

SMALL SCREEN NATION BUILDING: *ASTANA – MY LOVE*

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Abstract: In 2010 the first episodes of the television miniseries *Astana – My Love* was screened in presence of Kazakhstani authorities. Systematic allusions to President Nursultan Nazarbayev throughout the episodes give the work, presented as a major cultural and societal event, a quasi-official status. Such productions blur the lines between political indoctrination and popular entertainment. *Astana – My Love* reflects Kazakhstan’s ongoing debates about its national identity and strategies for the future. The miniseries deserves scholarly attention because of the way the Kazakhstani authorities use it to define the past, assert an important role for the country’s president, name desirable allies in the present and in the future, and lay out what they define as positive ethical and cultural values in a neo-capitalist authoritarian environment.

On 21 June 2010, the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan was officially presented with a television miniseries titled *Astana – My Love*, two episodes of which were screened on this occasion.¹ The newspaper *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* reported from the Central Concert Hall “Kazakhstan” in Astana, where the ceremony took place, that these episodes “already allow us to predict that the miniseries will evoke great interest and find its audience. In order for this to happen, the film has all the necessary qualities: an intriguing plot, dramatic turns, and a fine cast.

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But its main accomplishment is that it is filled with love and kindness.”² At the ceremony, Kazakhstan’s Minister of Culture pointed out that such a large-scale project could only be carried out due to the economic growth that Kazakhstan had achieved under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

It is hard to imagine a comparable ceremony greeting with such fawning commentary in a Western context—the premiere of a television miniseries attended by the country’s leading dignitaries and celebrated as a national event. Indeed, what was so special about *Astana – My Love* that it merited a demonstration of official endorsement? Who were the creators of the film and who the influential forces behind them? What was their sociopolitical and cultural agenda, and how did it translate into the fabric of the final product?³ When film events in authoritarian societies are assigned a political-representational role, the genre of choice is usually the documentary, claiming to reflect the splendid “reality” of the society in question; specifically, feature-length documentaries were preferred for regime celebrations in various historical periods.⁴ However, this is not the case with *Astana – My Love*, an unabashed melodrama.

This article presents a close reading of a television miniseries that was produced and released as a blend of entertainment and propaganda. *Astana - My Love* follows most standard procedures of television miniseries in regards to character constellation and plot development, but also contains some elements that are unique—these are indicators of Kazakhstan’s ongoing debates about its national identity and strategies for the future. In the following discussion, I analyze the image of the past offered by this miniseries, the role of the president, allusions to desirable allies in the present and in the future, and ethical and cultural values in a neo-capitalist authoritarian environment presented as positive. This approach helps pioneer the understudied role of television in Central Asian societies, going beyond methodological challenges (among others

² Adiiia Rakhmetullaeva. ““Astana – liubov’ moia.”” *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 22 June 2010. *Ahiskapress*, a Turkish-language news portal for Meskhetian Turks, also reported on the event; cf. <http://ahiskapress.com/?p=1913>.

³ Just one year earlier, the twelve-part miniseries *City of Dream* (Gorod mechty, 2009) had been released. Directed by the experienced Kyrgyz filmmaker Ernest Abdyzhaparov, its title also refers to Astana and most of its episodes take place in the capital. However, the image of Astana is far less glamorous, and the characters go through genuine crises when moving from Almaty to the new capital. This series was given no official endorsement and vanished quickly.

⁴ The textbook example is German documentary filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl whose visual grandiosity defined fundamental totalitarian aesthetics – the premieres of her films were turned into official state events. In the Soviet Union, directors such as Roman Karmen, Ilya Kopalin, and Lidiya Stepanova were recognized with numerous Stalin and State Prizes and enjoyed exceptionally long careers; their documentaries, too, were treated as highly relevant for the formulation of state policies.

the inability to get viewership data) and offering some important insights from one particular miniseries, its text and its context.

Astana – My Love: Popular Entertainment and Political Indoc-trination

The plot of *Astana – My Love* resembles a fairy tale rather than a documentary: In 1985, on a Turkish Airlines plane flying over Kazakhstan, the wife of an influential Turkish entrepreneur gives birth to a daughter. The assisting physician is a Kazakh woman whose son was born a little while before. In celebration of this coincidence, the two mothers promise to marry their children to each other once they are grown up. But years later, the Turkish woman dies, and the vow eventually is forgotten. Then, in 2009, the girl Inju—now an ambitious young lady working as a television journalist—visits Kazakhstan’s new capital Astana, and the boy Erlan – a promising architect currently working as a cab driver – gives her a lift to the hotel. Neither of them is aware of their fateful background, but that, of course, will change in the course of the twelve-hour series. Conspicuously, the representation-by-documentary tradition is not completely neglected: while *Astana – My Love* leaves no doubt about the fictitious nature of its story, the series does add elements that make the unbelievable more realistic, resorting to subplots involving professional and business competition, spousal disloyalty, and crime. More importantly, in the final episodes, Kazakhstan’s president himself makes repeated appearances via documentary footage, simultaneously watched on TV by several characters of the miniseries. Thus, the documentary genre that is so popular with authoritarian officialdom made its entry through the backdoor of those “television in television” scenes and provides the melodrama with a quasi-documentary dimension.

