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Russia's New Village Cinema:  
Community, Death, and Potential Rebirth in the Twenty-First Century

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Slavic Languages and Literatures

by

Dane Michael Reighard

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Russia's New Village Cinema:  
Community, Death, and Potential Rebirth in the Twenty-First Century

by

Dane Michael Reighard

Doctor of Philosophy in Slavic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Vadim Shneyder, Chair

The Russian Census of 2010 found that nearly twenty thousand settlements throughout the country exist in name only and that thirty-six percent of all settlements have a population of ten or fewer. This dissertation seeks to articulate Russian popular culture's response to the rural decline captured by these statistics via an examination of how contemporary art-house filmmakers have found in these provincial villages the ideal setting for cinematic representations of the enduring post-Soviet cultural trope of loss, as articulated by Serguei Oushakine in his anthropological study *The Patriotism of Despair*. By focusing on four films which use the imperiled village as a setting and central device—Gennadii Sidorov's social drama *Old Women* (2003), Ilya Khrzhanovsky's postmodern psychodrama *4* (2004), Taisia Igumentseva's dark comedy *Bite the Dust* (2013), and Andrei Konchalovsky's neorealist *The Postman's White Nights* (2014)—this study historicizes what I call “New Village Cinema” in order to explain why this nascent movement arose as a phenomenon of the Vladimir Putin era, simultaneously informed by and informing the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the past two decades.

Because the content of these pictures is generated by their form, and because they apply markedly different genres and styles of cinematography, characterization, and performance to similar narratives of loss, I examine each primarily vis-à-vis a theoretical framework uniquely relevant to its cinematic language. By establishing a foundational canon of New Village Cinema, this dissertation concludes that throughout the past twenty years the contemporary Russian village has remained a distinct chronotope that merits a more thorough investigation either within or without the broader field of provincial studies. While scholarship on cultural representations of post-Soviet tropes of loss—namely, the losses of empire and coherent ideology—and mourning continues to thrive, I maintain that a narrowed focus on the ongoing loss of a physical space and its typical occupants allows us to keep examining those abstract losses while highlighting a more tangible experience that resonates far beyond the Russian context.

The dissertation of Dane Michael Reighard is approved.

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2020

*Dedicated to Alyssa Dinega Gillespie and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, who helped me rediscover my potential.*

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

I have followed the Library of Congress system for transliteration throughout this dissertation, except with regard to proper Russian names that already have common anglicized forms—for example, Andrey Zvyagintsev (instead of Andrei Zviagintsev). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

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I wish to thank the entire faculty of UCLA's Department of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages and Cultures, whose members have nurtured my intellectual growth and encouraged independent, original thought. This department also introduced me to brilliant, challenging, and supportive colleagues, some of whom have become a second family to me.

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## Introduction

Looks like no one will ever come back /  
To the house where nobody lives.  
– Tom Waits

In a scene midway through Andrei Konchalovsky's 2014 film *The Postman's White Nights* (*Belye nochi pochta'ona Alekseia Triapitsyna*), the titular postman takes a walk with Timka, one of the only children in their northern lakeside village. He proudly tells the boy that he too can work for the post office when he grows up. "Soon, there won't be a post office," Timka responds, prompting Aleksei to ask rhetorically, "If there was no mail, who would live here? The village would disappear." This exchange, devastating in its nonchalance, suggests a dual existential crisis, both for the middle-aged protagonist whose profession is approaching obsolescence and for a village whose population can be counted on one's fingers. *The Postman's White Nights* is only one of the most recent Russian art films to address directly the physical and degeneration of the provincial village.<sup>1</sup> Gennadii Sidorov's *Old Women* (*Starukhi*, 2003), Ilya Khrzhanovsky's *4* (2004), and Taisia Igumentseva's *Bite the Dust* (*Otdat' kontsy*, 2013) all serve as evidence that the imperiled village has become an important post-millennial motif.

This is a study of how contemporary Russian filmmakers have found in the provincial village the ideal setting for cinematic representations of the enduring post-Soviet cultural trope of loss. It will seek to historicize the four films listed above as distinct products of the Putin era, simultaneously informed by and informing the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the past two decades. Examining these films chronologically, from *Old Women* to *The Postman's*

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<sup>1</sup> The designation "art film" here refers not only to a work's formal characteristics that satisfy David Bordwell's definition of the genre (including but not limited to narrative ambiguity and authorial expressiveness), but also to the work's release and reception, i.e. films that neither sought nor received commercial success but which were screened in competition at major international film festivals. See Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1979): 56–64.

