Projecting Social Concerns: Russian Auteur Cinema in the Putin Era

Dissertation

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Abstract

In recent years the Putin administration has increasingly consolidated its control over media and suppressed political opposition and dissenting views. Since 2012, ideological controls are ever expanding their reach also in the realm of cinema, circumscribing the social content of films and reflecting a marked shift toward authoritarianism during Putin’s third term as President. On the other hand, high art has often had a paradoxical role in Russia, taking on a larger significance and even becoming increasingly outspoken as authoritarian controls stifle freedom of expression. In the tsarist and Soviet periods, Russia’s great writers were the moral compasses for society; they frequently collided with government censors and their works were sites of conflict for difficult social issues. In the digital age, this torch has largely been taken up by Russian auteur cinema, which has become one of the only remaining sites of civic discourse on sensitive social and political issues.

These cinematic discourses are circumscribed by government censorship and funding, and an interesting “cat and mouse” game is taking place. New forms of Aesopian language have appeared in the Putin era. The postmillennial generation of auteur directors has been labeled, for example, the “New Quiets” (Novye tikhie) for their films in the early 2000s, which addressed social issues only obliquely through
metaphor and allegory. However, several of these directors have taken a “political turn” since 2013, making films that more explicitly address political corruption and authoritarian practices.

Through analysis of both aesthetics and content, this dissertation examines the postmillennial generation of auteur filmmakers to better understand the social concerns that preoccupy them, their aesthetic strategies, and what resonance this vanguard of social and political critique has in society. Unlike the majority of studies that focus on a particular aspect of post-Soviet cinema (e.g., Nancy Condee’s The Imperial Trace, Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova’s Cinepaternity), the present analysis will examine a wider range of social topics—national identity, xenophobia, postcoloniality, political discourse—attempting to illuminate connections among them.
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Note on Transliteration

This dissertation employs the Library of Congress system (without diacritics) throughout, except when Russian names and terms have common English spellings (e.g. Alexander instead of Aleksandr, Tolstoy rather than Tolstoi).
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... iv

Note on Transliteration ................................................................................................. v

Vita .................................................................................................................................. vi

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... viii

Table of Figures .............................................................................................................. x

Introduction .................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1  National Identity (De)Construction in Recent Auteur Cinema .................. 9
  Yuri’s Day: Collective Trauma and the "Patriotism of Despair" ..................................... 12
  My Joy: Russia at an Impasse ....................................................................................... 29

Chapter 2  Xenophobia Overt and Covert ................................................................. 42
  Russian Literature’s Orientalist Legacy ......................................................................... 43
  Soviet Nationality Policy and Cinematic Tropes ......................................................... 52
  Multiculturalism and the “National Question” in the Putin Era .................................... 69
  Nikita Mikhalkov’s 12 and the New Multiculturalism ................................................... 79
  Destabilizing Popular Conceptions: Russia 88 and Captive ...................................... 84
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 98

Chapter 3  The Voice of the Other: The Migrant Trope and Sergei Dvortsevoi’s Tulpan ......................................................................................................................... 101
  Giving Voice to the Other?: She, Another Sky and Migrant Documentaries .............. 102
  In Between and Beyond: Hybrid Genre and Multicultural Perspective in Dvortsevoi’s Tulpan .......................................................... 116
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 134
Chapter 4  From Tikhie to Gromkie: Myth and Reality in the Films of the "New Quiets"

.................................................................................................................................................. 137

Soft-Censorship and the Ideological Molding of Cinema in the Putin Era ...................... 138
Toward a Definition of the Russian "New Wave" or "New Quiets" .................................. 152
The Political Turn of the New Quiets .................................................................................. 180
The Crisis of the Third Space and the Reception of New Political Cinema ................. 193
In Place of a Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 200

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 204

Filmography ............................................................................................................................ 221
Table of Figures

Figure 1: Liubov and Andrei arrive in Iur'ev-Polskii in *Yuri's Day* ........................................ 14

Figure 2: Liuba in the tuberculosis ward in *Yuri's Day* ................................................................. 14

Figure 3: One of the many grotesque figures populating *Yuri's Day* ............................................. 16

Figure 4: The romantic Russian Kremlin in Iur'ev-Pol'skii, *Yuri's Day* ......................................... 17

Figure 5: Liuba and Tanya come together, *Yuri's Day* ................................................................. 18

Figure 6: The eerie choir director, *Yuri's Day* ..................................................................................... 19

Figure 7: Redemption and reunion in *Siberia, MonAmour* .............................................................. 25

Figure 8: Marina seeks out her assailant in *Portrait in the Darkness* ............................................... 26

Figure 9: Andrei and Marina commiserate on the rooftop ................................................................. 27

Figure 10: Disposing of a body in the opening shot of *My Joy* ..................................................... 30

Figure 11: One of several recent "concussed heroes," Giorgii in *My Joy* ......................................... 34

Figure 12: Living amidst crumbling Stalinist architecture in *Tambourine, Drum* ....................... 37

Figure 13: Katya trapped in *Tambourine, Drum* ............................................................................... 37

Figure 14: Western decadence in *A Sixth Part of the World* ........................................................... 54

Figure 15: Oppressed colonial subjects in *A Sixth Part of the World* ........................................... 54

Figure 16: Soviet diversity, *A Sixth Part of the World* ................................................................. 56

Figure 17: Soviet diversity, *A Sixth Part of the World* ................................................................. 56

Figure 18: Mongol children join the Pioneers, *A Sixth Part of the World* ................................. 58
Figure 19: Mongols reading Pravda in A Sixth Part of the World ........................................ 58
Figure 20: Descendant of Ghengis Khan, exploited by a Western fur trader, Storm Over Asia ........................................................................................................... 60
Figure 21: The "storm of revolution" sweeping across Asia, Storm over Asia .......... 60
Figure 22: A veiled Central Asian woman, Three Songs about Lenin ............ 64
Figure 23: Unveiled woman attains Soviet consciousness, Three Songs about Lenin .... 65
Figure 24: Center versus periphery in Three Songs about Lenin....................... 67
Figure 25: Celebrating Moscow achievements, Three Songs about Lenin................ 67
Figure 26: Nikita Mikhalkov, head of the jury in 12 ........................................ 83
Figure 27: Russian soldiers are sacrificed for all Soviet peoples, 12 .................. 84
Figure 28: Shtyk talks to the camera in Russia 88................................................ 85
Figure 29: One of the playful, reflexive pogrom scenes in Russia 88.............. 87
Figure 30: Rubakhin solicitously tending to his captive in Captive ...................... 97
Figure 31: Rubakhin after strangling his captive in Captive ................................ 97
Figure 32: The captivating beauty of the Caucasus, Captive............................. 98
Figure 33: Maya in a migrant slum on the outskirts of Moscow in She ............. 103
Figure 34: Ali in Another Sky ................................................................................. 106
Figure 35: Echoing shots of Ali and his son in Another Sky ............................. 108
Figure 36: Migrant living conditions depicted in Another Sky ...................... 110
Figure 37: Migrant women inspected by customers in a brothel, Another Sky ......... 110
Figure 38: Mansur on a construction site in Bakuradze’s Moscow ................... 112
Figure 39: Mansur stares at a billboard, dreaming of the good life, Moscow......... 113
Figure 40: The protagonist leaving Belarus in He's Gone.................................. 114
Figure 41: Everyday life in the family's yurt, *Tulpan* ................................................................. 121
Figure 42: Livestock and dusty landscapes, *Tulpan* ................................................................. 121
Figure 43: Asa examines his big ears, *Tulpan* ........................................................................ 128
Figure 44: Asa and Boni, *Tulpan* ...................................................................................... 130
Figure 45: Asa and Boni dream of glamorous lives abroad, *Tulpan* ................................. 132
Figure 46: Asa's brother listens to BBC radio every day, *Tulpan* ........................................ 132
Figure 47: Asa is torn about leaving or staying on the steppe, *Tulpan* ......................... 134
Figure 48: Top ten Russian films at the box-office, 2006-2014 ........................................... 154
Figure 49: Most notable festival awards won by Russian films, 2003-2014 ..................... 157
Figure 50: Shots of the vast steppe in *Euphoria* ................................................................. 164
Figure 51: Vera runs from her husband along the Don River, *Euphoria* ....................... 165
Figure 52: Vera and Pavel in *Euphoria* ........................................................................... 167
Figure 53: Scenes of the mentally handicapped rider bookend *Euphoria* ...................... 168
Figure 54: Lenia and his road crew in *Free Floating* ......................................................... 171
Figure 55: Lenia and Piggy's awkward courtship, *Free Floating* .................................... 171
Figure 56: Alexander Iatsenko, the archetypal "Quiet" hero in *Shame* ............................ 173
Figure 57: Ivan, the stoic protagonist of *The Hunter* ....................................................... 175
Figure 58: Liuba at the bus stop near the farm, *The Hunter* ............................................ 175
Figure 59: Ivan and Kolya visiting Soviet war memorial, *The Hunter* ......................... 177
Figure 60: One of many allusions to Putin in new political cinema, *Leviathan* .......... 182
Figure 61: United Russia officials force Alexander off the land, *A Long Happy Life* .. 183
Figure 62: Alexander Sergeevich addresses the villagers, *A Long Happy Life* .......... 184
Figure 63: The faltering people's revolt in *A Long Happy Life* ........................................... 184
Figure 64: This timeless, immutable landscape bookends *A Long Happy Life* .......... 185

Figure 65: Kolya struggles against the Leviathan............................................. 186

Figure 66: The skeleton of a whale that reappears in *Leviathan* ...................... 187

Figure 67: Dima disturbs the city officials at a party, *The Fool* ...................... 189

Figure 68: The aggressive residents of the dormitory turn on Dima, *The Fool* ........ 189
Introduction

In recent years the Putin administration has increasingly consolidated its control over media and suppressed political opposition and dissenting views. Since 2012, ideological controls are ever expanding their reach also in the realm of cinema, circumscribing the social content of films and reflecting a marked shift toward authoritarianism during Putin’s third term as President. During this period, the funding structure for national cinema has been reformed and funds are now awarded to films on a case-by-case basis, decided ultimately by the Minister of Culture himself. In order to obtain the distribution license needed for any public screening, films now come under considerable scrutiny, and have increasingly been denied licenses on the grounds of explicit language, “homosexual propaganda,” “falsifying history,” and “insulting religious views.” These ideological controls in cinema parallel similar developments in other media and cultural spheres, including the creation of monolithic educational curricula in schools, censorship of Russian theater and television, and even growing regulation of the Internet. Civil society is rapidly shrinking as the Putin administration reinstates many of the authoritarian controls of the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, high art has often had a paradoxical role in Russia, taking on a larger significance and even becoming increasingly outspoken as authoritarian controls
stifle freedom of expression. In the tsarist and Soviet periods, Russia’s great writers were the moral compasses for society; they frequently collided with government censors and their works were sites of conflict for difficult social issues. In the digital age, this torch has largely been taken up by Russian auteur cinema, which has become one of the only remaining sites of civic discourse on sensitive social and political issues. These cinematic discourses are circumscribed by government censorship and funding, and an interesting “cat and mouse” game is taking place. New forms of Aesopian language have appeared in the Putin era. The postmillennial generation of auteur directors has been labeled, for example, the “New Quiets” (Novye tikhie) for their films in the early 2000s, which addressed social issues only obliquely through metaphor and allegory. However, several of these directors have taken a “political turn” since 2013, making films that more explicitly address political corruption and authoritarian practices.

Through analysis of both aesthetics and content, this dissertation examines the postmillennial generation of auteur filmmakers to better understand the social concerns that preoccupy them, their aesthetic strategies, and what resonance this vanguard of social and political critique has in society. Unlike the majority of studies that focus on a particular aspect of post-Soviet cinema (e.g., Nancy Condee’s The Imperial Trace, Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova’s Cinepaternity), the present analysis will examine a wider range of social topics—national identity, xenophobia, postcoloniality, political discourse—attempting to illuminate connections among them. This systematic study of Putin-era cinema traces the evolution of auteur film aesthetics and discourses, including: new, fraught forms of patriotism (Chapter 1); the perpetuation and postmodernist subversions of xenophobic constructions (Chapter 2); recent postcolonial treatments of
minorities and the former imperial periphery (Chapter 3); and the spectrum of avoidance and engagement with political realities exemplified by the “New Quiet” directors (Chapter 4).

The films chosen are among the most widely discussed and distinguished of the postmillennial generation of auteurs (see Figure 49 for a list of festival awards), as well as those most germane to analysis of the social concerns at the center of this study. Embracing a cultural studies approach to examining texts in their social and political contexts, this dissertation engages a variety of disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural theory. Moreover, it provides a close analysis of critical and popular reception of several films, since the reactions provoked by these films are often no less revealing than the films themselves.

Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson has argued that cinema manifests political fantasies, hopes, and fears, tapping into the “political unconscious” of societies and articulating actual and potential social relations (Jameson 2013). American film scholar Robin Wood writes: “To write politically about films means, basically, to write from an awareness of how individual films dramatize, as they inevitably must, the conflicts that characterize our culture: conflicts centered on class/wealth, gender, race, sexual orientation” (Wood 1986, 4). However, if commercial cinema provides an insightful lens for cultural studies because of its industrial, team-style production, and reflection of mass tastes, auteur cinema should be examined with an awareness of the artistic and ideological goals of a particular _auteur_. Unlike most studies, which either
examine commercial/blockbuster films\textsuperscript{1} or are not explicitly concerned with distinctions between commercial and auteur,\textsuperscript{2} this dissertation primarily analyzes auteur films, differentiating between mainstream audiences and the niche target audiences of these “post-Fordist” consumer products.

This study conceives of the Russian film industry as what Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser called an “ideological state apparatus,” heavily shaped and circumscribed by the political superstructure. Auteur cinema, too, works within the narrow constraints of ideological controls, but has provided a space for opposing views, reflecting the complex relationship of power and resistance. While most films in this study illustrate the ideological and aesthetic divides between “commercial” and “auteur” products—for example, the very different treatments of minorities in blockbusters and auteur films discussed in Chapters 2 and 3—these designations are at times not clear-cut; virtually all arthouse filmmakers have some commercial aspirations, just as commercial directors invariably leave clear aesthetic and ideological imprints on their films.\textsuperscript{3} This analysis sheds light on the complex relationship between commercial and auteur film production in Russia today, considering the deliberate opposition of auteurs to tendencies of commercial cinema (Hollywoodization/”hamburgerization” and claims of continued “varnishing” of social realities), as well as how the government funding structure shapes

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{1} Cf. Norris 2012.
\textsuperscript{2} Among many others, see Hashamova 2006 and 2007; Condee 2009; Goscilo and Hashamova 2010; and Beumers 2012.
\textsuperscript{3} The problematic commercial-auteur divide can be traced back to the very introduction of auteur theory, which applied not to “auteur” products made independently from an industrial structure, but to directors of commercial films with highly discernable individual styles, such as Jean Renois and Alfred Hitchcock.
\end{flushleft}
both categories of films.\(^4\)

As this study argues, cinema has been a key site for mediating discourses of national identity, alterity, and competing notions of civic and social responsibility in the transitional post-Soviet period. Chapter 1 examines portrayals of the Russian nation, its past, and its folk (*narod*) in Putin-era auteur cinema, identifying tendencies of “neo-chernukha” and “neo-populism.” It engages theories of trauma and psychoanalysis by Julia Kristeva and Cathy Caruth, as well as Slavic cultural theorists Alexander Etkind and Sergei Oushakine, to illuminate Russia’s peculiar national identity discourse in this period and its treatment in cinema.

Engaging critiques of nationalism and practices of Othering by theorist Slavoj Žižek, Chapter 2 explores Russian alterity—tracing post-Soviet treatments of the Other in cinema to Orientalist rhetorical practices of the tsarist and Soviet periods—as well as attempts by auteur directors to subvert stereotypical constructions. A close analysis of Putin-era “multiculturalism” reveals the perpetuation of both subtle and overt hierarchies and paternalistic attitudes in the post-Soviet space borne out by the constructions of a number of recent films. At the same time, several recent critiques of Western multiculturalism demonstrate the difficulties of articulating new forms of identity in “post-national” and multiethnic societies. Chapter 3 continues the exploration of Russian identity and alterity. Engaging theoretical works by Frantz Fanon, Julia Kristeva, and Homi Bhaba, it analyzes Russian auteur cinema’s postcolonial treatment of the Other and

\(^4\) Expressing a common sentiment among independent filmmakers, director Vadim Abdrashitov defined the shift to action and special effects in Russian blockbusters as a process of “hamburgerization” of Russian cinema (“Seansu otvechaiut” 2005).
the imperial periphery, including the challenges and potential of “speaking with rather than for” the Other.

Chapter 4 attempts a portrait of the postmillennial auteurs known as the “New Wave” or “New Quiets,” and discusses their strategies of avoidance and engagement with social realities amidst increasingly shrinking spaces for civic expression. Employing critiques of the mechanisms of ideology, particularly as articulated Louis Althusser, but also Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek, this section examines Russian auteurs’ participation in and resistance to ideology. The evolution of these directors’ strategies of representation illuminates important shifts in Putinism—most conspicuously since 2012—that political and cultural historians are only beginning to explore. While the theoretical underpinnings for this study are wide-ranging, they are united by Marxist and psychoanalytical approaches to understanding the driving forces behind ideology and identity formation.

While the social concerns explored here may appear disparate and unrelated, one of the goals of this study is to show that recent discourses of national identity, alterity, and civic engagement are in fact interconnected and comprise, as it were, a nexus of the dominant ideology in the Putin era. The chapters of this dissertation correspond to the salient elements of this ideology. As one film and culture critic recently argued, the Putin administration has eschewed liberal models of democracy, multiculturalism, and de-colonization, instead reviving a redux of Sergei Uvarov’s Triad of “Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality” for the modern day (Artiukh “Parad” 2014). The “negative identity” discourse that, according to sociologist Lev Gudkov, predominates in post-Soviet Russia, reveals the strong connection between identity and alterity, by defining the
Self not in terms of affirmative qualities, but in contrast to various threatening or inferior Others. The prevailing ideology in Russia today rejects democratic liberalism, multiculturalism, and critical discourses of feminism and postcolonialism by associating them with foreign elements both within and outside of Russia’s borders.

The absence of a cogent national identity, is in part a symptom of the failure to acknowledge and mourn the traumas of the Soviet past and the difficult transition in the 1990s, leaving Russia in what Etkind calls a “post-imperial melancholia.”5 Russia’s post-imperial imaginary is also reflected in the prominence in recent cinema of the imperial periphery (the Caucasus and Central Asia) and subaltern figures. Chapter 2 demonstrates that, while the Putin administration has cultivated its own “sovereign” multiculturalism in the new millennium, this rhetoric is defined yet again in negative terms against the “utopian” multiculturalism of the West. As Chapter 4 argues, civil society and political culture in Russia today, too, are connected with these unstable conceptions of nation, Self, and Other. Totalitarian discursive practices from the Soviet period have been revived in the “soft authoritarian” climate of Putin’s Russia, which increasingly treats critical viewpoints as foreign and seditious.

These and other links abound between the salient aspects of Putin-era ideology that preoccupy the postmillennial auteur filmmakers and are the subject of this study. These filmmakers at times also play a role in the dominant ideology, as I suggest in the discussion of “neo-populist” films in Chapter 1 and the New Quiets’ “avoidance of social cinema” in Chapter 4. However, each chapter in this study demonstrates a tension

5 See also Vladimir Sorokin’s critique of Russia’s reversion to Soviet-style authoritarianism as a result of not confronting its past (Sorokin 2014).
between auteur films and the political superstructure, suggesting that auteur cinema, though increasingly circumscribed by ideological controls, has been a key space for ideological resistance.
Chapter 1
National Identity (De)Construction in Recent Auteur Cinema

We are the people of Ivan Susanin and Prince Bagration! We are a great people of the world!

- *Yuri’s Day*

- Where does this road lead?
- It’s not a road, it’s a direction.
- Well, where does this direction lead?
- It’s a dead end. A dead end of evil power.

- *My Joy*

Some critics have characterized the “chernukha” films of perestroika and the 1990s as a historical corrective to the varnished reality of Soviet cinema (Khlopliankina 1989, 49-51; Lawton 1992, 91-92; Beamers 2012, 58). If the majority of these films deconstruct the Soviet narrative, then Russian cinema of the post-2000s demonstrates the opposite preoccupation with reconstructing national identity. In recent commercial cinema, this is most evident in a plethora of blockbusters glorifying Russian historical and folk heroes.\(^6\) While it has taken a more sophisticated form in Russian independent

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\(^6\) To name a few: *The Barber of Siberia* (Mikhalkov, 1999), animated films *Alesha Popovich and Tugarin the Serpent* (Bronzit, 2004) and *Prince Vladimir* (Kulakov, 2006), *Turkish Gambit* (Faiziev, 2005), *Ninth Company* (Bondarchuk, 2005), *Admiral* (Kravchuk, 2008), *Gentlemen, Officers* (2008), *The Brest Fortress*
cinema, nationhood discourse is nonetheless front and center. This is certainly the case with two of the most celebrated films of the so-called “New Wave,” Kirill Serebrennikov’s *Yuri’s Day* (*Iur’ev Den’*, 2008) and Sergei Loznitsa’s *My Joy* (*Schast’e moe*, 2010), which engage the national idea both explicitly and allegorically. These films reveal striking aesthetic and thematic similarities. The journeys of their respective protagonists constitute a modern-day “return to the people,” but the Russian *narod* that they encounter has little in common with the one envisioned by 19th-century populists such as Alexander Hertsen. Both films depict the Russian folk in an unflattering light, using devices of the horror genre and the grotesque to create what one critic calls “social horror” films (Condee 2012, “Two Kinds of Dark Meat”). But they ultimately construct very different pictures of the Russian nation and its direction in the future. While *Yuri’s Day* reaffirms, if ambivalently, the centrality of the folk tradition to Russian national identity, *My Joy* shatters any nostalgia for Russia’s past and its *narod*. As such, these films represent the two predominant tendencies in recent independent cinema’s nationhood discourse: neo-populism, a fraught, but ultimately reaffirming exploration of Russian cultural history; and neo-chernukha, a continuation of chernukha’s utter rejection of all traditions, past, present, and future.


7 *Yuri’s Day*, won grand prize (“Belyi Slon”) at the Russian Guild of Film Critics and Filmmakers Festival and the Warsaw International Film Festival, as well as Best Female Role from the Russian National Film Festival Kinotavr. *My Joy* was awarded for Best Dramaturgy at Kinotavr, the grand prix at the Kiev International Film Festival and was selected to compete for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival.
In a recent article, Birgit Beumers analyzes the phenomenon of nostalgia and identity construction in post-Soviet cinema and mass culture, which she argues arises from a desire to rebuild links with the past at a time of cultural instability (Beumers 2012, 56). Her study is the latest in a large body of scholarship since 1992 that analyzes post-Soviet cinema’s preoccupation with the past. Citing Oleg Sulkin and Lev Gudkov respectively, she characterizes post-Soviet Russia as an “ideological vacuum” that has largely subscribed to a “negative identity,” that is, an identity defined primarily by its rejection of other systems of values—including both Soviet ideology and “empty” Western values (Gudkov 2004; Sulkin 2008, 113). Of course, this does not account for all cultural production in this period, which includes playful, postmodern engagement with and even continuation of Soviet models. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia in post-Soviet culture, Beumers observes that two paradigms for viewing the Russian past have emerged in the cinema of recent years: an imperialist, orthodox view and a liberal, democratic view. “Imperial, orthodox nostalgia,” which is most often found in kitschy commercial products and mass culture, is typically an uncritical conception of the past, often “harmless,” superficial, and longing for positive aspects of Soviet everyday life (byt) rather than its political realities. The

8 Among others see Larsen 2000; Boym 2001; Lawton 2002; Gillespie 2002; and Hashamova 2006.

9 Expressions of such a “negative identity” in cinema is the subject of Yana Hashamova’s Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film.

10 See for example Mark Lipovetsky’s argument that Brat 2 (Balabanov, 2000) revives Socialist Realist models, such as its depiction of the Western enemy, corrupted by money, and the superiority of Russian spirituality (Lipovetsky 2000); Seth Graham also draws parallels between chernukha films and the Socialist Realist tradition, noting their shared “consistency of idea and image.” He argues that chernukha is an inversion of that formula (Graham 2002, 12-13).

11 For a concise description of these modes of nostalgia see Boym, 50.
second cinematic discourse is a more nuanced view of the past, which neither glorifies war heroes nor pines for the everyday life of past epochs. Citing films such as Pavel Chukhrai’s *Driver for Vera* (*Voditel’ dlia Very*, 2004) and Aleksei Balabanov’s *Cargo 200* (*Gruz 200*, 2007), Beumers argues that this liberal paradigm turns a critical eye to Soviet history and usually debunks the nostalgia of mainstream cultural production (Beumers 2012, 58). However, my analysis will demonstrate that within the “liberal” discourse of contemporary auteur and arthouse cinema there is yet another recent tendency. A number of films—such as *Yuri’s Day*, *Twilight Portrait* (*Portret v sumerkakh*, 2011), and *Siberia, MonAmour* (*Sibir’ Monamur*, 2011)—while paradoxically retaining much of the social critique and naturalistic aesthetic that are typical of chernukha and its descendants, eschew the negative identity, “heroless-ness” (*bezgeroinost’*) and utter despondency of such neo-chernukha films as Balabanov’s *Cargo 200*, Aleksei Mizgirev’s *Tambourine, Drum* (*Buben, baraban*, 2009) and Loznitsa’s *My Joy*. Instead they attempt to salvage meaning from Russian cultural myths and traditions, such as Christian collectivism and kenoticism.

**Yuri’s Day: Collective Trauma and the "Patriotism of Despair"

The work of promising director Kirill Serebrennikov and renowned scriptwriter Yuri Arabov, *Yuri’s Day* was released in 2008 to critical acclaim. Its heroine, Liubov Pavlovna (played by Ksenia Rappaport), a famous Moscow opera singer, takes her twenty-year-old son to her native Golden Ring town, Iur’ev-Pol’skii, just days before their planned emigration to Germany. This nostalgic trip, she hopes, will reconnect them with their cultural roots. Andrei has little interest in his mother’s whimsical plan and the
first minutes of the film portray the tension between mother and son. A few hours after
their arrival in the town, Andrei mysteriously disappears and is never heard from again.
A commentary perhaps on social conditions and criminality in Russia, he becomes a
walking statistic, an example of the town investigator’s startling revelation that “in
Russia 40,000 people disappear each year without a trace.”

After Andrei’s disappearance, Liubov, or Liuba, remains in the town to search for
him and has several shocking encounters with the townspeople. She witnesses the assault
of Tania by her alcoholic brother, and the two women commiserate over several glasses
of samogon (moonshine). Uncanny doubles of Liubov’s son turn up in the local
monastery, the prison’s tuberculosis ward, and drowned at the bottom of the river, but
none proves to be her real son. This traumatic loss and the shocks she experiences in the
town lead Liubov down a path of psychological and emotional death and rebirth. Her
transformation from the celebrated opera singer Liubov Pavlovna to “tough Lucie”
(Liusia ne boius’-ia), a humble and resilient member of the collective, is punctuated
throughout the film by the visual motif of Liubov crawling on the ground, reduced to an
infantile state, as well as the complete loss of her prized voice, which only returns in the
film’s final scene after her transformation is complete. Linguistic changes also reflect
Liuba’s new outlook. The historical and literary allusions of the Russian intelligent—
reciting Blok’s verse from memory on the church bell tower—are replaced by down-to-
earth folk aphorisms, such “The cabbage is planted in the garden and potatoes are underfoot!”12

Figure 1: Liubov and Andrei arrive in Iur'ev-Polskii in Yuri's Day

Figure 2: Liuba in the tuberculosis ward in Yuri’s Day

12 «Капуста на грядках, картошка под ногами!»
As a means of coping with the loss of her son, Liuba becomes a surrogate mother to the tuberculosis patients in the prison, recalling Sonia’s relationship to the Siberian prisoners in *Crime and Punishment*. But, unlike Sonia, who inspires a quiet reverence in the prisoners, Liuba is assaulted and nearly gang-raped, as if to deliberately distance the film from the naive idealism of the 19th-century Slavophiles. Despite its clear (and for some viewers, hackneyed) populist sentiments, *Yuri’s Day*’s depiction of post-Soviet provincial Russian culture is surprisingly “unvarnished.” The film displays many of the hallmarks of neo-chernukha films, including a dilapidated and impoverished town, rampant alcoholism, on-screen physical and sexual assault, corrupt and incompetent law enforcement, and menacing ex-prisoners (“zeki”), the living symbol of a failed Soviet penal system. By featuring such social problems as these and the statistic about disappearances in Russia, *Yuri’s Day* advances a clear social critique typical of the so-called “Russian New Wave.” Visually, the film adopts many conventions of the horror genre and the grotesque, foregrounding physically deformed, ghoulish characters, covered in tattoos (a reference to their prison backgrounds), with silver-capped teeth or indeed no teeth at all. The faint sound of discordant violins is heard throughout much of

13 It is no coincidence that Dostoevskian motifs run throughout the film. Serebrennikov originally requested a script about Dostoevsky, but scriptwriter Arabov produced the script for *Yuri’s Day* instead. See Shigareva 2008.

14 Critic Irina Liubarskaia comments on the reception of the film by one segment of the Russian intelligentsia: “The more progressive minds were the most upset—they were indignant that, under the guise of Russian spirituality, they were again being inundated by the official slogans of the Church, sprinkled with the special blend of ‘liubliu Rossiiu ia, no strannoiu liubov’iu’ (Russia, I love you, but with a strange love)” (Liubarskaia 2008).
the film, heightening the suspense and the eerie mood. In one gratuitous scene we witness Seryi, the town investigator, vomiting violently into the basin in his apartment, although this has little diegetic relevance, as his alcoholism is not alluded to elsewhere. In another scene, several seconds of screen time are devoted to the prison guard slurping milk from a bowl before grinning and revealing his lack of teeth.

Figure 3: One of the many grotesque figures populating Yuri’s Day

15 The prevalence of grotesque characterizations, horror motifs, and spectres in films such as Yuri’s Day, Cargo 200, The Convoy, Living, and others gives credence to Alexander Etkind’s theory of “Post-Soviet hauntology” in Russian cultural memory and merits a more in-depth analysis of this imagery. Etkind argues: “Haunted by the unburied past, post-Soviet culture has produced perverse memorial practices…” (182).
This bleak portrayal of the townspeople contrasts in the film with visual signifiers of an idealized Russian landscape: vast snow-covered spaces, an ancient Kremlin, an Orthodox church with golden cupolas, and a bell tower. If the film’s iconography reflects a deep ambivalence, combining grotesque and romanticized depictions, the narrative is somewhat clearer in its message. Liuba resigns herself to staying in Iur’ev-Pol’skii indefinitely. After her transformation, she becomes Tania’s protector and best friend, as well as benefactress to the tuberculosis patients. In the film’s final scene, when asked whether she is leaving the town, Liuba answers, “Where will I go? Everything I have is here.” Tania responds, “Live with me as long as you like. I’m happier when you’re here.” Their hair, colored with the only ugly metallic-red dye available in Iur’ev-Pol’skii, blends together in the slightly overexposed sunlight. Then, hearing “angels

Figure 4: The romantic Russian Kremlin in Iur'ev-Pol'skii, Yuri's Day

16 The choice of Blok’s verse, which Liubov recites on the bell tower, is significant: “O my Russia! O, wife! The long road is clear to us to the point of pain.” («Русь моя! Жена моя! До боли / Нам ясен долгий путь!»)

17 «—Куда же я поеду, у меня здесь всё. –Живи у меня насколько хочешь, мне с тобой веселее». 
singing” in the church, Liuba joins the choir and discovers for the first time how to merge her voice with the group’s and “sing from her soul.”

The film’s collectivist logic is reinforced, moreover, by the dual meaning of its title, “Yuri’s Day.” Not only referencing the mother and son’s daytrip to Iur’ev-Pol’skii, it also alludes to the feast day of Saint George. On this holiday in ancient Rus’, serfs were permitted to change their masters and experience a liberation of sorts, if only for a day. The film’s title has been interpreted as signifying, ironically, not a freeing from bondage per the tradition, but “the liberation of Liuba’s spirit from pride and individualism” (Lipovetsky 2008). Complicating Liuba’s sense of newfound belonging, however, the film’s final frames rest on the eerie, demented expression of the church choirmaster—a reincarnation of Vasilii Surikov’s Boiarina Morozova (1884-1887)—thereby underscoring the ambivalence about the Russian folk at the heart of the film.

Figure 5: Liuba and Tanya come together, Yuri’s Day
Notably Yuri’s Day’s populist sentiments are complicated not only by an ambivalent portrayal of the Russian people, but also by several moments of parody and self-irony. When purchasing tickets to the bell tower museum, the cashier tries to sell Liubov and Andrei a patriotic t-shirt depicting a Russian bear with an axe. Andrei declines, saying that the shirt is “frightening.” The shirt draws an implicit comparison between commercial and official appropriations of national symbols and Liubov’s return to her roots. These complexities do not contradict the film’s ultimate conclusions, but demonstrate the modernist aesthetic of its scriptwriter and director, “subjecting any impulse, including the most noble one, to skepticism and doubt” (Plakhov 2008). Moreover, by problematizing its own populist narrative, Yuri’s Day attempts to distinguish itself from overly idealized and kitschy commercial treatments of the Russian narod. These complexities were lost on some viewers, who dismissed it as “yet another
chernukha film about freaks,” and led more than one critic to note a seemingly contradictory logic in the film.\footnote{For a brief description of the film’s reception at the Kinotavr Film Festival, see Liubarskaia. In the same article Liubarskaia comments, “Personally, for all of the reception of the film’s depth and spirituality, I can’t say with certainty what exactly its author was trying to say.” Mark Lipovetsky also observes “contradictory logic” in the film (Lipovetsky 2008).}

*Yuri’s Day*’s fraught identification with Russian history and the *narod*, epitomized by the grotesque and poetic depictions of Iur’ev-Pol’skii and the film’s ambivalent narrative, reconnects the nationhood discourse of contemporary cinema with the longstanding tradition of the intelligentsia, which can be traced back at least to Alexander Pushkin’s famous correspondence with Piotr Chaadaev. In a letter of 1836, Pushkin acknowledges Russia’s backwardness and marginality throughout much of European history, but insists nonetheless on Russia’s special significance. He proceeds to describe the paradoxical mixture of contempt and devotion that he feels for his country:

Do you think we should be excluded from Europe? Although I am sincerely devoted to our sovereign, I am by no means in ecstasy about what I see around me. As a writer I am irritated, as a man of discernment I am insulted, but I swear on my honor that not for anything in the world would I want to exchange my native land nor have any other history than the one of our ancestors, the one that God bestowed on us. (Pushkin 1979, 465).