Communication scholars often treat miniseries synonymously with soap operas,⁵ although technically the two genres are distinct.⁶ They do share a large number of episodes, the fact that—if commercially successful—they are continued for one or more seasons, have a linear continuous main plotline and a relatively stable cast. However, with few exceptions, the cultural prestige of soap operas, which usually take place in the same sets year after year, is lower than that of miniseries—after all, the latter have increasingly attracted important directors, screenwriters, and performers who would never agree to work on regular soap operas, such

⁵ For a non-academic Kazakhstani reflection of this view, cf. Asel’Mukanova. “Kino na ‘mylo’!” *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 17 October 2008.

⁶ For a substantial discussion of the terminology and its implications, see Ien Ang. 1985. *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. London and New York: Methuen, especially pp. 52-55.

as *Days of Our Lives*.⁷ And still, in post-Soviet societies, even successful miniseries are not seen as legitimate parts of national cultural memory, which is defined by the standards of traditional high culture. Kazakhstani critics rarely afford television miniseries serious attention, pointing out that even the most quoted native miniseries—*The Crossroad* (Perekrestok, 1996-2000)—did not lead to a subsequent cult or regular reruns.⁸ However, similar to most post-Soviet societies, television miniseries, especially from Latin America, have enjoyed enormous popularity in Kazakhstan, despite their relatively low prestige among professional critics.⁹ They played a particular role in the renaissance of national culture at the end of the tumultuous 1990s, when *The Crossroad* was launched with British funds and, during the first season, realized with direct technical and creative assistance from the BBC—an experience aptly called by one of the involved specialists a “Marshall Plan of the Mind.”¹⁰ At the time of Kazakhstan’s severe economic crisis, this was a project that gave employment to many forlorn writers and performers and laid the groundwork for the necessary professionalization of television feature production in the country. That miniseries also pursued a goal that could be defined as “social pedagogy” — “to help the viewer become familiar with the new realities of life, and to see and understand the social changes that are unfolding in Kazakhstan”¹¹ — in other words, assist them during the transition from a communist to a capitalist economy.

The success of *The Crossroad* can be considered “natural” due to its freshness and closeness to Kazakhstani reality; no official influence was necessary to engineer its popularity.¹² The situation was different for *Astana*

⁷ Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg have directed miniseries; David Lynch made one of the most artistically interesting ones, *Twin Peaks* (1990-91). The budgets of some HBO miniseries such as *Rome* or *Boardwalk Empire* are comparable to those of medium-level feature films.

⁸ However, in recent years there has been a shift in the attitudes of cultural criticism toward television miniseries, in part due to quality products such as *The Sopranos*. The reputable journal *Iskusstvo kino* devotes entire issues to the miniseries phenomenon; one analyst even went so far as to call miniseries “the main chroniclers of humanity” and claim that TV serials “prepare an internet nation.” Cf. Andrei Bystritskii. 2014. “Serialy gotoviat internet-narod.” *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 11: 133-40.

⁹ Because of the fundamental difference in status, television miniseries that are currently produced in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet countries should not be put in the same category as feature films whose prestige is distinctly higher; comparisons between television and cinema films tends to neglect the specific production and reception conditions of each of them.

¹⁰ For an insightful account of the working conditions and the specific problems that British television producers, writers and other colleagues were facing in Kazakhstan, cf. Ruth Mandel, “A Marshall Plan of the Mind.” In Faye D. Ginsburg et al., eds. 2002. *Media Worlds: Anthropology of New Terrain*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 211-28.

¹¹ Raushan Shulembaeva, “Letopis’ nezavisimosti. God 1996-j. Sbyvaiusia zavetnye mechty,” *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 2 November 2011.

¹² Still, that project, which ran for five years with altogether 465 episodes, was endorsed by

– *My Love*: the exceptional fanfare accompanying its premiere clearly indicated that its significance went far beyond that of a regular television product and its success was not left to chance or normal free media market competition. A closer look at its content and context will shed light on the cultural components of neo-authoritarian governance in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet framework and lead to a deeper probe of the substance of its encoded messages as well as its production and marketing strategies.

Astana – My Love consists of twelve one-hour episodes. At the beginning of each episode, prior to the title and credits, for several seconds a quotation fills the screen:

“Cities create a country, the capital creates a nation.”

– Nursultan Nazarbayev

The fact that an epigraph precedes a miniseries is highly unusual for the genre, supplying *Astana – My Love* with an authoritative weight that distinguishes it from regular television serials. Furthermore, the epigraph contains an explicitly ideological—indeed teleological—message, intended to provide an interpretive framework to its viewership.¹³ Beginning with the president's quote, the introductory episode leaves no doubt about three key aspects of the miniseries as a whole: 1) The plot is not meant to depict everyday reality in the strict sense of the term; the ritualistic promise of a boy and a girl to each other due to the circumstances of their birth is more characteristic of fairy tales and foundational myths. 2) The girl's Turkish and the boy's Kazakh nationality signify a special relationship between Kazakhstan and Turkey that gives the love story a symbolic and geopolitical dimension. 3) Repeated references to the fact that the girl's birth happened in the skies over Tselinograd—in other words, over the future Astana—suggest that the location holds a particular meaning for the characters and what they symbolize; in addition, the miniseries' title itself leaves no ambiguity in regards to the conceptual role of the location. In this context, the Nazarbayev quotation implicitly suggests a parallel between the birth of the female lead and the birth of a nation.

President Nazarbayev at the time; cf. Amos Owen Thomas. 2010. “Franchising culture for Kazakhstan television: producers' ambivalence and audiences' indifference.” *Jump Cut*, 52, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/thomasKzakstanTV>.