*White Nights*, I will establish an overarching narrative that reflects the ebb and flow of the era's defining features, including but not limited to rural economic depression, climate change, and demographic crisis.

While each of these films deals explicitly with shared experiences of loss, of things both tangible and abstract, the village setting complicates the trope as presented by Serguei Oushakine. The subjects of his study *The Patriotism of Despair*—residents of Bernaul, the administrative center of the Altai region in southern Siberia—are experiencing an ideological liminality, seeking “to restore their feeling of belonging” in the absence of Soviet power and the “Soviet motherland.”<sup>2</sup> Village life, on the other hand, is not presently in a liminal state but a terminal state. Russian culture has a longstanding tradition of viewing the village as a self-contained community isolated from the rest of the world and defined by a strict boundary. As Kathleen Parthé explains, “In Russian folklore, crossing boundaries—of the threshold or the village—made one vulnerable to evil spirits who could harm or even kill you. In a social sense, the people in the adjoining settlements may have had everything in common with each other, but they had different names and often perceived each other as being not only different, but even hostile.”<sup>3</sup> The characters of what I am calling New Village Cinema therefore experience no apparent post-Soviet liminality; as long as the village still exists, then that is where they belong.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>4</sup> I include the modifier “new” to designate films produced after 2000 and to differentiate from the existing (and broad) term “village films,” which Zhanna Budenkova describes as “encompassing a range of films from Stalinist comedies whose actions unfold in kolkhoz settings (especially films by Ivan Pyr’ev) to dramas produced in the Stalinist period and beyond, dealing with a theme of communist construction in the village and/or involving a juxtaposition of rural and urban existence.” Budenkova, “Fragments of Empire: The Heartland in Post-Soviet Film,” in

Rather than suffering from the trauma of a loss that has already occurred, they must cope with anxiety about a loss that has been in progress for the better part of a century. Indeed, because the village is the rare space that has experienced more continuity than difference between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, its impending disappearance portends a further destabilization of national identity.



**Fig. 1: An Uzbek family passes through the village gate (*Old Women*).**

According to Margaret Paxson, “Russian villagers carry the extra burden of how their own country’s elite has seen them: conservative, irrational, mulish, and brutish (and, at the same time, the repository of the national ‘soul’).”<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that while *Old Women*, *Bite the Dust*, and *The Postman’s White Nights* each offer ultimately sympathetic portraits of their village dwellers (*4* does quite the opposite), not one of the four filmmakers is a village “insider”:

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*Cinemasaurus: Russian Film in Contemporary Context*, ed. Nancy Condee, Alexander Prokhorov, and Elena Prokhorova (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 137n1.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Paxson, *Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 6.



Sidorov was born in Bishkek and raised in Ekaterinburg, and the others hail from Moscow (Konchalovsky and Khrzhanovsky from elite families). Yet the characteristics Paxson lists have not been perpetuated solely by urban artists; Village Prose writers (*derevenshchiki*), of the Soviet era who, by definition, grew up in villages and could draw from personal experience, did not shy away from utilizing stereotypes associated with village folk in order to recapture the “radiant past.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the New Village Cinema movement, like Village Prose of the post-Stalin epoch, is not an ethnographic exercise but an ongoing polemic about long-held cultural myths.<sup>7</sup>

The 2010 nationwide census found that nearly twenty thousand settlements in the Russian Federation exist in name only, and thirty-six percent of all settlements have a population of ten or fewer.<sup>8</sup> This striking statistic, evoking images of the Russian countryside as dystopian frontier dotted with ghost towns, is emblematic of a larger demographic phenomenon widely known as the “Russian Cross” (*russkii krest*). Named after the graphical intersection of rising death rates and falling birth rates in 1992, the Russian Cross has since become a euphemism for the demographic crisis now in its third decade.<sup>9</sup> While the appropriate degree of panic in response to

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<sup>6</sup> See Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*.