Serebrennikov’s comments in interviews about the film reveal a similarly ambivalent identification. One journalist’s interpretation of *Yuri’s Day*—“Our country is simultaneously what we want to return to and something terrible, which has us in its grasp” (Shigareva 2008)—prompted the following response from the director:

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18 For a brief description of the film’s reception at the Kinotavr Film Festival, see Liubarskaia. In the same article Liubarskaia comments, “Personally, for all of the reception of the film’s depth and spirituality, I can’t say with certainty what exactly its author was trying to say.” Mark Lipovetsky also observes “contradictory logic” in the film (Lipovetsky 2008).
You know, there is that feeling. And we’ve all experienced it. We want to leave, to break away, but our homeland won’t let us go. And what this substance is, whether terrible or holy, is not for us to understand. How should we feel about this? There are different ways to look at it… Is it good that [Liuba] stayed in the choir to sing ‘Kheruvimskaia,’ remained in this town to continue searching for her son? But on the other hand, what is an opera diva? Ambitious, full of ego, in conflict with her son, endlessly lonely. And here she attempts to find a different, true, fate for herself. Here there are people who need her, there’s a goal in life, there’s a community that has accepted her as a different person. (Shigareva 2008)

While the ambivalent relationship of today’s creative intelligentsia to its history and narod reveals a continuity with intelligentsia tradition, anthropologist Sergei Oushakine has characterized recent nationhood discourse as a historically specific phenomenon, a reaction to the loss of Soviet identity and the traumatic transitional period following 1991. Oushakine characterizes post-Soviet Russia’s national identity discourse as a “patriotism of despair,” and analyzes the stories of those disaffected by capitalism, soldiers’ mothers, and war veterans, as well as the academic production of intellectualized narratives about the Russian tragedy. Emphasizing the prominence of the traumatic in the process of national reconstruction, Oushakine demonstrates “how the ‘work of the negative’ was used in creating new forms of collectivity” (Oushakine 2009, 5).

I would argue that Yuri’s Day is contemporary cinema’s starkest illustration of...
precisely this peculiar form of collective identity, which revisits a traumatic past through a highly troubling present, and in doing so creates new forms of communion with the narod.

Indeed Yuri’s Day’s narrative and visual motifs invite an analysis of recent Russian history and contemporary identification through the lens of trauma. The loss of her son and the violence she experiences put Liuba into a psychological state of dissociation typical of trauma victims.21 Her condition culminates in a scene in which she has sex with Seryi in a nearly catatonic state. The camera further estranges the sex scene, alternating extreme close-ups of legs, arms, and shoulders—suggesting alienation from the self and the body—with shots of Liuba, staring blankly at the wall. Considering the film’s explicit engagement with the Russian national idea, one could read Yuri’s Day as an allegory about Russian history as a history of loss and the attempt to cope in the aftermath of trauma. The surreal disappearance of Liuba’s son, the grotesque and estranged depictions of this historical, Golden Ring town and its inhabitants, reinforce the sense of “knowing and not knowing” inherent in trauma narratives (Caruth 1996, 4). In her seminal study of trauma, Cathy Caruth writes, “For a history to be a history of trauma incomplete and unsuccessful: the loss has been incorporated into the subject, who cannot (meaning that he does not want to) free himself from it” (Etkind, 155).

21 Freud explains the mind’s dissociative reflex during trauma, saying “There is more to say about the living vesicle with its cortical layer for the reception of stimuli. This particle of living substance hovers in the midst of an external world charged with the strongest energies, and would be killed by the stimuli coming from these energies if it were not provided with a shield against stimuli…Behind the shield, these layers can now devote themselves to the reception of the quantities of stimuli allowed to pass through. By dying, however, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from this fate” (Freud 2011, 68).
Liuba’s transformation and rebirth as a humble servant of the town recycles Orthodox (and Dostoevskian) motifs of kenoticism—the humbling and ennobling power of suffering—and sobornost’. The film is not as much about the loss of Andrei or a social commentary about the violence Liuba witnesses, as it is about her survival and transformation in the aftermath of trauma. As Caruth suggests, “The story of trauma as the narrative of a belated experience, from telling of an escape from death or from its referential force, […] attests to its endless impact on a life” (7). Does Russian auteur cinema today, then, reflect either a traumatic neurosis or an attempt to come to terms with the trauma of the 1990s—economic defaults, large-scale criminality, the Chechen Wars and, perhaps most significantly, the rejection of Soviet identity—after a period of latency?23

Indeed trauma and its aftermath are a central theme in post-millennial auteur cinema, reflecting both the shared experiences of the current generation of Russian filmmakers and the historical moment. Trauma in recent cinema operates on a number of planes—sociological, allegorical, and aesthetic. The cyclicality of physical violence, sexual assault, child abuse, and other traumatic experiences is explored by cyclical

22 Since Caruth’s important study, there have been a number of other significant contributions to trauma and cinema scholarship. The function of cinema to reach the viewer by triggering traumatic memories or responses has been demonstrated convincingly in recent works, such as Anton Kaes’ study of cinematic depictions of war and post-traumatic stress and the collection The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture. However the effects of such depictions continue to be debated. Joshua Hirsch has discussed the possibility of the ‘vicarious’ trauma of the spectator and Ann Kaplan complicates the reception of traumatic images by introducing the concept of ‘empty’ empathy.

23 The paradoxical return to and repetition of traumatic experience is the subject of Freud’s study Beyond the Pleasure Principle.
narratives and visual repetition in films such as Vasilii Sigarev’s *Wolfie* (*Volchok*, 2009) and *Living* (*Zhit’*, 2012), Aleksei Mizgirev’s *Tambourine, Drum* (2009) and *The Convoy* (*Konvoi*, 2013), Bakur Bakuradze’s *Shul’tes* (2008), Aleksei Popogrebskii’s *How I Ended This Summer* (*Kak ia provel etim letom*, 2010), Alexander Veledinsky’s *Alive* (*Zhivoi*, 2006), Andrei Zviagintsev’s *Elena* (2011), Angelina Nikonova’s *Twilight Portrait* (2011) and Viacheslav Ross’s *Siberia, MonAmour* (2011). What is of particular interest in the present analysis is not merely this shared preoccupation with traumatic experience, but the very different reactions in its aftermath.

Like *Yuri’s Day*, the films *Siberia, MonAmour* and *Twilight Portrait* are ambivalent, but ultimately redeeming portrayals of the Russian folk. Ross’s *Siberia, MonAmour*—ostensibly in dialogue with another “post-apocalyptic” trauma narrative, Alan Resnais’ *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959)—depicts disappearing Siberian villages, degraded by alcoholism, poverty, marital infidelity, and violence.24 A devoutly Orthodox elderly man, Ivan (Petr Zaichenko) and his grandson, Lesha (Misha Prots’ko), are the last remaining inhabitants of the abandoned village Monamur, deep in the Siberian taiga. When two thieves stumble upon Monamur, the old man invites them into the home. Violating the sacred law of hospitality, they attempt to steal the old man’s most prized possession, the golden icon to which he prays daily. When Ivan tries to prevent them, they beat him nearly to death while his grandson looks on. In another subplot, an army captain (Nikolai Kozak) brutally rapes a young prostitute (Sonia Ross), but later has a

24 Among other prizes, *Siberia Monamour* was awarded a Nika for Best Debut, as well as various prizes at film festivals in Toronto, Rotterdam, Brooklyn, Torun, and the “Stalker” and “Window to Europe” Festivals.
change of heart and saves her from further sexual assault by his military superior. The
captain-rapist and his victim, mysteriously bonded together, escape from the military
compound and find further redemption at the film’s conclusion by saving the lives of the
old man and his grandson, who is stuck in the village well. As in *Yuri’s Day*, characters
bond through their traumatic experiences. Romantic Siberian landscapes, moreover,
coexist in the film with extreme social degradation and violence—a duality captured
perfectly by the film’s opening montage, a breathtaking panorama of the Siberia forest,
juxtaposed with shots of a pack of starving, menacing wolves.

In Angelina Nikonova’s celebrated debut, *Twilight Portrait*, the heroine Marina
(Olga Dykhovichnaia) is abducted and sexually assaulted by Russian police. Rather
than taking revenge or appealing to criminal justice, Marina seeks out her police officer-
assailant, Andrei (Sergei Borisov), and begins a sexual relationship with him, thereby

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25 Among other prizes, *Twilight Portrait* was awarded for Best Cinematography at Kinotavr, the Grand
Prize at the Reykjavik Film Festival, Best Debut at the Warsaw Film Festival and Best Actor (Sergei
Borisov) at the Stockholm Film Festival.
acting out a neurosis of repetition. Andrei reacts violently to her attempts to talk with him about his life and to achieve emotional intimacy, implying his own wounded past. Marina learns from Andrei’s brother that the two boys were abandoned by their absentee father and alcoholic mother, growing up homeless until an old man took them in. Marina begins living with Andrei, his brother and “grandfather” in their dingy, cramped apartment on the outskirts of Rostov-on-Don. Scenes of the lovers’ rough, borderline sadomasochistic sex alternate with scenes of Marina cooking and painstakingly scrubbing the dirty apartment (echoing scenes in Yuri’s Day in which Liuba scrubs the filthy floor of the tuberculosis ward).

Figure 8: Marina seeks out her assailant in Portrait in the Darkness
The attempts of these educated, upper-class heroines to clean up the squalor of their new surroundings evoke the intelligentsia’s enlightenment mission. However, significantly, it is Marina and Liuba who ultimately learn from the narod, achieving a new sense of humility, purpose and, impliedly, a more authentic life. At the end of *Twilight Portrait*, Marina leaves behind her former bourgeois life—marked by infidelities and squabbles over money—eternally bonded to Andrei. The instances of “Stockholm syndrome” depicted in *Twilight Portrait* and *Siberia MonAmour* problematize the villain-victim dynamic, creating sympathy for both characters, who are caught in a cycle of repetitive violence and are ultimately rehabilitated through shared suffering, empathy, and re-established community.26

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26 Director Nikonova commented to this effect: “Despite everything, this is life-affirming cinema with a bright ending” See Smirnova and Tolstaia, 2012.
The paradoxical attraction of the upper-class Marina to her former rapist and his squalid environs, as well as Liuba’s desire to renounce her life as a celebrated opera diva to wash the floors of the prison ward, can be understood both as a neurosis of repetition following a trauma, and an attraction to the abject. Julia Kristeva describes the abject as an abrupt encounter with the Real (a traumatic image or event inaccessible to the rational mind), which “disturbs identity, system, order.” The abject “draws [the subject] toward the place where meaning collapses,” to the place before entering the symbolic order, before the formation of subject and object (Kristeva 1982, 2). It is no coincidence, I would argue, that the neo-populist narratives of recent Russian cinema frequently depict protagonists paradoxically drawn to the abject, thus leading to a break with their former identity and a reunion with their ‘true’ cultural roots. This, in part, explains the horror devices, death, and violence so pervasive in these otherwise realist works of social critique.27

While Yuri’s Day, Siberia, MonAmour, and Twilight Portrait were frequently dismissed by viewers as mere “chernukha,” they are in fact a significant departure from chernukha’s discourse of negation. In their study of Perestroika cinema, Horton and Brashinsky outline the following common features of chernukha:

1) The family, agonizing or already collapsed;
2) Average […] citizens unmasking their animalistic natures, ultimate

27 Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers make a similar argument about the prevalence of violence and the abject in contemporary Russian theater and New Drama, which creates a “strange transgressive pleasure derived from grief and from the transformation of the Self (that was in childhood and is no more) into a homo sacer, the naked person on the naked soil, into the same Other –[and from this] arises the opportunity for the formation of a new Self […] The Real, deprived of the link with Symbolic and Imaginary […] is capable of providing a source of existential pleasure” (2009, 196).
immorality and unmotivated cruelty;
3) The death of all former ideals, leaving no hope for the future after the closing credits;
4) Packed everyday conditions in ‘communal apartments’ […] with the attendant ‘communal’ psychology and forms of communication;
5) Senseless hysterics and fights arising from nowhere and dying down in the middle of a scream;
6) Usually, a few ‘adult’ scenes. (Brashinsky 1992, 163-164).

This group of “neo-populist” independent films shares all of the characteristics of chernukha except one. No longer embracing “the death of all former ideals, leaving no hope for the future after the closing credits,” they place their hope in the fallen, but ultimately noble Russian people. As such, these films articulate, albeit in a more complex manner, a number of the discourses that dominate Russian commercial cinema and mass media: a reunion with an ascendant Russian folk; the redemptive power of suffering; and the superiority of indigenous Russian culture over empty global or Western values.

*My Joy: Russia at an Impasse*

Like Serebrennikov, Sergei Loznitsa continues in *My Joy* the sobering critique typical of auteur cinema’s liberal discourse through an unvarnished depiction of both Russia’s history and *narod*. As if to state its artistic goal from the outset, the film’s original script included the following epigraph, citing Nikolai Gogol’s remarks about

28 Seth Graham provides similar characteristics in his study of chernukha films (Graham 2000).
Dead Souls: “There are times when it is not possible to turn society, or even one generation, towards the beautiful, so long as it is not shown the depths of its present abasement” (Gogol 1969, 109). Deciding that this phrasing was too didactic, Loznitsa replaced it with the film’s first scene. A fitting opening for a neo-chernukha film, it shows the unaesthetic churning of a cement mixer, accompanied by the sound of sloshing cement, before it is poured on top of a dead body (perhaps one of the 40,000 Russians who disappear each year?). This scene, although it has no direct connection to the plot, attempts to translate the epigraph into filmic language, holding up a sobering “mirror” to society. Loznitsa embraces the role of cinema as vehicle for social change. When asked in an interview about this scene and whether he thought cinema could change society, Loznitsa answered with a smile, “It already is” (Vishnevetskii 2010).

Figure 10: Disposing of a body in the opening shot of My Joy

29 «Бывает время, когда нельзя иначе устремить общество или даже всё поколение к прекрасному, пока не покажешь всю глубину его настоящей мерзости».

30 This scene recalls the frequent disposal of bodies in Aleksei Balabanov’s The Stoker (Kochegar, 2010).
In *My Joy*, truck driver Giorgii (Viktor Nemets) delivers a shipment of flour across the Russian countryside. The result is an ethnographic tour, as it were, of present-day Russian provincial and village life. Recalling Alexander Medvedkin’s *Film Train (Kinopoezd)* project of the 1920s, the film’s visual refrain is a point-of-view shot of the road as Giorgii drives through abandoned truck stops, police checkpoints, forests, and villages. He picks up a teenage prostitute, but is more interested in helping her than using her services. He gives a ride to a nameless old man, a former Red Army soldier (Vladimir Golovin) who tells his tragic story from the Great Patriotic War. Later, Giorgii is accosted by wandering thieves, who are former prisoners, in a forest. Under the pretext of talking by the fireside, they knock him unconscious with a log in order to steal his freight, leaving him brain-damaged for life.

In addition to the postdocumentary aesthetic of *My Joy*, perhaps its most striking stylistic feature is a skillful weaving of *fabula* and *siuzhet*. All of the subplots in the film echo one another and are interconnected. Shortly after leaving the checkpoint where present-day traffic police (GAI) extort bribes from passersby, the former soldier tells Giorgii his own story of extortion during the Great Patriotic War. In this flashback, a Red Army commander threatens the soldier with imprisonment in order to steal the gifts that he is bringing home to his fiancée from the war. The soldier hands over the prized

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31 In addition to *My Joy*, ex-convicts also populate Iur’ev-Pol’skii in *Yuri’s Day* and roam the Siberian wilderness in *Siberia, Monamour*, posing a constant threat to travelers. Like the figure of the threatening police officer, the ex-convict occupies a prominent place in recent cinema, suggesting their importance in the cultural imaginary—ghosts, as it were, of the haunted Soviet past.

32 For a discussion of Loznitsa’s “postdocumentary” aesthetic, see Abdullaeva, 267-277.
gifts, but avenges the extortion by shooting the commander as his train pulls away. However, this tragic turn of events prevents him from ever returning to his bride and former life. Like the old man, the protagonist Giorgii also loses everything—his name, memory, and identity—in a single moment of treachery. In yet another parallel story, one of the three vagrants who assault Giorgii by the fireside is in fact his double, a mute who is similarly brain damaged. We learn that this mute thief was the little boy depicted in a subsequent flashback scene. In this scene, also set during the Great Patriotic War, two Red Army soldiers, seeking shelter, visit the country home of a schoolteacher and his small son. The next morning, the soldiers kill the father and loot the house while the son looks on. This child, we are led to believe, grows up to become the very same mute who assaults Giorgii with the roaming band of thieves. In this way, the structure of the narrative creates a circularity and continuity between the villainy of the past and present, and debunks any possible nostalgia, even for the sacrosanct period of the Great Patriotic War—a theme that Loznitsa continues in his subsequent film, *In the Fog* (*V tumane*, 2012).

In *My Joy* the treatment of the past is neither romanticized nor ambivalent. The past is unequivocally traumatic and has left the Russian people irreparably damaged. The old former Red Army soldier lives out the rest of his days in obscurity, nameless and isolated. Giorgii is a walking zombie, unable to speak or recall his past life. In stark

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33 One of the thieves tells Georgii, “They say they killed his father.”

34 Film and cultural theorist Mikhail Iampol’skii writes about the “image of man” in each of the major epochs of Russian cinema. He makes a similar argument that post-Soviet man in cinema is “affected man,” i.e., a traumatized or mentally disturbed man who is cut off from history and tradition and whose actions are unpredictable and not psychologically motivated. See Iampol’skii 2011.
contrast to blockbuster cinema, which constructs a romantic vision of the past and revives various cultural myths, the film portrays Russia’s past as “a total, nullifying negative experience” from which no meaning can be recovered (Gusiatinskii “Proshche” 2008). The conversation between Giorgii and the wandering thieves expresses the film’s complete rejection of Russian cultural tradition:

-Where does this road lead?
-It’s not a road, it’s a direction.
-Well, where does this direction lead?
-It’s a dead end. A dead end of evil power.35

In My Joy, the traumatic past is devastating and manifests itself in cycles of violence that will continue indefinitely into the future. From this view of history emerged a common trope36 in Russian cinema of the last several years, the “concussed hero,” of which Giorgii is the latest example. Stricken with brain damage, amnesia or shell-shocked from wartime trauma, the damaged protagonists in Soaring (Otryv, Mindadze, 2007), Shul’tes (Bakuradze, 2008), The Edge (Krai, Uchitel’, 2010), Stoker (Kochegar, Balabanov, 2010) and The Convoy (Mizgerev, 2013) symbolize a nation traumatized and unable or


36 This study departs from the narrow definition of a “trope” as an umbrella category for figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. It employs the term in a broader sense as a signifier with a rich history of cultural and textual associations, or as literary theorist Yuri Lotman described the term: “not as embellishment merely on the level of expression, a decoration on an invariant content, but as a mechanism for constructing a content which could not be constructed by one language alone” (Lotman 1990, 44).
unwilling to confront its past. This tendency prompted one critic to remark, “[Today] anyone who lays claim to the status of a positive hero must be concussed […] A concussion is the only possible national idea now in Russian cinema” (Gusev 2011).

Figure 11: One of several recent "concussed heroes," Giorgii in My Joy

This is the point where the neo-populist and neo-chernukha films of recent cinema truly diverge. Liubov Pavlovna in Yuri’s Day, Marina in Twilight Portrait, and the army captain in Siberia MonAmour also experience a series of traumas and break with their former identities. Unlike the characters of My Joy, however, they are reborn with renewed purpose, both finding meaning in the collective and becoming instruments of justice. Critic Tatiana Moskvina-Iatsenko argues that death plays a central role in recent cinema: “Testing the hero through the proximity of death, filmmakers check the

37 «Контузия осознана отечественным кино как единственновозможная ныненациональная идея…»
condition of his soul and of the world” (Moskvina-Iatsenko 2012). I would, however, replace “death” in this claim with “trauma.” In the case of Liubov Pavlovna, traumatic experience has an ennobling effect and leads to rebirth. However, Giorgii in My Joy is reincarnated not as a humble servant of the collective but as a psychologically stunted agent of death. The film’s final scene, in which Giorgii shoots the innocent and guilty alike—with the same gun used decades earlier to shoot the Red Army commander—shatters any hope of escaping the cycles of violence and trauma from which contemporary Russian culture continues to suffer.

A number of recent films assume a similar discursive position vis-à-vis the Russian nation. I would argue that Aleksei Balabanov’s Cargo 200 (2007) and Stoker (2010), Aleksei Mizgirev’s Tambourine, Drum (2009) and The Convoy (2013), Vasilii Sigarev’s Wolfie (2009) and Living (2012), among others, constitute the “neo-chernukha” of contemporary cinema. Not only do they debunk the romantic/nostalgic images of mainstream cinema through unvarnished portraits of history and contemporary social conditions, but they also continue chernukha’s unrelenting aesthetic of negation through narratives and filmic language of inescapable cyclicality, “leaving no hope for the future after the closing credits.” This negative identity discourse, coupled with Russia’s exultant blockbuster cinema, recall what Kristeva described as the “melancholic imaginary,” i.e., a “complex dialectic of idealization and devalorization to a lost object” (Kristeva 1982, 6).

Although exploring somewhat different themes and social milieu, Aleksei Mizgirev’s celebrated Tambourine, Drum employs a bleak aesthetic and a narrative logic
similar to that of *My Joy*, closing the door on any positive identification or redemption for its characters. The heroine Katya (Natalia Negoda), a librarian in a provincial mining town, is presented as an archetypal representative of the outmoded intelligentsia, a guardian of high culture amidst the ruins of late-1990s post-Soviet society. Katya meets a traveling naval officer (Dmitri Kulichkov), and glimpses true love, before the romance ends in mutual disenchantment, betrayal, and tragedy. The film’s grey skies and drab tones are complemented by the decaying buildings that house the library and miner’s dormitory where Katya lives. Meticulously chosen by director Mizgerev and production designer Denis Shibanov, the crumbling Neoclassical architecture of the Stalinist period is ever-present in the film, serving as a constant reminder of both social deterioration and historical baggage. The joyless lives of the characters and the film’s bleak aesthetic paint a picture of a post-Soviet purgatory in which, as the film’s refrain suggests, “You can’t be a weakling; while you are strong enough you have to endure. If you endure, you’re a person. If not, just a weakling.”

38 Among other prizes, *Drum, Tambourine* was awarded Best Director and a Special Jury Prize at the Locarno (Switzerland) Film Festival, a Golden Eagle (Moscow) for Best Female Role, and the National Critics’ Guild “White Elephant” for Best Script and Best Female Role.

39 A felicitous choice for the lead, Natalia Negoda appears in her first major role since the classic *Little Vera* (1989), where she also played a female character during a time of identity crisis and historical transition.

40 Mizgerev explained the choice of setting: “Production designer Denis Shibanov found a series of crumbling Stalinist structures in the Tula oblast’ […] There was a time when such architecture looked opulent, a sort of glamorous kitsch. Today this is a space of memory, in which people take quarters, making their homes among the ruins of the former empire” (Dondurei 2009).

41 «Нельзя жить тряпкой. Пока сильный, надо терпеть. Терпишь, то человек. Нет, то тряпка.»
Figure 12: Living amidst crumbling Stalinist architecture in *Tambourine, Drum*

Figure 13: Katya trapped in *Tambourine, Drum*
As the director put it, the film portrays a world in which “everyday life is trapped by a feeling that any positive action is doomed” (Dondurei 2009). This inescapability is reinforced by the film’s mise-ên-scene, always framed by the close confines of rows of library books or the walls of narrow rooms. Katya glimpses love for the first time, and she and the unnamed naval officer dream of a new life together. However, all of the characters are ultimately exposed as duplicitous: the naval officer, despite his purported idealism, is actually an escaped prisoner; Katya’s friend and fellow librarian betrays her and sleeps with her lover; the dentist, a seemingly good-natured man who courts Katya, in fact lives by taking bribes and ultimately arranges the murder of the naval officer. Katya, herself, a portrait of the “rotten intelligentsia” (gnilaia intelligentsiia), symbolically sells off volumes of Pushkin and Lermontov and maneuvers to disinherit her brother in order to receive her father's apartment. The film constantly juxtaposes binaries of the transcendent and the base through symbols and skillful dramaturgy, and suggests widespread hypocrisy in society that extends even to the intelligentsia. In two poignant scenes that bookend the film, Katya reads Rudyard Kipling's famous poem "If..." to school children. While her triumphant reading in the opening scene is met with applause, in the final scene she reads the poem in a shaky, broken voice to a bewildered audience. The scene comments bitterly on Katya's true nature, as she has failed to live up to her professed ideals. The film’s conclusion confirms the logic of inescapability: the sailor is murdered and Katya slits her wrists.

42 «Повседневный быт скован ощущением безысходности любого позитивного шага». 
While all hope for redemption is dismissed in the neo-chernukha films of recent auteur cinema, the opposing trend of neo-populist films constitute auteur cinema’s counterpart to the affirmative identity discourses of Russian mainstream cinema and media today. In these films, meaning is found both in reconnecting with lost tradition and the suppression of individualism in the interest of reconnecting with a collective. These films demonstrate the impulse to social identification in contemporary Russian society, what Beumers calls “a longing for a sense of collective that is no longer extant in the current capitalist climate governed only by self-interest” and Oushakine describes as the invention of new modes of behavior and forms of collectivity during a period of ‘cultural liminality’ (Beumers 2012, 56; Oushakine 2009, 4).

In both My Joy and Yuri’s Day, the primary culprit for atomization and cultural degradation is a lack of social responsibility, expressed by the pithy phrase “Don’t meddle!” (ne lez’!). This phrase is used in critical scenes in both Yuri’s Day and My Joy and suggests a possible interfilmic dialogue. When Liuba, appalled by the malnutrition of the prisoners, declares that she will bring them food, the investigator Seryi tries to dissuade her: “What are you meddling for? What’s it to you?” (Chego lezish’? Chego nada?). In My Joy, the truck driver in the final scene expounds at great length a similar philosophy, exclaiming: “Don’t meddle!…You know, it’s a real talent to know how not to get involved!…If you steal, go ahead and steal! Just don’t meddle in others’ business!”

43 Virtually all of the socially oriented films of recent auteur cinema

43 «Не лезь! Ты знаешь, что талант надо иметь никуда не лезть! Если воруешь, то воруй! Только не лезь!»
demonstrate a common concern with a lack of social responsibility, what film critic Daniel Dondurei has called “the breakdown of social relations” in contemporary Russia (“Aktual’noe kino” 2008). While My Joy expresses no hope in this regard, in Yuri’s Day Liuba breaks the cycle of “Ne lez’!” She brings food to the prisoners and protects Tania from her alcoholic brother. In Siberia MonAmour, the formerly callous army captain protects the young prostitute and then heroically saves the old man and his grandson. Marina in Twilight Portrait attempts to heal her own and Andrei’s psychological trauma and to improve the quality of life of everyone in her new surroundings. Recent independent films of this “optimistic” strain typically emphasize social responsibility and small, everyday acts of heroism.44

. . .

To conclude, Kirill Serebrennikov’s Yuri’s Day and Sergei Loznitsa’s My Joy reflect a broader anxiety about nationhood in Russia today. In contrast to the idealized portrayals of recent patriotic blockbusters, both neo-populist and neo-chernukha films depict the Russian narod in an unflattering light, using naturalistic scenes and grotesque methods of characterization. These techniques are part and parcel of a clear social critique, which emphasizes cultural degradation in the form of alcoholism, violence, rape, and squalor. Most importantly, these films are united by an emphasis on the lack of duty

44 Films of “quiet critique” (so-called “novye tikhie”) typically emphasize such everyday heroism and redeemed community, including Free Floating (Khlebnikov, 2006), Simple Things (Popogrebskii, 2007), How I Spent This Summer (Popogrebskii, 2010), Shul’tes (Bakuradze, 2008), and The Hunter (Bakuradze, 2011).
to one’s fellow man, the mentality epitomized by the common phrase “don’t meddle.” However, the films in these two categories draw antithetical conclusions. *My Joy* effectively uses *fabula* and *siuzhet* to show cycles of violence and corruption tracing from the Great Patriotic War to the present, both debunking any nostalgia for the past and precluding any hope for the future. Following in the footsteps of directors Aleksei Balabanov, Aleksei Mizgirev, and others, Loznitsa continues a negative identity discourse that loudly rejects, and offers no affirmative forms of identification. *Yuri’s Day*, while maintaining a strong social critique and ambivalent depiction of the *narod*, attempts to salvage meaning from Russian visual tropes and cultural myths, such as Christian collectivism and kenoticism. Attempting to create films with greater appeal for audiences (*zritel’skoe kino*) and reacting to the unrelenting despondency of chernukha films, *Yuri’s Day*, *Siberia MonAmour*, and *Twilight Portrait* are part of a recent trend among the young generation of indie filmmakers, which places a measured, qualified hope in the fallen Russian *narod*. 
Chapter 2
Xenophobia Overt and Covert

As Chapter 1 suggests, the post-Soviet transition in Russia has been a period of acute cultural instability, which has given rise to a number of phenomena. The recent preoccupation with re-establishing identity, on the one hand, has turned inward: the Russian and Soviet pasts have become sites of debate and active myth-making, and shared experience, however negative or traumatic, has led to new forms of collectivity. But this unstable identity discourse has also turned outward, placing considerable emphasis on alterity and defining the Self in contrast to various Others. Sociologist Lev Gudkov characterizes post-Soviet identity as primarily a “negative identity,” which he describes as “self-constitution by contradiction from another significant subject or representation, but expressed in the form of denial of any qualities or values of their bearer: as strange, disgusting, frightening, menacing, embodying everything that is unacceptable for the members of a group or community; in short: as an antipode” (Gudkov 2004, 271). A number of studies of post-Soviet cinema have examined Russia’s renewed emphasis on alterity and construction of Others.45 This chapter will continue this analysis of Russian identity and alterity in the films of Putin-era auteurs.

Inextricably linked to discussions of Self and Other is official nationality policy. The “nationality question” posed by the Bolsheviks continues to be a major point of contention in Russian society today. I will examine how the vicissitudes of Russian nationality policy have been reflected in cultural production, including how certain rhetorical practices in literary classics and Soviet cinema have persisted to recent films, including the trope of Russia’s “gift of empire” to its backward neighbors; Orientalist admiration and vilification of the Eastern Other; and Soviet narratives of the “big family,” “friendship of peoples” and Russia’s “little brothers” on the imperial periphery.

Post-Soviet blockbusters, such as *The Ninth Company* (*Deviataia rota*, Bondarchuk, 2005) and *12* (Mikhalkov, 2007), recycle and update Orientalist narratives from earlier periods. In this regard, Nikita Mikhalkov’s *12* is a fascinating example of how subtle rhetorical practices of multiculturalism in Putin’s Russia reproduce the same paternalistic and hierarchical relationships of earlier imperial periods. Other recent films, typically of the film-festival variety, such as *Captive* (*Plennyi, Uchitel’,* 2008) and *Russia 88* (*Rossiia 88*, Bardin, 2009) problematize and undermine these timeworn narratives in interesting ways through postmodern genre and plot devices.

**Russian Literature’s Orientalist Legacy**

A brief overview of the treatment of minorities and imperial subjects in the Russian literary tradition will shed light on the treatment of these subjects in Russian cinema. Canonical works by Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Lev Tolstoy,
among others, solidified conceptions about the Eastern Other that have considerable currency even today and inform cinematic depictions. The prolific tradition of literary works set in the imperial periphery and, especially, the Caucasus region, suggests the rich significance of the eastern Other in the Russian popular imagination. These were not merely tales of adventure and exotic lands and peoples, but served as a mythological space for exploring Russia’s imperial ambitions, the alienation of the individual, and notions of Russian identity and alterity. The works in this tradition reveal a striking consistency of theme and characterization, but also demonstrate a diversity of artistic goals, political viewpoints, and styles that suggest something about their respective artists and historical contexts.

Pushkin’s “Prisoner of the Caucasus” (1821) is an appropriate starting point because it effectively inaugurated the Caucasus tradition in Russian literature and established the major topoi for the works that would follow. As Vissarion Belinskii wrote: “Only in Pushkin’s narrative poem for the first time was Russian society acquainted with the Caucasus…” (Belinskii 1981, 6:311). Under the influence of Lord Byron’s Eastern tales—in particular his depiction of Albanian culture in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-1818)—Pushkin created the quintessential Russian Romantic portrait of the region. The poem’s protagonist, a disaffected Russian nobleman, leaves behind society life in search of freedom in the Caucasus, where he is injured and held captive in a Circassian village. While convalescing he observes and admires the simple way of life, military prowess, and customs of the Circassians. In keeping with Rousseau’s Noble Savage and other Romantic treatments of native cultures, Pushkin presents the Caucasian
way of life as a refreshing alternative to Russian society, characterized by the betrayals and vanity of a corrupt Russian society. The poem initiates the Romantic admiration for the Caucasian way of life, free from an oppressive state and Petersburg social convention. The Caucasus becomes “an allegorical screen upon which the Russian writer could project, and deflect, his own political alienation,” and the admiration for its way of life expresses “nostalgia for a more organic form” (Ram 1999, 3:8). Caucasians were not the only objects of Romantic exploration of alterity; Cossacks and gypsies served a similar function in Russian literature in works such as Pushkin’s *The Gypsies* and Nikolai Gogol’s *Taras Bulba*, although arguably Caucasians enjoyed a special status in the Russian imagination as the ultimate free people and the most formidable fighters.46 In the post-Soviet period, Central Asia, along with the Caucasus, has become an increasingly important site of exploration of identity, alterity, and neo-imperial relationships, in light of migration trends and the growing importance of the region.

