lekarstvo ot skuki*, 1998) draws on thematics and imagery of *The Queen of Spades*, the Pushkin story later developed into an opera by Petr Chaikovsky. The episode opens with a shot of the Lion Bridge, which spans the Griboedov Canal (known also as the Catherine Canal). Church bells ring in the background. The camera pans to the left, capturing an impoverished, disheveled man huddled in a corner of the embankment; a half-empty bottle of some unidentified hard liquor stands next to him on the pavement. This juxtaposition of beauty and poverty evokes the theme of Petersburg as a city of contrasts. This theme develops further when the drunken man spots something in the water and crawls over to the water's edge to investigate. We see his shocked reaction a moment before we see what evoked it: the corpse of a grey-haired old woman is floating in the canal. At this moment, the diegetic sounds of church bells and lapping water fade as the soaring notes of Chaikovsky's opera mark the end of this introduction.

Petersburg's system of canals are "the point of greatest ambivalence on the symbolic map of the city" (Clark;1995. p. 10). "On the one hand," Clark argues, Petersburg's canals are "fetid waters, unacknowledged sewers, and as such suggest disease, flux, decay, and corruption. [...]" On the other hand, they are an integral part of the grand design for taming nature and imposing

order on the city" (p. 10). The fact that the dead woman enters the story line floating in a canal symbolically emphasizes the ambivalence surrounding her cause of death. Captain Larin, who represents official order, initially refuses to investigate the case at all, insisting that there is no crime: the woman took her own life. Despite his convictions, Larin is drawn back repeatedly to the canals and to Maria Pavlovna, a friend of the deceased who searches for clues to her friend's death in the text of *The Queen of Spades*. Maria Pavlovna believes in a link between the "three cards" theme of the story and opera and the three rooms of the dead woman's desirable downtown apartment: "Nothing is accidental," she insists. "It's all interconnected, but it's in a code we have to crack." Larin, for his part, rejects such romantic notions of investigative police work: "Our work is not a ladies' game of cards," he informs Maria Pavlovna. "It's dirt, muck, blood, and reports." In the end, Maria Pavlovna's hunch turns out to be right, but the guilty are uncovered only because of the "reports" Larin cites in his angry invective. Thanks to some old reports unearthed by Lieutenant Dukalis, Larin learns that the coroner who confirmed the old woman's cause of death to be suicide had falsified documents earlier and that she is the lover of the dead woman's nephew. Lest the police detectives be accused of being too fanciful, the literary theme in this series, for all its potential, never overwhelms the dominant story line. Rather, literary references hover below the surface story, occupying the space of dream sequences and alternative versions.

### PETERSBURG AS A COP'S FATE

Although the series can be quite brutal in its portrayal of crime, episodes often conclude with an investigator delivering a philosophical monologue, underscored with slow, poignant music. Significantly, these speeches concern not the nature of crime or the futility of fighting crime, but rather the detective's place in St. Petersburg. An especially dark episode called "Autumn Evening Blues" (*Blius osennego vechera*, 1998) ends with Kazantsev's brooding words: "I want only one thing: to rush away on a magic cloud into the black Petersburg sky, never to return." Kazantsev's action on the screen contradicts his words: instead of rising up over the city, he heads off to a metro station, soon to descend into its depths. His partner Larin enjoys a more positive moment of introspection at the finale of "Kisses, Larin" (*Tseluiu, Larin*, 1998). The captain sits on a windowsill, which offers the audience a view of the river Neva on a cold, cloudy day. Under the low, gray clouds, the city appears oppressive and mysterious. Larin intones: "This is my city, but it's yours as well. How good it is that I have the city, the Neva, and you." Although Kazantsev feels hemmed in and longs to escape Petersburg and Larin celebrates the city as his own, both scenes suggest that the cops, whether they like it or not, are tied to St. Petersburg by fate.

Kazantsev appears in a less pensive mood at the end of the episode "Support" (*Podstavka*, 1998). Having unmasked the murderer of a young reporter, he takes the late reporter's girlfriend on a stroll through the city, having promised to protect her "day and night." In a scene suitable for a travelogue of St. Petersburg, the attractive couple walks past attractive landmarks, such as the Cathedral of the Resurrection (known popularly as the Cathedral of the Savior on the Blood). The city has been reduced from a social entity where crimes are committed and solved to an aesthetic object of beauty. Underscoring the scene is a treacly vocal number called "White Night" (*Belaia noch*), the term for the prolonged hours of daylight during the summer solstice that are practically a Petersburg trademark. At first, the lyrics seem to

support the visual image of an emerging love affair: “We wandered over the Neva all night, the two of us together.” The chief images of the song—dreams, fog, twilight—reflect Petersburg’s enduring and endearing affiliation with the fantastic: “In the sleeping city, where dreams come true / Where footprints (*sledy*) disappear in the summer twilight.” This line, however, also comments on the obstacles to solving crimes in this city: the “footprints” (*sledy*) are also the “clues” sought by *sledovateli* or investigators. Although the visual language of this closing sequence reassures the audience that the police detectives have preserved the city as a place of personal comfort, the lyrics of the accompanying song suggest the challenges the police face in uncovering clues.

### CRIME IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

Olcott (2001), in his book *Russian Pulp: The Detektiv and the Way of Russian Crime*, examines what he terms the “peculiarities of Russian crime,” observing that notions of innocent and criminal activities are unique to each culture. A distinctive feature of the Russian *detektiv*, according to Olcott, “is how many characters who are clearly intended to be positive heroes are shown to be casually violating laws” (p. 86). Although the cops from the street of broken streetlights usually get their man, they may break protocol or even break the law in the process. In the episode “Petersburg Present” (*Peterburgskii prezent*, 1998) Dukalis and Larin find themselves short on cash for lunch, so they employ the services of a certain “Bomzh Ivanych” to stage a hold-up of a nearby cafe (Bomzh—his nickname is the official Russian acronym for a homeless person: *bez opredelennogo mesta zhitel'stva*—is a recurring minor character in the series who provides the detectives with information from the street in return for some food and a warm place to stay). In the hold-up scene, the policemen subdue the would-be “criminal” in short order and remove him from the premises. When they return, the grateful cafe manager offers them hamburgers and coffee on the house.