<sup>7</sup> My primary resource for understanding Village Prose as a genre, and the most thorough long-form analysis available, is Parthé’s *Russian Village Prose*. For more, see also Geoffrey Hosking, “The Russian Peasant Rediscovered: Village Prose of the 1960s,” *Slavic Review* 32, no. 6 (December 1973); Irina Nikolaevna Ivanova, “Derevenskaia proza v sovremennoi otechestvennoi literature: konets mifa ili Perezagruzka?” *Filologicheskie nauki: Voprosy teorii i praktiki* 6, no. 24 (2013); M. V. Minokin, *Sovremennaia sovetskaia proza o kolkhozhnoi derevne* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1977); L. S. Shepeleva, *Nravstvennye iskaniiia v sovremennoi sovetskoi proze o derevne* (Cheliabinsk: Cheliabinskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1984); and Harry Walsh, “The Village Writers and the Single-Stream Theory of Russian History,” in *The Search for Self-Definition in Russian Literature*, edited by Ewa M. Thompson (Houston: Rice University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> See Federal’naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, “Vserossiiskaia perepis’ naseleniia 2010,” accessed September 8, 2020,

[http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Andrey Korotayev and Darya Khalitourina, “The Russian Demographic Crisis in Cross-National Perspective,” *Russia and Globalization: Identity, Security, and Society in an*

the Russian Cross is debated even in Western scholarship, President Vladimir Putin has dedicated much of his tenure in office to developing programs designed to increase national birth rates, so far with limited success.<sup>10</sup> As recently as January 2020 he stressed in a speech to the Federal Assembly that escaping the “demographic trap [*lovushka*]” by growing Russia’s population is among the nation’s highest priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Significant depopulation of the Russian provinces began with Lenin’s urbanization policies in the 1920s and continued steadily through the fall of the Soviet Union and into today, but popular culture throughout the Soviet era offered starkly contrasting depictions of village life. Village Prose, a literary phenomenon that enjoyed great popularity in the 1960s and 70s, directly reckoned with the disastrous aftermath of Stalin’s failed agricultural policies while still adhering to culturally-ingrained romantic notions about the setting. Following the essayistic exposés of collectivization by Valentin Ovechkin and other *ocherkisty* of the 1950s, Village Prose developed three main strands: the historical, which attempts to trace the lineage of the national character, as in Vasily Shukshin’s Stenka Razin novel *Ia prishel dat' vam voliu* (1971) and Fyodor Abramov’s four-part family saga *Brat'ia i sestry* (1959–78); the ecological, which laments the destruction of the natural world and advocates for the conservation of ancient buildings and traditions, exemplified by Viktor Astaf’ev’s *The Tsar Fish (Tsar'-ryba*, 1976); and

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*Era of Change*, ed. Douglas W. Blum (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008); and N. M. Rimashevskaiia, “Russkii krest,” *Priroda* 6 (1999).

<sup>10</sup> Oushakine, for one, skeptically argues that the Russian Cross is little more than a political tool used to “ethnocize” the population: “Wrapped in demographic terms, the story about the dying nation is a *historical* project. Providing an inverted teleology, it aims at delineating, at pacing out the path that has lead to the current (miserable) location.” “Vitality Rediscovered: Theorizing Post-Soviet Ethnicity in Russian Social Sciences,” *Studies in East European Thought* 59, no. 3 (September 2007), 176. Cf. Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Dying Bear: Russia’s Demographic Disaster,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (2011); and “Drunken Nation: Russia’s Depopulation Bomb,” *World Affairs* 178, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> *RIA Novosti*, “Putin zaiavil o neobkhodimosti obespechit' rost rozhdaemosti,” January 15, 2020, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200115/1563437998.html>.

the lyrical, in which “writers rejoice in nature and the folk traditions and crafts of the peasantry which they know at first-hand, admiring the simplicity and natural rhythms of peasant labour. They view with anguish the shift from the countryside and the erosion of the simple but profound values of the man of the soil. They fear that the very soul of Russia is being taken away in the modern world, and their tone is elegiac and mournful.”<sup>12</sup> Valentin Rasputin’s *Farewell to Matyora* (*Proshchanie s Materoi*, 1976), about a village’s forced evacuation before the construction of a dam, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Matryona’s Place* (*Matrenin dvor*, 1963), which depicts the noble suffering and exploitation of an old woman, are two examples of this strain, a mode that will play a significant role in contextualizing the films of New Village Cinema. While all four of my films emphasize their village’s isolation from the rest of the world, favor small, contained episodes over goal-oriented plots, and project a sense of nostalgia—to name three defining characteristics of Village Prose—each one breaks from the tradition in unique ways.