Paradoxically, Romantic treatment of the eastern Other alternated primitivist and anti-primitivist views, sometimes “idealizing and diabolizing in the same breath” (Ziolkowski 2005, 26). If the former tendency was largely an identification of the alienated individual with Caucasian freedom and simplicity, the latter was the Russian version of Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism, a “European superiority over Oriental backwardness.”47 However, as David Schimmelpenninck von der Oye observes, the

46 For a more extensive analysis the image of Cossacks and Caucasians in Russian literature, see Kornblatt 1992 and Layton "Nineteenth-century Mythologies" 1997.

Russian position vis-à-vis the Asiatic Other was less stable and more problematic than its Western European counterparts: “Both culturally and politically, Russia has genuine roots in Asia, which made the Orient both self and Other.”\(^{48}\) Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous quote from The Diary of a Writer about the conquest of Central Asia reflects both Russia’s pretensions to European superiority and its own unstable sense of self: “In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas we shall go to Asia as masters. In Europe we were Tatars, whereas in Asia we, too, are Europeans. Our mission, our civilizing mission in Asia will bribe our spirit and drive us there” (Dostoevsky 1949, 1044).\(^{49}\) This liminal position between East and West informed the fraught identity discourse that resulted in what Etkind calls “internal colonization”: Russia colonized itself and assimilated its own people (Etkind 2011).

The dualistic admiration for and superiority to the Caucasus peoples would be adopted by other Romantic writers, such as Mikhail Lermontov, who deviated little from this Romantic-Orientalist discourse in his own “Prisoner” poem (1828) and novel, A Hero of Our Time (1839). The “Circassian Song” in Pushkin’s “Prisoner” tale—which enjoyed tremendous popularity in Russia—warns of a sinister Chechen lurking on the river bank: “Sleep not, O Cossack: in the gloam / The Chechens near the river roam” (Pushkin 1937, 109).\(^{50}\) The trope of the menacing Chechen would be repeated in

\(^{48}\) David Schimmelpenninck von der Oye, Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2010).

\(^{49}\) “В Европе мы были приживальщики и рабы, а в Азию явимся господами. В Европе мы были татарами, а в Азии и мы европейцы. Миссия, миссия наша цивилизаторская в Азии подкупит наш дух и увлечет нас туда.”

\(^{50}\) “Не спи, казак: во тьме ночной / Чеченец ходит за рекой.”
Lermontov’s widely circulated song about the Caucasus, “Cossack’s Lullaby” (1840): “An evil Chechen crawls along the shore / Sharpening his dagger” (Lermontov 1935, 61). As historian Michael Khodarkovsky points out, such constructions of Caucasians had their roots in sweeping classifications of “outlanders” (inorodtsy) and the early rhetoric of Russian officials in the 1700s, who routinely described the neighboring nomadic tribes as “wild, unruly and disloyal peoples… with savage customs” (Khodarkovsky 1997, 10). The depiction of backwardness in the Orient and Russia’s “civilizing mission” has served, in one or another form, as justification for Russian imperialism there to the present day.

Despite their reductive and dubious characterizations, such constructions were solidified in Russian popular imagination by Romantic writers. In a letter published in Pravda in 1995, the Chechen writer Vakhid Itaev laments the influence of Lermontov’s famous characterization of Chechens in “Cossack’s Lullaby”: “How stubborn ignorance is! For a century and a half all Russian mediocrity has been obsessed with one line of Lermontov. But, after all, it’s mischievous poetic license, not a description of the Chechen” (as quoted in Ziolkowski 2005, 62). As several scholars have noted, such stereotypes were reinforced throughout the Caucasus canon by a lack of differentiation and the practice of glossing Caucasians as “Circassians” (Pushkin), “Tatars” (Tolstoy) and, in the post-Soviet era, with any number of (often pejorative) terms that reveal a tendency to conflate and stereotype (Layton 1997, 7; Grant 2005, 52; Ziolkowski 2005, 51).

31 «Злой чечен ползет на берег / Точит свой кинжал.»
These constructions, moreover, were accompanied by the resounding silence of these characters, as well as a marked lack of diversity or individuality among them. In short, Caucasian characters in Russian cultural production are “always spoken for, but quite literally, rarely speaking” (Grant 2005, 51). While Pushkin makes a nominal effort to differentiate between the Circassians (cherkesy) by whom the Russian hero is held captive and the sly and menacing Chechen, “creeping along the river bank,” he himself expressed reservations about his poem, not least because he had never actually met a Circassian. He wrote to a friend: “The blankness of the plot approximates the poverty of its invention; the description of Circassian custom is not connected in the least with reality…” (as quoted in Grant 2009, 102). Nonetheless, these works by Pushkin and Lermontov would create the formula for the Caucasus adventure tale and initiate many of its tropes that continue to predominate, even in post-Soviet cultural production.

A number of other parallels can be observed in the Romantic treatment of the Caucasus by Pushkin and Lermontov. Lermontov’s prisoner and the hero of his novel, Pechorin, exhibit the same alienation and escapism that led to fantasies of freedom and adventure in the Caucasus. In his poem “Farewell Unwashed Russia” (1841), Lermontov bids farewell to Russia, a country of “slaves” and “military uniforms” promising to go into hiding beyond the Caucasus Mountains (Lermontov 1954, 191). In both Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s “Prisoner” poems appears a Circassian maid whose innocence and pure love contrast with the Russian protagonists’ “oversatiation” and inability to love. Bela

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52 In addition to the conflation of Caucasians today as “Chechens” and Central Asians as “gastary” (migrant workers), both Central Asians and Caucasians are often indiscriminately referred to with derogatory epithets, such as “chernye” (“blacks”), “khachi,” and “churki.”
serves an almost identical narrative function in Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*,
personifying the uncorrupted Noble Savage, while as an object of Pechorin’s sexual
conquest simultaneously reinforcing Russian hegemony. In this process of idealization,
the Caucasian becomes an abstraction, an allegory, devoid of any psychological realism
or agency.

In *The Captive and the Gift*, Bruce Grant analyzes the Caucasus canon through
the “Prisoner” cycle of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, and others, and argues that the
Russian taking of land, resources, and lives in the region was largely narrated as an act of
giving. The “good Russian prisoners” held captive in these stories were Promethean
figures, chained to the Caucasian mountainside as punishment for giving the gift of
civilization, and often wept for by their Caucasian captors. Grant argues that, by showing
the Russian protagonists as passive victims rather than aggressive imperialists, these
works practice an “art of emplacement” (Grant 2009, 98). Such inversions of power
dynamics and “sleights of hand” formed the Russian cosmologies of persuasion with
respect to the Caucasus and legitimized Russian imperialism there over the centuries.

Lev Tolstoy’s version of the “Prisoner of the Mountain” (1872) was written for
children’s textbooks and had a wide readership, selling over two million copies by the
time of the author’s death. Although his tale glosses the Caucasians as merely “Tatars”
and continues the rhetorical devices of emplacement (i.e., the inverted role of aggressor

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53 This rhetorical practice is not unique. As Grant points out, the Russian depictions of the “gift of empire”
and the “good Russian prisoner” recall Richard White’s concept of the “conquering victim” in American
historiography of settlement and engagement with native tribes.
and victim), it departs from the Romantic discourse of Pushkin and Lermontov by introducing an anti-imperialist critique to the story. In Tolstoy’s version of the “Prisoner,” the protagonist is no longer a disaffected Russian nobleman, but an everyman (significantly named Ivan), a conscripted soldier from a village. The story no longer emphasizes the protagonist’s personal alienation and the Romantic treatment of the Caucasians is muted. When Ivan Zhilin climbs to the top of the mountain and looks at the surrounding landscape, in contrast to the awestruck lyricism of Pushkin’s prisoner, he simply looks for a proper escape route and then descends. The members of the village are not a faceless group, but are relatively differentiated, with names and even differences of opinion about the Russians and what to do with the prisoners. Although the story perpetuates a number of stereotypes—for example, the “ruddy Tatar” who enters, “pointing his dagger and glaring at Zhilin like a wolf” (Tolstoy 2015, 184)—alterity is not a main emphasis in Tolstoy’s tale. Misconceptions about the Tatars are even cleared up in the story. When Zhilin is captured he says, “Well, I know what you devils are like: if you take me alive you’ll put me in a hole in the ground and thrash me with whips” (182). But he is soon disabused of his ideas about the Caucasians, who treat him humanely, even affably. The captor, Abdul-Murat, grows fond of Zhilin and expresses reluctance to let him go: “I have grown to like you, Ivan…I wouldn’t even let you go if I hadn’t given my word” (190). By making the protagonist a simple soldier and

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54 «...красный татарин вошел...кинжалом пошевеливает, как волк исподлобья косится на Жилина»

55 «Ну, знаю вас, чертей, если живого возьмут, посадят в яму, будут плетью пороть. Не дамся же живой».

56 «Да я тебя, Иван, полюбил… я бы тебя и выпускать не стал, кабы слова не дал.» Ibid.
emphasizing commonalities with his Tatar captives, Tolstoy draws implicit comparisons between these subjects of the empire, forced into conflict by forces beyond their control. If one considers Alexander Etkind’s theory of Russia’s “internal colonization,” the story can be understood as a humanistic and class-based critique of imperialism, under which both the common Russian and Caucasian pay the ultimate price.

The critique of imperialism in Tolstoy’s “Prisoner” is perhaps clearest in the figure of the reclusive Caucasian beekeeper. The old man was once a rich and fierce fighter until seven of his eight sons were killed by the Russians. His only remaining son deserted his people and joined the Russian army, prompting the old man to seek him out and kill him. Now the beekeeper lives in bitter seclusion, cursing the Russians who destroyed his family. As opposed to traditional sleights of hand, which portray Russians as captives and victims of Caucasian savagery, Tolstoy’s story humanizes the Tatars by describing their suffering at the hands of the Russians. Later in the story, a slain Tatar is brought back to the village, and his funeral and mourning rites are described in detail. If in the Caucasus canon the prevalent trope of the Corpse functioned, as Harsha Ram suggests, as an expression of Russian victimization and imperial anxieties, Tolstoy subverts this trope with a rare instance of a Caucasian corpse and funeral, privileging Caucasian suffering and victimization over that of the Russians (Ram 1999, 13). Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat (written 1896-1904) would arguably take this anti-imperialist

57 Notably, Sergei Bodrov’s celebrated film Prisoner of the Mountain (1996) is an adaptation of, not Pushkin or Lermontov, but Tolstoy’s Prisoner tale. Transposed onto the post-Soviet conflict in Chechnya, Bodrov’s film also draws parallels between the common Russian and Chechen soldier and questions the imperial mission.
critique one step further, “dismantling the winners’ epic about the Caucasus” and emphasizing the bonds between the mountaineers and the Russian narod (Layton “Nineteenth-Century” 1997, 96).

Soviet Nationality Policy and Cinematic Tropes

While an exhaustive treatment of “the East” in Soviet cinema is beyond the scope of this study, I will outline here the predominant tropes and narrative styles of the period in order to draw continuities between pre- and post-Soviet periods. Two conclusions can be drawn from this analysis: first, that Soviet cinema of the East was highly influenced by the vicissitudes of Soviet nationality policy; and second, that despite its expressly anti-colonialist rhetoric, Soviet cinema heavily recycled characterizations of Eastern Others and national hierarchies inherited from Orientalist literary classics—a tradition largely continued, as I argue, in the post-Soviet period.

The first Russian films dealing with the imperial periphery, which preceded the 1917 Revolution, were travelogues and ethnographic documentaries. Production of such films began in earnest in 1907 and soon became a popular trend, “contributing to Russia’s self-image as an imperial power” (Sarkisova 2007, 22). Presaging the educational mission of the Soviet Department of Enlightenment (Narkompros), which took charge of film production in 1919, filmmakers in the tsarist period were enlisted to create “useful entertainment,” variously depicting proper hygiene, health, travelogues to
exotic and remote regions, and patriotic films during World War I. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the representational strategies of the 1920s were greatly influenced by Soviet nationality policy, particularly Lenin’s strong anti-colonialist stance and proclamation of the right of the republics to self-determination. Although bourgeois nationalism was a philistine ideal from the perspective of Marxist theory, a distinction was made between the nationalism of oppressor and oppressed nations; the latter was deemed temporary, but acceptable. Russia, it was argued, must allow for national sovereignty to win back the trust of nations it had formerly oppressed. Moreover, the Bolsheviks “needed native languages, native subjects and native teachers […] in order to polemicize with their own bourgeoisie, to spread anticlerical and anti-bourgeois ideas” (Slezkine 1994, 418). Hence a policy of “nationalist in form, socialist in content” was adopted. Historians such as Francine Hirsch and Terry Martin have explored early Soviet nationality policy, identifying the paradoxical blend of proletarian internationalism, national specificity, organic unity, and cultural backwardness that fell under the official policy of “indigenization” (korenizatsiia) (Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001).

Early Soviet cinema was an important medium for promoting indigenization policy. A number of films from the period reflect Soviet discourses of ethnic

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58 In Lenin’s 1916 essay “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” he writes: “The proletariat cannot but fight against the forcible retention of the oppressed nations within the boundaries of a given state, and this is exactly what the struggle for the right of self-determination means. The proletariat must demand the right of political secession for the colonies and for the nations that ‘its own’ nation oppresses. Unless it does this, proletarian internationalism will remain a meaningless phrase; mutual confidence and class solidarity between the workers of the oppressing and oppressed nations will be impossible.”
particularism and anti-colonialism. Dziga Vertov’s *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), made at the height of indigenization policy, creates a utopian federated space with a

![Image](image1.jpg)

**Figure 14: Western decadence in *A Sixth Part of the World***

![Image](image2.jpg)

**Figure 15: Oppressed colonial subjects in *A Sixth Part of the World***
mosaic of cultures. This documentary incorporates a wealth of footage, both shot by Vertov’s team of commissioned operators and incorporated from existing archival materials. The first part of the film critiques the “exploitative logic of capital,” juxtaposing colonial subjects and the working class in the West with the frenetic leisure of the rich—dancing the foxtrot at jazz clubs and counting their jewelry. The remainder of the film is a colorful montage of the Soviet peoples, which attempts to capture the diversity of the vast Soviet Union that comprises “one sixth part of the world.” As if addressed directly to the minority populations, scenes of the diverse republics and achievements of modernization are punctuated throughout by intertitles proclaiming: “All of this belongs to you! Your factories. Your plants. Your oil…”

The “liberal” depictions of national diversity in the 1920s, such as Vertov’s *A Sixth Part of the World*, nonetheless portrayed national cultures as aestheticized, superficial, and apolitical cultural forms, in national costumes and singing songs. This rhetorical strategy would continue throughout the Soviet period. Soviet Georgia, for example, was invariably called “sunny socialist Georgia,” and described as having fine weather, which explained the “joyful” folk art produced there (Martin 1999, 171). But no presentation of different values, social systems, or traditional economic and kinship relations was permitted. To use the language of Žižek, this was a depiction of nationalism deprived of its substance and with a highly regulated enjoyment (*jouissance*) (Žižek 1993; 1997). In this regard, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Soviet multiethnic discourse anticipated many of the rhetorical strategies of post-Soviet multiculturalism.
In contrast to films of the 1930s that celebrated the diversity of the USSR, *A Sixth Part of the World* is relatively non-hierarchical, with little of the privileging of Russian culture that prevails in later films. As one film historian observes, “The world in *A Sixth
"Part of the World" is not only geographically heterogeneous, but also culturally fragmented, with the Kremlin walls becoming one geographical reference among many” (Sarkisova 2007, 30). Nonetheless, the film’s mosaic of cultures coexists with a linear progressivist worldview that promotes assimilation. A number of scenes depict members of the republics breaking with traditional custom to join the new Soviet proletariat. In one sequence, intertitles alternate with corresponding footage, declaring: “I see the woman has cast away her yashmak (veil) / Another woman educates the women of the East / A young Communist Samoyed is reading the newspaper The Northerner / Buryats and Mongols are reading the Buryat-Mongol Pravda / Mongol children become members of the Young Pioneers…” In this way, Vertov’s film reveals the contradictions inherent in early Soviet nationality policy: a staunch anti-colonialist rhetoric and a celebration of ethnic particularism co-existed with a monologic, teleological discourse of development and assimilation. In this sense, the film portends the limitations of self-determination and contains the “seeds of neo-colonialism” (Sarkisova 2007, 36).
Vsevelod Pudovkin’s *Storm over Asia (Potomok Chengiz-Hana*, 1928) continues the “anti-colonialist” discourse of the period. Set in 1918, the film portrays a Mongolian herdsman and trapper who is cheated out of a valuable fur by a European capitalist trader.
Ostracized by the town for brawling with the trader, he leaves home and eventually joins up with Soviet partisans to help the fight against the occupying British Army (which, in reality, was not in Mongolia during this period). He is later captured by the British, who decide to execute him. Having ordered his death by firing squad, the British command discovers among his possessions an amulet that suggests he is a descendent of Ghengis Khan. Attempting to capitalize on this heritage, they nurse him back to health and appoint him the new leader of a puppet regime. However, the descendant of Ghengis Khan soon rebels against this exploitative arrangement. In the film’s final scene, he rides out to lead the rebellion against the British occupiers. This “storm over Asia”—in which hurricane winds accompany Mongolian riders on horseback, sweeping across the steppe to rid the country of their Western occupiers—suggests a socialist revolution that, it was hoped, would continue to take hold across Mongolia and Central Asia. The film depicts a benign alliance between Bolsheviks (partisans) and the oppressed local ethnicity against an exploitative colonizing power. Subjectivity and agency are granted to the hero, with the provision that he obtain the proper Soviet consciousness.
Figure 20: Descendant of Ghengis Khan, exploited by a Western fur trader, *Storm Over Asia*

Figure 21: The "storm of revolution" sweeping across Asia, *Storm over Asia*

The limits of federated socialism and the egalitarian vision of the Soviet peoples began to reveal themselves already during the transition of leadership from Vladimir
Lenin to Joseph Stalin while Lenin was largely incapacitated by illness. Lenin remained a staunch opponent of imperialism, insisting on the right of the republics to federated autonomy and even secession. Reacting to Lenin’s insistence on Georgia’s right to secede in 1922, Stalin accused him of “national liberalism” in a letter to the Politburo (Lewin 1968, 52). Stalin’s shift to centralized governance is clear in his proposal of the same year, in which he divested the republics of their federated sovereignty, putting them under the authority of the Central Committee in Moscow. Thus began the policy in which central authority in Moscow not only imposed its will, but presented its policies as desired by the constituent republics.

The backing away from national self-determination was but one of many facets of what historian Nicholas Timasheff called the “Great Retreat” from Bolshevik ideals under Stalin’s leadership, along with a reversion to traditional gender roles and conservative aesthetics in the arts. While the cultivation of nationalities was somewhat de-emphasized under Stalin, it nonetheless remained a tenet of Soviet nationality policy, though articulated in increasingly paternalistic rhetoric. For example, at the Tenth Party Congress in 1927, Russians were defined as an “advanced culture,” guilty of great power chauvinism, and all other nations in the USSR were categorized as “non-Great Russians,” who were victims of tsarist-imposed statelessness and backwardness. Stalin had declared

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59 If the present decision is confirmed by the Central Committee of the RCP, it will not be made public, but communicated to the Central Committees of the Republics for circulation among the Soviet organs, the Central Executive Committees or the Congresses of the Soviets of the said Republics before the convocation of the All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, where it will be declared to be the wish of these Republics (Lewin 1968, 61).

60 The characterization of this period as a “great retreat” is a subject of debate among historians. See Timasheff 1946; Hoffman 2004.
“the need to eliminate the backwardness (economic, political, and cultural) that the nationalities have inherited from the past, to allow the backward peoples to catch up with central Russia” (“Desiatyi s’ezd Kommunisticheskoj Partii” 1927).

In 1935, Stalin declared that resentment and mistrust had been overcome, replaced by mutual friendship among the Soviet peoples. As in other cultural and political spheres, the declaration that socialism had successfully been “built” became a justification for doing away with its most progressive policies. For party leaders this alleged friendship of the Soviet peoples cleared the way for them to extol the Russian nation without fear of antagonizing national minorities (Martin 2001, 441). In reality, the “friendship of peoples” discourse was part and parcel of what postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon called the false path of “client statism” in decolonizing regions. Namely, rather than mobilizing mass national movements, local elites were empowered by and appropriated into a neocolonizing structure (Fanon 1963, 101).

Official rhetoric began to reproduce the cultural hierarchies of the tsarist regime, informing later discourses of the Soviet “big family” with Russia at its head and the other nations as Russia’s “little brothers.” In the years leading up to World War II, Stalinist culture assumed an increasingly chauvinistic tone, describing Russians as “the first among equals in the fraternal family of peoples of the USSR” (Martin 2001, 429).61 During the victory celebrations following World War II, Stalin would describe Russia as “the most outstanding of all nations comprising the Soviet Union” (Slezkine 1994, 448).

61 For a lengthy discussion of the shift to Russian nationalism in Soviet official rhetoric and policy, see Brandenberger 2002.
Dispensing with the original ideal of a post-national dictatorship of the proletariat, in 1950 Stalin penned an essay asserting that nationality, not class, was the primary category of identity. If the Soviet Union was, as historian Yuri Slezkine suggests, a large communal apartment in which nationalities were reinforced and occupied separate rooms, it was a communal arrangement with definite limitations and national hierarchies (Slezkine 1994).

Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs About Lenin (Tri pesni o Lenine, 1934)* reflects the vicissitudes of shifting Soviet nationality policy and rhetorical practices in the 1930s. This sixty-minute panegyric to the father of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Lenin, begins: “We never saw him or heard his voice, but he is close to all of us like a father. No father ever did as much for his children.” As film historian John MacKay observes, as was the case with Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), *Three Songs About Lenin* marks Vertov’s transition from an avant-garde aesthetic to “a ’religious’ or quasi ‘sacred’ cinematic discourse, grounded [...] in deep cultural memories of religious practice” (MacKay 2006, 378). Vertov’s evolving style paralleled a rhetorical turn in society from the celebration of egalitarian achievements of international workers to a cult of personality built around Lenin and Stalin. It also reflected the denunciation of “formalism” and official adoption of Socialist Realism in 1934.

*Three Songs About Lenin* consists of three parts, structured around three songs sung by various minority peoples of the USSR. Song One, titled “My Face was in a Dark Prison,” features an Uzbek woman wearing a paranja robe and chachvon veil, the traditional dress of many Central Asian women. Through intertitles she declares: “I was
in a dark prison. I led a blind life. In ignorance and darkness, I was a slave without chains

[…] But in came the ray of light of Lenin’s truth.” Continuing the modernization
discourse of Vertov’s earlier *A Sixth Part of the World*, Part One proceeds to show the
achievements of Central Asian republics: the efficiencies of collective and mechanized
farms, new factories, literacy, and electrification of the villages. Vertov relies on existing
Soviet discourses of the veil, which were well established even before the *hujum* in 1928
(a series of policies aimed at removing veils and promoting women’s rights to literacy
and work in Central Asian republics). The veil had become a symbol of imposed
blindness, and unveiling meant achieving the proper Soviet consciousness, becoming
unmuzzled and acquiring a voice (MacKay 2006, 381).

Figure 22: A veiled Central Asian woman, *Three Songs about Lenin*
Paradoxically, the film introduces a new focus on subjectivity not present in Vertov’s earlier and more egalitarian films. Numerous close-ups of the faces of Central Asian women serve as “psychological pivots” for the remaining footage. False match-up shots of their eyes cutting to subsequent footage suggest their imagination and interiority. The shift to individualized characters from composite types was part of a broader trend in Stalinist art of the 1930s that celebrated class heroes and other “little people” of the Soviet Union. As in Pudovkin’s Storm over Asia, the women in Three Songs About Lenin are empowered by the proper Soviet worldview, revealing the colonial argument in a new guise. They are shown not merely reading, but specifically reading the works of Lenin. However, it is worth noting that the transition from backwardness to modernity was not limited to the nationalities of the republics, but extended also to the Russian peasantry.
As film scholar Lilya Kaganovsky observes, as Soviet citizens made the transition from spontaneity to proper consciousness, they were rewarded with Soviet subjectivity (Kaganovsky 2008, 25). This convergence of various imperial subjects and the illiterate Russian masses is another example of Etkind’s thesis that “Russia colonized itself, assimilated its own people” (Etkind 2001, 65). The cinematic trope of empowerment and modernization through Soviet subjectivity, which applied equally to the Russian folk and the peoples of the periphery, is another example of Russia’s unusual colonial project.

Continuing the quasi-sacred narrative, Song Two, titled “We Loved Him,” depicts Lenin’s funeral and the mourning of all the peoples of the Soviet Union. The opening shots of Song Three, titled “In a Big City of Stone,” convey the grandiosity of Moscow, the modern capital. Intertitles read: “In Moscow, in the city of stone, there stands a tent on the square in which Lenin lies […] and you can come to look upon Lenin in this tent and your sadness will disappear like water.” In this part, the relative heterogeneous and horizontal vision of the Soviet Union depicted in Vertov’s earlier film A Sixth Part of the World has clearly become hierarchical; shots of the still-modernizing republics are constantly elided with images of the Red Square, simultaneously evoking admiration for the imperial center and suggesting the proper path for development.

62 We should be careful not to conflate external and internal colonization, however. Adeeb Khalid, historian of Central Asia, objects to Etkind’s theory of internal colonization, arguing that it “can make conquest and violence disappear from view [...] In Russia today, such formulations buttress a particular national memory that is happy with the idea of an imperial past, but not with that of conquest, violence, and the possession of colonies. Annexation (prisoedinenie) continues to outflank conquest (zavoevanie) as the preferred mode of thinking about the imperial legacy” (Khalid 2012, 907).

63 «В большом каменном городе на площади стоит кибитка, и в ней лежит ЛЕНИН […] и подойди к этой кибитке и взгляни на Ленина, и печаль твоя разойдется, как вода»
The homogenizing vision of the International is most explicit at the film’s end:

“The centuries will pass by with an iron tread along the land, and people will forget the
names of the countries where their ancestors lived. But they will never forget the name of Lenin.” Though most of the film is accompanied only by an asynchronous musical score, it includes three interview scenes with synchronous sound. These interviews feature individuals who speak about their Stakhanovite labor achievements and their devotion to Lenin. Significantly, only European Russians are interviewed, and they act as models to be emulated by their compatriots from the Republics. In short, as one critic rightly argues, Three Songs About Lenin “epitomizes the early Soviet nationality policy of state-sponsored evolution in which the Russian ‘vanguard’ would ‘push forward’ the various ‘backwards’ peoples of the Soviet Union […] toward a common international—or post-national—future” (Papazian 2013, 79).

In the late Stalinist period and onward, the national specificity and the diversity of the Union —epitomized by the rhetoric of the “friendship of peoples” (druzhba narodov)—continued to be a major cinematic motif. Early Soviet cinema’s folklorist celebration of the Other, perhaps already deprived of significant political agency or substance, shifted to an increasingly superficial and caricatured depiction of Soviet minorities. Stalinist works of Socialist Realism such as Circus (Tsirk, Aleksandrov, 1936) and The Fall of Berlin (Padenie Berлина, Chiaureli, 1950) featured scenes in which members of the diverse republics come together to dance and sing in their native languages. During late socialism, comedies and adventure films such as Kidnapping, Caucasian Style (Kavkazskaya plennitsa, Gaidai, 1967), White Sun of the Desert (Beloe sol’ntse pustyni, Motyl, 1970), and Mimino (Danelia, 1977), depicted periphery nationalities in increasingly caricatured terms. At the same time, however, the Soviet
imperial project and national hierarchies were often treated with greater ambiguity than those clearly delineated in the early Soviet period. *White Sun of the Desert*, through its hero Sukhov, hints at an ambivalence about the Bolshevik mission in Central Asia.

Shurik in *Kidnapping, Caucasus Style* is hardly an imposing Russian hero, and the traditional narrative of Russia’s civilizing mission in the Caucasus is further problematized by its urbane Caucasian heroine, Nina.

**Multiculturalism and the “National Question” in the Putin Era**

On January 23, 2012, shortly before his re-election for a third term as president, Vladimir Putin published an article in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* titled “Russia: the National Question.” This lengthy and widely-read article to a large extent encapsulates official Russian nationality policies and rhetoric in the new millennium. In this article Putin insists foremost on Russia’s multietnic character and history, exhorting Russian citizens to tolerance and coexistence in the name of preserving the territorial integrity and the strength of the nation. Recalling his famous statement in 2005 that the collapse of the USSR was the “biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th-century,” Putin laments that at the time of this collapse the former Soviet Republics “were unable to find the strength, responsibility or political will to preserve the territorial integrity of the homeland” (Putin 2005; 2012). Warning against not only minority but also Russian separatist sentiments,

64 «...крушение Советского Союза было крупнейшей геополитической катастрофой века».

65 «И у них не нашлось ни мужества, ни ответственности, ни политической воли – чтобы последовательно и настойчиво отстаивать территориальную целостность Родины». 

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he insisted that efforts to build a monoethnic Russian nation are counter to its interests and could lead to the destruction of the nation, calling advocates of this ideology “provocateurs” and “opponents of the State.” Rebutting the ethnonationalist phrase “Enough feeding the Caucasus!” (Khvatit kormit’ kavkaz!), which has gained cultural currency in recent years, he asserted: “Tomorrow inevitably they will say ‘Enough feeding Siberia, the Far East, the Urals, the Volga region, the Moscow region.’ This was precisely the logic of those who brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union” (Putin 2012).66

Despite this emphasis on multiethnic coexistence, however, Putin is careful to distinguish the Russian multiethnic nation from empty and “utopian” Western multiculturalism, which he says places insufficient burden on the minority cultures to integrate and respect the ‘native’ majority inhabitants, thereby weakening the nation.67 In these countries, he asserts, small ethnic and religious communities often refuse to adapt and, consequently, it is “difficult to expect any loyalty to one’s country from those sorts of residents.”68 He insists that Russia is neither a melting pot nor an ethnic state, but a multiethnic nation that for centuries has undergone a process of adaptation, integration and mixing on all levels of society. Invoking Dostoevsky’s famous speech about the

66 “Завтра неизбежно последует призыв: «Хватит кормить Сибирь, Дальний Восток, Урал, Поволжье, Подмосковье». Именно по таким рецептам действовали те, кто привел к распаду Советский Союз».

67 “The reflection of this in politics has become ‘multiculturalism,’ rejecting integration through the process of assimilation. It elevates the ‘right of the minority to difference’ to an absolute and in doing so does not sufficiently balance this right with civic, cultural and behavioral obligations of the minority in relation to the native population and society as a whole” (Putin 2012).

68 “Прямо скажу – от гражданина, поставленного в такие условия, трудно ожидать лояльности по отношению к своей стране».
unique unifying mission of the Russian people, he asserts that Russian national identity is a polyethnic civilization, held together by the Russian cultural core. During the collapse of this nation in 1991, the country was “saved by the moral will of the Russian people.” Thus Putin’s vision of national identity emphasizes the subordination of the many ethnicities of the former empire into mainstream Russian culture, rather than a preservation and coexistence of distinct cultural communities. As such, he advocates a “unified cultural code” (edinyi kul’turnyi kod), including educational and cultural programs, such as a curriculum of 100 great books of Russian culture that ethnic minorities and immigrants, as well as Russians, must read.

Putin proceeds, moreover, from the topic of Russian nationality policy to the question of regional integration. Citing the Eurasian Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States, he outlines current efforts to expand Russian geopolitical and economic influence. Putin's vision to become “the center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia,” therefore, places a clear emphasis on the restoration and expansion of geopolitical and economic empire. His article is representative of nationality rhetoric more generally since the turn of the millennium, which suggests that multiethnic coexistence and tolerance are not a priori ideals, but are necessary to strengthen and expand national-imperial interests. Rights to distinct cultural, religious, and linguistic practices are deemphasized and arguably infringed upon by paternalistic integration policies, which privilege Russian national culture over minority cultures and rights.

Lest this discussion be misunderstood as an apology for Western multiculturalism, it is important to acknowledge the problematic nature of and ongoing
debates surrounding multiculturalism around the world today. Numerous cultural
theorists and commentators have critiqued Western multiculturalism. Žižek underscores
the serious limitations of multiculturalist tolerance in the West: “Liberal ‘tolerance’
condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance. Any ‘real’ Other is instantly
denounced for fundamentalism, since its kernel of Otherness resides in the regulation of
its jouissance and is by definition patriarchal, violent, never the Other of ethereal wisdom
and charming customs” (Žižek 1997). Žižek’s critique is borne out by faltering
multiculturalism in Western European nations in recent years, which arguably espouses
tolerance of a bowdlerized Other, deprived of its jouissance. Žižek, moreover, argues
that Western multiculturalism is a neoliberal discourse that has been appropriated by
dominant power structures, “by incorporating a series of crucial motifs and aspirations of
the oppressed [...] and re-articulating them in such a way that they became compatible
with the existing relations of domination.” In this sense, he argues, multicultural
discourse recalls the Foucauldian motif of the interconnection of power and resistance,
where power and counter-power generate each other. Contemporary American historian
Lisa Duggan has posed a similar critique of neoliberal discourses such as
multiculturalism, arguing as follows:

The newly more visible conflict among elites is accompanied by an overlapping
conflict over cultural politics. On one side is the residual strategy of cultural
traditionalism deployed during the late twentieth century ‘culture wars’ —
energetic attacks against ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘permissiveness’ intended to
shrink the funding bases as well as popular support for sites of non market
politics—the arts, education and social services. On the other side is a newly

69 Challenges to multiculturalism in recent years in Western European nations such as Germany and France
(e.g. the 2010 law banning headscarves in France) are examples of these difficulties.
emergent ‘equality’ politics that supports ‘diversity’ and ‘tolerance’ but defines these in the narrowest terms, and entirely within the framework of globalist neoliberalism. (Duggan 2012, 21)

These criticisms, among others, underscore the challenges and unresolved questions that arise in the attempt to articulate new forms of identity in “post-national” and multicultural societies.