¹³ In their discussion of Michel Foucault's concept of “governmentality” as applied to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova refer to the work of Mitchell Dean who uses the notions of *telos* and “national idea” within the framework of a country and its culture – this has direct significance for officially endorsed miniseries such as *Astana – My Love* that verbalize and visualize a teleological dimension, i.e., “the city of the future.” Cf. Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova. 2009. “Mass Spectacle and Styles of Governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61 (7): 1252.

The Producers

It is easy to see that *Astana – My Love* was conceived as a prestige project, furnished for the anniversary of the founding of Kazakhstan’s new capital and in preparation of the 20th anniversary of the country’s independence in 2011. Produced by Kazakhfilm Studio “Shaken Aimanov” and the Turkish company Eurasia Film Production, with participation of the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, it was first shown on Kazakhstan’s popular *Khabar* channel in July 2010. Even before the project’s completion, the producer announced that the series could potentially reach 200-250 million viewers and was negotiating sales to Turkey and Arab states.¹⁴ The stakes were so high that a genuinely critical debate about the film’s merits and shortcomings in official Kazakhstani media was out of the question.¹⁵ Instead, *Astana – My Love* was immediately included in Kazakhstan’s lavish 2011 jubilee DVD edition celebrating the country’s cinematic legacy: of the 20 DVDs representing the best achievements of 50 years of Kazakhstani cinema, six (each DVD containing two episodes) were given to this serial that had just been released. Moreover, *Astana – My Love* is the only television miniseries in the entire edition and concludes it both chronologically and by design. The prestige position assigned to it indicates that its production was planned and carried out on the highest government level.¹⁶

While the exact background of its conception, financing, and realization will likely remain opaque, it is clear that two Kazakhstanis played decisive roles in creating this project: the then-Minister of Culture, Mukhtar Kul-Muhammed, and the producer, Gulnara Sarsenova. As the credits state, *Astana – My Love* is based on an idea of Kul-Muhammed. A prominent member of Nazarbayev’s inner circle,¹⁷ a brief look at his career allows for some insight into the origins of the project’s underlying concept.¹⁸ Born in 1960 in the Uighur Autonomous region of China,

¹⁴ Galina Shimyrbaeva. “Dolgaia istoriia ljubvi,” *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, No. 22, 2 February 2010.

¹⁵ The exceptions were some online venues that are discussed in this article; official newspapers were all positive in their response to the miniseries.

¹⁶ The history of its production and release indicate that *Astana – My Love* presents a vision of the nation of Kazakhstan and its future that has been implemented in a top-down manner. However, as Rico Isaacs has argued, there exist more than one narrative “pertaining to the notion of the Kazakh nation and identity in film.” Cf. Rico Isaacs. 2014. “Nomads, Warriors, and Bureaucrats: Nation-building and Film in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan.” *Nationalities Papers* 43(3): 2.

¹⁷ In her study of the Kazakhstani elites, Sally Cummings lists the presidential advisers as members of level 3 of the Institutional Ranking of Influence (of seven) and the Ministry of Information of Information and Social Accord as part of level 5. Cf. Sally N. Cummings. 2005. *Kazakhstan: Power and the Elite*. London: I.B. Tauris: 40.

¹⁸ http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mukhtar_Kul-Muhammed.

Kul-Muhammed's family immigrated to Kazakhstan in the late 1960s. Kul-Mukhammed defended a thesis on Alash Orda, the prominent Kazakh nationalist movement of the early twenty century, and since the 2000s has been in charge of many state commissions dealing with national identity issues.¹⁹ Kul-Muhammed's academic expertise indicates an interest in the philosophical aspects of statehood, including its origins and specific conditions of development, that can be tied to the conceptual underpinnings of *Astana – My Love*, including the role of the leader of a nation, its capital, and its architecture.

The producer of the miniseries, Gulnara Sarsenova, belongs to the same generation as Kul-Muhammed. Born in 1961, she also graduated in journalism from Kazakh State University in Almaty. In addition, Sarsenova studied at the Soviet State Film Institute VGIK in Moscow where one of her teachers was Tat'iana Lioznova, creator of the legendary Soviet miniseries *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (Sem'nadtsat' mgnovenii vesny, 1973).²⁰ A successful businesswoman, Sarsenova is the owner of *French House* (Frantsuzskii dom), a chain of luxury goods stores, and is credited with founding the newspaper *New Generation* and the magazine *Revue*. As a film producer, she has helmed international coproductions such as the historical blockbuster *The Mongol* (2007), which was nominated for an Oscar as Best Foreign Picture, and projects such as *Tulpan* (2008) which enjoyed international success on the art-house circuit. Her semi-documentary musical film "My Star" (2012) features the president's daughter, Dariga Nazarbayeva, a fact that confirms Sarsenova's proximity to the highest echelons of Kazakhstan's elite.²¹

The biographies of Kul-Muhammed and Sarsenova suggest that *Astana – My Love* was the product of established and ambitious members of Kazakhstan's elite whose worldview and values are close to, if not identical with, a number of ideological concepts of that elite in the Nazarbayev era, and who found it advantageous to convey basic assumptions of this ideology through the format of a popular television miniseries, as well as to openly demonstrate their loyalty to it. Surely, the internal discussions about the Kazakhstani nation's development are difficult to pinpoint for outside observers and much is left to speculation; however, given the generous financial support of the project by the state it seems safe to conclude that at least influential segments of the Kazakhstani elites were aligned with

¹⁹ See the biographical page available at http://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=30105657.