While Village Prose never developed into a concurrent cinematic movement, it yielded a few noteworthy film adaptations, primarily those mounted by author-director-actor Shukshin; more common were unprogrammatically melodramatic films like Andrei Konchalovsky’s *Siberiada* (1979) that shared Village Prose’s eschatological interpretation of village life.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, decades of propagandistic Soviet films beginning with Sergei Eisenstein’s *The General Line* (*General'naia liniia*, 1929) and Alexander Dovzhenko’s *Earth* (*Zemlia*, 1930) “varnished the reality” of collectivization and its effects, culminating in a trend of escapist musical comedies set

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<sup>12</sup> David Gillespie, *Valentin Rasputin and Soviet Russian Village Prose* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1986), 7–9.

<sup>13</sup> For more on melodrama as a means of social and political critique, see Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 149–189.

in the kolkhoz.<sup>14</sup> As Village Prose’s literary output waned in quantity and influence by the mid-eighties, cinema’s focus on the village also diminished; instead, Perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union fostered the artistic trend of *chernukha*, which in the absence of ideological constraints wallowed in the bleakness of contemporary—and decidedly urban—life.<sup>15</sup>

The purpose of this study is not to trace a history of films about the Russian village but to investigate how, after Putin’s ascendance to the presidency in 2000, the village once again became a prominent cinematic subject. In his book *Contemporary Russian Cinema: Symbols of a New Era*, Vlad Strukov argues that Putin’s concept of the “Power Vertical”—a re-centralization of government control that effectively limits the influence of local officials—has been invalidated by various national crises and the president’s own failure to decisively resolve them.<sup>16</sup> Strukov concludes that “at both the micro- and macro-levels, the Putin era is a moment of rupture, discontinuous ontology and zigzagged variation, and not an instance of transition or restoration.”<sup>17</sup> This rupture has contributed not only to the deterioration of the village as a real, physical space but also to the destabilization of the village as a cultural myth. According to Lyudmila Parts, “In mass culture [of the twenty-first century], the traditional privileging of the center over the backward provinces gives way to the view of the provinces as a repository of national traditions and moral strength. Conversely, high literature and art-house films provide an

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<sup>14</sup> See Richard Taylor, “Singing on the Steppes for Stalin: Ivan Pyr’ev and the Kolkhoz Musical in Soviet Cinema,” *Slavic Review* 58, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Birgit Beumers lists the following common motifs of *chernukha* films: “beggars on the streets, impoverished pensioners, economic chaos, street crime, Mafia shootings, pornographic magazines and videos, decaying houses and ramshackle communal apartments, and the emergence of a new class.” Tellingly, most of these phenomena are exclusively associated with urban rather than rural life. See *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Vlad Strukov, *Contemporary Russian Cinema: Symbols of a New Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

alternative, harshly critical image of the provinces.”<sup>18</sup> Momentarily disregarding the critical differences between “province” and “village” while also presupposing their synechdochal relationship, I present the recent art-house films of New Village Cinema as evidence that the intelligentsia’s village—absolutely provincial in its binary opposition to the center—is no longer neatly defined by its “moral strength” or lack thereof but by its rapidly diminishing ontological status.

### Literature and Methodology

The past decade has seen the emerging field of provincial studies, described by Otto Boele as a “new and promising direction in Russian scholarship that studies the provinces (*provintsiia*) both as an object of ideological reflection and a distinctive semiosphere producing its own discourses and texts.”<sup>19</sup> Provincial studies has thus far been preoccupied with the examination of or resistance to the “dominant discourse” that imagines “[Russia’s] geography as organized around an inescapable center-periphery binary.”<sup>20</sup> Parts writes:

Discussions pertaining to the Russian provinces refer not to actual locations but, rather, to the cultural myth of ‘the provinces’—*provintsiia*—a construct that is heavily loaded with cultural, philosophical and, of course, ideological meanings.... Unlike the region per se, these provinces cannot be visited, but only imagined; they possess no inimitable names or

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<sup>18</sup> Lyudmila Parts, *In Search of the True Russia: The Provinces in Contemporary Nationalist Discourse* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Otto Boele, review of *Perm' kak tekst: Perm' v russkoi kul'ture i literature XX veka*, by Vladimir Abashev, *Slavic Review* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 891.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Lounsbery, “Provinces, Regions, Circles, Grids: How Literature Has Shaped Russian Geographical Identity,” in *Russia’s Regional Identities: The Power of the Provinces*, ed. Edith W. Clowes, Gisela Erbslöh, and Ani Kokobobo (New York: Routledge, 2018), 45.