Alongside an emphasis on the multiethnic nation and tolerance, as discussed in Chapter 1, the Putin administration has waged an aggressive nation-building campaign in recent years that extends to countless social institutions, including the creation of new national holidays, a new standardized history textbook and school curriculum, and a greater influence over news media, film, and television production. Considerable scholarship has been devoted in recent years to current Russian practices of historical memory, nostalgia, and nation building, demonstrating the government's active role in shaping a national identity discourse that celebrates the achievements of the Russian and Soviet empires (in particular the victory in the Second World War), downplays their tragic aspects, and discourages critical discussion (Etkind 2009; Kaplan 2009; Norris 2012). These practices of constructing what political scientist Benedict Anderson termed "imagined community," by means of a unitary vision of the nation and its past, have combined with the paternalistic nationality rhetoric of the Putin administration to increase

70 Other scholars have raised similar objections; see Melamed 2011; Ahmed 2012.

71 In addition to the existing Day of Russia, Victory Day, and the Day of the Defense of the Fatherland, Putin created another patriotic holiday in 2005, the Day of National Unity. Tellingly, this holiday, which celebrates Russian liberation from Polish invaders in 1612, has become an occasion for the annual "Russian March," a mass demonstration of Russian nationalists calling for a “Russia for Russians.” See Chapter 4 for a discussion of government censorship in media and cinema.
tension between Russians and ethnic and religious minorities in Russia today. Scholars and political commentators have argued that Putin has repeatedly rallied popular support and consolidated power through appeals to nationalist sentiment (Ryzhkov 2013; Laruelle 2013). At the beginning of 2014, facing his lowest approval rating since 2000 and an approaching economic downturn (projecting GDP growth in 2014 of 0.5%, on a steady decline from 1.3% in 2013, 3.4% in 2012 and 4.3% in 2011), Putin's defiant pursuit of "Russian national interests" in Ukraine and the takeover of Crimea fueled a rise in his popularity to an unprecedented 87% in August 2014 (“Putin’s Approval” 2014).

Rhetorical practices that constitute Russian identity through rejection of various Others (the West, ethnic minority groups, counter-cultural communities, liberal members of a “fifth column,” etc.) have become increasingly prevalent in recent years in official discourse and media, prompting suggestions that the Putin administration has created external enemies to distract from shortcomings of domestic policies. As I will argue, the “negative identity” discourse in contemporary society identified by sociologist Lev Gudkov is borne out by a closer analysis of recent cinema.

In short, Putin’s nationality policy can be understood as a delicate balancing act between a conception of a multicultural nation—essential to stabilization and expansion of geopolitical and economic empire—and a cultivation of nationalism for the consolidation of popular support. Notably, the Russian multiethnic discourse rejects “empty” and “utopian” multiculturalism in the Western sense, which, it is claimed, fails to sufficiently engender social cohesion and national identity. Instead it necessitates
assimilation into the dominant Russian culture through various cultural institutions and paternalistic rhetorical practices.

Maintaining the delicate balance between the contradictory discourses of a multiethnic nation and Russian nationalism is proving an increasingly difficult task. Both legal and illegal immigration into the country has steadily increased, creating large immigrant and migrant communities in Russian cities. Estimates of the illegal immigrant population in Russia range from official figures of approximately 5 million to speculation in the media of up to 35 million (Andrienko and Guriev 2005). A 2013 United Nations report found that Russia has the second largest immigrant population in the world, after the United States, estimated at 11 million (“International Migration” 2013). These staggering numbers, combined with frequent discussions of Russia’s “demographic crisis” due to low birth rates, relatively low life expectancy, and emigration, have also fueled racist nationalist sentiments. In 2012 29% of Russians felt ethnic tension in their local community, which marked a steady increase from 22% in 2006 and 27% in 2008. Similarly, the number of Russians who feel that violent ethnic clashes are possible in Russia has shown a steady increase, up from 23% in 2009 to 39% in 2011 and 43% in 2012 (Levada 2013). A Levada Center survey conducted in 2013 revealed that 69% of Russians think that there are too many migrants living in their region or city (Tétrault-Farber 2015).

72 Although Russian demographics have stabilized somewhat in recent years, discussions of demographic crisis continue. Russia’s population fell from its peak of 148 million in 1991 to 142 million in 2008, but has risen again to 146 million in 2014 (Federal’naia sluzhba 2015). However, this stagnant population growth can be compared with increases in U.S. populations from 248 million in 1990 to 281 million in 2000 (13% increase) and 308 million in 2010 (9% increase); and in Germany from 79 million in 1990, 82 million in 2000 and 2010 (World Bank 2015).
Xenophobia and interethnic tensions have risen in recent years, leading to increasingly frequent racial demonstrations and even pogroms. Frequent, small-scale conflicts and racially motivated crimes have culminated in a number of larger disturbances. In December 2010, the alleged killing of a Russian soccer fan by a Caucasian man erupted into a mass anti-immigrant demonstration of tens of thousands of Russians on Manezh Square in Moscow. Another mass demonstration occurred in 2013 in the Biriulevo suburb in southern Moscow after a similar incident. Smaller-scale demonstrations and pogroms against Caucasian and Central Asian immigrants have also erupted with increasing frequency across the country, including incidents in 2013 in Saint Petersburg, Saratov, Tver’, Ivanovo and Sverdlovsk. In May 2014, after another Russian football fan was allegedly killed by an Uzbek man, a crowd of several hundred Russians led a pogrom on an open-air market in the Moscow suburb of Pushkino.73

The Putin administration has responded to these rising tensions with a marked change in tone and a crackdown on immigration. A series of new laws have been passed in 2013 and 2014, which both limit legal immigration and attempt to minimize the population of illegal migrants. One new law significantly increases the punishment for fictitious registrations in so-called “rubber apartments”—residences where up to thousands of people are registered but do not live—as well as unsanctioned registration of migrants in the dilapidated buildings where they often live in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions. In October 2013, the Moscow city police announced that it would

73 For reports on these attacks and disturbances, see Sukhov “Ethnic Affairs” 2013; Sukhov “Riot” 2013; “Moscow Region Market” 2014.
conduct weekly raids on apartments reportedly housing illegal immigrants. Such raids, however, are frequently criticized as opportunities for taking bribes.\textsuperscript{74} Previously immigrants from CIS countries were able to come to Russia with internal passports issued by their country of origin. However, in June, 2014, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev signed into law a new regulation requiring immigrants to obtain international passports to enter and leave Russia from all CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, except those in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Armenia). Also since January 2015, a new law requires immigrants to pass Russian language and history exams in order to receive a residency permit (Tétrault-Farber 2015).

Keenly aware of the dangers of nationalist and separatist sentiments, which, combined with other problems, led to the empire’s collapse and significant bloodshed and ethnic cleansing in both 1917 and 1991, the Putin administration has been careful to contain these movements. With the exception of Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal-Democratic Party, until recently ultra-nationalist expression had been limited to relatively marginal and fringe groups. But since 2013 this appears to be changing. Prominent figures from a variety of political camps—including the popular opposition leader Alexei Navalny and Sergei Metrokhin, a candidate for the progressive Iabloko party—have made increasingly xenophobic public statements.\textsuperscript{75} Official discussions underscore the

\textsuperscript{74} See for example Bovt 2013 and Von Twickel 2013. Depictions of such extortion of illegal migrants for bribes by police and migration services is depicted also in the film \textit{She} (Sadilova, 2013), which is discussed in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{75} For a discussion of xenophobia in mainstream and official discourse, see Ryzkhov 2013.
ills of illegal immigration, but rarely discuss the positive contributions of migrant populations, providing cheap labor and performing tasks that Russians find undesirable. The reliance on these undocumented workers for cheap and dirty labor, indispensable to economic development, creates conflicting priorities in the government and is a disincentive to genuinely stem the flow of migrants. Some commentators therefore argue that official discussions of immigration are merely face-saving measures to appease the populace (Sukhov 2013). Most often the victims of these indeterminate policies are the migrants themselves, who are entirely vulnerable and easy targets of exploitation by corrupt authorities and employers.

Alongside escalating ethnic tension and xenophobia, there are simultaneously growing discussions of multiculturalism and tolerance in public discourse. In cultural texts this has revealed several distinct attitudes vis-à-vis ethnic and religious minorities. Blockbuster and commercial products today alternately construct xenophobic depictions of minorities or “multiculturalist” narratives that reveal neo-colonial hierarchies. Auteur films, on the other hand, often subvert such depictions (as in the case of Captive and Russia 88, discussed at the end of this chapter) or attempt to individualize and give voice to minorities (as discussed in Chapter 3). The chasm dividing commercial and arthouse cinema into, as one scholar suggests, “imperial, orthodox” and “liberal, democratic” discourses, is also reflected in their constructions of minorities (Beumers 2012, 57). While many blockbuster films such as Fyodor Bondarchuk’s Ninth Company recycle timeworn stereotypes, others, such as Nikita Mikhalkov’s 12, pay lip service to new discourses of multiculturalism, but ultimately, in fact, trumpet paternalism as a benign
policy. Independent filmmakers in recent years, by contrast, have increasingly engaged this topic on screen, providing more nuanced perspectives. Films such as Pavel Bardin’s *Russia 88* (2009) and Alexei Uchitel’s *Captive* (2008) construct Self and Other in fraught and self-conscious narratives, thereby destabilizing prevailing depictions of Russians and minority groups. Chapter 3, furthermore, will consider how the newest generation of auteur filmmakers has shifted the discussion in a new direction, attempting finally to give voice to the subaltern rather than focus on Russian identity through the lens of an Other.

**Nikita Mikhalkov’s *12* and the New Multiculturalism**

In 2003 scholar Mark Lipovetsky remarked an “absence in contemporary Russian culture of important postmodern discourses, such as feminism, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism” (Lipovetsky 2003). During the Putin era, in the realm of gender and sexuality, we have witnessed a retrenchment to conservative and traditionalist views. However, a renewed emphasis has been placed on tolerance and Russia’s multiethnic character in light of the massive influx of migrant workers to Russia since 2000 and the continually strained relations with regions of the Caucasus. As discussed above, the particular brand of multiculturalism that has arisen in Putin’s Russia is self-consciously distinct from that of the West. No film better reflects this peculiar relationship to Russia’s ethnic minorities than Nikita Mikhalkov’s blockbuster *12* (2007).
By depicting a jury’s deliberations over the fate of a young Chechen man accused of murdering his adoptive Russian father, Mikhalkov’s film—like Sidney Lumet’s *12 Angry Men* (1957), upon which it was based—directly “confronts” practices of discrimination against minorities. The jurors, who are initially ready to convict the defendant on the basis of flimsy evidence, one by one undergo a catharsis and are able to look beyond the boy’s ethnicity. The film satirizes jingoistic nationalism in the figure of Juror Number Three, a taxi driver (Sergei Garmash), who declares that all Caucasians are “savages” (*dikari*) and that “native Muscovites feel like outsiders in their own city.” In one scene, the taxi driver censures another juror for changing his vote to “not guilty,” attributing the decision to “Jewish logic” and “typical Jewish tricks.” Although the taxi driver is one of the more forceful voices in the group, the satire of his extremist views is complete when bird droppings suddenly land on his forehead during one of his many tirades. Ultimately, even he is touched by the collective catharsis of the jurors and he changes his plea to “not guilty.”

Opposed to this aggressive nationalism in the film is a new type of language, which ostensibly attempts to move beyond crude stereotypes to find commonalities between diverse members of Russian society. The jury itself is diverse and includes a Jew, two men of half-Jewish descent, and a Caucasian surgeon. Over the course of the film, each juror experiences a change of heart, which enables him to break free of his former insular worldview and sympathize with the Chechen defendant and his fellow jurors. In most cases, this jolt in viewpoint is accompanied by a physical jolt, as when
Juror Number Eight, the comedian (Mikhail Efremov), is knocked over by a heavy medicine ball before delivering an emotional soliloquy.

The elaborate opening sequence of the film establishes its place at the center of post-Soviet nationality discourse through a variety of cinematic techniques and historical allusions. The entire sequence is shot in black and white. It begins with an establishing shot from a great distance of the Chechen boy riding a bicycle along the mountainside. A dolly out technique slowly reveals the vastness and beauty of the surrounding mountains. The photography throughout the scene is overexposed, creating a blurred and idyllic effect. A voiceover of fragments of the judge’s instructions to the jury is heard throughout and it later becomes clear, from the defendant’s yawning and blinking, that this is a dream. Soon the boy on his bicycle passes Mikhail Gorbachev, superimposed onto a Caucasus mountainside and delivering the following line of a speech: “For a thousand years, the Russian people gave so much so that on these broad expanses different nations would be united under the banner of this federation.” A minute later Gorbachev reappears, saying, “I don’t have words to describe my state of mind in these moments...,” a clear reference to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Next, Russian soldiers are shown charging brazenly into battle (some of whom are shot), beneath a parade banner with Soviet-era slogans such as, “Peace, Labor, Happiness” and “Long live the bright future of the peoples of the world.” The boy rides his bicycle toward his mother, who is speaking untranslated Chechen. He repeatedly shouts to her, in Russian,

76 «У нас – тысяча лет позади. Русский народ много отдал для того, чтобы на обширных просторах были объединены в одной семье многие народы, которые вышли на арену с помощью могучего государства.»

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“Speak Russian mom!” (Govori po-russki, mama!). In one of Mikhalkov’s many nods to art cinema—in this case, Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925)—the final shots of the montage show the dead mother’s body and the boy falling off his bicycle.77

The allusion to Gorbachev in the dream emphasizes the lost Soviet narratives of the “friendship of peoples” (druzhba narodov) and “the big family,” and suggests the need for a new approach to interethnic relations in the post-Soviet space. While the boy's pleas to his mother to "speak Russian" perhaps are intended to gain sympathy for the minority characters, who make a good faith effort to assimilate and integrate, they also betray hierarchies of language and culture in contemporary Russia, hierarchies that the film in fact reinforces. In contrast to Western postcolonialist works, there is no acknowledgement in Mikhalkov’s 12 of Russian hegemony or historical exploitation of the Caucasus, giving credence to one scholar’s claim that Russia has “avoided the postcolonialist assessment that its Western counterparts have been subjected to in recent decades” (Thompson 2000, 22-23). The allusion to Russia's “centuries-long sacrifice, so that different nations would be united under the banner of this federation,” is an un-ironic lament of the collapse of the former ‘benevolent’ imperial relationship. It is up to the predominantly Russian jury to decide the fate of the Chechen prisoner, whom they tellingly refer to as "the little Chechen" (chechenenok). Ultimately, in an act of heroic magnanimity, they acquit him of his crime and even decide to adopt him in order to

77 Another instance of arthouse intertexts in 12 is the shot of a dog carrying a human hand in its mouth, an allusion to Akira Kurosawa’s Yojimbo (1961).
protect him from danger and, presumably, to help his development as a human being.\textsuperscript{78} The opening montage sequence, with its references to Russian sacrifice for its neighbors, continues narratives of the “gift of Empire” that originated during tsarist colonization and persisted in the Soviet period in the discourse of the big family of nations. The narrative clearly continues the paternalistic treatment of periphery and minority nationalities as Russia’s “little brothers,” a dominant Soviet trope. In this way, the multiculturalist discourse in \textit{12} echoes the official rhetoric of the Putin regime—it is no surprise that, during a private screening arranged for Vladimir Putin by the director, the President allegedly “shed a tear” and gave the film his highest endorsement (“Mikhalkovu” 2007). The narrative acknowledges no culpability and instead reinforces paternalistic power relations and the notion of Russian self-giving.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure26.jpg}
\caption{Nikita Mikhalkov, head of the jury in \textit{12}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{78} Given the political tendencies of director Mikhalkov—a topic of frequent discussion among the Russian intelligentsia—it is not surprising that he himself plays the benevolent leader of the jury, who casts the deciding vote and makes the decision to adopt the Chechen boy.
Destabilizing Popular Conceptions: *Russia 88* and *Captive*

Pavel Bardin’s docudrama *Russia 88* (2009) follows an eponymous gang of skinheads in contemporary Moscow. In reflexive fashion, the film consists of a documentary being shot by one of the group’s new fringe members, Edward (Mikhail Poliakov), whom they jokingly call “Abram” due to his Jewish appearance. Abram follows the day-to-day activities of Russia 88’s members, capturing their meetings and pogroms against minorities, as well as their mundane conversations and private home lives. The film interweaves pseudo-documentary footage of the group in everyday situations—riding in a tram car, drinking beer in a park, attending a neo-Nazi rock

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79 *Russia 88* won several prizes, including “Discovery of the Year” at the Moscow Nika Festival, the Special Jury Prize at the *Dukh Ognia* festival in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia and the Grand Prize at the Chebaksary International Film Festival in Russia.

80 Bardin’s film is in dialogue with Pavel Lungin’s 1992 *Luna Park*, which portrays a skinhead gang and the conflicted identification of its leader, who finds out he may have Jewish heritage.
concert—with a taut melodramatic narrative centered on its protagonist, the group’s ringleader Shtyk (Petr Fedorov). Rifts emerge between Shtyk and his surprisingly well-to-do family as his fascist activities become increasingly radical. When Shtyk discovers that his teenage sister Yulia has been dating a Georgian boy named Robert, he mobilizes his group to teach Robert a lesson. Russia 88 clashes with Robert’s group of Caucasian friends, resulting in several deaths. Shtyk ultimately shoots Robert, prompting Yulia to take her own life. In the film’s final scene, Shtyk stands over the bodies of his sister and her boyfriend, looking at all of the carnage he has caused. As if waking up from a trance, he repents of his hatred and the deaths he has caused before proceeding to shoot himself.

Figure 28: Shtyk talks to the camera in Russia 88
The director describes the film’s novel and highly referential format as a “mockumentary.”\textsuperscript{81} Although it lacks the mood of satirical humor usually associated with the genre, the film indeed employs a pseudo-documentary format (ostensibly a propaganda film glorifying the heroics of the Russia 88 group), in fact, to deconstruct the Russian neo-Nazi worldview. The amateur filmmaker Abram, who is never fully embraced by the group due to his partial Jewish heritage, provides an outsider’s vantage on the skinhead subculture. The viewer embodies this estranged perspective, which is given privileged, intimate access to the group’s way of life. The self-consciously constructed nature of the film, with its rough editing, outtakes, and wholly unglamorous moments, parallels the identity construction of the Russian fascists themselves, showing how this ideology is indoctrinated and actively performed, and how it coexists paradoxically with their banal private lives (or perhaps for which it is a compensation). Indeed Bardin’s ‘film about making a film’ parallels Abram’s ‘film about making a fascist.’\textsuperscript{82} Abram’s question to each of the group’s members, “How did you become a fascist?”, serves as the film’s refrain, tying together its loose structure. The puffed-up bravado of the fascists is undercut by footage from their mundane home lives: Shtyk interrupts one of the group’s neo-Nazi chants to greet his elderly neighbor as she carries

\textsuperscript{81} The experimental, mockumentary format of the film reflects broader trends of postdocumentary aesthetic and experimentation with multimedia and genre among the new generation of Russian auteurs, such as Alexander Fedorchenko’s mockumentary First on the Moon (Pervye na lune, 2005); Boris Khlebnikov’s Oxygen (Kislorod, 2009), which is filmed as a series of music videos; anthology films such as Short Stories (Rasskazy, Segal, 2012), Dialogues (Dialogi, Volkova, 2013), and Crush (Korotkoe zamykanie, Take5, 2012), etc.

\textsuperscript{82} The film’s reflexivity and innovative structure anticipate Joshua Oppenheimer’s celebrated documentary The Act of Killing (2012), which employs a similar reflexive structure to underscore the performance and constructed bravado of its killer-protagonists in Indonesia.
her groceries home; later, this ruthless fascist leader is shown blowing out candles on a birthday cake while his family sings to him and presents him with gifts. Abram’s footage of the group’s raids against “foreign occupiers,” moreover, underscores staging and performance. After the gang beats up a Caucasian man in a Moscow metro car in the film’s opening, a subsequent shot shows the swarthy Caucasian victim removing black makeup from his face, revealing that the victim was actually one of the group’s members in costume. In contrast to the plethora of neo-Nazi propaganda videos on the Internet, which glamorize such attacks as spontaneous acts of bravery through careful editing, Abram’s documentary reveals that most of Russia 88’s actions are staged. Rather than a commercial for neo-Nazism, Abram’s footage turns into an inquiry into the hidden lives and motivations of the skinheads themselves.

![Image of two individuals in costume with text on a object]

**Figure 29: One of the playful, reflexive pogrom scenes in *Russia 88***

In addition to presenting questions of reflexivity and performance, Bardin’s *Russia 88* subverts the allure of the neo-Nazi subculture in a number of other ways.
Abram’s question to the group’s members—“How did you become a fascist?”—prompts unexpected responses. One member, Vitya, had a brother who was killed in the Chechen War, which he blames on the fact that “his battalion was full of black-asses.” Another member, himself a soldier of the First Chechen War, says that the government betrayed them by signing the 1997 Khasaviurt Peace Accord and ending the war, leaving discharged soldiers like him without a cause. Abram admits to Shtyk on camera that he joined the fascist group because, as he says, “I never had any friends before. You are my first close friend.” Shtyk, in turn, increasingly finds solidarity in the group because of his problematic home life. In one sequence, when his family’s birthday party ends in bitter argument, we see Shtyk leave home to celebrate his birthday with his neo-Nazi brothers, who embrace him warmly, present him with fascist paraphernalia, and have a raucous party in his honor. Shtyk clearly feels that this is his real family, not the divorced parents who do not accept him. While the members’ motivations for becoming skinheads are diverse, they are united by a disaffection from society, and have little to do with the minority groups of Jews and immigrants that they choose to scapegoat. Abram’s pointed question reveals, moreover, that they are completely unable to articulate cogent views or provide compelling reasons for becoming neo-Nazis. As one critic succinctly puts it, they are clearly “lost in a fog” (golovy v tumane) (Arkhangelskii 2009). Moreover, the brotherhood that the group provides ultimately proves tenuous. When Russia 88 comes under investigation by law enforcement for murder near the film’s end, the group

83 There is, in fact, a subtle homosexual subtext that runs throughout the film, further destabilizing this macho brotherhood. The diminutive, effete Abram idolizes the physically impressive Shtyk, following him voyeuristically with the camera. Shtyk accuses him of this at the film’s end: “Tell me Abraham, did you dream of me naked? That’s what you’re making your film about, you faggot.”
abandons Shtyk, leaving him to take the fall. Perhaps most explicitly, the film’s narrative discredits the fascist worldview through Shtyk, who ultimately repents of his views and deeds. He declares “I killed this man because he didn’t look like me. My sister’s dead because of me,” before turning the gun on himself and committing suicide. The senseless carnage of the final scene is a sobering picture of the logical conclusion of this worldview of racial hatred and violence.

While *Russia 88* received high praise from most critics—including an enthusiastic reception at the Berlin International Film Festival—for its bold treatment of a taboo subject, a number of others expressed concern that it might be interpreted as glamorizing skinhead culture (Arkhangelskii 2009). The film’s relatively ambiguous portrayal of the skinheads, if not creating sympathy for them, at least gestures toward explanations for the subculture. As one critic notes, however, “this approach allowed the director to […] weave a more complex picture than a flat ideological position of ‘the stupid barbarian skinheads’ and the ‘viewer who knows better’” (Andreeva 2009).

Bardin’s film explores not only how neo-Nazis arrive at their views, but even purposely humanizes them. Shtyk is a charismatic figure, who cries when he buries his beloved dog, and is strikingly polite to his elderly neighbor Tania. By eschewing a simplistic vilification, the film forces a deeper reflection on the skinhead phenomenon among viewers. As several viewers remarked, these skinheads look and act in many respects like typical young Russian men and could be one’s neighbor or relative (Arkhangelskii 2009). The film’s real power and resonance (as well as its truly controversial message) lie precisely in its characterization of Russian nationalism as—to
borrow Hannah Arendt’s formulation—a ‘banality of evil.’ Not only are the skinheads in many ways average young men, but the film also suggests that their activities are an outgrowth of mainstream Russian views, what Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly describe in their recent study of post-Soviet identity as the prevalence of “banal nationalism” (Bassin and Kelly 2012, 8). To that end, real and unscripted interviews are interpolated throughout the film in which real-life Muscovites overwhelmingly express their approval for the motto “Russia for Russians” (Rossiia dlia russikh). Bardin remarked that he included the interviews, in part, because he wanted to expose displays of everyday chauvinism that are usually censored from Russian television (Arkhangelskii 2009). This anecdotal footage is confirmed by recent sociological surveys conducted by the Levada Center, a Russian independent non-governmental organization that conducts polling. In 2012 56% of Russians adamantly or moderately supported the slogan “Russia for Russians,” showing a steady increase from 43% in 1998, 50% in 2006, and 54% in 2009 (Levada 2013, 157). One of Russia 88’s messages, Bardin says, is that “the people who support the phrase ‘Russia for Russians’ are also fascists.” The film explores this fine line between banal nationalism and extremism further, when the skinhead group’s patron and protector, a local police commander whom they call “Master,” tells Abram: “I’m not a fascist, I’m a patriot!” Such moments implicitly pose the question: is the wave of Russian patriotism in recent years also bordering on fascism?

Not only is nationalism widespread among individuals in diffuse form, but the film also shows how radical groups like Russia 88 are institutionalized. The local police turn a blind eye to most of Russia 88’s activities, allowing the skinheads to carry out the
‘dirty work’ for them of intimidating local minority groups. In one scene, a local politician (Andrei Merzlikin) offers Russia 88 his patronage, ready to give money to the group for building renovations and training if they will cooperate with the youth group coordinated by his political party (a clear reference to the murky relations between mainstream nationalist politicians and youth groups such as “Nashi”).

Concerns about the film glamorizing or creating interest in skinhead movements likely masked the real objections to the film, namely, its uncomfortable exposé of diffuse chauvinistic nationalism in society and the tacit acceptance and even active participation of the authorities. As the director rightly points out, criticisms about the film perpetuating fascism are misplaced; not only is Russia 88’s portrayal of these skinheads unappealing and unglamorous, but also the idea of the film is itself antithetical to skinhead culture, which grows in the absence of scrutiny and dialogue, a dialogue that the film aims to provoke. The history of Russia 88’s distribution, moreover, is revealing and is a striking example of how contemporary Russian films often become sites of discursive conflict, as I will argue in Chapter 4 about films such as Andrei Zviagintsev’s Leviathan (2014) and Yuri Bykov’s The Fool (Dura, 2014). Originally denied a distribution license, ostensibly for concerns about depicting fascism, screenings of Russia 88 were initially expected to be limited to film festivals. However, the Kinoteatr.doc film festival in Moscow inexplicably canceled its screening in early 2009 and Russia’s Spirit of Fire International Film Festival was pressured to cancel the screening, but proceeded to show the film. After some public outcry, the film ultimately received a distribution license from the government in April, 2009, but was shown very little, as theater owners were wary of
creating controversy (Borisova, 2009). As I argue in Chapter 4, such tactics are arguably part of a strategy of soft censorship to prevent or circumscribe the distribution of politically controversial films through concealed means of obstruction and intimidation.

In short, *Russia 88* destabilizes conventional narratives about benevolent Russians and menacing or uncivilized Caucasians and Central Asians in a number of ways. Its highly reflexive structure reveals the constructed nature of skinhead identity, drawing attention to its unglamorous realities, contradictions, and absurdities. The film’s narrative logic reveals the tragic consequences of this worldview, embodied by Shtyk, who causes the death of his sister and her boyfriend before repenting and taking his own life. Perhaps most unsettling to mainstream viewers, the film underscores the continuity between banal nationalism and the activities of these extremist groups, suggesting widespread culpability and prompting reflection by average viewers. Its controversial reception and obstructed distribution was commensurate with its bold indictment of society and the authorities.

Aleksei Uchitel’s *Captive* (2008)84—co-written and adapted with Vladimir Makanin from his 1994 story *Caucasian Captive*—depicts the capture of a young Chechen soldier by Russian infantrymen Rubakhin and Vovka during the Second Chechen War. Having captured the Chechen adolescent to act as their guide, Rubakhin and Vovka must traverse Chechen-occupied territory to reach a Russian convoy, which is

84 *Captive* won, among other awards, the prize for Best Director at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in the Czech Republic and the “White Elephant” award for Best Cinematography from the Russian Guild of Film Historians and Critics.
surrounded and besieged in a ravine. During their journey, Rubakhin and the Chechen captive develop an appreciation for one another, which blurs the line between homoeroticism and a respect for each other’s humanity.

Marking the clearest departure from the “Prisoner of the Caucasus” cycle established by Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy, and continued in post-Soviet cinema by Sergei Bodrov in *Prisoner of the Mountain* (*Kavkazskii plennik*, 1996), Uchitel’s *Captive* (like Makanin’s original) retains the major topoi of its predecessors, but subverts a number of key elements. Far from the Romantic-imperialist tale of Pushkin’s original, *Captive* features a highly ambiguous political and romantic situation and in doing so destabilizes dominant narratives about the region. Most obviously, the trope of the captive is inverted: the prisoner is no longer Russian, as in all previous renderings, but Chechen. This reversal, long overdue in the cycle, does away with the historical sleights of hand identified by Bruce Grant, casting off the facade of passivity and benevolence of the “good Russian prisoner” (Grant 2009, 16). Instead, the imperial relationship is laid bare and the question of the legitimacy of the imperialist project comes to the fore. While the Romantic hero fled “the suffocating confines of European Russia,” and found freedom through captivity in the Caucasus, the Russian captor in Makanin’s story has nominal control, but is in fact a prisoner twice over: captive to the Russian enchantment with the Caucasus and to his homoerotic desire for the prisoner (Ram 1999, 9). The film is in dialogue not only with the imperial narratives of Caucasus literature, but also with treatments of the Chechen Wars in films such as *Blokpost* (Rogozhkin, 1998), *Prisoner of the Mountain*, and *War* (*Voina*, Balabanov, 2002). As critics remarked, rather than the
“hurrah-patriotism” and simplistic constructions of Self and Other that characterize most treatments of this highly mythologized war, this film is marked by artistic distance, meditative pacing, and a relative lack of action (Plakhov 2009; Gusiatinskii 2008). Reminiscent of Alexander Sokurov’s *Alexandra* (2007) or Terrence Malick’s *A Thin Red Line* (1998), *Captive* focuses on the material experience of war and raises existential questions about the possibility of maintaining one’s humanity in such conflicts.

*Captive* employs two narrative techniques typical of anti-war films, such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *A Thin Red Line*, and *Joyeux Noel* (Carion, 2005): it questions the political motives behind the conflict and emphasizes the common humanity and similarities between Russians and enemy soldiers. Like Tolstoy’s *Prisoner of the Caucasus*, an early example of this critical tradition, *Captive* presents a hopelessly entangled and interminable military conflict in its depiction of the Russian and Chechen commanders, Gurov and Alibekov, who negotiate the barter of weapons for food, and whose symbiotic relationship has indeed led to a longstanding friendship. Borders between ally and enemy are blurred between all major characters and the immediate concerns of war, such as negotiations for food and weapons, become secondary to the enjoyment of eating a meal, smoking, and drinking tea with the alleged enemy. While in Makanin’s original, the languor and relative indifference of Gurov and Alibekov to the matter at hand are reinforced by the repeated epithet “lazy,” in the film these

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85 “Waiting for tea both of them unhurriedly, with after-dinner laziness, had a smoke. The smoke just as lazily wafted from the cool veranda to the vineyard…” («В ожидании чая оба неспешно, с послобеденной леницей закуривают. Дым так же лениво переползает с прохладной веранды на виноград и пластами тянется в сторону огорода» (Makanin 598).
contradictions are more subtle, but nonetheless present. Uchitel’ captures this visually and through fragments of dialogue, portraying Gurov’s cozy veranda, Alibekov’s compliments to Gurov’s wife (“you always have such great tea...”), close ups of the steam wafting up from the kettle, as well as the friendly rapport of Gurov and Alibekov, the latter referring to the former with the familiar “Petrovich.” While commander Gurov is unwilling to lend any of his soldiers to help Rubakhin and Vovka to save the besieged convoy, he agrees to provide the enemy commander with bullets and Kalashnikovs. These contradictions suggest a war that has long ago lost a clear sense of mission, in which outsiders (chuzhie) can become insiders (svoi), and vice versa.

Affinities between Russians and Chechens are explored through the relationship of Rubakhin and his Chechen captive. In Makanin’s story, Rubakhin asks his Chechen captive, “Really now, what sort of enemies are we—we’re practically related? After all, we were friends! Weren’t we?... I’m just like you. And you’re just like me. Why do we have to fight?” In Uchitel’s film, this theme is transposed into cinematic language: Rubakhin and the captive exchange appreciative glances and Rubakhin is often shown tending to the captive’s injured ankle. This human decency and mutual understanding is contrasted with the crude Vovka, who serves to further alienate Rubakhin from the cause of the war. In place of the virtually ubiquitous genre convention of camaraderie between

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86 “Если по-настоящему, какие мы враги, мы свои люди. Ведь были же друзья! Разве нет?” горячился и даже как бы настаивал Рубахин, пряча в привычные (в советские слова смущавшее его чувство.” This passage recalls the famous passage from Erich Remarque’s 1929 novel All Quiet on the Western Front: “But now, for the first time, I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late. Why do they never tell us that you are poor devils like us, that your mothers are just as anxious as ours, and that we have the same fear of death, and the same dying and the same agony” (Remarque 2004, 117).
brothers-in-arms, Rubakhin feels much more sympathy for his Chechen captive than for his coarse compatriot Vova.