In order to avert potential criticism of the detectives’ ethical standards, the entire lighthearted and humorous scene is presented as harmless play-acting with frequent references to American movies. Dukalis, in imitation of American police procedurals, even begins to read the would-be robber his Miranda rights: “*Vy imeete pravo khranit' molchanie.*” Dukalis is a Russian cop, playing the part of a Russian cop to an audience whose expectations are so influenced by American popular culture that every arrest must begin with the words “You have the right to remain silent.” Larin repeats the motif of playing a role his complement to Bomzh Ivanych following the fraudulent hold-up: “You acted it perfectly. They’ll give you an Oscar.” After the danger has passed, the startled waitress praises the cops for their courage, noting that the robber “even had a real gun. Just like in an American movie.”

Although Larin and Dukalis may be abusing their positions and misrepresenting themselves, the subtext of this scene suggests that their reward is rightfully earned, even if the methods they used to achieve that reward are questionable. The *menty* do their job well, but their salary does not allow them the luxury of lunch in a modest cafe. In contrast, in the episode “La-La-Fa” (1998), our collective learns that another investigator in the police station (not a member of the core team) has demanded a bribe from Kolya, a boy brought in on charges of drug possession. Kolya, the viewers learn, is basically a “good kid,” but was caught because he was foolish enough to make a delivery for a friend “just this once.” The officer in charge of his case

promises to let him go for one hundred dollars. Dukalis, Larin, and Volkov, annoyed by this abuse of power, agree to help Kolya out of his tight spot. The morality of *Streets of Broken Streetlights* distinguishes between good cops who occasionally break the rules (played by the core actors) and the corrupt cops (always non-recurring characters). In so doing, the television show acknowledges, but downplays, the serious problem of corruption in the Russian police force. According to Louise Shelley (2000), "In 1993, Russian police officials reported that 13,000 Internal Affairs employees (out of a total workforce of over one million) were directly collaborating with organized criminal groups and many more were accepting bribes" (p. 105). In the world of this fictional Petersburg precinct, however, corruption is an aberration.

The series also distinguishes between those who possess a great deal and those who possess little. To swindle some hamburgers from a profitable café is less odious than to demand a bribe from someone who can ill afford it. The vagrant Bomzh Ivanych is depicted as good-hearted and generous, while characters with many material possessions, such as Ugriumov, are motivated by greed.

The demand for a bribe and the pretend café heist illustrate what Olcott recognizes as the fundamental tension of the *detektiv* genre: "that between *zakon*, or 'law' and *spravedlivost*, [or] 'justice'" (p. 96). The cops of *Streets of Broken Streetlights* distinguish between abstract and soulless legality, which they sometimes flout, and justice, which they always observe. In "Contrabass," a young man is found beaten and badly injured. Major Solovets tries to convince the victim's father, a musician with ties to the criminal world, to entrust the police with the investigation rather than using his personal connections. Solovets, a representative of law and order, tells the father, "You and I have the same goal: justice [*spravedlivost*]."

Since justice is a higher ideal than law, the cops of *Streets* are not above seeking justice using less-than-legal methods. In "Dancing on Ice" (*Tantsy na l'du*, 1998), a "new Russian" (a term for the *nouveaux riches* of post-Soviet Russia) is brought down to the precinct after he gets into a fistfight with a stranger who accidentally bumped into him on the street. In the course of questioning him about this minor infraction, Volkov is treated rudely by this new Russian. Although he has no proof of more serious wrongdoings, Volkov judges by the man's behavior that he must be a "villain" (*podlets*) with something to hide. After he is forced to release the man, the young lieutenant begins to look into his business practices and eventually uncovers fraud. Even before a crime is uncovered, the cops of *Streets of Broken Streetlights* are depicted with the ability to detect criminals based on their appearance or behavior in a single brief encounter.

## CONCLUSION

The series is set in a concrete place—Petersburg—but it also occupies a "utopia," literally a no-place. Aleksandr Kapitsa, the veteran producer of *Streets of Broken Streetlights* admits, "This is the police our viewers wish they had, but don't" (Bohlen, 2000). The criminal investigative team in *Streets of Broken Streetlights* represents not repression, but the rule of the just. Corruption in the police force may be acknowledged, but as the exception for a minority of venal cops.

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The creators of the series answer those conservative cultural critics in Russia who malign the popular *detektiv* genre as a threat to authentic literary and visual forms. By drawing from the multifaceted myth of Petersburg, *Streets of Broken Streetlights* inserts itself into a venerable Russian tradition, thereby transcending its status as an ephemeral artifact of popular culture. The series references classic works of Petersburg architecture, literature, and music—works that would be familiar to the general Russian audience—not only to legitimate itself as a “thinking person’s” police procedural but also to offer its audience a satisfying message about crime. In *Streets of Broken Streetlights*, a criminal is not necessarily someone who commits a crime. A criminal can be someone who appears uncultured or out of place in Petersburg (as in the Sphinx scene in “Third from the Left”) or someone who deserves to be punished (as in “Dancing on Ice”). The police investigators in “The Streets of Broken Streetlights,” who rightfully inhabit this city and are linked to it by fate, recognize the guilty and are prepared to uphold justice.

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