²⁰ The fact that Sarsenova regularly mentions her apprenticeship with Tat'iana Lioznova is an indicator for the high esteem in which Soviet miniseries are still held by many Kazakhstanis. The 1970s were the decisive decade for the genre in the Soviet context; cf. Elena Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Miniseries of the 1970s*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2003.

²¹ Marina Khagai. "Ee zvezda." *Karavan*, 24 February 2012; <http://www.caravan.kz/article/41835>.

the series' underlying ideology.

Yet, the people behind *Astana – My Love* must also have been aware that Kazakhstanis hardly watch television to be lectured for twelve hours about the country's shining future. The danger of an epigraph together with the name of its author burden the subsequent viewing experience with the expectation of political gravitas, of a small screen sermon to the people of Kazakhstan. As if to counter this impression, the producers chose as the miniseries' promotional slogan a very different line: "Love, schemes, betrayal, power struggle, ambition (*more draiva*), and love again." In other words, there are two verbal messages associated with *Astana – My Love*: one situated in the most prominent spot, at the beginning of each episode, and the other used for advertising the miniseries for mass consumption through the media. Together, these strategies represent the ambiguous blend of authoritarian self-representation and commercial appeal that is typical of the project and Kazakhstan's state-supported culture as a whole.

The director, Ermek Shinarbaev,²² began his career with serious, sensitive feature films adapted for television from stories by Russian-Korean author Anatolii Kim (*My Sister, Liusia*, 1985; *Stepping out of the Forest onto the Meadow*, 1987; *The Revenge*, 1991). He was part of the team that created the innovative *The Crossroads* in the late 1990s and subsequently made a number of feature films and documentaries devoted to music and fine art, often coproduced with French companies. Shinarbaev's films can be characterized as middle-brow and largely apolitical; unlike some other directors of his generation, he has never been interested in controversy or social criticism. Still, his reputation prior to *Astana – My Love* was that of a serious artist—a standard to which the miniseries, despite a few minor artistic achievements, certainly does not live up. Be that as it may, *Astana – My Love*, while purporting to reflect the "mission" of Astana and its loving inhabitants, presents an extremely selective image of society.

The Rich and the Beautiful

The miniseries' central plot line is the love between the Kazakh architect Erlan and the Turkish television journalist Inju; however, immediate complications arise from the fact that Inju is already engaged to Kemal, a promising Turkish entrepreneur, while Erlan has a serious relationship with Laura, a ballet dancer who is also the lover of aging architect Alibek. Erlan has just returned from study abroad in the United States. He is depicted as honest, loyal, dependable, and forthright. Most importantly, Erlan is genuinely gifted—his project of a representational building for Astana is reputed to add another gem to the capital's impressive ensemble of palaces. However, Erlan's friend and fellow junior architect, Abzal, betrays him,

²² In some publications his name is transliterated as Shynarbaev.

stealing the project in order to solidify his position in the construction company of Alibek, whose daughter Marzhan he is dating. This blatant betrayal of friendship sets in motion a number of dramatic clashes that are the substance of the following ten episodes. Only in episode 11, Abzal is finally eliminated, clearing the way for the triumphant episode 12.

Almost without exception, the characters of *Astana – My Love* are architects, surrounded by entrepreneurs, media celebrities, doctors, and elegant housewives. The occupation and wealth of the dramatis personae leaves no doubt as to the series' milieu: the upper crust of the Kazakh and the Turkish establishment. Alibek is obviously a multimillionaire, whereas Inju's father is repeatedly referred to as "a billionaire."²³ This choice of milieu of the "rich and beautiful" is typical both for producers and regular audiences of television miniseries worldwide, allowing the viewer a temporary distraction and relief from annoying everyday banality and trivial problems, be they social or financial, justifying the focus on interpersonal issues: love, trust, hatred, ambition, competition, and betrayal that are supposedly the same in all social strata. Both Kul-Muhammed and Sarsenova inhabit this world, and likely millions of regular Kazakhs would like to be part of it, too. If *Astana – My Love* were merely a regular product of the television dream factory, there would be nothing objectionable in such exclusiveness. However, the miniseries was conceived and presented as a dramatization and visualization of ideological and cultural officialdom. Therefore, its deliberate ignoring of any genuine social difficulties, its elimination of any element that does not fit its image of wealthy urban perfection conveys a strategy that goes beyond principles of entertainment. The consistently featured upper class milieu gives the film a surface of political and social homogeneity, providing the entire miniseries with an air of intentional political unawareness. The only political entity explicitly mentioned is the president who, as the film suggests, is a unique phenomenon and belongs to a higher order.²⁴

²³ It should be noted that the secondary plot lines are rarely pursued with any consequence. For example, Alibek's amorous adventures that seriously threaten his marriage in two episodes are resolved at a speed indicating that no deepening of this conflict is desirable, perhaps because it could be perceived as a hint at some high-ranking officials' own escapades. As is common in miniseries, sudden turns abound (for example, Kemal gives Inju a horse and a few seconds later she is injured by it when she rides it the first time, etc.). The fact that these turns are unmotivated by any rational factors is usually accepted by those viewers who are satisfied by minimal plausibility and do not expect psychological analysis or realistic causality for each event – these plot turns mainly function as fillers, creating short-lived suspense and an equally quick denouement. But they also produce a collateral effect when, in the overarching fight of good versus evil these sub-conflicts are temporarily won by the forces of darkness. While those victories are just as short-lived as the conflicts from which they result, they can increase the viewer's human interest in the good characters who otherwise may appear all too bland.