The most subversive aspect of Captive is its homoerotic subtext, which further destabilizes conventional depictions of machismo—and often homosociality, but not homosexuality—at war and the power dynamic between captive and captor. Rubakhin’s admiring gaze follows the Chechen captive throughout the film and he cares solicitously for him, giving him his own socks to ease the pain of his wounded ankle, carrying him across the river, etc. In dialogue with Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella Death in Venice, Uchitel portrays an ambiguous relationship that blurs the distinction between an appreciation for the Platonic ideal of beauty and homoerotic desire. Some critics were disappointed by Uchitel’s decision to tone down the homoerotic elements from Makanin’s original, while others applauded its artful play with this ambiguity, which is epitomized by the film’s climax. Finding themselves unexpectedly surrounded by a Chechen detachment, Rubakhin, Vovka, and the captive hide in a copse of trees. In a particularly visceral scene, Rubakhin smothers the captive to death. Whether he does this to prevent the boy from giving them away or to rid himself from his homoerotic desire is unclear.

87 For the former reading, see Matizen 2009; for the latter Gusiatinskii 2008 and Liubarskaia 2014. Indeed Uchitel’s remarks about the film suggest his discomfort with an overt portrayal of homosexuality: “I never would have made this film if in Makanin’s story there had been the suggestion of homosexuality, the way some journalists are trying to characterize it […] What Rubakhin experiences in relation to the Chechen boy - it isn’t one guy falling in love with another. It is much more complex and subtle.” (Bobrova 2014).
In short Uchitel’s *Captive* rejects stereotypes about the Caucasus, consciously subverting a number of the dominant tropes in the “Prisoner” cycle. In doing so the film calls into question long-held views of Caucasian culture and Russian colonial legitimacy. Through the blurring of boundaries between enemies and allies and the homoerotic
tension between captor and captive, the story deflates traditional hostilities and questions simplistic conceptions of Russians and Chechens in this conflict. Perhaps most interestingly, the power relationship of the prisoner cycle is reversed. The captive is now a Chechen and yet the story suggests that Rubakhin, and by extension the common Russian soldier, is the true prisoner of the Caucasus. Thus Uchitel’s *Captive* unmasks the imperial relationship, questions its legitimacy, and predicts its doomed fate.

![Figure 32: The captivating beauty of the Caucasus, Captive](image)

**Conclusion**

As Grant, Schimelpennick, Ziolkowski, and other scholars have argued, the 19th-century Russian literary treatment of the Caucasus employed a range of Orientalist tropes and narratives—primitivist and anti-primitivist constructions of the Noble Savage and a menacing, backward Other; rhetorical sleights of hand about Russia’s “gift of empire”
and civilizing mission; and the “art of emplacement” in which Russian heroes are benevolent prisoners rather than aggressors in the region. Such rhetorical practices assuaged Russian imperial anxieties, as well as transformed the Caucasus into an allegorical space for intellectuals to explore Russian identity.

In the Soviet period, the early anti-imperialists films of the 1920s, such as Dziga Vertov’s *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926) and Pudovkin’s *Storm Over Asia* (1928), reflected the Bolshevik critique of tsarist imperialism, but already revealed the “seeds of neocolonialism” by portraying a monologic, teleological discourse of development and assimilation for periphery nationalities (Sarkisova 2007, 36). From the 1930s onward, films such as Vertov’s *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934) continued to celebrate diversity and the “friendship of peoples,” but were more bold in privileging Russian national culture. By the late Stalinist years, Socialist Realist films such as *Circus* (1936) and *The Fall of Berlin* (1950) celebrated a folkloric Other in bright national costumes and singing songs, but deprived of any *jouissance* or political agency. This culminated in the highly caricatured depictions of late socialism in films such as *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style* (1967), *White Sun of the Desert* (1970), and *Mimino* (1977).

Lermontov, and Tolstoy, retaining its major topoi, but inverting a number of key elements, such as the power dynamic between captive and captor and the introduction of the homosexual subtext. The latter bona fide examples of postcolonial texts, as well as the attempts to “give voice to the Other” that I will examine in Chapter 3, nonetheless represent a minority viewpoint and a small fraction of cultural texts.
Chapter 3

The Voice of the Other: The Migrant Trope and Sergei Dvortsevoi’s *Tulpan*

In addition to the relatively unreflective treatment of the minorities in recent blockbusters such as *12* and *Ninth Company*—as well as films that problematize dominant narratives such as *Russia 88* and *Captive*—a number of young auteurs have shifted the discussion in a new direction. Intimate portraits of migrant workers (gastarbaitery) are created in feature films such as *Another Sky* (*Drugoe nebo*, Mamuliia, 2010), *Moscow* (Bakuradze and Mamuliia, 2007), and *She* (*Ona*, Sadilova, 2013), as well as in a group of cinéma vérité documentaries such as *Gone Away* (*Uekhal*, Gai-Germanika and Khlebnikov, 2006). No longer focusing on Russia’s relationship to the East as subaltern or allegorical space, these films attempt finally to give a voice to the Other, which had almost ubiquitously been a silent figure in earlier cultural production. Each of these films, in its own way, humanizes the migrant worker for a largely Russian audience, depicting the everyday lives, dreams and struggles of this class of “untouchables,” normally seen sweeping streets, manning kebab stands, or on construction sites. The lives of these characters are fraught with ambiguities and the

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88 Other examples of this theme in recent cultural production include: Eduard Bagirov's 2007 novel *Gastarbaiter*; Iusup Razykov's 2009 feature film *Gastarbaiter*; and the 2014 Teatr.doc plays *Akyn-opera* (winner of the Golden Mask award) and *Akyn-opera 2*.  

101
films’ dramaturgy open-ended, reflecting the “possibility for change without closure” that Laura Mulvey suggests is the critical element in transcending essentializing discourses (Mulvey 2009, 175). Films such as Sadilova’s She demonstrate the limitations of such attempts to speak “for” or “with” the Other, while Sergei Dvortsevoi’s Tulpan is more successful in its challenge to reductive stereotypes, binaries, and cultural hierarchies.

**Giving Voice to the Other?: She, Another Sky and Migrant Documentaries**

Sadilova’s 2013 film She tells the story of Maya, a young Tajik woman living in Russia as an illegal immigrant.89 Maya’s boyfriend convinces her to run away with him from Tajikistan to Moscow, promising a better life. However, after their arrival in Moscow he abandons her to return home and marry the bride his family has arranged for him. Stranded, with no connections, and unable to speak Russian, Maya is entirely at the mercy of her new surroundings. The other migrants in her makeshift slum—and, especially, Nadezhda, a Russian woman who lives among them—take pity on her, providing her with a place to stay, and arranging work for her as a maid in an wealthy Russian home. The film follows Maya as she grapples with difficult work and living conditions, homesickness, isolation, and occasional raids by immigration services. Ultimately with the help of Nadezhda and others, Maya perseveres and begins to adapt to

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89 She was awarded the Grand Prize at the “Window to Europe” festival in Vyborg, Russia, the Special Jury Prize at the Saint Petersburg festival Vivat kino Rossii! and the Best Direction Prize at the Vostok i zapad festival in Orenburg, Russia.
life in Russia. Sadilova, whose oeuvre is marked by a skillful use of generic conventions and melodramatic elements, delivers a happy ending to this tale of hardship in a foreign land: Maya finds love with another young migrant and the couple begins to assimilate and improve their economic lot, as we see from their new, Russian-style clothing in the closing scene.

Figure 33: Maya in a migrant slum on the outskirts of Moscow in She

She’s narrative focuses on the personal travails of a young migrant girl, her homesickness and isolation, her outsider’s gaze, but also her dreams and aspirations. It is clearly part of the recent trend of filmmakers to attempt to humanize and give voice to migrant laborers. Sadilova remarked in an interview that she made the film “so that we all would see in the migrant worker not just a person in an orange uniform, doing unskilled
labor, but that they each have their own unique fate”\textsuperscript{90} (Khokhriakova 2014). At the same time, the film seems to promote a number of conservative viewpoints, perhaps making it more palatable to its primarily Russian audience. The Russian heroine, Nadia, is the most noble and selfless character in the film, which suggests a benevolent and paternalistic relationship of Russians to their Central Asian “little brothers,” similar to the motif of the “gift of Empire” in the tsarist and Soviet periods described by Bruce Grant, rather than the problematization and critique found in most postcolonial works. The narrative logic of the film, moreover, does not serve to complicate or explore notions of subjectivity of the migrant. Rather, the formula for happiness is quite clear: work hard, learn Russian, and assimilate.\textsuperscript{91}

Although her husband is half-Tajik, Sadilova herself is ethnically Russian. When a member of a majority or privileged group portrays a minority or subaltern culture, it is always difficult and problematic to determine the authenticity of that voice and its position vis-à-vis the subaltern culture. According to theorist Wendy Hesford, critical debates about such representations reveal two equally flawed attitudes:

[The first is] the problem of the privileged speaking for rather than with the oppressed, thereby situating oneself as an authenticating presence, and [the second is] the assumption that the subject can speak only for herself, a stance that ignores how rhetorical conventions and discursive systems shape the construction of subjectivity and agency (Hesford 2004, 107-108).

\textsuperscript{90} «...чтобы все мы увидели в гастарбайтере не просто человека в оранжевой форме, занимающегося черным трудом, но поняли, что за каждым из них — своя судьба».

\textsuperscript{91} In this regard, the director’s comments on Putin’s nationality policy are also revealing: “The message of our film corresponds perfectly with the way Vladimir Putin views the nationality questions: there should be no national minorities, no ‘us’ and ‘them’ – everything should fall under the cultural code” (Borisova 2012).
Therefore, while it is perhaps possible to “speak with rather than for” the oppressed, as Hesford contends, Sadilova’s *She* stops well short of challenging paternalistic characterizations of the Other.

Like Sadilova’s *She*, the decorated debut of Dmitrii Mamuliia, *Another Sky*, tells the story of Central Asian migrants in Moscow.\(^92\) The herder Ali and his small son leave the Uzbek steppe for Moscow in search of the boy’s mother, who left them several years earlier, presumably for a better life in the imperial capital. Receiving word that his wayward wife, Miriam, has fallen ill, Ali finally decides to make the long journey to find her. Shots of inexplicably dying sheep in the film’s opening scenes portend the turmoil that descends on Ali and his family after they leave their home for the hostile big city. Arriving in Moscow, Ali takes on work as a manual laborer and arranges for his 9 year-old son to assist at a lumber mill to support them while they search for Miriam. In a tragic and seemingly inevitable climax, the boy is crushed at the mill by a tree, which had been felled by a giant logging machine.\(^93\) Ali sells his plasma at a blood bank to obtain the money necessary to bribe a morgue employee, so that he can identify his son’s body and collect his belongings. Only after enduring constant indignities and the loss of his son does Ali finally locate his wife at the end of the film.

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\(^92\) *Another Sky* was awarded the Special Jury Prize at Karlovy Vary, a Russian Nika prize for Discovery of the Year (Best Debut), as well as Best Music and the Critics’ Guild Award at Kinotavr.

\(^93\) Machines constitute an important visual motif in the film. Montage sequences juxtapose both Ali and his small boy with discomfiting shots of the massive logging machines. Similarly the women in the textile mill are invariably paired with constantly humming sewing machines. In *Another Sky*, man, and the migrant in particular, is wholly at the mercy of both physical and economic mechanisms.
Unlike the *dominant* of Sadilova’s *She*, however, that of *Another Sky* is not the intimate, everyday lives of the migrants, but the existential experience of Otherness and alienation. Trained as a philosopher at the University of Tbilisi, director Mamuliia creates one of the quintessential works of the filmmakers known as the “New Quiets” (*Novye tikhie*, discussed in Chapter 3), a group of young, postmillennial auteurs whose stoic and virtually silent protagonists observe the estranging surroundings of various urban and decayed provincial milieux. Mamuliia has frequently insisted that *Another Sky* is not a film about the social problem of migration and, moreover, claims that, “In the future, I would like to depart entirely from social themes because such recognizable signs, about which the viewer makes inferences, are in fact a burden for a work of art” (Mamuliia 2010). Rather, the migrant’s outsider perspective is, as it were, a defamiliarization

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94 «Я же хотел бы в дальнейшем […] уйти от социальных тем, потому что подобные опознавательные знаки, которые можно достроить, являются неким грузом для искусства». 

106
device that provides a fresh look at material reality and existence. Underscoring the experience of marginality, the film interpolates footage of a group of deaf and disabled children—not connected to the film’s diegesis—who cast their own outsider’s gaze on the Moscow streets. According to Mamuliia, the loneliness and alienation of the migrant provide a form of insight.95 A staunch adherent to the principles of arthouse cinema, Mamuliia attempts to capture the rich complexities and contradictions of existence with minimal authorial and ideological mediation and “to make viewers' eyes sensitive to reality” (Chuviliaev 2010).96

Despite the director’s insistence on an absence of social and political messages, however, the film undoubtedly creates a highly contextualized portrait of migrant workers and an exposé of the conditions of their lives in Russia. The demeaning treatment of migrants by Russians, as well as the inhumane conditions in which they live and work, comprises much of the screen time. For instance, shortly after arriving in Moscow, Ali is arbitrarily detained by a police officer at the train station. A handheld camera provides an oblique-angle close-up of Ali as he is dragged gruffly by the collar to a police van. In another episode, a policeman detains Ali’s son for allegedly breaking a window. Again, a handheld camera follows as the policeman drags the small boy by the collar in identical fashion, a cinematic echo of the earlier scene with the father. Once in detention, Ali waits in line, along with other homeless and illegal immigrants, to be

95 “While living inside of one’s own private life, in order to really see something in the world one has to ‘find oneself in the night’… Hence loneliness here is a way of seeing.” (Chuviliaev 2010)

96 «В том-то и дело — как сделать глаз чувствительным». 
sprayed down by a sanitation machine. This striking sequence is also repeated later in the film. Arrested for a second time for sleeping on a park bench, Ali is again taken into detention. The camera pans the stoic, downtrodden expressions of the migrants and homeless as they stand naked in line, waiting to be sprayed down like chattel. Regardless of the director’s intentions, these scenes function as a lament of the indignities and hardships suffered by the migrants, who are wholly at the mercy of Russian authorities and citizens.

![Image of Ali and his son](image.jpg)

**Figure 35: Echoing shots of Ali and his son in* Another Sky* **

Ali’s search for Miriam leads him through several iconic locales in the migrant underworld: he enters the cramped quarters in a migrant slum, where at least a dozen Central Asian men are living on makeshift bunk-beds in a small room; he talks with the workers at a kebab stand; and he visits a brothel where migrant women, reduced to sexual commodities, are paraded around a room to be inspected by customers. Scenes of living and working conditions of migrants such as those in *Another Sky* and *She* are becoming increasingly commonplace in Russian cinema, as well as media reportage, thereby increasing, if not public sympathy, at least public awareness of such conditions.
Similarly contradicting Mamuliia’s assertion, the narrative and editing decisions in *Another Sky* construct a clear critique of the way this labor system dehumanizes and commodifies migrant laborers. Considerable screen time is devoted to their monotonous labor. Ali is shown in a warehouse loading the same heavy sacks onto a truck, day after day, in endless succession. Later, the search for his wife leads him to a textile factory. In this pivotal scene—which is a comment not only on the working conditions of migrants, but also the alienating nature of modern assembly line labor in general—each worker is shown endlessly performing a single repetitive task: sewing together two pieces of fabric, piling garments, or carrying them to a storage area. A montage of disorienting, oblique-angle and out-of-focus shots speeds up into a vertiginous whirl as Anna Muzychenko’s violin score, which won Best Music at Kinotavr, rises to a tragic climax. Throughout the film, close-up shots of money changing hands serve as a constant reminder of the commodification of all aspects of the migrants’ lives. This visual refrain culminates after the accidental death of Ali’s son, when the boss from the lumber mill hands Ali a few thousand rubles (a few hundred dollars) as compensation for his son’s life.
Figure 36: Migrant living conditions depicted in *Another Sky*

Figure 37: Migrant women inspected by customers in a brothel, *Another Sky*

Generally, Muzychenko’s haunting orchestral melody intensifies the film’s most poignant moments, reinforcing the tragic mood that pervades this portrait of migrant life. Shots of the dying sheep on the steppe and the television news coverage that Ali watches in his apartment, invariably informing about the threat of a swine flu epidemic, serve a
similar atmospheric function, creating the impression of an environment that is ubiquitously antagonistic. In another richly poetic scene, Ali hits a dog while driving. Having exited the car, as Ali stands above the panting dog, its metaphorical significance becomes clear: the world of *Another Sky* is a harsh and unforgiving place, where, like the wounded dog, migrants are vulnerable, wholly at the mercy of hierarchies and mechanisms beyond their control. Tellingly, there is no happy end for the dog. Ali leaves it behind to die.

Similarly concerned with the experience of migrants, Mamuliia’s *Moscow* (2007), co-written and directed with celebrated director Bakur Bakuradze, is a 40-minute docudrama that follows a young Kyrgyz migrant worker in Moscow. Having recently arrived in the capital, Mansur struggles to find work in the oversaturated labor market. His mother, Mukhhabbat, and brother, Nurik, who has already found work on a construction site, appeal to friends to help Mansur get on his feet. For most of the film, however, he is relegated to domestic duties in their dilapidated living quarters, watching his small nephew or simply lying in front of the television at home. The viewer is privy to the byt of these Kyrgyz migrants: the mother kneads dough in the kitchen, Mansur changes the flat tire on his bicycle, and the two brothers talk about quitting smoking. Mansur is frequently shown watching untranslated Russian television or walking in public spaces in Moscow—a skate park, a ritzy café—curiously observing upper-middle-class and absolutely inaccessible Russian life. Such scenes, which are present also in *She* and *Another Sky*, remind us that postcolonial texts depict not only externally imposed power structures, but also the ambivalent identification of the colonized subject,
revealing a desire to assimilate to the colonizing culture for material reasons, a desire that often coexists with a resistance to assimilation and anxiety about the loss of cultural tradition. Frantz Fanon—the Afro-French cultural theorist whose works were fundamental to the formation of post-colonial studies—famously explored the “inferiority complex” of the colonized subject in his book of 1952, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Using a psychoanalytical framework, Fanon argued that colonial subjects become alienated from their own culture and sense of self, and therefore internalize the desires and fears of the hegemonic culture. Such a subject may wish to deracinate himself, lose his color, language, and identity (Fanon 1967, 45; xxxiii).

Figure 38: Mansur on a construction site in Bakuradze’s *Moscow*
Mansur is, of course, invisible to Russian society. The only interaction between Russians and migrants in the film occurs during occasional visits from the Russian “overseer class,” those who act as go-betweens to coordinate the cheap, under-the-table labor that the migrants provide to companies and wealthy individuals. In *Moscow*, as in *Another Sky* and *She*, the scenes of migrants’ public life—coming and going from constructions sites, getting on the bus, tending the landscaping in a Moscow park—are frequently juxtaposed through montage and jump cuts with scenes of their intimate home lives. This aesthetic strategy humanizes migrants to the Russian viewer by connecting these familiar, but faceless, figures with the realities of their private lives.

In 2006-2007, producer Katya Filippova organized a collaborative project titled *Diaspora*, a series of cinéma vérité documentaries portraying the lives of immigrants in Russia. Among them were Mikhail Brashinskii’s *Blood Type (Gruppa krovi)*, dedicated to the Korean diaspora living in Moscow; Giorgii Paradzhanov’s *Children of Adam (Deti Adama)*, which portrays Moscow’s Kurdish diaspora; and *Gone Away*, the story of a Belorussian immigrant leaving his home and family for economic opportunity in
Moscow, co-directed by well-known filmmakers Boris Khlebnikov and Valeriia Gai Germanika. Each of these films in its own way individualizes and tells the stories of particular migrants. Interestingly, Gone Away renders the prologue to the migrant experience—portraying the Belorussian protagonist’s difficult parting with his native village and family, rather than his life in Moscow. This film opens with a lengthy scene of the protagonist and his friend scraping together the funds to purchase a bottle of vodka and drinking it on a street corner. Combined with images of the dusty, desolate town, this footage creates an impression of ennui and economic stagnation in rural Belarus. The hero’s desire to move to Moscow to find work, however, is tempered by the anxiety of leaving home for a foreign land and the difficulty of parting with family and friends. Having made the journey by train to Moscow, in the film’s final frames the newly arrived foreigner stands for the first time on Russian soil, dwarfed by the towering buildings and bustling streets.

Figure 40: The protagonist leaving Belarus in He's Gone
This series of migrant documentaries both reflects and attempts to engender a growing cultural sensitivity to migrant minorities—in these instances, Uzbek, Tajik and Belarusian—in Russian society. In May, 2014 the Moscow School of New Cinema hosted a series of film screenings devoted to the subject of migrant workers in Russia, including Bakuradze and Mamuliia’s *Moscow* and Germanika and Khlebnikov’s *Gone Away*. The directors participated in the discussion, which explored the evolving relations between Russians and the growing migrant minority populations, the question of assimilation and accepting differences, and the need for a more sensitive ethnic discourse. Director Boris Khlebnikov, echoing recent observations by political commentators, spoke about the need to cultivate racial sensitivity in public and official discourse, suggesting that openly racist remarks by officials and public figures act as a state sanction for widespread racist attitudes in society (“Moskva” 2014). Objecting to the paternalistic and assimilationist attitudes in society and the nationality policies of the Putin regime, director Mamuliia diagnosed the problem of Russian attitudes to minorities as a desire to assimilate them instead of accepting their difference. Others struck a hopeful note, pointing out that minorities in Russia, in contrast to many western countries, typically do not live in ethnic ghettos, but live next to Russians and send their children to the same

97 For an example of a similar arguments made by political commentators see Ryzhkov 2013.

98 “Immigration in our country is immigration from the East. Eastern man has another way of life, he is fundamentally different, and we should not perceive him as “not-different,” we need to perceive him as different. And exactly as Other we should perceive him. The problem of this ‘uncivilized relationship’ [to the Other] consists in the fact that you want to make him like you […] What is this Other, this person from the East? He is dangerous precisely because you cannot grasp him fully. You cannot understand him fully and you try to approach him with your own standards, to force your system of values on him.” (“Moskva” 2014).
schools with Russian children, suggesting a greater hope for tolerant coexistence in the future.

In 2014 the Muzeon Park in Moscow opened a School of Migrant Languages, offering free courses in the most common languages of migrant workers: Tajik, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Moldovan. When speaking of the school in an interview, its organizer, Veronika Sergeeva remarked: “Of course, these are lessons in tolerance of sorts, where you gain respect for other people’s cultures by learning their language.” (Mukhametshina 2014). While such phenomena are far from pervasive in Russia today, these independent films, the Migrant Language School, and the discussion of migrant workers at the Moscow School of New Cinema are examples of grassroots phenomena that reflect a potential awakening to a multicultural consciousness. However, growing sensitivity and awareness are overshadowed in Russia today both by discourses of openly xenophobic nationalism and the Putin administration’s peculiar neo-imperialist rhetoric of multiculturalism, which continues the paternalistic attitudes and hierarchies of the tsarist and Soviet empires.

In Between and Beyond: Hybrid Genre and Multicultural Perspective in Dvortsevoi’s Tulpan

Perhaps no film better illustrates the potential of giving voice to the Other than Sergei Dvortsevoi’s film Tulpan (Tiul’pan, 2007), which tells the story of a family of nomadic sheep herders on Kazakhstan's Betpak-Dala, or “Hungry Steppe.” The film was met with critical acclaim and won several awards at international film festivals, including
the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes for unique directorial vision. Its unexpected success is variously attributed to its authenticity, exotic locale, heartfelt narrative, well-observed characters, and universal themes. Still relatively unexplored, but no less central to the film’s resonance, is the way it moves beyond traditional genres and cultural perspectives. Its genre of “docufiction,” the multicultural (national and cultural) background of the filmmakers, and the film’s narrative, which all challenge fixed perceptions of familial, cultural, and national identities, invite an analysis of the way the film, its production, and its reception create a discourse of hybridity and fluidity of structures and meanings.

Before analyzing Tulpan’s narrative, it is worth considering how its hybrid genre is inextricably linked to the vexed question of authentically portraying the subaltern. After receiving accolades for his four documentary films—Paradise (Schast’e, 1996), Bread Day (Khlebnyi den’, 1998), Highway (1999), and In the Dark (V temnote, 2004)—Dvortsevoi swore off documentaries, turning for the first time to feature film with Tulpan. He attributes this change of heart to a combination of ethical and aesthetic factors. For instance, his feeling of personal involvement with the real-life subjects of his documentaries led to a moral dilemma. Meeting the protagonist of his first film, Paradise, several years after its release, he learned that the man's participation in the film nearly led to his imprisonment by the Kazakh government (Shavlovskii 2008). The subject of his last documentary, In the Dark, was a blind elderly man living in poverty in suburban Moscow, who spent his time making string bags and giving them away to passersby. During the filming process Dvortsevoi felt that his role as documentarian prevented him
from helping the impoverished and disabled man. These and other experiences led him to conclude, “Documentary film is a strange genre. In many respects it is amoral […] The law is the worse things are for the subject, the better for the film […] The further you go, the more you think, do I need to be doing this? In any case, I concluded that I don't, and I no longer shoot documentary pictures” (Shavlovskii 2008).99

Dvortsevoi’s generic shift was also motivated by aesthetic concerns. In his view, documentary films guarantee authenticity no more than fiction films because documentary directors, in his words, “can make 10 different films about one person […] you can show [the subject] however you want” (Reichert 2008). The debate about cinematic authenticity and objectivity has always been central to realist fiction film and documentary filmmaking. Dziga Vertov's Kino-pravda works, for example, were an early attempt to capture authentic reality through newsreel footage, but to edit and arrange it in a way that revealed deeper, more profound truths. This project informed later debates in the 1950-60s, between proponents and opponents of the cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema documentary movements, about the possibility of achieving objective truth. These movements strove for a higher degree of truthfulness, but in different ways. While directors espousing Direct Cinema argued that documentarians should be invisible bystanders, unobtrusively capturing reality as it unfolds, representatives of cinéma vérité were active participants and provocateurs, who believed that through artificial stimulation

99 «Документальное кино вообще странный жанр. Во многом аморальный […] Таков закон: чем сложнее герою, тем лучше для тебя. Чем хуже для него, тем лучше для фильма […] И чем дальше ты идешь, тем больше ты умеешь, и тем больше задумываешься — а нужно ли вообще это делать? Я, во всяком случае, ответил на этот вопрос отрицательно. И больше не снимаю документальных картин». 
one could get at a more “revealing truth” (Barsam 1992, 304). These and other, similar debates in film history have revealed the complexities and subjectivity involved in documentary and realist filmmaking. Several critics and film historians have emphasized that to seek objectivity and truthfulness in film is an inherently contradictory endeavor, as succinctly stated by film theorist Claire Johnston: “If we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification. The sign is always a product. What the camera in fact grasps is the 'natural' world of the dominant ideology” (Johnston 1974, 28-29). Dvortsevoi recognized this inherent contradiction in his documentary films and concluded that feature films could be no less truthful.

With Tulpan Dvortsevoi endeavored to achieve an effect of heightened realism, less through genre than through a dedication to naturalistic film techniques and an organic, quasi-documentary filming process that incorporates real and unexpected events. In this way he achieved a rare degree of naturalism and perceived authenticity that is often praised by viewers and critics. The film was shot and produced over the unusually long period of three years. Dvortsevoi co-wrote the script with Gennady Ostrovskii, whose celebrated career as a scriptwriter has often bridged the gap between melodrama and genre conventions.100 The narrative features, on the one hand, a conventional plot, with common romantic and comedic devices. On the other hand, quotidian details from the everyday lives of the nomadic herders and extensive shots of landscapes and animals run throughout the film. They exist on an equal footing with the narrative, occupying

100 Ostrovsky wrote the scripts for such generic cross-over films as In Motion (V dvizhenii, Iankovskii, 2002), My Step Brother Frankenstein (Moi svodnyi brat, Frankenshtein, Todorovskii, 2004) and The Lover (Liubovnik, Todorovskii, 2002).
approximately the same amount of screen time. Dvortsevoi retained only twenty percent of the film's original script, constantly modifying it to incorporate unexpected developments and new ideas. Weather conditions, animals, and the organically changing relationships of the film's characters over three years provided a wealth of material for finding what Dvortsevoi calls “the poetry of everyday life” (Nafus 2008). Perhaps the best illustration of this approach is the ten-minute extended shot of a lamb's birth, which serves as the film's climax. This improvised scene was one of the first filmed, and Dvortsevoi, recognizing its poignancy, changed the entire script to build the narrative around it (“Video Interview”, 2008). He has frequently commented on his distaste for “mathematical” and predictable scripts, as well as heavy-handed ideology that dominate the mainstream. In Tulpan he largely eschews such a narrative in favor of idiosyncrasy and unpredictability, a method he describes simply as “observing life” (Buckmaster 2009).
Several other production decisions contribute to the film's attempt at authenticity. The production team took great pains in its casting process, traveling throughout Kazakhstan and interviewing hundreds of potential actors. Ultimately, Asa's sister, Samal (Samal Esliamova), was the only professional actor chosen for the film. In a rehearsal process reminiscent of methods developed by Stanislavsky and elaborated by Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, the family of Ondas, Samal, and the children were asked to live together in a yurt for a month before filming began in order to achieve more natural relationships on screen. Samal, who is from the more urban and modern region of northern Kazakhstan, had never lived in such conditions and learned to cook and tend to domestic duties in this new environment. Dvortsevoi attributed the natural performances of the children to this method of extended cohabitation before and during filming.
The formal qualities of *Tulpan* also reflect this aesthetic of heightened realism. The film uses no extra-diegetic music, instead preferring the sounds of the everyday—silence, howling wind, and the braying of livestock. Dvortsevoi used minimal editing and cuts in favor of long takes, which allow the viewer, in the director's words, “to breathe with [the characters] and feel like you live with them in real time […] to feel the dust, to feel the wind and all the physical reality” (Buckmaster 2009). The film's cinematography features long shots and extended takes, but also frequent use of handheld and shoulder cameras, which create the appearance of documentary footage. Moreover, a number of common documentary themes are present in the film, including problems with stillborn sheep (possibly the result of earlier Soviet nuclear testing in the region), the disappearance of herders on the Hungry Steppe, and ubiquitous poverty. However, these themes remain secondary and serve merely as background for the individual lives of the characters.

Nonetheless, alongside its quasi-documentary detail, the film features common romantic and comedic devices, a conventional narrative about "fitting in" and the pursuit of love and rural tranquility. A few critics have found fault with the script, viewing it as incongruously melodramatic and derivative of “clichés from Soviet romantic comedies” (Gusiatinskii 2009). Another Russian film critic, remarks: “The seams [of the story] are almost invisible. Well, except occasional moments when the simple Kazakh boys utter Gennady Ostrovskii’s text” (Maliukova 2009). Asa’s frustrated attempts at courting Tulpan or the comic-relief figure of Boni are examples of such filmic conventions.
In short, Dvortsevoi’s patient method of “observing life,” his casting decisions, naturalistic editing, and the combination of quotidian, ethnographic detail with a somewhat conventional narrative that explores universal themes, constitute a hybrid genre. Russian film critic Elena Gracheva (2009) succinctly describes these features as “not mere ethno-fusion […] but an organic symbiosis of faktura and the laws of narrative, of document and invention, of random nature and deliberate art” (Gracheva 2009). Judging by viewer response, although Dvortsevoi achieved his aim of a perceived authenticity among viewers and critics, the film’s hybrid genre of docufiction at the same time reminds the critical viewer of the impossibility, and perhaps the undesirability, of achieving unadulterated reality in cinema.

The hybridity of the film’s genre, its blurring of boundaries, is complemented by the multicultural background of its filmmakers. While the Romantic-Orientalist portrayals of the Eastern Other (alternately ennobling and vilifying, but always essentializing), the paternalistic narratives of the earlier imperial epochs, and the relative silence of Caucasian and Central Asian characters has largely continued in the cultural production of recent years, Dvortsevoi’s Tulpan arguably departs from this trend by providing a more nuanced and heterogeneous portrait of Kazakh culture, replete with its own contradictions and ambivalent identifications. By exploring nuances of Kazakh identity—identification with both colonizing and colonized cultures, city and steppe, etc.—Dvortsevoi’s film seems to break with the tradition of cultural reductivism and devoicing. Nonetheless Tulpan does so from the perspective of its ethnically Russian director.
A number of recent studies have shed light on depiction of the former imperial periphery in Russian cultural production. Nancy Condee’s *The Imperial Trace*, one of the first works to consider cinematic instead of literary texts, focuses largely on the Russian empire’s longstanding and complex identity discourse, especially vis-à-vis the West. However, it also considers the way imperial hierarchies and relationships persist in post-Soviet society and cinema. In this regard, Condee characterizes the modern Russian relationship to its new surrounding nation-states as differing little from the former center-to-periphery relationship of the Russian empire, only in new forms of regional leadership and cultural influence (Condee 2009, 21; 29). The notion of Russia’s “imperial trace” in a more diffuse form is a fruitful lens through which to consider questions of identity in *Tulpan*.

Postcolonial theorists have debated the possibility of a hegemonic culture characterizing a subaltern culture, including whether or not this process is inherently essentializing and incapable of preserving the complexities and heterogeneity of the subject. Often cited as a potential alternative to such discourse, spaces of mixing and hybridization, which blur national identifications, pose a profound challenge to colonial notions of difference because “the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation” (Bhabha 1994, 168). Dvortsevoi himself is an example of just such hybridization and fluid identity, as an ethnically Russian citizen of Kazakhstan, who has spent most of his life in Kazakhstan, but now lives in European Russia. Julia Kristeva describes this emerging category of identification that is “in between and beyond” clear-cut national identification as follows:
Those men and women of the borderlands, those unclassifiable ones, those cosmopolitans among whom I include myself, represent on the one hand the pulsation of the modern world surviving its famous lost values, thanks to or despite the flood of immigration and hybridization, and on the other hand, as a result, embody that new possibility that is forming contrary to national conformisms and international nihilisms (Kristeva 2000, 168).

Kristeva, a Bulgarian now living in Paris, has explored issues of Bulgarian identity in its postcolonial/post-Soviet context. While dealing with different cultures and media, both Kristeva and Dvortsevoi occupy positions as intellectuals revisiting, from a position of distance and immigration, their home cultures, both formerly on the periphery of the Soviet empire. Both risk representing the home culture from the arguably privileged position of foreign immigration. Kristeva points out that such migrant artists “risk what we know neither here nor there; and why should we do so? Well, so as to generate new beings of language and blood rooted in no language or blood, diplomats of the dictionary, genetic negotiators […] who challenge authentic and hence military citizens of all kinds” (Kristeva 2000, 168-169).

What does this arguably privileged perspective impart to the works of Kristeva and Dvortsevoi? On the one hand, it creates a perception of heightened authority that readers and viewers often equate with a transnational and therefore “more objective” voice. This perceived objectivity in their works resides largely in the coexistence of an unsparring depiction of cultural problems and stark realities with what is noted by critics as a “clear affection” for the life of its people, an ability to capture the byt and bytie of this life, which includes idiosyncrasy and heterogeneity. At the same time, the works of Kristeva and Dvortsevoi, through hybridity and fluid identities—both their own and those
of the people for whom they speak—counter and attempt to move beyond fixed perceptions of identity.

Although the trend of Othering the eastern cultures of the Russian imperial periphery continues to predominate in post-Soviet literature and films, in *Tulpan* Dvortsevoi’s unique cultural position has led to a perceived authenticity as well as an absence of typical objections to Othering and misrepresentation in cases when a majority culture depicts a minority culture. A notable exception was a small number of Kazakh government officials, who disapproved of the film and claimed that *Tulpan* was “worse than *Borat*” and “very bad for Kazakhstan” (Ishchenko 2010). However, at a screening attended by several thousand ordinary Kazakh citizens, the audience loved the film (“Video Interview” 2008). Western critics likewise praised Dvortsevoi’s sensitive and nuanced depiction of Kazakh culture. One critic writes, “Kazakh-born Dvortsevoi not only has a real affection for [his characters], but also deeply understands their nomadic traditions and how they...all harbor their own special hopes” (Phillips “*Tulpan*” 2009).

Roger Ebert also comments on the film’s complex portrayal:

There is humor, some of it involving the cucumber salesman, and tenderness, as when Samal sings a bedtime lullaby to her tired husband and children. There is stark reality in the difficult birth of a lamb that manages to survive... The film’s closing shot is epic in its meaning and astonishing in its difficulty.” (Ebert 2009)

Dvortsevoi’s own comments in interviews attest to this complex viewpoint, his understanding of the difficulty of life on the Hungry Steppe, and also his love for the place and admiration for its beauty. Upon presenting the film at Cannes, he laconically stated, “Thank you for coming. We hope you enjoy it and you share our love for Kazakhstan and for what you see on the screen” (“Un Certain Regard” 2008). Dvortsevoi
made a conscious effort to avoid overt ideology in the film, stating, “I’m not trying to prove something but to show this world—its relationships and physical reality—to people” (Phillips “Film Director” 2009).

Despite the painstaking quasi-documentary filming method, the director’s self-proclaimed distaste for ideological cinema and his cultural perspective, which is arguably “in between and beyond” national identifications, the film nonetheless is a product of signs, mediated foremost by Dvortsevoi, who is neither from the Betpak-Dala nor ethnically Kazakh. However, the lack of economic and cinematic integration by members of Kazakhstan’s Hungry Steppe culture presents significant obstacles to self-representation by this group. I would argue that Wendy Hesford’s assertion that a majority member of society can “speak with rather than for” the subaltern is borne out by Dvortsevoi’s nuanced representation of Kazakh culture.

In addition to Dvortsevoi himself, the multicultural background of the film’s production team contributed to this unique vision of Kazakhstan. The film provides a veritable case study in international collaboration and co-production. The Kazakh-Russian director Dvortsevoi and mainstream Russian scriptwriter Ostrovskii were joined by a Polish camera team, led by cinematographer Jolanta Dylewska, a French sound designer, William Schmitt, and funding and producers from Germany, Kazakhstan, and Switzerland. The international interest in the film, evident in its production team and accolades at film festivals, reflects not just an ethnographic curiosity about this relatively unknown place and culture, but an exploration of universal questions of identity in the postcolonial world—questions raised explicitly within the narrative itself.
When the film begins, Asa has just returned to Kazakhstan after serving in the Russian navy off the coast of Sakhalin. He dreams of settling down on the Betpak-Dala with a wife and livestock, but is unable to obtain a flock without first marrying, as it is believed that one cannot survive on the steppe without a wife. Tulpan is the only marriageable girl in the region, and we see the desperate attempts of Asa and his family to arrange the match. Asa (like Dvortsevoi himself) has moved back and forth between his native Kazakhstan and relatively modern Russia. He tries to impress Tulpan and her family with his travels and tales of the exotic aquatic life that he encountered at sea. Significantly, he wears his Russian naval uniform only in the scenes at Tulpan’s house, as a sign of his refinement and cosmopolitanism. Somewhat surprisingly, Tulpan is indifferent to his stories of exotic lands, and she rejects him because of his “big ears.”

![Figure 43: Asa examines his big ears, Tulpan](image)

Figure 43: Asa examines his big ears, Tulpan
The viewer discovers, however, that Asa and Tulpan’s failure to connect is more likely due to their very different identifications and hopes for the future. Like all of the young characters in the film with the exception of Asa, Tulpan hopes to move away to the city, and therefore is entirely unimpressed by Asa’s modest dream of family life and herding on the steppe, which he has charmingly captured in a drawing on the collar of his naval uniform. Asa is rejected not only by Tulpan, but in fact by all aspects of steppe life: the farm boss refuses to give him a flock without a wife; his brother-in-law is reluctant to accept him as one of his own; and the steppe itself seems to reject him when he fails to deliver the first lamb’s birth. As Russian critic Alena Solntseva writes, “Overcoming his own estrangement, his own foreignness, the natural initiation of a man who has renounced superficial stereotypes in search of authenticity – that is the real subject of the film” (Solntseva 2009). Tulpan, a local girl, wants to flee the difficult and humble life on the steppe that she knows all too well for the promise of an unknown, better life in the city. In contrast, Asa, who is originally from the city and has even lived in relatively modern Russia, comes to the steppe somewhat ignorant of its realities to pursue his pastoral dreams. Asa’s failed courtship, in other words, problematizes and explores questions of cultural identification—between traditional steppe culture and city life, between insiders and outsiders.

Not only Tulpan and Asa, but the majority of the film’s characters are confronted with a crisis of identification that is both linguistic and cultural. The children of Samal and Ondas all have a fascination with modern, urban culture. The oldest son is characterized primarily by his habit of listening to the Russian broadcast of BBC radio,
which he summarizes each day for his father before bed. The youngest son, still a toddler, wanders in and out of scenes, playing with a pet turtle and repeatedly asking, “When will we go to Almaty?” The children, surrounded by dust and boredom, seem to live vicariously through their dreams of the outside world. This recalls the central theme of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (*Tri sestry*, 1900), in which for the entirety of the play the eponymous sisters dream of moving to Moscow. Like *She* and *Moscow*, *Tulpan* portrays the ambivalent psychology of the colonized subject that Frantz Fanon described, revealing the “imperial trace” (Condee 2009, 5) in post-Soviet Russian cinema. At the same time the film itself combats persistent imperial hierarchies through its hybridity and blurring of cultural borders.

Figure 44: Asa and Boni, *Tulpan*
The generational split implied by the film, moreover, is clearly reflected in its language. All of the young characters, including the children, Asa, his sister, Samal, and Boni, speak Russian, while the older characters, who identify unequivocally with steppe culture, speak only Kazakh. Asa converses in Russian for most of the film, but breaks into Kazakh at times when interacting with Ondas and the farm boss, reflecting both his desire for acceptance and his complex and wavering identifications. All the characters reflect the ambiguity of identification, linguistic and cultural, in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Asa’s friend Boni, the tractor driver, also dreams of leaving the steppe. He often speaks to Asa of moving to Almaty, or better yet, to Russia, even America, implying a perceived hierarchy of development and the “good life.” With his gold teeth, photos of bare-chested women, and outmoded cassette single of Boney M’s “Babylon” (apparently, the only song he listens to), he is a parodic figure whose out-of-touch and overly romantic notions of city life further complicate the film’s identity discourse by poking fun at one of the dominant viewpoints among Kazakh youth. Similarly, Samal tries to rid Asa of his illusions about moving to the city. When, frustrated by his difficulties in the steppe, he prepares to leave for the city, Samal says, “Do you understand that no one is waiting for you there? Do you understand that no one needs you there? Everything will be ok for you here. You will find a girl.”

101 Frantz Fanon discusses such “language hegemony” as a feature of the psychology of the colonial subject in *Black Faces, White Masks*.

102 “Ты понимаешь, что нигде никто тебя не ждёт? Понимаешь? Никому ты не нужен […] Можешь понять, что у тебя будет все нормально и найдешь здесь девчонку? Ты можешь это понять?”
At the close of the film it seems that Asa, for now at least, has decided to stay in the steppe and pursue his dreams there, though he is no closer to finding a wife or establishing a farm and livestock of his own. This ending hints at the identity hesitations that the younger generation of Kazakh people faces in a post-imperial space and time.
The film’s final scene of the family, including the small children, straining to pull down their yurt and move to a different part of the steppe amid clouds of dust and howling winds, reinforces the image of steppe life as both unrelentingly difficult and beautiful. By problematizing and complicating simplistic conceptions of both city and steppe life, the film’s narrative suggests that there are no easy answers for its young characters, and Asa must struggle to make a life, whether here or there. His experiences in the steppe dispel his illusions, and he tentatively decides to remain there, now with a more sober understanding of its hardships. Others, such as Boni, will likely leave for the city and will presumably meet with their own series of disillusionments and new understandings of themselves, the city, and their rural homeland.

It is telling that the only characters who have experienced both city and steppe life, Asa and Samal, choose to remain in the steppe. Asa’s decision at the end of the film to stay is hesitant, influenced by the harsh circumstances of life there. His hard-won choice might suggest yet another Romantic, idealized treatment of rural life and the director’s invocation of the Noble Savage myth. More likely, however, it reveals Dvortsevoi’s attempt to level the perceived hierarchy among Russia, urban Kazakhstan, and the Hungry Steppe, and in doing so, to challenge the paradoxical but pervasive desire of the former periphery subject to join and assimilate into the hegemonic culture. This dialectic between city and steppe and the torn identification of the protagonists are reinforced by the film’s visual structure. Shots of the horizon, split evenly between earth and sky, are interspersed throughout the film. These shots appear rhythmically throughout and serve as a visual leitmotif that echoes the dichotomy between the characters’
quotidian earthly life in the steppe and their dreams of a better life, whether urban or pastoral.

Figure 47: Asa is torn about leaving or staying on the steppe, Tulpan

Conclusion

The prominence of subaltern figures in recent Russian cinema reflects a clear preoccupation with anxieties of identity and alterity in the Putin era. As discussed in Chapter 2, blockbuster treatments of minorities and the imperial periphery continue to recycle in overt and covert ways stereotypical constructions of earlier periods. These depictions echo and reinforce paternalistic rhetorical practices in public discourse and
growing tensions between Russians and minority groups in recent years. Auteur filmmakers have largely challenged these views and constructions in the Putin era. Films discussed in Chapter 2, such as *The Captive* and *Russia 88*, subvert conventional cultural hierarchies in these films in a number of ways, challenging viewers to reflect on xenophobic preconceptions. Chapter 3 has examined the prominent migrant trope in recent cinema. The films *She*, *Another Sky*, and the migrant documentaries *Moscow* and *He’s Gone* reflect a fledgling multicultural sensitivity in Russia today. Each of these films in its own way attempts to give voice to and individualize the migrant Other. While some of these filmmakers are themselves members of minority groups (Mamuliia, Bakuradze), others are not (Sadilova, Gai-Germanika, Khlebnikov), and the films of the latter group reveal the challenges and possibilities of speaking “with rather than for” the Other. Sadilova’s *She* creates a sympathetic and complex portrait of its migrant-heroine Maya, but nonetheless relies on familiar cultural hierarchies, exemplified by the film’s assimilationist logic and the benevolent figure of the Russian character Nadia.

Dvortsevoi’s *Tulpan* is perhaps the most successful of this postcolonial treatment of a subaltern group in the post-Soviet space. *Tulpan*’s multicultural filmmakers impart a transnational perspective to the film that avoids a stereotypical depiction of Kazakh identity and life in the city and steppe. The film’s narrative explicitly raises questions about linguistic and cultural identifications in post-Soviet Kazakhstan through Asa, Boni, and others, undermining romantic and simplistic notions of both the steppe and the city, and presenting a much more complex picture of cultural realities. The film’s hybridity and fluidity impart a heightened sense of cultural authority and authenticity that
challenges and arguably breaks free of the vicious cycle of Othering that inheres in such cultural products.
Chapter 4

From Tikhie to Gromkie: Myth and Reality in the Films of the "New Quiets"

Тьмы низких истин мне дороже
Нас возвышающий обман.
Александр Пушкин, “Герой,” 1830

“Writers who write about totalitarianism are absolutely helpless, because nobody’s willing to accept the truths they portray.” Marek Hłasko

“Russia is the perfect country for scoundrels and those who would fight them. If you are by nature neither a fighter nor a scoundrel […] all the same, you have no choice.” Mikhail Shishkin

This chapter will attempt a portrait of the post-millenial generation of Russian auteurs, who have been labeled alternately the “Russian New Wave” and the “New Quiets.” Despite some diversity of aesthetic and thematic tendencies, these directors nevertheless reveal a number of striking similarities and shared preoccupations. In the first decade of the 2000s, critics frequently remarked that these directors avoided contemporary social and political realities in order to revel in mythical spaces or everyday material reality. However, expanding authoritarian controls in Russia have

103 For the epigraphs, see Pushkin 1948; Hłasko 2013; Gorsky 2013.
inspired a “political turn” by a number of these directors. As the films of these directors go from “quiet” to “loud,” their reception reflects a “crisis of the third space” in Russia today, where socially oriented cinema is reviled by a large segment of the population as unpatriotic. An examination of the reception of *Leviathan*, the most contentious film in recent years, demonstrates the chasm between a critically inclined intelligentsia and a conservative mainstream.

**Soft-Censorship and the Ideological Molding of Cinema in the Putin Era**

In recent years, political scientists often have described Russia as a “soft authoritarian state” in an attempt to refine the binary categories of democracy and authoritarianism and describe mechanisms of “soft power” in the postmodern era. Edward Schatz writes:

> The cement of soft authoritarian rule is an elite’s ability to frame political debate, thereby defining the political agenda and channeling political outcomes. Soft authoritarianism relies more centrally on the means of persuasion than on the means of coercion, although coercion remains part of the ruling elite’s arsenal. (Schatz 2009, 203)

In the political sphere, such soft authoritarian practices include: minimizing political opposition by limiting its media exposure (via television, radio and print advertisements, and eliminating public debates); presenting ubiquitous coverage of the positive impact of the current regime; unofficially intimidating opposition candidates and protesters; and cultivating authoritarian discourse in the public sphere by equating government support with “patriotism” and dissent with “betrayal.” No less central to the active ideological campaigns of soft authoritarian governments is the use of mass media—especially news
media, television programming, and cinema—to craft narratives favorable to the current power structure. If we conceive of Russia in the Putin era as such a hybrid, soft authoritarian regime, then an analysis of cinema as one of its key ideological apparatuses reveals much about both Putin-era ideology and its influence on film production.

Ideological controls in the Putin era can be illuminated by the work of Louis Althusser. In his influential essay of 1971, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser challenges the Marxist-economist idea of ideology as merely a byproduct of the mode of production. Drawing upon psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan’s notion that the subject is irrevocably born into and defined by a symbolic order, Althusser views the subject as inseparable from ideology, which confers an identity on the individual and provides a stable social position and personal orientation. Moreover, Althusser describes the mechanisms through which dominant ideology both reproduces itself and determines individual subjectivity. He divides these mechanisms into the categories of “repressive state apparatuses,” such as the penal system, police, and military; and “ideological state apparatuses,” including educational curriculum and mass media (cinema, television, print media, etc.) (Althusser 1971). Given the highly ideological tradition of Russian cinema—which the Bolsheviks considered “the most important of the arts”—and the renewed ideological controls of the Putin era, Althusser’s formulation of ideological apparatuses is a fruitful lens through which to analyze post-Soviet cinema.  

104

104 Lenin allegedly remarked that “For us, cinema is the most important of the arts,” underscoring its ideological potential. Lenin (and especially Stalin after him) actively used cinema to promote the Bolshevik
While an exhaustive examination of ideological controls in cinema during the Putin era is beyond the scope of this study, a discussion of some of the major initiatives is in order.\textsuperscript{105} The Putin administration increasingly has expanded its influence over film production, usually under the aegis of “increasing profitability,” but also revealing a stark ideological agenda.\textsuperscript{106} The most significant shift toward quasi-authoritarian ideological controls has occurred since the re-election of Vladimir Putin in 2012 to a third term as president and his subsequent appointment of Vladimir Medinsky to the post of Minister of Culture the same year. Since that time, in the realm of film production, this tandem has introduced:

- regulations banning “homosexual propaganda,” “falsifying history,” explicit language, and “insulting the feelings of religious believers” in cinema and other media;
- new distribution licenses requiring approval from the Ministry of Culture for all public screenings of films;
- an active role in crafting the “Week of Russian Cinema” program, which is shown in numerous countries and actively promotes a positive image of Russia abroad.\textsuperscript{107}

\begin{itemize}
\item agenda, sending propaganda films and projectionists by train across Russia to advertise the Revolution (Remnick 1994, 143).
\item See also: an analysis of official memory practices, including history curriculum in schools, holidays, and monuments (Etkind 2009); government plans for a unified history textbook “without ambiguous interpretations” (“Nuzhny edinie uchebniki” 2013); the creation of a “unified cultural curriculum” for teaching Russian literature and language in schools (“Gotovitsia edinaia” 2015); and an in-depth analysis of government control of television and news media (Gatov 2015).
\item For discussions of government concern over the profitability of cinema, see Dondurei 2013.
\item For example, the “Week of Russian Cinema” in 2013 consisted of the following films: \textit{The Champions} (\textit{Chempiony}, Diuzhev, 2013), a film about Russian Olympic gold medalists; \textit{Speak of the Devil} (\textit{Legok na pomine}, Abyzova, 2013), a fantastical comedy about a realtor who discovers a home with magical powers; \textit{The Country of Good Children} (\textit{Strana khoroshikh detochek}, Kaptur, 2013), a children’s film about a mischievous girl; \textit{Messenger from Heaven} (\textit{Kur' er iz raia}, Kheborodov, 2013), an action blockbuster about a stolen car; \textit{The Major} (\textit{Maior}, Bykov, 2013), a criminal drama about police corruption; and \textit{Dark
• a new process for obtaining government funds for cinema (historically, by far the largest funding source for Russia auteur filmmakers), which requires approval for films from the Ministry of Culture on a case-by-case basis, does away with the anonymity of applicants, and includes “prioritized themes,” such as the commemoration of WWII and heroes of labor;\textsuperscript{108}  

• a new system for the funding of film festivals that has defunded such politically contentious events as the Moscow documentary festival Artdokfest;\textsuperscript{109}  

• repressing “liberal” cinema institutions, including the Research Institute for Cinema (NIIK) and the Museum of Cinema (Muzei kino).\textsuperscript{110}

Perhaps the weightiest structural changes are the new policies regarding distribution licenses and government funding for film projects. In conjunction with new laws prohibiting explicit language, “homosexual propaganda,” “falsifying history,” and “insulting religious feelings,” the careful granting of distribution licenses by the Ministry of Culture has become a formidable mechanism for controlling film production, circulation, and audience. Distribution licenses had already been required for all screenings in movie theaters and on television, as well as DVD distribution. However,

\textit{World: The Balance} (Temnyi mir: ravnovesie, Asudilin, 2013) a fantasy action film. Among these only \textit{The Major} received significant critical acclaim and contains socially tendentious themes (Artiukh 2014). In 2014, while a number of independent films were chosen, the most celebrated films, such as \textit{Leviathan} and \textit{The Fool}, were conspicuously absent from the “Week of Russian Cinema,” presumably due to their political content.

\textsuperscript{108} See Nekrasova 2014; Maliukova 2014.

\textsuperscript{109} For a critical discussion of this ideological ‘squeezing out’ of liberally-oriented film festivals, see Belopol'skaia 2013 and Manskii 2013.

\textsuperscript{110} The “squeezing out” of such institutions parallels similar events in other cultural spheres: the eviction of Teatr.doc from its building in 2014 (“Vlasti potrebovali” 2014); harassment and eviction of NGOs, such as Memorial and For Human Rights (see Berry 2013; Kara-Murza 2015); for a detailed account of the eviction of NIIK from its building in Moscow see Semenov 2014; regarding the removal of Naum Kleiman from Muzei kino, see Maliukova 2014.
prior to the arrival of Vladimir Medinsky in 2012, these licenses were granted almost ubiquitously, a few rare exceptions notwithstanding. In conjunction with the new censorship laws of 2013 and 2014, the Ministry of Culture has begun scrutinizing films with renewed vigor. In 2014 Natalya Meshchaninova’s *The Hope Factory* (*Kombinat 'Nadezhda*', 2014), Hussein Erkenov’s *Ordered to Forget* (*Prikazano zabyt’*, 2014) and several others, were denied distribution licenses. *The Hope Factory*, which depicts stark social and economic degradation in the industrial Russian town of Norilsk, was denied on the grounds of explicit language, which the filmmakers felt was too important to the authenticity of the film to remove. *Ordered to Forget*, which portrays the deportations and executions of Chechens under Stalinism, was denied a license on the grounds of falsifying history (Semenov 2014, “Epos”). Even the most acclaimed film of the year, Andrei Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan* (discussed at length later in this chapter) was initially denied the right to be shown in Russia until sufficient public outcry tipped the scales in its favor and it was granted a license, albeit with an 18+ certificate due to explicit language (Pulver 2014).¹¹¹ A peculiar compromise was found by reducing the sound during moments of explicit language, a technique that is increasingly used by film festivals as well.¹¹²

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¹¹¹ For a good overview of recent changes to the mechanisms of government control in cinema, including film distribution and funding, see Nekrasova 2014.

¹¹² Besides *Ordered to Forget*, *The Hope Factory*, and *Leviathan*, other films that were temporarily or permanently banned from distribution in Russia include *Intimate Parts* (*Intimnye mesta*, Chupov and Merkulova, 2013) and *Winter’s Journey* (*Zimnii put’*, L’vova and Taramaev, 2013), for their depiction of homosexual content.
As of 2014, new rules for distribution licenses now also apply to all public screenings. Most notably, this has had a major impact on Russian film festivals, which previously did not require distribution licenses for each film. The Moscow documentary film festival Artdokfest, for example—which traditionally screens a wide variety of documentaries, including those addressing socially and politically controversial themes—is now severely restricted in the films available to it. Festival organizers are searching for new strategies and loopholes to get around the draconian policies; for example, if a given film is in any way a co-production, it is billed as a foreign film to justify its screening, since foreign films are exempt from screening licenses. The film *Olya’s Love* (*Olina liubov*, Sakharnov, 2014), a documentary about a lesbian couple living in Russia, was screened by Artdokfest in summer of 2014, and billed as an Austrian film because it had Austrian co-producers. These situations are closely monitored by the Ministry of Culture, which alternately averts its eyes to such screenings or cracks down on them, depending on the circumstances (Belopol’skaia 2015). The conflict between the Ministry of Culture and Artdokfest culminated in 2014. Citing the “anti-government” views of the festival’s chief organizer, Vitalii Manskii, Medinsky dispensed with all pretenses of objectivity and publicly declared: “Not a single project of Mansky, including Artdokfest, will ever receive any money as long as I am Minister of Culture” (Rykovtseva 2014).¹¹³

Major reforms of the funding structure for cinema have had a similar effect, providing the government much more granular control over film production. In 2012 the

¹¹³ «Ни один проект Манского, в том числе и Артдокфест, не получит никогда никаких денег, пока я являюсь министром культуры».  

143
Cinema Fund (*Fond kino*), which previously bore sole responsibility for awarding public funding for film projects, was declared ineffective, most of its staff replaced, and was renamed the Fund for Social and Economic Support for Cinema. A new structure was put in place for awarding federal support to film projects. Whereas in the previous system, subsidies were granted on a competitive basis to studios rather than individual films, to be distributed to projects as they saw fit, under the new system of “pitching,” individual film projects are proposed to a series of expert panels and are deliberated. The first panel consists of filmmakers and critics who give their opinion of the professional merits of the project. Proposals then move on to a second panel within the Ministry of Culture; the third and final level of approval belongs to the Minister of Culture himself, who considers the panels’ recommendations, but makes the ultimate decision and may disregard them (Nekrasova 2014). This system also did away with the anonymity of the previous system, and now requires knowledge of all filmmakers involved in a given project. This change has raised concerns about potential preferential treatment or blacklisting. Also included in these reforms were: language expressing preference for a smaller number of large-budget projects, rather than a greater number of low-budget productions (i.e. a shift of priority from auteur films to blockbusters); new “prioritized themes” to be determined on an annual basis; and more serious measures for combating piracy.

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114 This vertical of censorship in contemporary cinema resembles Stalin’s role as final arbiter of film products in the 1930-40s, described by historian Peter Kenez (Kenez 2001, 187-191).

115 In 2013 these were “the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Great Patriotic War, heroes of labor, the war on drugs, and the 100th anniversary of WWI” (Dondurei 2013).
Controversies arose around the funding of two films in particular in 2014. The Ministry of Culture in 2014 granted the bio-pic *Tchaikovsky*, proposed by director Kirill Serebrennikov, a relatively small sum of 30 million rubles (approximately $1 million) or 12% of its proposed budget, but denied it the more substantial funding that was expected from the Cinema Fund. Allegedly, the film was not supported despite widespread interest in its subject matter and the many accolades of its director because of the portrayal of the composer's non-traditional sexual orientation. In an act of protest, the director refused the 30 million rubles offered by the Ministry of Culture, declaring that he would seek outside funding. However, one year later in 2015 production of the film has not resumed and its fate remains undetermined (Nekrasova 2014). Celebrated director Alexander Mindadze’s *Good Hans, Kind Peter* (*Milyi Hans, dobry Petr*, 2015)—which tells the story of friendship during the Great Patriotic War between German engineer Hans and his Moscow colleague Peter—was denied funding on the grounds of “historical falsification,” despite the unanimous endorsement of the panel of film experts. Viacheslav Tel’ianov, the Director of the Department of Government Support for Cinema in the Ministry of Culture, explained that the film was denied because “This year [we were soliciting films] for the 70th anniversary of the [War’s] Victory. And in this film there wasn’t the sort of viewpoint that the veterans of the Great Patriotic War expect” (“Fil’m *Milyi Hans*” 2014). After significant public outcry the film was reassessed and granted funding. However, Medinsky gave a speech to the Russian Duma in late 2014 about future funding for cinema, stating: “I want to emphasize again that, from here on

116 «Все сделано под одну дату — 70-летие победы. И в этом фильме может быть немного не тот взгляд, которого ждут ветераны Великой Отечественной войны». 
out, we do not plan to finance any projects that clearly have a denigrating
(ochernitel’kii), anti-historical character, which spit upon our history and the deeds of
our ancestors” (Maliukova “Pod kopytami” 2014). 117

A number of other situations illustrate the soft-authoritarian strategies of
intimidation and circumscription of cinema. The film Russia 88 (discussed in Chapter 2),
enjoyed an enthusiastic reception at the Berlin Film Festival in February, 2009. It then
was included in the program for the film festival “Spirit of Fire” for debut films in
Khanty-Mansysk, Russia later in February, 2009. The organizers of the festival suddenly
came under pressure from the regional administration to cancel the screening of Russia
88, as “people ‘at the top’ were unhappy with the film” (Boriso 2009). However, they
disregarded these admonitions, screened the film and even awarded it the Special Jury
Prize and the Critics’ Guild Prize. The film was then scheduled to be shown at the
Russian festival KinoTeatr.Doc in Moscow in April, 2009, but was unexpectedly
canceled by the festival organizers, reportedly due to external pressures.

The Gogol Center theater in Moscow planned a screening on December 30, 2013
of the documentary film Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer (Lerner and Pozdorovkin, 2013),
which would be followed by a discussion with two of Pussy Riot’s members, Nadezdha
Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, who had been released from prison one week earlier.
The day before the screening, however, the theater’s director, Kirill Serebrennikov,

117 «Мы, я подчеркну еще раз, не намерены впредь финансировать проекты, носящие явно
очернительский, антиисторический характер, которые оплевывают нашу историю и дела наших
предков». 

146
announced on social media that the event had been canceled by Sergei Kapkov, the head of the Moscow Department of Culture. Kapkov wrote to Serebrennikov demanding the cancellation of the event: “A government establishment should not be associated with people who evoke such an ambivalent reaction and whose activities are based on provocations” (“Vlasti Moskvy…” 2013). In response to the cancellation and remarking the paradoxical actions of the Russian authorities, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova posted on Twitter: “They let us out, but won't let us show a film about Pussy Riot. That's the Russian government” (Olson 2013).

On December 30, 2014, two dozen viewers were seated in Moscow’s theater Teatr.doc in anticipation of a documentary exposé about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Suddenly police officials and a television crew entered, declaring the need to evacuate the building due to a bomb threat. Despite the presumed urgency of a bomb threat, the police carefully checked and recorded the documents of all in attendance before allowing them to exit the theater. The three organizers of the event were then taken to a nearby police station for questioning and were released only the following morning. The screening of the film was successfully prevented (Ruble 2015).

118 «Я глубоко убежден, что государственное учреждение культуры не должно ассоциироваться с именами персон, которые вызывают столь неоднозначную реакцию и чья деятельность основана на провокации общества».

119 These tactics are strikingly similar to those used to disrupt a recent videoconference with opposition leader Mikhail Khodorkovsky in a Saint Petersburg hotel on December 7, 2014. Earlier in the day, the building was intrusively searched for drugs. During the scheduled meeting time, police attempted to evacuate the building, though meeting-goers managed to slip away from them back to the conference room. Power was then cut off to the building, but the videoconference proceeded using portable batteries, until the batteries ran out of power, at which point the organizers ended the event (Nechepurenko 2014).
These examples of expanding controls in cultural production during the Putin era parallel soft-authoritarian measures employed in other social and political spheres. Just as politically controversial films such as *Leviathan* are allowed to be made, but their distribution and resonance carefully controlled by the authorities, expressions of political opposition (campaigns of opposition figures, protest meetings) are allowed to take place, but always under the threat of arrest or detention. Authoritarian prohibitions are a difficult position to justify domestically to the body politic and internationally in the global order dominated by democratic, capitalist nations. Instead, the current power structure in Russia employs more subtle measures of obstruction, intimidation, and undermining such expressions in the largely state-controlled media. In official policy, such channeling of political outcomes includes a gross disproportion of media coverage for United Russia candidates over their opponents and policies such as the 2005 legislative reform, which raised the threshold of required votes to gain seats in the Duma from 5 to 7% (effectively squeezing out smaller opposition parties). Unofficially, methods of intimidation are employed selectively, “making examples” of those who step out of line, and act as a deterrent to widespread organization of the opposition. The prosecution of political opponents such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Alexei Navalny in what many believe are politically motivated “show trials” both prevents them from posing a serious challenge and sends a message to other potential rivals. Similarly, protest meetings are ostensibly permitted by the government, but a significant number of protesters—such as Maxim Luzyanin, Konstantin Lebedev, Mikhail Kosenko, Alexander Naumov, and many others—have been arrested and sentenced to several years in prison.
for participating in “mass unrest,” creating apprehension among those who might consider joining such demonstrations (“Bolotnaya Square” 2014).

Perhaps most significantly, rhetorical strategies are employed in the government-controlled mainstream media, which increasingly portray political opposition leaders and their counterparts in the arts as traitors, unpatriotic, or agents of the west. Amidst growing nationalist fervor after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, President Putin caused a stir with the following statement in his speech to the Russian Parliament:

Certain western politicians are threatening us not only with sanctions, but with the prospect of worsening our domestic affairs. I would like to know what they have in mind: the acts of a fifth column—various types of “national traitors”—or are they hoping to worsen Russia’s socio-economic situation and in this way provoke the people’s dissatisfaction? (Putin 2014).120

Since that time, mentions of a “fifth column” and “national traitors” have been relatively widespread in the mainstream media, arguably creating a witch-hunt culture against those critical of the government. For example, the popular state-owned television channel NTV aired the programs “13 Friends of the Junta” (13 druzei khunty) and “17 More Friends of the Junta” (17 eshche druzei khunty) on August 24, 2014 and September 1, 2014, respectively. These programs profiled Russian artists and activists who had attended anti-war rallies or spoke out publicly against Russia’s activities in Ukraine, referring to them in unambiguous terms as “fascists” and “traitors.” Andrei Makarevich, singer of the rock band Mashina Vremeni, was lambasted for giving a concert to Ukrainian refugees from

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120 «Некоторые западные политики уже страшат нас не только санкциями, но и перспективой обострения внутренних проблем. Хотелось бы знать, что они имеют в виду: действия некой пятой колонны – разного рода «национал-предателей» – или рассчитывают, что смогут ухудшить социально-экономическое положение России и тем самым спровоцировать недовольство людей?»
Donetsk and Luhansk. The poet Dmitry Bykov was called an “anti-patriot” who “converts lines of poetry into rubles.” Other targets include activist Kseniia Sobchak and now-deceased politician Boris Nemtsov. Such denunciations echo similar practices in the Soviet Union, when figures such as Boris Pasternak and Joseph Brodsky were subject to defamation.