²⁴ For an in-depth discussion of the Nazarbayev cult in Kazakhstan, see Rico Isaacs. 2010. "‘Papa’ – Nursultan Nazarbayev and the Discourse of Charismatic Leadership and Na-

But the choice of milieu in *Astana – My Love* is not simply based on genre clichés, political opportunism, and social ignorance. After all, oil executives, diplomats, or pop artists also would have been legitimate candidates for a representative Kazakh miniseries, producing the same glamour effect on screen. However, it is the architects who are most closely connected to the declared mission of creating a new nation through its capital. They represent the one professional group that turns the presidential vision of Astana as the center of nation-building into reality, much more directly than oil executives who oversee the production of the country's riches or diplomats who represent it to the outside world or pop singers who praise it. Had the producers and directors chosen, say, genuine city administrators as characters, it would have been much harder to ignore social reality and its unpleasant and hard-to-resolve conflicts. But architects, from the point of view of official state ideology, are members of the very professional cast that carry out the will of the supreme nation-builder whose omnipresence is signaled in the miniseries from its opening. Architects are engaged in creating a livable future; past or present are much less relevant for their work and in the case of Astana, as a city created from scratch, not relevant at all. Thus, the choice of this professional milieu is logically connected to the film's epigraph. Furthermore, the world of privilege in which the architects and their families live can be construed as the justified reward for the central role they are playing in making the president's vision of Kazakhstan's future reality. Watched in this light, the function of the characters as carriers of values and the implied normative ethics acquire a new meaning as well: only those who are morally firm have the right to participate in the creation of a new nation through its capital and, ipso facto, its architecture. Moreover, these creators inhabit their own product, living in the self-designed parts of the city, not in the old Soviet quarters that are never shown at all.

Kazakhstan's neo-capitalist upper class is blatantly visible in every episode; however, the system on which it is based is never explicitly addressed, let alone questioned. The fact that Kazakh society includes a social stratum of privileged citizens living in huge mansions and driving expensive cars is presented as a matter of course and normal. This fact is also not historicized, which can only be justified by the characters' youth: unlike the relatively balanced age representation in the groundbreaking miniseries *The Crossroad*, the majority of performers in *Astana – My Love* is young; indeed, many of them were hired as students from acting classes. Furthermore, none of the characters is genuinely old—the oldest one is the senior architect and businessman, Alibek, a man in his fifties. This demonstrative emphasis on youth and youthfulness in connection with

tion-Building in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan." *Studies in Ethnicities and Nationalism*. 10 (3): 435-452.

Kazakhstan's young capital is one of the miniseries' implicit messages. The vast majority of the characters grew up in the independent Kazakhstan and have no reason to refer to the Soviet past, whereas the few older characters apparently have eradicated it from their memory.

The series consistently purports that there is upward mobility for everybody, metaphorically formulated as "realizing one's dreams." The methods to move up in this class system vary and depend on each character's moral outlook. Both Erlan and his rival Abzal, representing good and evil in its pure form, want to succeed. The difference is that Erlan is not interested in moving upward per se—for him, promotion and wealth in the future are the natural and just gratification for his hard work, talent, and dedication in the present. Abzal, on the other hand, pursues his goal regardless of the costs, including through lies, betrayal, and crimes. In order to satisfy his ambitions, the carrier of evil has to resort to unethical and finally illegal methods, finding allies among corrupt officials and criminals. The schemes that they engage in have a whiff of reality but are not allowed to fully evolve or dominate any episode. In the end, the police arrest all the crooks, their masters who play billiards in shady restaurants, and other denizens of an underworld that has no connection to the bright Astana in which good people are busy realizing their dreams. Evil can only slow down the process of realizing the predestined Kazakh national utopia; the harm inflicted by evil is temporary and is corrected with relative ease by forthright characters such as Erlan in conjunction with the police who unflinchingly arrive in *deus ex machine* manner.

It is fundamentally important for the character constellation of *Astana – My Love* that the good characters are also the gifted ones. However, this leaves the viewer with a dilemma: if talent by definition is destiny—what are the lesser gifted or ungifted supposed to do? Accept their rightful place at the bottom (which is excluded from the film's space)? In this regard, Abzal once again represents an interesting case. He clearly understands that Erlan is superior to him as an architect—and that this is a result of "destiny," a given. Initially, he befriends Erlan so as to profit from his talent. But when the competition for upward social mobility begins in earnest, Abzal is not willing to accept destiny's choice and let Erlan move faster. Instead he engages in scheming, lies, and downright fraud to neutralize his talented competitor, faking his own non-existent talent to the outside world. The fact that the film rejects ruthless methods that are typical of free market societies points to the existence of an assumed system of justice in Kazakh society. Aberrations such as Abzal's behavior have no place in the city of the future, and even Abzal ultimately must realize this.

In regard to the Kazakhstani class system, the most revealing plot elements are those associated with money and power, including the competition for multi-million-dollar contracts and the price of surgical

procedures. However, *Astana – My Love* consistently demonstrates that in the long run none of the individual decisions can change the overall outcome of the predetermined process, namely, Astana's and Kazakhstan's ascension to a glorious future. The real decision-making power is beyond the characters' reach; it lies with destiny and those who understand its direction. This metaphysical dimension is alluded to from the beginning: human beings can move in accordance with their fate or in resistance to it, but they cannot change it in principle. This explains the soothing effect of such television products on viewers who accept the metaphysical assumption of destiny in the first place. But such fairy-tale-like soothing also produces one of the sociopolitical effects that make miniseries such as *Astana – My Love* attractive for a political establishment interested in the consolidation of existing power structures. It encourages trust in the grand design underlying the nation's trajectory, regardless of possible aberrations caused by "evil forces." Miniseries such as *Astana – My Love* encourage an acceptance of society as it is. Not surprisingly, they rarely, if ever, feature characters who question destiny's plan on a national scale or for themselves. Rather, in the vast majority of cases, miniseries favor characters who actively work toward the grand design's maximum realization.