Such manipulations of public opinion have proved very effective, engendering skepticism and hostility among a large percentage of the population toward critical discussions and further polarizing public discourse. The paradoxical granting of permission to hold political demonstrations and to organize opposition movements are what political scientists call “release valve” policies, which provides a pretense of democracy and political expression, but in a controlled and circumscribed manner (Hildebrandt 2013; Massoud 2013). Ideological controls in cinema and other cultural spheres reveal the same calculated mixture of allowance, obstruction, and intimidation. Thus, in contrast to the straightforward production of propaganda in the Soviet period, universally censored and often commissioned by the State, we can conceive of cultural production in Putin’s Russia as something closer to the Althusserian model, which relies more on circumscription and deterrent than on ubiquitous censorship, but also allows some space for resistance. Echoing Michel Foucault’s conception of discourse as a site of both power and resistance, Althusser wrote in the same essay on “Ideology”:

The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISA’s as easily as it can in the [Repressive] State apparatus, not only because the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the
utilisation of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in struggle. (Althusser 1971, 165)

In practice, it is impossible to gauge the impact of these tightened ideological controls by specific examples alone, as such measures also act as a deterrent for certain types of film projects. This circumscription of film production was a major topic of the annual discussion of the state of Russian cinema at the 2014 Kinotavr Film Festival. One critic remarked: “Producers are now afraid of the government. The sense of ‘fear’ has recently re-emerged. Every director has the fear that they won’t give him funding. Private producers are afraid that they will pressure them, that they will have ‘trouble’ (nepriiatnosti) if they start to make films of this sort, and they are warning us about this” (Dondurei 2014). Director Boris Khlebnikov gestured toward a political radicalization of Russian cinema (which this chapter will argue has already begun) in the growing authoritarian climate of the film industry:

Now a new generation should arise because all of the requisite conditions have been created for it: censorship; the government is behaving [shamefully]—it has already stated that it does not want to give money to auteur cinema; and directors are left with very limited channels to make a statement. (Kuvshinova 2014)  

121 «У каждого режиссера есть страх, что ему не дадут денег. Частные продюсеры боятся, что на них надавят, они будут иметь неприятности, если начнут снимать фильмы такого рода, и эти предупреждения им делаются».

122 «Сейчас должно прийти новое поколение (вдруг оно придет?), потому что для этого создались в воздухе все условия: цензура, государство **** [надоело], ведет себя очень **** [плохо], не хочет и уже формулирует, что не хочет, давать деньги на авторское кино, и у режиссера остается очень узкий канал высказывания». 
Toward a Definition of the Russian "New Wave" or "New Quiets"

In the post-Soviet period, Russian national cinema found itself in a perpetual state of “crisis.” The economic and infrastructural upheavals in the film industry during the 1990s, coupled with a sudden influx of foreign (especially Hollywood) films, led to a virtual collapse of the Russian film industry.\(^{123}\) In the new millennium, annual roundtables of filmmakers, industry leaders, and government officials have consistently addressed the state of emergency in national cinema. Discussions over the years have been wide-ranging, revealing a diversity of viewpoints and potential solutions to the problems of the industry: the need to increase cinema’s profitability and appeal to audiences; debates about the value of big-budget genre films and their prioritization over auteur productions; calls for a move away from chernukha to more redemptive, entertainment films; consideration of a “moral code” in cinema and quotas limiting the distribution of foreign films; establishment of censorship and “prioritized themes” for government-funded films, and so on.\(^ {124}\)

In the Putin era, Russian cinema has experienced a modest Renaissance. This is the result of a confluence of factors, most notably increased prosperity among Russian moviegoers and the government’s concerted investment in cinema,\(^ {125}\) which has yielded a marked increase in big-budget Russian films that succeed at the box office. In that regard,

\(^{123}\) For an overview of the troubled transition of Russian national cinema in the 1990s, see Lawton 2004; Beumers 1999; and Beumers 2009.


\(^{125}\) Government funding for cinema increased to 12 times what was spent in 2000 (Dondurei 2013).
2004 was a watershed year; Timur Bekmambetov’s fantasy blockbuster *Night Watch* (*Nochnoi dozor*, 2004) broke all post-Soviet box-office records and was the first Russian film in that era to lead the annual box-office profits in Russia. Taking *Night Watch* as a blueprint for effective advertising and high production value on a minimal budget, a large number of Russian blockbusters have since occupied the top ten in annual box-office revenues in Russia and CIS countries (see Figure 48).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Rank at Box Office (Russia and CIS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td><em>Day Watch</em> (<em>Dnevnoi dozor</em>)</td>
<td>Bekmambetov</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Wolfhound</em> (<em>Volkodav iz roda serykh psov</em>)</td>
<td>Lebedev</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Heat</em> (<em>Zhara</em>)</td>
<td>Gigneishvili</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Bimmer 2</em> (<em>Bumer 2</em>)</td>
<td>Buslov</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td><em>Irony of Fate 2</em> (<em>Ironiia sud’by. Prodolzhenie</em>)</td>
<td>Bekmambetov</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Shadowboxing 2: Revenge</em> (<em>Boi s teni 2: Revnash</em>)</td>
<td>Megerdichev</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Lovy-Dovey</em> (*Liubov’-morkov’)</td>
<td>Strizhnekov</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td><em>Admiral</em></td>
<td>Kravchuk</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Best Movie</em> (<em>Samyi luchshii fil’m</em>)</td>
<td>Kuzin</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Lovy-Dovey 2</em> (*Liubov’-morkov’ 2)</td>
<td>Pezhemskii</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Inhabited Island</em> (<em>Obitaemyi ostrov</em>)</td>
<td>Bondarchuk</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Hard Labor Vacation</em> (<em>Kanikuly strogogo rezhima</em>)</td>
<td>Zaitsev</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Taras Bulba</em></td>
<td>Bortko</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td><em>Six Degrees of Celebration</em> (<em>Elki</em>)</td>
<td>Bekmambetov</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Nasha Russia: The Eggs of Fate</em> (<em>Nasha Rasha: Iaitsa sud’by)</em></td>
<td>Orlov</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td><em>Vysotsky. Thank You for Being Alive</em> (<em>Vysotskii. Spasibo , chto zhivoi</em>)</td>
<td>Buslov</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Six Degrees of Celebration 2</em> (<em>Elki 2</em>)</td>
<td>Baranov, Gabriadze, Kiselev, Kott</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>Three Heroes on Distant Shores</em> (<em>Tri bogatyria na dalnikh beregakh</em>)</td>
<td>Feoktistov</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td><em>Stalingrad</em> (<em>Bondarchuk</em>)</td>
<td>Bondarchuk</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Six Degrees of Celebration 3</em> (<em>Elki 3</em>)</td>
<td>Kiselev</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td><em>Viy</em></td>
<td>Stepchenko</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 48: Top ten Russian films at the box-office, 2006-2014**  

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126 Statistics drawn from IMDB’s “Box Office Mojo” Database: http://boxofficemojo.com/intl/cis/yearly/
Russians began going to the movie theaters again in the early 2000s. Overall film attendance in Russia rose steadily every year from 2002-2014 (Boletskaia and Golitsyna 2015). Total box office sales went from a meager $7 million in 1997 to $34.5 million in 2000, $190 million in 2003 and $500 million in 2006—an increase by a factor of 70 in less than a decade (Condee 2009, 82). Russian productions began to carve out a larger portion of overall box-office profits, rising from 15.5% in 2002 to a peak of 29.5% in 2005, before declining somewhat to 22% in 2009 and 18.2% in 2014 (“Gospodderzhka” 2013). These numbers are now comparable to other European national cinema. By comparison, in 2013 the percentage of the box office earned by local film products was 33.8% in France; 21.4% in Poland; 21% in the United Kingdom; and 14% in Spain. In 2013, moreover, Russia overtook the UK as the second largest European market in terms of admissions (European Audiovisual Observatory 2014). The number of movie theaters in Russia tripled from 2004 to 2012 (Neumeyer 2014). Though encouraging to producers and government officials, these upward trends still left much to be desired. For example, in 2013 only eight of the ninety Russian films released in theaters (9%) were profitable, while in 2012 only eleven of eighty-six films (13%) made money (Kitaeva 2014). Pressure on industry leaders and filmmakers continues and new initiatives are continually proposed. A downturn in the Russian economy and high inflation in 2015 do not bode well for film profits in the coming years.127

127 For an in-depth overview of the revival of the Russian film industry in the early 2000s, see Condee, 2009: 80-84.
Although many Russian viewers reviled Russian auteur cinema after a decade of chernukha’s violent excesses and bleak narratives, it too enjoyed a revival in the 2000s. Also buoyed by a period of increased economic stability and investment in cinema, a new generation of directors came of age and gained considerable recognition on the international film circuit, winning prizes at the world’s biggest festivals (see Figure 49 for a list of the most prestigious awards). Reacting to their relative success, some critics began referring to the new generation of Russian auteurs as the “Russian New Wave,” a reference to earlier periods of revitalization and aesthetic innovation in French, Czech, Romanian, and other national cinemas. Not surprisingly, this label—not the result of any manifesto or self-declared movement, but applied haltingly by critics—was frequently disputed the directors themselves, who pointed to their aesthetic and thematic differences. When, in 2011, several of these directors were asked whether a New Wave existed, eight of the ten respondents (Bardin, Khlebnikov, Popogrebsky, Sigarev, Mizgirev, Bakuradze, and Voloshin) responded emphatically that there was no Russian New Wave (Saulenko 2011). Others, while reluctant to embrace the idea of a unified New Wave, acknowledged the shared ethos of the generation’s filmmakers, such as director Boris Khlebnikov, who remarked:

The French New Wave or [Italian] Neorealism… these things came about because a large number of people were united against something […] and it’s not that we’ve explicitly made a pact, but something has happened in life that has

128 It should be pointed out that the directors who are usually considered the core members of the French New Wave also disputed this label, which became an accepted term only retrospectively (see Greene 2007).
provoked the same general phobia in all of us […] Essentially this is a state of fear about what is taking place around us.” (Volobuev 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Most significant award(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>The Return (Vozvrashchenie)</td>
<td>A. Zviagintsev</td>
<td>Venice International Film Festival: Golden Lion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Euphoria</td>
<td>I. Vyrypaev</td>
<td>Venice International Film Festival: Little Golden Lion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Playing the Victim (Izobrazhaia zhertvu)</td>
<td>K. Serebrennikov</td>
<td>Rome International Film Festival: Best Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Captive (Plennyi)</td>
<td>A. Uchitel’</td>
<td>Karlovy Vary International Film Festival: Best Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tulpan</td>
<td>S. Dvortsevoi</td>
<td>Cannes International Film Festival: Un Certain Regard Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Mermaid (Rusalka)</td>
<td>A. Melikiian</td>
<td>Berlin International Film Festival: FIPRESCI Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yuri’s Day (Iur’ev den’)</td>
<td>K. Serebrennikov</td>
<td>Warsaw International Film Festival: Grand Prix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Another Sky (Drugoe nebo)</td>
<td>D. Mamuliia</td>
<td>Karlovy Vary International Film Festival: Best Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>My Joy (Schast’e moe)</td>
<td>S. Loznitsa</td>
<td>Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival: Grand Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faust</td>
<td>A. Sokurov</td>
<td>Venice International Film Festival: Golden Lion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>A. Zviagintsev</td>
<td>Cannes International Film Festival: Un Certain Regard Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>In the Fog (V tumane)</td>
<td>S. Loznitsa</td>
<td>Cannes International Film Festival: FIPRESCI Prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Leviathan</td>
<td>A. Zviagintsev</td>
<td>Cannes International Film Festival: Best Screenplay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 49: Most notable festival awards won by Russian films, 2003-2014

Nevertheless, critics frequently noted the commonalities of the new generation of auteur directors, citing, among other things: a unique blend of documentary film

129 «Французская «новая волна», или неореализм […] это все получилось из-за того, что большое количество людей было против чего-то […] И я думаю, дело не в том, что мы как-то договорялись, а просто что-то произошло в жизни, что у всех вдруг одна общая фобия появилась. На поверхности это выглядит как фобия ментов, у всех в фильмах менты — но по сути это состояние страха от того, что вокруг происходит».  

157
techniques—especially long takes and a fixed or shaky handheld camera—with highly mythical narratives and settings; stoic and largely silent protagonists; and a shared intonation of alienation in their films, informed by a post-Soviet cultural crisis and the director’s coming of age in the difficult period of the 1990s (Vishnevetskii 2010; “Novye tikhie” 2011). However, the intellectual baggage of the term “New Wave” and the hesitancy of critics to crown this generation a bona fide New Wave relegated the label to the dustbin of history.

As one moniker fell out of favor, another arose that perhaps more aptly described a certain core group of the generation’s directors. Khlebnikov introduced the term “New Quiets” (Novye tikhie) at the annual discussion of Russian national cinema at Kinotavr in 2011, and it has since gained wide currency among critics and filmmakers. Quoting Sergei Shnurov, cultural icon and singer of the band Leningrad, Khlebnikov remarked: “Shnurov very rightly called our generation the ‘New Quiets.’ It’s a very apt description. We curse and fear these cops — back away and whisper ‘scumbags,’ ‘bastards,’ etc. In my opinion, cinema should already be much louder and more free. We should not whisper, but produce films that are of a directly social nature” (“Novye tikhie” 2011). Thus Khlebnikov characterizes the understated social commentary and alienated protagonists of his generation of filmmakers, not without a note of self-deprecation.

130 «Очень правильно Сергей Шнуров назвал наше поколение — «новые тихие». Это очень точное название. Мы ругаемся и боймся всех этих мужиков — пятимся назад и как бы шепчем: сволочи, ублюдки и т.д. На мой взгляд, кино должно быть уже намного более громким и свободным. Мы должны не шептать, а производить кино куда более прямого социального действия». 
A number of observations by film critics and cultural historians have shed light on the relatively “quiet” cultural production of the Putin era. One prominent film critic noted “a timid avoidance of social cinema,” which she explained as an aversion to social themes and overt ideology that predominated in the Soviet period (Stishova 2013). Another noted a certain escapism among the Russian auteurs: “Both directors and viewers are far from ecstatic about socio-cultural marks of our day, and the language of parable (pritchevoy iazyk) is an excellent way to […] speak about the timeless” (Kasianova 2012). Auteur cinema, like high literature, arguably lost its raison d’être in the first two decades of post-Soviet Russia, as censorship was minimal and society no longer looked to high art as a counterpoint to heavy-handed official ideology. Certainly this generation of directors was also influenced by market considerations, particularly the distaste of the general public for bleak depictions of social realities that dominated perestroika and 1990s cinema, and the calls by industry leaders for more uplifting narratives and positive role models.

More generally, the traditional role of high-brow literature and cinema as critical vanguard was tempered in the first decade of the new millennium by what language historian Michael Gorham calls a “period of restoration” in language culture (Gorham 2014, 13). Centripetal rhetorical practices — to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s term — in

131 “И режиссер, и зритель не в восторге от социокультурных примет дня сегодняшнего, а притчевый язык — отличный способ забыть о сменяющихся раз в полгода гаджетах и поговорить о вечном”.

132 Anna Lawton attributes the crisis of Russian auteur cinema in the 1990s to its lost status as “the conscience of the nation” (Lawton 2004, 13).

133 See for example Nikita Mikhalkov’s famous speech to the Filmmakers’ Union in December 1997 (Mikhalkov 1999).
contemporary Russia reflect not only a censorship imposed from above, but also a grassroots and self-imposed conservativism. In 2012, for example, the Russian Union of Filmmakers published the consensus of its plenary session in which it requested a number of measures limiting freedom of expression. Complaining of immoral and denigrating depictions of reality in Russian cinema and pandering to Western festival audiences, the Union requested that a “moral code” be imposed on cinema (“V Dome kino” 2012). Later that year, young Russian filmmakers and film students published an open letter to Nikita Mikhalkov, President of the Filmmakers’ Union, enthusiastically supporting the same measures and requesting the creation of a youth division of the Union for greater oversight of young filmmakers (“Otkrytoe pis’mo” 2012). Similarly, when Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky defunded Moscow’s documentary film festival Artdokfest in 2014, he remarked, “I won’t even say how many people called me and told me: thank you for doing this” (“Medinskii” 2015). Such examples reflect what Althusser called the process of “interpellation,” a process by which ideology “recruits subjects among individuals” and “transforms individuals into subjects” who actively participate, even enjoy, their ideological identification (Althusser 1971, 162). Similarly, Žižek ties ideology to Lacan’s notion of enjoyment (jouissance), arguing that ideology becomes an end in itself (Žižek 1989: 43-44; 2013: 122).

The conservative discourses of patriotism, nation building, and traditional values that dominated official rhetoric, mass media, and other cultural spheres in the “zero years” (nulevye gody) helped to shape the relatively conciliatory intonation of the New Quiet filmmakers. Like their counterparts in cinema, many Russian writers such as
Ludmila Ulitskaya and Ludmila Petrushevskaya found themselves at odds with the dominant mood, and focused instead on timeless interpersonal conflicts or constructed allegorical mythical spaces.\textsuperscript{134}

Revealing both post-Soviet society’s search for affirmative identification and an anxiety of influence of sorts, Russian auteurs in the new millennium largely eschewed scathing rhetorical practices of chernukha cinema, striving for greater viewer identification with characters. Though a far cry from the positive heroes of Socialist Realism, their protagonists are typically what director Bakur Bakuradze calls “potential heroes, thrown into a space where they are not able to prove themselves as heroes” (Volobuev 2009).\textsuperscript{135} Socially and politically stifled, the protagonists in Popogrebsky’s \textit{Simple Things} (\textit{Prostye veshchi}, 2007), Kheromeriki’s \textit{Heart’s Boomerang} (\textit{Serdtsa bumerang}, 2011), and Khlebnikov’s \textit{Free Floating} (\textit{Svobodnoe plavanie}, 2006) exhibit only the heroism of small, everyday acts. In that sense, while retaining their critical gaze on society, these films demonstrate new, fledgling forms of social identification amidst a breakdown of social relations in the post-Soviet period.

The problem of nomenclature notwithstanding, the films of a core group of directors—Zviagintsev, Popogrebskii, Khlebnikov, Vyrypaev, Mizgirev, Serebrennikov,

\textsuperscript{134} Benjamin Sutcliffe discusses these writers’ shift to “transhistorical time” in the post-Soviet period (Sutcliffe 2009, 100-103). Petrushevskaya has since disavowed her fiction and has abandoned prose writing for cabaret performance.

\textsuperscript{135} "...потенциального героя, брошенного в то пространство, где он не может проявить себя героически".
Bakuradze, Loznitsa, Gai-Germanika, Sigarev, and Khomerkii—reveal striking commonalities that give credence to the “New Quiet” designation. However, the cinematic language and dramaturgy of these directors reflect two predominant tendencies, which can be described as “metaphorical” and “metonymic” (corresponding loosely to Roman Jakobson’s description of these functions of language). The former films eschew contemporaneity, are set in generalized, composite spaces, and explore timeless themes and human dilemmas. The clearest examples of this “metaphorical” cinema are Zviagintsev’s The Return (Vozvrashchenie, 2003) and The Banishment (Izgnanie, 2007); Vyrypaev’s Euphoria (2006) and Delhi Dance (Tanets Delhi, 2013); and Serebrennikov’s Betrayal (Izmena, 2012). The characters in these trans-historical narratives are often nameless, the time and place of the action unknown. Their scripts construct mythical spaces—engaging religious subtexts and fairy tale motifs—while contentious social and political topics are addressed only through oblique allegory or exist in the background.

The “metonymic” contingent of the New Quiets demonstrates the opposite tendency, situating narratives in highly contextualized settings and social milieu and portraying them with quasi-documentary authenticity. Like their more mythical counterparts, these films focus on universal and interpersonal themes—relationships of

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136 This list is not exhaustive, but highlights the most prominent and influential directors with shared sensibilities.

137 Cf. Jakobson 2002: 95-96

138 Critic Nancy Condee describes such allusory political markers in recent cinema, remarking: “Where in contemporary Russian cinema is the space for socially contradictory themes? […] This space is the background” (Condee 2013).
parents and children, marital infidelity, illness, maturation—rather than contentious social or political issues. The best examples of this strain of cinema are Khlebnikov’s Free Floating (2006), Help Gone Mad (Sumasshedshaia pomoshch’, 2009), and Till Night Do Us Part (Poka noch’ ne razluchit’, 2012); Bakuradze’s Shultes (2008) and The Hunter (Okhotnik, 2011); Popogrebskii’s Simple Things (2007) and How I Ended The Summer (Kak ia provel etim letom, 2010); Gai-Germanika’s Everyone Dies But Me (Vse umrut ia ostanus’, 2008); and Khomeriki’s Fairytale about the Dark (Skazka pro temnotu, 2009) and Heart’s Bumerang (2011).

One of the most celebrated films of the New Quiets, Vyrypaev’s Euphoria (2006) depicts a classical tragedy transposed onto Russia’s vast steppe.139 The heroine Vera, unfulfilled by her gruff husband Valera, unexpectedly meets Pakha at a friend’s wedding and the two instantly fall in love. Spurning her marital and maternal duties, Vera is consumed by her passion for Pakha. While she is distracted and pining for him, her unattended daughter Masha loses a finger to the family’s aggressive dog Pirate. The brutal but principled father Valera shoots the dog, quickly cuts little Masha’s bloodied finger off, and gives her vodka to ease the pain. When Vera goes to bury the dog, she again encounters Pakha and the two lovers spend the night together under the moonlight. While Valera is passed out from drink and Vera gone all night with Pakha, Masha’s grandparents decide to take her to a hospital in the nearest town, two hours away. Pakha and Vera set out on an odyssey, by boat, car, and on foot, to reach the hospital.

139 Euphoria was awarded the Little Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, the Grand Prix at the Warsaw Film Festival, the Special Jury Prize at Kinotavr and the Russian Nika for Best Debut and Best Music.
Meanwhile Valera, who has discovered their relationship, sets fire to the family home and embarks on foot with shotgun in hand to track the lovers down. The film ends tragically and predictably, Valera shoots both his wife and her lover as they drift down the Don River in their boat.

Figure 50: Shots of the vast steppe in *Euphoria*
Like the other “metaphorical” films of the New Quiets, *Euphoria* is set in a mythical space, where time and social context are irrelevant. Indeed, the historical period of the film is almost undetectable, with only electric lines and Pakha’s old Moskvich automobile as temporal markers. The characters too are instantiations of myth, lacking psychological complexity. Each character is consumed entirely by a single passion and their actions play out the roles of Greek tragedy. Vera and Pakha’s all-consuming love and Valera’s quest for vengeance are a kind of madness, signified by the film’s ambiguous title. “Euphoria” suggests not a blissful, carefree happiness, but an all-consuming passion that leads to tragedy. Pakha and Vera’s repeated dialogue throughout the film—“I don’t know what is happening to us” and “What will we do now?”—

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140 In one brief scene, a modern sports utility vehicle drives by Pakha’s old Zhiguli. This playful moment underscores the temporal vacuum in which these rural characters live, playing out timeless human conflicts on this remote part of the steppe.
suggests that characters are controlled by forces beyond their control. The motif of madness recurs throughout, as Pakha inexplicably begins beating goats in the barn and Valera shoots a passing cow with his shotgun. However, the narrative departs from Greek tragedy in that Valera’s retribution is not cathartic but a kind of cruel insanity.

Like the film’s narrative and setting, the characters’ names—Pavel, Vera, Masha—are highly archetypal. In Euphoria’s original script, the quotation “Saul! Why do you persecute me?” from the Acts of the Apostles, served as an epigraph, but was later removed. Biblical allusions to Saul/Paul are quite clear in the film, however. In the film’s opening scene we meet Pakha (a diminutive of Pavel, the Slavic equivalent of Paul) on the road, when he suddenly has a change of heart and turns back, leaving his friend behind. Like Saul/Paul, Pakha becomes his own sort of “apostle of love,” through which the film poses questions about passionate love and familial duty. The film is riddled with such biblical allusions. Near the end of the film, Vera and Pakha walk naked along the beach, like Adam and Eve after the fall. In this playful and poetic moment, they walk up to the Don River and collapse into it with smiles on their faces, thus giving themselves over entirely to fate and the elemental forces that control them.

Pagan and Christian subtexts are interwoven throughout. Aerial shots of the endless steppe and Don River frame virtually every scene, serving as a constant reminder of the elemental forces upon which, as Pakha says, “everything depends.” In the final scene, Vera and Pakha lie dying floating down the river, as if floating in Charon’s boat across the River Styx. While some praised Euphoria’s rich and erudite construction, others felt that it “drowns under the weight of its heavy-handed associations,” reflecting
its author’s inexperience (Tsyrkun 2006). Both Christian and pagan symbolism underscores the characters’ helplessness, tossed about by fate. *Euphoria*’s opening and closing scenes present a playful metaphor for the film’s existential point of view. Children place a mentally handicapped man on a motorbike and start up the engine. The man rides across the vast steppe at breakneck speed, mesmerized by the beauty and grandiosity of the world as it flies by him, paralleling the film’s hapless characters who are taken for an exhilarating and precarious ride by forces beyond their comprehension.

![Image of Vera and Pavel in Euphoria](image)

**Figure 52: Vera and Pavel in Euphoria**
Khlebnikov’s *Free Floating* is another key film of the New Quiets, but of the opposite “metonymic” strain, which places the characters in highly contextualized settings. *Free Floating* follows Lenia (Alexander Iatsenko), a recent high-school graduate in a dusty provincial town near Yaroslavl.\(^1\) When the Volga Motor Works, where he secures his first job, is purchased and shut down by a western competitor, Lenia finds himself “floating” aimlessly through life. Appealing to the local unemployment bureau, he tries his hand as a plasterer and shoe salesman at a market before settling into a position with the public works department (*Zhelishchno-kommunal’noe khoziastvo*). While on the job, Lenia encounters “Piggy” (*Khriushka*), a girl from his school, and begins a romance with her. Ultimately, he leaves this job too, only to take on a new

\(^1\) *Free Floating* won the Grand Prix in the Central and E. European Film competition at the Warsaw International Film Festival; Best Director at Kinotavr; the White Elephant Award from the Russian Guild of Film Critics; and the Tarkovsky Prize at the “Window to Europe” festival in Vyborg, Russia.
position as a barge worker at the film’s conclusion. This quintessential postdocumentary film eschews a traditional narrative arc, leaving the few conventional plot devices (such as Lenia’s relationship with Piggy) unresolved. Rather, *Free Floating* adheres to the loose structure of everyday reality, and consists primarily of mundane scenes of Lenia sleeping on his pull-out couch, riding on public transport, and repairing potholes in the road. As in documentary cinema, material reality is not merely a backdrop for the narrative, but is elevated to the film’s subject. Long takes, static shots, and an absence of musical score allow the viewer to “enter into” the film’s physical space.

Reflecting another hallmark of New Quiet cinema, *Free Floating* painstakingly recreates the unrefined language of the street. Influenced by the so-called New Drama of Russian theater, these filmmakers’ scripts often employ or resemble the ‘verbatim’ method—a process by which interviews are conducted with real-life people in the street, transcribed, and then performed by theater actors. In *Free Floating*, language is a critical element of both the film’s aura of authenticity and subtle, deadpan humor. In one hilarious and untranslatable dialogue, Lenia and Piggy begin their awkward courtship:

- Ну, и чё ты?
- А ты чё?
- Да работа чё. А ты чё?
- Да я так…
- Ну чё, пока?
- Давай.\(^{142}\)

\(^{142}\) -Well, what?
- You, what?
- Well, I'm working, that's what. And what's with you?
- Oh, you know...
- Well, bye then?
- Alright see ya.
This comical teenage sociolect is well known to the Russian viewer, creating a humor of recognition. *Free Floating*’s sparse script is punctuated throughout with similar absurd exchanges. Standing around uneasily on their first date, Piggy asks Lenia, “Want to look at the goats?” to which he eagerly agrees. Recalling Soviet odes to labor, Lenia’s overseer at the public works (Evgenii Sytyi) constantly rails against “hackwork” (*khaltura*) and makes poetic proclamations about his own work in the road repair business:

> This is my iron-clad rule. I always strive to make work a celebration. A celebration! So that steel bar in your hands is not a tool of violence against the road, but, you know, a doctor’s syringe! With the help of which you bring joy, not to yourself, but first and foremost to the road! Understand? To be creative, to think of new and brilliant innovations!\(^{143}\)

These absurd situations simultaneously provoke laughter and underscore Lenia’s alienation, creating the mood of this existential tragicomedy.

\(^{143}\) Это мое железное правило. На рабочем месте я всегда стремлюсь […] сделать праздник! Праздник, чтобы лом в руках был не орудием насилия дороги, а таким, знаешь, докторским шприцом! С помощью которого ты доставляешь, в первую очередь, не себе удовольствие, а дороге! Понимаешь? Ты должен попытаться разнообразить, придумать какие-то яркие неожиданности!
While ostensibly apolitical, *Free Floating*’s portrait of a modern-day, provincial factotum suggests stagnation and disorientation in everyday Russian life. In one scene,
two young men from Lenia’s neighborhood get drunk and watch him as he repairs the road. The three men stare at one another with expressions of embarrassment and empathy. In this poignant and silent exchange, the characters (and viewers) recognize the bleak prospects available to them in their small town: to become unemployed alcoholics or to fill holes in the road. Later, in the film’s poetic climax, Lenia impulsively goes for a swim in the river after a drinking spree. He paddles frantically against the current, declaring, “I will split this whole river apart,” before conceding, “Okay, enough. Enough. I don’t need this.”

The scene literalizes the metaphor of “free floating” (svobodnoe plavanie), suggesting Lenia’s disorientation and futile struggle for self-actualization in his current environment. Russian film scholar Lilya Nemchenko argues that in recent auteur cinema, “the commonality of the everyday generates a commonality of the tragedy of existence” (Nemchenko 2011). The “tragic everyday” portrayed in films such as Free Floating and Tambourine, Drum at once comments on socio-economic conditions and expresses aimlessness and identity crisis amidst the ruins of the former Soviet empire. As Nemchenko observes, characters live amidst the artifacts of this former civilization (Soviet décor, furniture), which serve as a constant reminder of its collapse.

The New Quiet directors revive the trope of the “little man” in society (malen’kii chelovek) from the 19th-century literary tradition; the films Heart’s Bumerang, Free Floating, Help Gone Mad, Shul’tes, and The Hunter center, respectively, upon a subway driver, a road repairman, a migrant worker, an amnesiac, and a rural farmer. As during the reign of Nicholas II in the 19th century, the little man trope today can be understood

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144 «Поломаю сейчас всю эту реку на фиг!… Я все… Я все… Не фиг не надо мне.»

![Alexander Iatsenko in Shame](image)

**Figure 56: Alexander Iatsenko, the archetypal "Quiet" hero in Shame**

Another quintessential film of New Quiet cinema, Bakuradze’s *The Hunter* follows Ivan (Mikhail Barskovich), a hunter and pig farmer in a rural region of Pskov.
Like Khlebnikov’s *Free Floating*, *The Hunter* eschews a traditional plot in favor of a loose, episodic narrative. The camera matter-of-factly portrays Ivan as he hunts in the forest, feeds and butchers pigs on the farm, and sits at the family dinner table. Ivan cares for his small son, Kolya, who has only one arm due to a birth defect. He teaches Kolya to shoot a rifle with a single arm and, despite the large expense, takes him to a sanitarium for physical therapy treatments. Stoically coping with the difficulties of the life around him, Ivan unexpectedly finds a kindred spirit in Liuba, a worker who is on the farm as part of a hard labor sentence for a criminal conviction. We learn only that Liuba killed a man in an accident, though no details are given. Ivan and Liuba find solace in each other, but seem to understand from the very beginning that there is no future in their affair, which comes to an end when she leaves the farm after her labor sentence is complete.

The inhabitants of this remote farm live out their lives, stoically and in relative silence, eating, sleeping, hunting, and procreating. Scenes of human characters alternate with footage of the forest and pigs on the farm, emphasizing the biological essence of humans, living out the life cycle, as it were, outside of society and ideology. Images of Ivan’s hardscrabble life—stoically bludgeoning a pig to death, tending to his disabled son, resting by the fire after a hunt—epitomize the austere beauty at the heart of the film. Though highly emplaced in the physical and social reality of contemporary rural Russia,

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145 *The Hunter* was awarded Best Director, the Russian Guild of Film Critics Prize, and Best Female Role for Tat’iana Shapovalova at Kinotavr in 2011. It was also nominated for the Un Certain Regard prize at the Cannes International Film Festival.
the film simultaneously reflects the New Quiet aversion to contemporaneity and ideology. As director Bakuradze commented:

I thought for a long time where I could shoot this film so the protagonist wouldn’t be tied to any standards, traditions, etc. […] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian people weren’t able to figure things out and had nowhere to turn for meaning except to God. All of these questions came together, the particular time and space allowed me to study a man who makes these decisions himself, independent of outside factors. ("Kinotavr 2011")

Figure 57: Ivan, the stoic protagonist of The Hunter

Figure 58: Liuba at the bus stop near the farm, The Hunter
Like the characters in Ludmila Petrushevskaya’s post-collapse/post-apocalyptic tale “The New Robinson Crusoes” (2000), Bakuradze’s hero lives outside of society, relying on himself for survival. Such characters seek an identity grounded in the material and biological world rather than grand metanarratives, whether conservative or progressive. In this sense, as one critic observes, many of the films of the New Quiets “are not interested in the dogma of conviction, but in man in his native essence” (Sukmanov 2013). This search for meaning and social identification outside of ideology and conventional society is also apparent in films such as *How I Ended This Summer, Simple Things*, and *Free Floating*. Moreover, the stoic alienation of *The Hunter, Free Floating*, and many other films of the New Quiets reflect, as one critic remarked, “loneliness as part of [post-Soviet] individuation, a consequence of collapsed collectivity” (Stishova 2006). The Soviet past looms large throughout *The Hunter*. When Ivan brings Kolya to a nearby war memorial, Kolya reads the inscription and asks “What was the Soviet Union?” As though rhetorical, the question is left unanswered. Throughout the film Ivan and Kolya search the lake for the ruins of a Soviet plane shot down by the Germans during World War II. Near the end of the film, the family of this pilot appear unexpectedly on the farm, asking to see the place where the plane had crashed. Young Kolya’s fascination with these heroic symbols suggests a desire for a stronger ideological orientation than his nuclear family and life on the farm provide.