A Future without Past

Given the representational function of *Astana – My Love*, the country's history is mentioned surprisingly rarely. In regard to Astana itself – arguably the central character of the miniseries, just like Dallas in its legendary predecessor – destiny's grand design is associated with the city's steady growth in the present, but not its past.²⁵ Apart from the Nazarbayev epigraph, an implicit conceptual indicator is the theme song, "Astana" and the fascination with the city's wellbeing that is shared by those characters who are destined for happiness: Erlan's innermost desire is to create another impressive building for the capital, while Inju is working on a documentary about Astana that will be shown on Turkish TV. This "documentary within a fairy tale" is a venue that breaks with the film's principle of conveying its underlying ideological concepts in an implicit manner. Carefully alternated with romantic scenes, Inju's reports about Astana provide the pretext for brief but explicit lectures. Thus, in episode 5, she meets with a family in which the sons are named after legendary Kazakh heroes. The naming is based on the belief that the qualities of those heroes will transfer onto the

²⁵ For a discussion of the real perceptions of Astana among Kazakhstanis, see Natalie Koch. 2013. "The 'Heart' of Eurasia? Kazakhstan's Centrally Located Capital City." *Central Asian Survey*, 2 (32): 134-147.

current carrier of the name: Ablai Khan,²⁶ Kabanbai,²⁷ Otegen,²⁸ Karasai,²⁹ and Kenesary.³⁰ This is the first time that some minimal historical context is established in a film that otherwise focuses exclusively on the present and the future. Another such rare occasion happens when one of the characters polemicizes against the common view of the Kazakh people as nomads. His counterargument is that what now is Astana is located on the Silk Road and that Kazakhs in the past also were craftsmen, artists, and preachers.³¹ A third historical reference is contained in episode 10, titled “The Land of Nomads and Dreamers.” Kemal, the young Turkish businessman who has fallen in love with Alibek’s daughter Marzhan, accompanies her to the mountains where the two witness a folk festival featuring traditional competitions, including *kuresi* (wrestling) and *baiga* (horse racing). This experience takes place near the miniseries’ culmination, at which point the forces of darkness are removed through the arrest of the criminals, the death of the hired killer, and the self-removal of the traitor Abzal—the road to harmony is finally free.

However, the scarcity of references to Kazakhstan’s ancient history is exceeded by far by the virtual absence of references to Kazakhstan’s Soviet period. Based on watching *Astana – My Love*, it is inconceivable that prior to 1991, i.e., a mere twenty years earlier, the development of Kazakhstan as part of the USSR was interpreted from a strictly Marxist-Leninist (and, for some thirty years, Stalinist) viewpoint, ascribing the role of the leader to the “older brother” Russia. In the miniseries, Russia is hardly ever mentioned.³² Although the characters communicate in Russian,

²⁶ Ablai Khan (1711-1781) was a Kazakh ruler who fought for a strong centralized state; in recognition of his valor in fighting the Dzungars he was named a *batyr* (hero). The 2005 blockbuster *Nomad* is based on his life.

²⁷ Kabanbai was an 18th-century military leader who is also called a *batyr*. In May 2014, on the Kazakhstani holiday, Day of the Defenders of the Homeland, a monument to Kabanbai that cost about one million dollars was dedicated in Ust-Kamenogorsk.

²⁸ Otegen Otegululy (1699-1773) was a *batyr* who for many years fought against the Dzungars. Interestingly, he opposed the peace deal with China brokered by Ablai Khan.

²⁹ Karasai Altynaiuly (1698-1671) became known as Karasai *batyr*; his clan comes from the area of Akmolinsk.

³⁰ Kenesary Kasymov (1802-1847) was a Kazakh ruler; the grandson of Ablai Khan who led a war for national independence against Russia during which he was captured and executed by Kyrgyz warriors.

³¹ Due to the crisis in Ukraine and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the issue of Kazakhstani state history and the integrity of its borders has become more pressing since 2014, which is reflected in the plans to celebrate the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh state. Cf. Laruelle, Marlene, “Kazakhstan’s Posture in the Eurasian Union: In Search of Serene Sovereignty,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 165, March 25, 2015.

³² Astana has been conceived as a truly Kazakh project, as opposed to Almaty that is seen as more Russian. “The change of capital, announced in 1994 and accomplished in 1997, has often been interpreted as a gesture in favor of its Kazakhness (...). However, Nazarbaev’s project goes much further: the point is to anchor Kazakhstan within the international com-

they receive their education in New York and London, not Moscow or St. Petersburg. Their professional and personal aspirations are directed toward Turkey and the West, not Russia—and not China. Regarding Russian characters in the film, they are extremely rare and secondary at best. One character in particular, Rita, a friend of Erlan's mother, plays a rather irritating role, for her smothering "care" causes more problems than it resolves. Interestingly, the miniseries was shot in Russian and dubbed into Kazakh, and the viewer of the DVD can choose between the two language versions. The title song "Astana" is sung in Kazakh during the opening credits and in Russian at the end. However, it is highly conspicuous that toward the film's conclusion, when President Nazarbayev answers Inju's question, he does so in Kazakh, giving a speech lasting several minutes that is eagerly watched and apparently understood by all characters on TV – without any Russian translation for the characters or the viewers.³³

Another aspect of reality that is virtually absent from the entire film is religion. None of the characters is ever seen praying or referring to religious practices. *Astana – My Love* depicts Kazakh and Turkish society as modern and secular: both women and men, youths and parents make their own decisions about love and labor; these decisions are debated but ultimately accepted by those around them. The underlying guiding principle, however, is not the individual's self-determination. Neither is it a divine authority or its representatives on Earth. In *Astana – My Love*, the guiding principle, which the characters recognize and obey, is *destiny*. For the Kazakhstani elites, in whose name the miniseries was made and who officially endorsed it, destiny acts a post-Soviet replacement for history that, in a Hegelian cum Marxist-Leninist framework, was interpreted as that which evolves with the inevitability of a law of nature.³⁴

munity and to plot a bright future for it, embodied by the futuristic appearance of the new capital." Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Discursive Paradigms of State Identity in Kazakhstan: Kazakhness, Kazakhstanness, and Transnationalism," in Mariya Omelicheva, ed. 2014. *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia. Dimensions, Dynamics and Directions*. Lanham: Lexington Books: 1-20.

³³ Here, the film indirectly reflects the ongoing debate about the status of the primary language in Kazakhstan, which has divided the country and its elites. One news item refers to the fact that the miniseries was shot and first aired in Russian in July 2010 and only several months later in Kazakh; the article's title – "The Characters of the Kazakh-Turkish Series 'Astana – My Love!' Have Begun to Speak in the State Language" – has a sarcastic ring to it. "Geroi kazakhstansko-turetskogo serial 'Astana – liubov' moia!' zagovorili na gosudarstvennom iazyke," *BNEWS KZ*, 14 September 2010, <http://bnews.kz/ru/news/post/37908>.

³⁴ The functional similarity of the traditional notions of "destiny/predestination" and "history" as the realization of eternal laws deserves further exploration.

Destiny Replaces History

The association of President Nazarbayev with a television miniseries fashioned as a modern fairy-tale³⁵ could have easily been construed as sacrilegious by dogmatic watchdogs. Certainly, from their inception, television miniseries have used fairy-tale master plots and character archetypes to draw viewers in. But this consideration must have been outweighed by the implicit expectation of a happy ending for all fairy tales that is suggested in Episode 1 of *Astana – My Love*, which coincides with the teleological nature of the message expressed by the Nazarbayev quote, namely, the successful creation of a nation through its capital, embedding the private story in a wide-ranging political and historical context. Furthermore, the set-up is a clear indicator that this girl and this boy are meant for each other, as are their respective nations. Thus, the driving force behind the plot of this film is neither psychological nor social logic but *destiny*. Destiny as a metaphysical category imposing its will on humans regardless of their intentions or individual understanding does not operate in a linear, transparent, or rationally explicable manner. It is thus ideally suited as the supplier of conflict: despite the optimistic promise in Episode 1, the audience can also indulge in a variety of obstacles, misunderstandings, clashes, and complications before the central characters whose marriage is literally made in heaven will finally be united. The emerging Turkish-Kazakh alliance creates a related expectation of intercultural dealings as a source of tension and pleasure. But the geopolitical gravitas that enters the miniseries through this aspect at the same time also strengthens the declared predetermination: with the symbolic weight on their shoulders, ultimately the two lovers are destined to find each other, no matter what hindrances may come their way. Another aspect connects the plot of *Astana – My Love* to the Nazarbayev quote from the opening: since the Turkish girl's birth took place in the skies above the future capital Astana, the success of the national project is predestined just as the happiness of the future lovers is; initiating personal and national destiny in heaven is equivalent to the notion of “the right constellation of stars” in astrology and evokes quasi-divine connotations. Consequently, the nation's leader is presented as a chosen one who is aligned with a higher destiny.³⁶

³⁵ The makers of the series tried to diffuse the negative connotations of the term “fairy tale” in relation to a film that is focused on the president's pet project: “This is a story that could only happen in this blessed and wondrous place as is the new capital of Kazakhstan, Astana. Only because of the new miraculous energy that fills the air does the story of the two young heroes resemble a fairy tale.” Cf. *Astana Liubov' Moia*. <http://gulnarasarsenova.kz/pages/astana>, accessed 12 March 2015.

³⁶ For those familiar with President Nazarbayev's biography, his personal connection to Astana/Tselinograd, where he worked prior to the country's independence, establishes another important factor of “destiny.”

Within the context of *Astana – My Love*, the notion of “destiny” has replaced that of “history,” which used to explain the evolution of the Kazakh nation as part of the Soviet project. Now, predetermination stands in lieu of any sort of social theory. Destiny is the driving force on all levels: in private life and professional advancement; in the existing class system; in the evolution of Kazakh society, which is reflected in the miraculous growth of its capital; and in the geopolitical dimension, represented by the “natural” alliance between Kazakhstan and Turkey. Destiny is a profoundly metaphysical notion that has the advantage of not being debatable in a factual-scientific framework while connecting current thinking about the nation’s mission to age-old traditions and deeper layers of a mentality that emerged through millennia. Thus, a seemingly harmless, fairy-tale-like miniseries bears important markers of Kazakhstan’s socio-political program. Ingrained in the ups and downs of a romantic story are the proposed values of a self-conscious, tradition-based Eurasian type of modernity.