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146 In this respect, *The Hunter* reveals a continuity with a number of other post-Soviet survival narratives, such as Balabanov’s *Brother* (1997).
While some films adhere more clearly to these metaphorical (*The Return*, *Euphoria*) and metonymic (*Free Floating*, *The Hunter*) engagements with reality, others blur the distinction. Serebrennikov’s *Yuri’s Day* and Sigarev’s *Wolfy*, for example, lie squarely between these strains of New Quiet cinema, combining a documentary treatment of social realities with rich visual metaphors and mythical subtexts. The progression of director Andrei Zviagintsev’s oeuvre is perhaps the best illustration of this interplay of myth and contemporaneity. His first two films, *The Return* (2003) and *The Banishment* (2007), are set in the mythical realm—taking place in an unknown time and place, invoking biblical subtexts, and portraying timeless human conflicts—while his latter two films, *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014), shift emphasis to concrete social and political realities of contemporary Russia, depicting class conflicts, political corruption, and authoritarian abuses. Even in the latter films, however, Zviagintsev’s rich scripts and
visual language interweave mythological significance into everyday scenes and plot devices.

The unique blend of documentary techniques and artistic metaphor that characterizes much of New Quiet cinema has come to be referred to as “postdocumentalism.” In her book-length study *Postdok: Igrovoe/neigrovoe*, Russian film critic Zara Abdullaeva examines this aesthetic phenomenon in recent cinema and theater, which occupies the “gaps between fiction and non-fiction cinema, between artificial and natural” (Abdullaeva 2011, 18). The para-documentary realism that predominates in Putin-era auteur cinema and independent theater (so-called New Drama) is “concerned with overcoming the borders between document and fiction” (Plakhov 2008). On the one hand, this reflects broader trends in European independent cinema in recent years, which has embraced documentary authenticity as an alternative to the increasingly formulaic and “unrealistic” conventions of blockbuster cinema, dominated by superhero films and escapist fantasies. However, like its theatrical counterpart of Russian New Drama, Russian postdocumentary cinema is part of a new sincerity, which “undermines and acts as counterpoint to the postmodernist hypothesis that dominates post-Soviet culture about the ‘disappearance of reality’ under a layer of simulacra, diverse signs and mythologies, mass-produced by the mass media and mass

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147 Beumers and Lipovetsky discuss postdocumentary aesthetics in the theater of recent years at length in *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (2009).

148 The influence of such aesthetic trends in European cinema are often noted by Russian critics: “Free Floating is an obvious appeal to European directors […] It is an attempt to apply the same approach to our contemporary reality, to so-called ‘films about simple people’ — with humor, with refinement, with a certain ironic lethargy” (“Svobodnoe plavanie” 2006).
culture” (Lipovetsky and Beumers 2009, 38). Not surprisingly, many of the “New Quiet” directors—such as Loznitsa, Dvortsevoi, Khlebnikov, Popogrebskii, and Ira Volkova—began as documentary filmmakers. The painstaking attention to details of everyday life in the regions and subcultures they portray often reflects the intimate, ethnographic knowledge of the filmmakers.  

A majority of their films feature non-professional actors in significant roles, such as Free Floating, The Hunter, Euphoria, Tulpan, Twilight Portrait, and Wolfy. These docudramas “dig into reality and revel in life, revealing its deep existential layers” (Sukmanov 2013). Thus, despite their diverse settings and themes, these two aesthetic tendencies in New Quiet cinema have many commonalities, including: mise-en-scene as a prized attribute rather than action, dream, or fantasy; a “quiet” (understated or obliquely allegorical) critique of social and power relations; and a tone of stoical alienation.

In addition to aesthetic and discursive similarities, two other features of Putin-era auteur cinema are typical of a film “movement”: frequent collaboration among the directors in question and a boom in directorial debuts. In 2004 the Russian journal Seans placed its hopes for the revival of the Russian film industry in its thriving debut cinema, citing the government’s renewed investment in film debuts and the concerted efforts of film festivals such as Kinotavr and “Baltic Debuts” to encourage them through special competitions for debut filmmakers (Vasil’evna 2004). In 2005—around the time of the

149 Khlebnikov owns a country home in the region near Yaroslavl where Free Floating was set and filmed (Khlebnikov 2007); Bakuradze lived for a significant period in Pskov oblast and wrote much of the script for The Hunter there (“Vstrecha” 2011); Dvortsevoi took this ethnographic method to new extremes, living and shooting Tulpan on Kazakhstan’s Hungry Steppe for a period of 3 years (Shavlovskii 2008).
emergence of several of the key New Wave/New Quiet directors—Sergei Lazaruk, head of the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinema, announced that the number of debut films in Russia had increased by a factor of 15 in recent years (“Za poslednie gody” 2005).

There was also a marked increase in collaboration among the new generation of filmmakers. Popogrebsky and Khlebnikov co-wrote and directed their first three films, the shorts *In Passing* (*Mimokhod*, 1997) and *The Sly Frog* (*Khitraia liagushka*, 2000), and the feature film *Roads to Koktebel* (2003), before co-founding Koktebel Film Studio the same year. This studio has served as an anchor point for several New Quiet directors, producing not only the subsequent films of Popogrebsky and Khlebnikov, but also those of Sigarev and Khomeriki. In 2009, Khlebnikov, Vyrypaev, Serebrennikov, German Jr., and Piotr Buslov collaborated on the almanac film *Crush* (*Korotkoe zamykanie*), while Popogrebsky, Zviagintsev, Buslov, Igor Voloshin, and Alexander Veledinskii made the almanac film *Ekspiriment 5IVE*. A number of co-directed films have revealed the directors’ shared thematic preoccupations, such as Khlebnikov and Gai-Germanika’s documentary *He’s Gone* (2007) and the docufiction project of Bakuradze and Mamuliia, *Moscow* (2007) (see Chapter 3).

**The Political Turn of the New Quiets**

A number of factors shaped the “quiet” cinema of the early 2000s—a gradual tightening of ideological controls, the predominant mood of conservatism and
affirmative nation-building in society, an aversion to negativity and didacticism after chernukha cinema, etc. However, Russian high art has always had a paradoxical relationship to authoritarian controls, often becoming increasingly radical and outspoken as freedom of expression is stifled. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Russian writers were the moral compasses for society; they frequently collided with censors and their works were sites of conflict for sensitive topics. As authoritarian controls diminish spaces for expression today, Russian auteur cinema has largely taken up the torch from its literary predecessors, becoming one of the only remaining bastions—alongside, most notably, theater and protest art—of critical engagement with contentious social and political issues. This is most evident in the recent “political turn” of several of the New Quiet directors. After a decade of escaping contemporaneity to revel in mythical spaces and everyday material reality, they have begun making films that critique political corruption and authoritarian practices in Russia today. As one well-known Russian critic argues: “It took twenty years for [post-Soviet] cinema, dodging along the potholes of oblivion, to rid itself of the timid avoidance of ‘social cinema,’ which was considered a mark of Soviet thinking. Our cinema has finally begun speaking out about these things—about the post-Soviet social order” (Stishova 2014).150

Three films in particular reveal striking similarities and the common preoccupations of their filmmakers: Khlebnikov’s *A Long Happy Life (Dolgaia schastlivaiia zhizn’)*, 2013), Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan* (2014), and Bykov’s *The Fool*

150 «Понадобилось двадцать лет, чтобы наше кино, петляя по ухабам безвременья, наконец-то избавилось от синдрома стыдливого страха перед «социалкой», каковая считалась меткой совкового мышления, и вслух заговорило об этом — о постсоветском социальном устройстве». 

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(Durak, 2014). All of these films emphasize the absence of the rule of law in Russia today, the powerlessness of Russian citizens, and the ability of the government arbitrarily to deprive them of their property and rights. In all three films, clear allusions are made to the current government, from shots of United Russia party symbols to the portraits of Putin hanging prominently in the offices of corrupt officials. Perhaps most poignant and original is their critique of the Russian people, who, rather than uniting in resistance, turn against their own advocates and are often just as eager as the authorities to quash dissent.

Figure 60: One of many allusions to Putin in new political cinema, Leviathan

In Khlebnikov’s A Long Happy Life (2012) the protagonist, Alexander Sergeevich (Alexander Iatsenko), runs a small and faltering farm in a village near Murmansk in the Russian North. The land on which the farm is located has attracted a wealthy local businessman, and the government begins pressuring Alexander and other local farmers to sell their land. When he breaks the news to the villagers, a “small revolution” breaks out.
They implore him not to sell, even suggesting armed resistance if necessary. However, when the police pressure the villagers, they begin to turn against one another, one by one abandoning the cause. Ultimately only Alexander Sergeevich is left alone on the farm, leading to a tragic ending: In a moment of desperate defiance, he shoots the local politicians and policeman who come to force him off the land.

Figure 61: United Russia officials force Alexander off the land, *A Long Happy Life*

A comparison of *A Long Happy Life* with American director Gus Van Sandt’s 2012 rural drama *The Promised Land* provides further insight into this critique of the Russian narod. In *The Promised Land*, when a large corporation attempts to buy up land in a small American town for oil extraction, the townspeople unite, rejecting the lucrative deal proposed to them, and they run the fracking company out of town. In Khlebnikov’s film the grassroots uprising begins with a bang but goes out with a whimper, as one by one the villagers abandon the cause, leaving Alexander the lone idealist by the end of the film.
Serving as the opening and closing scene of Khlebnikov’s film is a beautiful but unsettling shot of the river that runs through the village. Is this a rising tide of seething unrest, as one critic suggests? (Stishova 2013) Or, more likely, a river that flows by for all times, impervious and unchanged, paralleling a narod that is unmoved by political and
social realities? Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan* features a similar visual leitmotif: the skeleton of a whale (Leviathan) that is shown repeatedly in key moments. The Leviathan is, both in its Biblical context and in Thomas Hobbes’ 1651 political treatise, an indomitable force or authority that cannot be overcome. I would argue that in all three films, this crushing Leviathan is not only an absolutist government, but also an inert mainstream, a *narod* highly resistant to political and social change.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 64: This timeless, immutable landscape bookends *A Long Happy Life***

In Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan*, also set in a small town in Northern Russia, the government is attempting to expropriate the home of Kolya (Alexei Serebriakov), a simple mechanic with a beautiful wife and son. Kolya built their rural homestead with his own hands and he is determined to keep it. His appeals in court are met with a barrage of
Kafka-esque legalese that recall recent high profile “show trials” in Russia.\textsuperscript{151} Not only does Kolya’s appeal fail, but also the corrupt town mayor makes it his mission to ruin Kolya’s life. When Kolya’s wife commits suicide, driven to despair by their problems with the authorities and by her own marital infidelity, the mayor conspires with the local court to convict him of her murder, and thus ultimately seizes Kolya’s land.

Figure 65: Kolya struggles against the Leviathan

Even more than Khlebnikov’s \textit{A Long Happy Life} and Bykov’s \textit{The Fool}, Zviagintsev’s \textit{Leviathan} attempts to understand the roots of Russian civic passivity. In several scenes the corrupt town mayor meets with a Russian Orthodox patriarch who reassures him that “All power is from God” (\textit{vsiakaia vlast’ ot Boga}). At the end of the film, the protagonist Kolya, having lost his home, his wife, and his dignity, asks a monk

\textsuperscript{151} The most prominent examples are the trials of Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina in 2012, as well as political opposition leader Aleksei Naval’ny in 2013-14, the outcomes of which were widely viewed to be politically motivated and predetermined.
about the meaning of his suffering. The monk quotes the Book of Job—“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down his tongue with a cord? Will he make many supplications to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you?”—reminding Kolya that, through bitter suffering, Job regained his piety and humility. However, as Russian critic Anton Dolin astutely remarked, *Leviathan* is Zviagintsev’s statement precisely against Jobian passivity and endurance, which equates passivity in today’s Russia with cowardice (*malodushie*) and resistance to a spiritual act (*velikodushie*). The film challenges the widespread fatalistic and Orthodox notion that, as the Orthodox patriarch reassures the corrupt local mayor, “Everything is in God’s hands” (*vse v rutse Bozhiei*).

![Figure 66: The skeleton of a whale that reappears in *Leviathan*](image)

Yuri Bykov’s *The Fool* is perhaps the most direct allegory about Russia’s political

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152 Dolin writes: “[The doctrine of Jobian humility] is convenient for the Russian Leviathan, and Zviagintsev’s film can be viewed as a gesture of protest against this view[...] After all, protesting prayer in a chapel where all bow down to the Leviathan, is also its own kind of prayer” (Dolin 2014).
situation and citizenry today. Dima Nikitin (Artem Bystrov), a simple plumber in a provincial town, discovers a massive infrastructural problem in an old dormitory housing hundreds of people. Aware that the building could collapse at any moment, he runs to alert the local authorities, disturbing them at an evening party. They eventually listen to him and realize the gravity of the situation, but as acknowledging it will incriminate them in negligence and since the local budget has already been embezzled, they ultimately decide to ignore the problem. Dima’s conscience will not allow him to stand by.

However, when he tries to force the resettlement of the building, the officials decide to ‘get rid of him.’ Yet ultimately it is not the officials who are his undoing. In the film’s final scene, in desperation Dima runs into the dormitory to evacuate its inhabitants, only to have this impoverished and ignorant crowd, annoyed by his ‘alarmism,’ turn on him. They beat Dima nearly to death just before the credits roll. The film’s extended allegory parallels a man warning about a collapsing building and the inhabitants who prefer not to hear him, evoking the sense of impending crisis in political and civil society in Putin’s Russia and the majority of its citizens, who are politically disengaged, even hostile, to any criticism of the authorities.
In all of these films the conflict between characters’ private interests and civic duty comes to the fore. In an ironic twist on the Pavel Morozov tale, Dima in *The Fool*...
chooses the interest of the “big family” over his “little family.”

Dima’s wife, Masha (Dar’ia Moroz), berates him near the end of the film for interfering and attempting to evacuate the dormitory: “Thanks a lot! We had a normal life. What were you thinking?” Dima responds, “I was thinking about people, dear. There are 800 people in there!” Masha retorts, “Are they all your wives and children?... They are no one to us.” Voicing the film’s central idea, Dima concludes, “Don’t you understand? We live like animals and die like animals because we don’t look after one another?”

Refusing to take the potential deaths of 800 people on his conscience, Dima sends his wife and son away to flee the city without him. This symbolic act of choosing his civic duty over personal concerns inverts the predominant modus operandi in society, marked by perpetual compromise and rationalization, and formulates a new form of heroism in post-Soviet cinema.

In an earlier scene around the family dinner table, Dima’s mother (Olga Samoshina) entreats Dima to spend his small savings to purchase a neighbor’s garage and dacha. He insists that he needs the money to complete his engineering degree in the institute, which he hopes will lead to a more meaningful career as a regional building inspector (to replace the corrupt official responsible for the crumbling dormitory). When Dima’s father stands up for him, the mother mocks the idealistic father and son, stating “You two can sit here righteously your whole lives in the dirt… We have nothing.”

Almost identical dialogues occur in the films of Khlebnikov and Zviagintsev,

153 Pavel Morozov was a boy in the Soviet Union who denounced his father as an enemy of the state in 1932 and was murdered by his family as retribution. He was held up as a model citizen in Soviet mythology.

154 «Ты не понимаешь, что мы живем как свиньи и дохнем как свиньи только потому, что мы друг другу никто?»
revealing the same tension between one’s private, material concerns and civic duty. In a pivotal scene in *A Long Happy Life*, the villager Zhenya is shown having dinner with his wife. The scene, closely framed with oblique angles to convey the uncomfortable tension, depicts the couple at their modest dinner table, debating their future in hushed tones.

Although Zhenya originally is one of the most vocal leaders of the village’s small revolt, his wife uses every available argument to convince him that they must abandon the village and look out for their own interests. Zhenya resists, saying “I can’t explain why, but you’re wrong,” but his wife ultimately prevails upon him to leave. The next morning, Zhenya informs Alexander Sergeevich of their decision. The camera zooms in on Alexander’s expression of bewilderment and betrayal as Zhenya looks down in shame.

Such fraught silences run throughout these films, poignantly capturing these subtle acts of craven compromise. In *Leviathan*, Kolya’s wife Lilya (Elena Liadova) similarly pleads with him to take the government’s payoff and move from their homestead to an easier life in the city.

All of these films present stark dialectics between ideals and material prosperity, civic duties and duties to one’s family, in scenarios that reveal the power structures ensnaring average Russians today. The ambivalent positions of their protagonists suggest an allegorical critique of the “stability bargain” in Putin’s Russia, a tacit contract in which citizens turn a blind eye to authoritarian practices in exchange for material guarantees.155 The critique of political disengaged masses is borne out by recent

155 The willingness of the Russian people to ignore or overlook authoritarian abuses has increasingly become an object of criticism in other cultural spheres. For example, in the closing remarks before his sentencing hearing in December, 2014, political activist Aleksei Naval’ny made a famous speech in which
sociological data. Opinion polls conducted in August, 2014 showed that only 12 percent of the public considered public protests viable. Those ready to take part was an even lower figure of 7 percent (“Police want to broaden…” 2015). Moreover, about one-third (37 percent) of Russian citizens expressed indifference to the murder of political activist Boris Nemtsov on February 27, 2015 (Levada 2015). Notably, these male auteurs construct a highly gendered presentation of such conflicts. Invariably Russian wives and mothers pressure the idealistic male protagonists to sacrifice their principles for the security or material benefit of the family.

The authors of A Long Happy Life, Leviathan, and The Fool take a caustically ironic position vis-à-vis the society in which their protagonists find themselves. Enduring mockery from friends and family for their naïve idealism, these “foolish” heroes refuse to compromise their principles. Thus, there has been a shift from the thwarted or potential heroes of earlier New Quiet films to idealistic men of action who are crushed by the system—from inaction and inescapability to action and doomed failure. Drawing upon a wealth of literary prototypes to depict these secular “holy fools,” the films pose the tacit question: Who is in fact the “fool,” the idealistic heroes or the overwhelming majority, whose cynicism and compromise appear to be a self-fulfilling prophecy? As one Russian critic put it: “The Russian fool is the modern hero in a hero-less time” (Artiukh, “Parad zvezd” 2014).

The stubborn adherence of these heroes to principle consists more in mundane acts than sensational political gestures. In all three films, the protagonist is shown

he exhorted the Russian people to confront the political realities of their country, declaring “Life is too short to simply avert one’s eyes” (zhizn’ slishkom korotka chtoby smotret’ v stol) (Rozhdestvenskii 2014).
repeatedly fixing or building an everyday object. In *The Fool*, Dima and his father regularly repair the bench in the courtyard of their block tenement, which neighborhood youth just as insistently vandalize. In *A Long Happy Life*, several minutes of screen time depict Alexander Sergeevich constructing hen houses, which he hopes will be a major boon to the village’s revitalized farm. Thus the films act as both mirror to the cyclicality of civic concessions and an exhortation to a new kind of heroism, everyday adherence to principle.

In short, each of these three films comprise just the sort of “loud,” outspoken political engagement that critics claim was lacking in earlier films of the New Quiets. Their commonalities are striking: a clear indictment of corrupt and absolutist governance, the absence of the rule of law, and, finally, an indictment of the willfully ignorant and inert Russian masses, who are often just as eager as the authorities to quash dissent. Thus, the political turn of current auteur filmmakers in Russia is not only a bold protest against current governance and shrinking civil society, but it is also a call to the disengaged Russian people for self-confrontation.

**The Crisis of the Third Space and the Reception of New Political Cinema**

While *Leviathan* is a bold civic statement and a major departure from Zviagintsev’s earlier films, the director nonetheless continues to employ various Aesopian rhetorical strategies to appease censors and the conservatively inclined mainstream. Working within the constraints of the film industry and public discourse,
which he described in 2014 as a “minefield.” Zviagintsev has repeatedly emphasized that the original inspiration for the film came from an event that occurred not in Russia, but in the United States. In 2004 Marvin Heemeyer, a resident of Colorado and owner of an automotive repair shop, drove a bulldozer into several government buildings before taking his own life after a government zoning commission ruled against him in a land dispute. The rhetorical practice of “whataboutism”—which deflects criticisms of Russian society by pointing to similar incidents in the West—is one of many rhetorical strategies Zviagintsev and other artists and activists employ to soften criticism for wider consumption (Rann 2014). Moreover, when speaking to Russian news outlets, Zviagintsev often resorted to the Aesopian language of his earlier works, emphasizing Leviathan’s timeless and universal themes rather than its topical political content: “It's about the nature of man, his earthly destiny, about the issues that have troubled us all for a long time: betrayal, love, lust for power, forgiveness, revenge” (“Russian Film Leviathan” 2014). More rarely, in moments of frustration or in interviews with foreign journalists, Zviagintsev described the film much differently. In an interview with the British newspaper The Guardian, Zviagintsev claims that although Leviathan’s themes are relevant everywhere, “it is a film about Russia,” which he describes as “feudal system where everything is in the hands of one person, and everyone else is in a vertical of subordination” (Walker 2014). Zviagintsev’s discursive strategies of masked or ameliorated criticism ultimately allowed the film to receive a distribution license and

156 See Walker 2014.
significant government funding, and to temper the public backlash against it.\textsuperscript{157} In other words, they allowed Zviagintsev to make a statement, while not being crushed by the Leviathan himself.

Not surprisingly, the reception of overtly political films like \textit{Leviathan}, \textit{The Fool}, and others, has been extremely polarized. Indeed, such films act as cultural lightning rods, revealing and perhaps reifying the chasm between Russia’s largely liberal intelligentsia and the vast majority of the conservative mainstream. In 2013 Slavist Nancy Condee astutely observed a “crisis of the third space” in Russian society, exemplified by contemporary cinema.\textsuperscript{158} The lack of “third spaces” in Russian society today—namely, ‘neutral’ spaces for civic exchange that act as alternatives to polarized and dialectical thinking—has created a crisis of representation in Russian cinema. Treatments of socially sensitive topics in cinema are perceived alternately as blasphemy or avoidance: “A neutral space, lying somewhere between ‘slander’ (\textit{ochernenie}) and ‘appeasement,’ where contemporary Russian cinema can address ambiguous questions of contemporary society, does not exist” (Condee 2013). Commenting on the fervent debate surrounding \textit{Leviathan}, journalist Vladimir Posner gestured to Russia’s “crisis of the third space” stemming from different notions of patriotism:

Anything seen as being critical of Russia in any way is automatically seen as either another Western attempt to denigrate Russia and the Orthodox Church or as the work of some kind of fifth column of Russia-phobes who are paid by the West

\textsuperscript{157} Notably the film received 35\% of its funding from the Ministry of Culture, although the funding was awarded by the previous, relatively liberal, Minister Alexander Avdeev (Pulver 2014).

\textsuperscript{158} The term “third space” (or “third place”) was coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg and famously employed by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. See Oldenberg 1989 and Bhabha 1994.
to do their anti-Russian work. (MacFarquhar 2015)

The reception of Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan* provides a stark illustration of the chasm between Russia’s intelligentsia and the mainstream. The majority of filmmakers and professional critics sang the film’s praises. Russian critic Valerii Kichin called *Leviathan* a “masterpiece” and Dolin described it as a “superior film, the best work of this world-famous director” (Kichin 2014; Dolin, “Zagarpunit” 2014). While several critics found fault with its dramaturgy, citing heavy-handed symbolism and a lack of sympathetic characters, they almost universally applauded its bold and honest characterization of Russian political realities.

On the other hand, the film provoked a wave of vehement criticism from both the authorities and everyday viewers. In an article titled “The People’s Court: Russian Viewers Rate *Leviathan,*” the independent online journal *FurFur* catalogued the Facebook responses of various Russian citizens to the film, which it deemed representative of a “people’s consensus.” One viewer, Alexander Veselyi, remarked:

I watched *Leviathan*. 2 hours and 30 minutes of wasted time! But I understand everything: In order to win a respected award abroad, one has to shoot a film about Russians who constantly drink, get ‘wasted’ more like it, where Russian women cheat on their husbands, where the characters wipe their feet on the Rule of Law, and the film portrays these people as the authorities! If the director of this film sees Russia as this country, he is an idiot!159

Evgenii Shestakov, a deputy in the Russian Duma, posted this reaction:

159 «Посмотрел Левиафан…2 часа 30 минут напрочь потеряного или выкинутого времени!!! Зато мне все понятно, чтобы получить уважаемую награду за бугром, нужно снимать фильмы о русских, которые постоянно пьют, точнее бухают, где Русские женщины изменяют своим мужьям, где о понятии закон вытирают ноги персонажи, которых пытаются показать как власть!!! Если режиссёр данной картины видит Россию такой страной, то он ИДИОТ!!!»

196
Director Zviagintsev, deliberately abusing the truth, shot a rabidly anti-Russian film [...] As usual with Zviagintsev there is not a single positive moment in the entire film [...] Disguising himself in the cloak of objectivity, the director who is a darling of the West lost his spiritual bearings and surreptitiously preaches to the chorus of the foes of our Motherland. As a deputy and viewer I feel it’s my duty to say to Mister Zviagintsev and those like him: Shut up! Everything that you are digging up will come back to fuck you! (Vanunts 2015)\(^\text{160}\)

Sergei Markov, Professor of Political Science at leading Russian universities MGU and MGIMO, went so far as to describe the film as laying the groundwork for a “genocide” of the Russian people:

The film shows life in Russia as so terrible that, it turns out, taking such life would not be such a big sin. Essentially, the film dehumanizes Russians and therefore is an ideological basis for the genocide of the Russian people. If I were Zviagintsev, I would pull the film from distribution, come to the Red Square, get on my knees and beg forgiveness from the Russian people. (“Chlen OP” 2015)

Religious activists described the film as “evil” and requested that the government ban it because it tarnishes the reputation of the Russian Orthodox Church (“Hollywood Orthodox-style” 2015). Often viewers who had not seen the film expressed vehement objections to it, recalling dismissals of the works of Boris Pasternak and Joseph Brodsky in the Soviet period by those who famously declared “I have not read it, but I don’t like it!” (ne chital, no osuzhdaiu!). However, in rare cases, support for the film came from some unexpected circles. Orthodox Metropolitan Simon of Murmansk (the region where Leviathan was filmed), issued a statement calling the film “honest” and praised it for

\(^\text{160}\) “Режиссер Звягинцев, умышленно злоупотребляя правдой, снял оголтело антироссийский фильм [...] Как обычно у Звягинцева, ни единого позитивного момента за всю картину [...] Рядясь в тогу объективности, обласканный Западом режиссер потерял духовные берега и исподтишка подымет хору недоброжелателей нашей Родины. Как депутат и как зрител считаю своим долгом сказать: уймитесь, господин Звягинцев и ему подобные! Все, что вы вытаскиваете на свет божий, будет иметь своим концом вас самих”. 

197
raising important questions about the state of the country (“Fil’m chestnyi” 2015). Such examples suggest that films like Leviathan not only deepen ideological divides in society, but have potential for creating genuine dialogue. However these instances appear to be a tiny minority in an otherwise extremely polarized reception.

Critical discussion of Leviathan centered most often on the film’s realism and the problem of typicality. Those who liked Leviathan praised its exceptional authenticity, while those ill-disposed to it insisted on its complete lack of realism and stereotypical depiction of Russian realities. Dolin wrote that, to the Russian viewer, the film’s “types are instantly recognizable” and Kichin called the film an accurate “diagnosis of Russian society” that “resembles today's newspaper chronicles” (Dolin “Kanny” 2014; Kichin 2014). On the contrary, the Minister of Culture, Medinsky, suggested that Leviathan exaggerates and distorts reality: “However much the authors made them swear and swig liters of vodka, that doesn’t make them real Russians. I did not recognize myself, my colleagues, acquaintances, or even acquaintances of acquaintances in Leviathan’s characters” (MacFarquhar 2015). Such debates about typicality in works of critical realism closely resemble and derive from discussions of Thaw- and Perestroika-era literature in the Soviet Union.

In his analysis of women’s prose in late Socialism, Benjamin Sutcliffe analyzes debates about realism in art through the lens of competing notions of realism in the Soviet period. Socialist Realist art, which predominated in the Soviet era, espoused what Marxist Gyorgy Lukács termed “transformative reality,” or a depiction of reality in which the typical is what will be or should be in a given era. However, certain writers of the
slice-of-life genre, such as Natalya Baranskaya and Ludmila Petrushevskaya, embraced a “reflective typicality” that attempted a more direct reflection of everyday life (Sutcliffe 33). This engagement with reality often provoked polarized debates about verisimilitude in society.\textsuperscript{161} Similarly, the majority of auteur productions in the Putin era have opposed an unvarnished \textit{byt} to the “transformative” depictions of glamorous Moscow high-rises and heroic narratives about World War II that predominate in commercial cinema. Like their predecessors in the late-Soviet critical realist tradition, these works are criticized for their “atypicality” and “exaggeration” of social ills. Clearly the artistic practices of the Soviet period continue to shape post-Soviet cultural products and moviegoers’ expectations.

Also inherited from the totalitarian discourses of the past, diametrically opposed understandings of “patriotism” lie at the core of the disconnect between the conservative mainstream and the intelligentsia. Zviagintsev insists that it is the artist’s duty today to “speak the truth, no matter what it is” and to continue “the tradition that has been maintained by the key figures of art: Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov” (Ruzaev 2014).\textsuperscript{162} This continuation of the tradition of critical realism often provokes accusations of anti-patriotism, but filmmakers such as Zviagintsev insist that

\textsuperscript{161} See also Birgit Beumers’ discussion of similar debates in Russian cinema in the late 1990s (Beumers 1999, 875).

\textsuperscript{162} «В истории России художник со времен Пушкина был заложником этой прекрасной и чистой необходимости — говорить правду, какая бы она ни была. Если хотите, это и определяло меру могущества государства. Чистых сердцем людей, на которых держалась эта традиция в России последние 200 лет, множество, всех тут не назвать, но ключевые фигуры в искусстве, конечно, Пушкин, Достоевский, Толстой, Солженицын, Шаламов... Наш долг — не прерывать эту традицию».  

199
their patriotism consists precisely in this criticism, which is born out of a love and concern for their country.\textsuperscript{163}

…

**In Place of a Conclusion**

This chapter’s portrait of the postmillennial generation of auteurs known alternately as the “New Wave” and “New Quiets” outlines their predominant aesthetic and thematic tendencies, while accounting for some of the differences among them. Their strategies of representation have been shaped both by ideological controls in the Putin era and by the exigencies of public discourse. The current soft-authoritarian government has carefully molded the dominant ideology using what Althusser called “ideological state apparatuses”—ever-expanding controls in mass media (including cinema), educational curriculum, etc. But the shrinking of space for alternative viewpoints also has involved an active self-censorship by Russia’s citizenry. It is in this atmosphere that films such as *Euphoria*, *Free Floating*, and *The Hunter* were produced, films that were characterized by a relatively muted social content and quiet alienation, earning this generation the label of “New Quiets.”

However, as space for critical discussions has rapidly diminished during Putin’s third term as president, several of these auteur filmmakers, paradoxically, went from

\textsuperscript{163} A discussion of these differing notions of patriotism in Russian society was held on Television Channel Dozhd’ in 2014. See “Kak vlast’ i oppositsiia ponimaiut patriotizm” 2014.
“quiet” to “loud.” The social/political turn of Khlebnikov, Bykov, and Zviagintsev demonstrates what Althusser described as the “possibility for resistance” within ideological state apparatuses. As with the high art of the tsarist and Soviet periods, contemporary auteur cinema’s moral and civic significance has grown as other spaces for civic exchange have been eliminated. The new political cinema, exemplified by *Leviathan*, *A Long Happy Life*, and *The Fool*, no longer alludes to sensitive subjects through oblique allegories, but directly references current political realities. Their scathing critique targets not only authoritarian abuses and corruption, but also is extended to the Russian people, their political passivity and even active participation in censorship. However, the reception of these films reveals two things: first, that audiences for such films in today’s Russia are miniscule and, therefore—with the exception of Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan*, due to its international accolades—their potential resonance is minimal; and secondly, such films reveal and perhaps reify the chasm between Russia’s largely liberal intelligentsia and the vast majority of the conservative mainstream, revealing a “crisis of the third space.”

Numerous scholars and intellectuals have attempted to understand the recent conservative mood among the Russian mainstream. Certainly, the active nation-building campaign and aversion to critical views reflect an impulse to affirmative social identification in the wake of a collapsed Soviet identity, as well as an aversion to social upheavals after the difficult period of the 1990s.\footnote{Irina Prokhorova, public intellectual and editor of the Russian literary journal *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, describes self-identity in the wake of a collapsed Soviet identity, as well as an aversion to social upheavals after the difficult period of the 1990s.} Irina Prokhorova, public intellectual and editor of the Russian literary journal *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, describes self-

\footnote{Cf. philosopher Maxim Goryunov’s writings on the fear of revolution in Russia today (Goryunov 2015).}
censorship by the Russian masses as part of a process of “coming out of totalitarian consciousness” (Kak vlast’ 2014). Still others look to material explanations for the lack of civic empowerment. Alexander Etkind has traced the failings of Russian democracy back to the “resource-dependent economy.” He contends that, while in labor-dependent economies the political structure relies on the working electorate for its economic stability, in resource-dependent economies wealth is extracted through resources, and the well-being of the labor force is a tertiary concern (Etkind 2014).

Sociologist Lev Gudkov’s theory of post-Soviet Russia’s “negative identity” also sheds light on Russia’s polarized civic space, as critical discourses in Russia today—not only the expressly political, but also discussions of gender and sexuality, multiculturalism, etc.—are often associated with a Western Other and characterized as seditious. One suspects that one of two fates likely awaits socially-minded Russian auteur cinema in the coming years: either progressive voices will be galvanized by such cultural products and other civic gestures, and will form more organized resistance; or, more likely,
authoritarian controls will clamp down even further on the film industry, making the production of political films such as *Leviathan* and *The Fool* impossible in the future.
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