As a result, what may appear as a heavy-handed narrative scheme requiring the audiences’ deliberate suspension of disbelief is in essence a perfect construction uniting individual happiness with the positive development of two nations carried out through the vision of Kazakhstan’s supreme leader who, one is led to believe, has been chosen by destiny no less. It can be assumed that this construct was meant to appeal to general viewers’ interest in soap-opera-style entertainment while at the same time conveying fundamental elements of Kazakhstan’s 21st-century state doctrine. A consequence of this idealized combination is the characters’ role as carriers of values. Within the proposed symbol-laden historical, geopolitical, and metaphysical framework any sort of individual psychology is largely irrelevant. What matters is the consistency of the characters’ value-driven behavior. Moreover, because of the openly demonstrated quasi-official and representational nature of the miniseries, a number of details acquire a significance that goes far beyond that of a regular “soap opera,” providing room for doctrinal and ideological interpretation instead.

While Abzal fulfills the usual role of the “bad guy” that is considered a requirement for miniseries, the specifics of his demise present a noteworthy deviation from Western stereotypes. Prior to his violent death, in episode after episode, Abzal lies ruthlessly and betrays people to whom he had sworn loyalty. A slick young cynic without remorse, Abzal takes two-facedness to perfection, deceiving his fiancée, his boss and soon-to-be father-in-law, his lover, and his friends. Only when his actions unintentionally lead to the death of his mother, the foundation of Abzal’s personality breaks, causing a stunning transformation from stock character to a genuinely suffering individual. The trauma he experiences changes his perception – everything he had regarded as valuable suddenly

loses its meaning. As a consequence, not only does Abzal try to repent to the extent possible by making up to Erlan and Kemal some of the damage that he had inflicted on their companies, but he also apologizes to Marzhan right before a hired killer stabs him—a finale that he himself apparently was trying to bring about. This moralistic turn is highly unusual for the miniseries genre in general and for *Astana – My Love* in particular. Not only do the Kazakh filmmakers never completely deprive Abzal—the stereotypical carrier of negative values such as greed, lust, and cynicism—of his humanity: in the end, they provide him with an opportunity for genuine redemption and his former friends with a chance to mourn him. Thus, careerism and sociopathic disposition are not declared to be unchangeable elements of the human condition that must be fought out, as Western miniseries demonstrate ad nauseam, but are depicted as choices that can be reversed. Had *Astana – My Love* offered more such subversions of miniseries clichés, it could have become an artistic phenomenon rather than a political one. Alas, this one episode of forgiveness is a solitary element in an otherwise predictable, cliché-ridden, albeit socio-culturally insightful television product.

The social impact of miniseries such as *Astana – My Love* within the media culture of Kazakhstan is hard to gauge with any degree of exactitude: opinion polls are not being conducted, and viewer ratings for 2010 are unavailable. Publicly available ratings for television broadcast became available only after 2013. Clearly, the fact that a television project of this stature has been so openly promoted and endorsed does not mean that audiences have accepted it. Thus, one article, published in July 2010, took a very critical stance, asking why the unprecedented amount of three million dollars was spent on an artistically low-quality product. “For what kind of audience was this series conceived? For the Kazakh? But we know almost everything about Astana as is.”³⁷ In response, a number of online visitors shared the critic’s viewpoint, bemoaning the wasting of the nation’s funds on a miniseries: “The bureaucrats of the Ministry of Culture have suddenly discovered their passionate love for Astana! And, as luck would have it, that love unexpectedly coincided with the 70th birthday of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In this case, it is no sin to waste even more than 3 million dollars.” Another visitor expressed a nationalist notion: “I did not like this film because it was shot in Russian. When will we shoot normal films in Kazakh? We have been independent for so many years, and still we speak only Russian.”³⁸ However, while one can conclude that such critical attitudes may be representative of larger segments of the population, at this point it is impossible to prove. Therefore, what

³⁷ Bakhyt Seiten, “‘Astana – liubov’ moia’: Povod k neveselym razmyshleniiam.” 9 July 2010; <http://old.camonitor.com/archives/503>.

³⁸ Ibid.

remains noteworthy and beyond doubt, are the sociopolitical and cultural intentions of the makers of *Astana – My Love* as indicators of trends in the Kazakhstani elites.

Conclusion

Kazakh and foreign film scholars have interpreted the return of recognizably national, commercially viable film production as part of nation-building.³⁹ Television is harder to analyze within this paradigm because of the overwhelming quantities of content that must be included in an analysis of general trends. Still, the influence of television on society cannot be overestimated.

Astana – My Love is easy to dismiss as a twelve-hour commercial for Kazakhstan's president and his policies. But the main motivation for this miniseries is contained in the manner in which it seamlessly integrates sociopolitical values in a melodramatic story, making the intended indoctrination largely painless since it is delivered in an entertaining fashion. If the ideas visualized and verbalized in this miniseries seem to be a relatively accurate reflection of state ideology, it is difficult to gauge how effective they are. What can be said without a doubt is that *Astana – My Love* was an officially launched contribution to the discourse on Kazakh identity and a forward-looking nationhood whose significance is underlined by the personal appearance of the president and his public endorsement of the project.

³⁹ Cf. Gulnara Abikeyeva, "Cinematic Nation-Building in Kazakhstan," in Michael Rouland et al., eds. 2013. *Cinema in Central Asia*. London: I.B. Tauris: 163-74.

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