characteristics, and could be located anywhere between the centre and the exotic periphery, including the liminal space of the boundary.<sup>21</sup>

According to Anne Lounsbery, canonical nineteenth-century literary works privileging the center's gaze were largely responsible for establishing a general attitude of condescension among the cultural imagination that persists today. Major writers such as Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov recycled the trope of the provincial town as “wretched and anonymous...at once repulsively alien and intimately familiar ... stagnant, homogenous ... a place distinguished only by its indistinguishability from all other provincial towns.”<sup>22</sup> Because New Village Cinema absolutely participates in this discourse surrounding this provincial myth, I hope to contribute to the dialogue begun by the leading scholars of provincial studies while at the same time carving out a new space at the intersection of two subdivisions of the larger field: studies of the provinces in film and television, which, as spearheaded by Parts, have seen numerous publications in only a few years;<sup>23</sup> and village studies, which have so far received less attention.<sup>24</sup> Lounsbery is currently doing valuable work on the village as a space distinct from the provinces as a whole, but so far she has focused her attention on literary representations of the nineteenth-century village. Her conception of the village/provinces dynamic, although defined in imperial terms, remains more or less applicable today:

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<sup>21</sup> Parts, “The Russian Provinces as a Cultural Myth,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 10, no. 3 (2016): 200–201.

<sup>22</sup> Lounsbery, “Provinces, Regions, Circles, Grids,” 45.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Parts, *In Search of the True Russia*, and the entirety *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 10 no. 3 (2016), a special issue dedicated to “The Russian Provinces on Screen.” The genesis of this issue was an October 2015 conference at McGill University with the same title. Participants included Birgit Beumers, Nancy Condee, and Mark Lipovetsky.

<sup>24</sup> For two notable examples with specialized approaches, see Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); and Paxson, *Solovyovo*.

[T]he label “provincial” does not refer to the empire’s borderlands (which were, as a rule, ethnically non-Russian) and neither does it refer to rural *peasant* spaces. Rural life is the village (*derevnia, derevenskii*), whereas *provintsial'nyi* (or *gubernskii*) generally refers to provincial cities and towns, and sometimes to gentry estates failing to attain a respectable level of culture. *Provintsia* is not linked with nature in any consistent way; peasants are not provincials, and peasant culture is not provincial culture.<sup>25</sup>

Each of this dissertation’s four films depicts a village/*derevnia* setting that fulfills or critiques the provincial myth, presents man’s coexistence with nature as a major theme, and features villagers belonging exclusively to the working class or lower. For this reason, a recurring comparison to Village Prose narratives is unavoidable. In this respect, Kathleen Parthé’s definitive study *Village Prose: The Radiant Past* is an invaluable resource. Though she herself argues that “theme-based definitions of village prose ... are insufficient,” her book, inspired by the methodology of Katerina Clark’s *The Soviet Novel*, offers “the clearest possible sense of the invariants, the essence” of the genre: “the village, the peasant home, nature, generational and cyclical time, folklore, radiant and bitter nostalgia, and the chronotope of an idyllic rural childhood/youth” as well as “binary pairs such as old age/youth, rural/urban, submitting to nature/ruling nature, and past/present.”<sup>26</sup> These parameters prove remarkably applicable to cinematic narratives produced half a century later. Parthé’s succinct summary of the village’s “fairly stable set of features” also neatly differentiates the village from the towns and small cities with which provincial studies regularly engage: “simple houses (wooden in the north and Siberia, wattle-and-daub or stucco in the central and southern regions), and their out-

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<sup>25</sup> Lounsbury, “Provinces, Regions, Circles, Grids,” 49.

<sup>26</sup> Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, 3–4, 140.

buildings (barns, sheds), vegetable gardens, small orchards, ponds, bathhouses, wells, a church and bell tower (though not in every village), and a cemetery.”<sup>27</sup>

Establishing a convincing correlation between the village trend in contemporary cinema and contemporary literature is a murkier prospect, one I will address but not attempt to answer, as the question exists beyond the scope of this project. Although recent years have seen no shortage of authors writing about rural themes, critics remain divided as to whether this activity constitutes a conscious movement, let alone a Village Prose revival. Dmitry Bykov, for example, stated in an interview that “Roman Senchin continues the tradition of ‘village prose’ writer Valentin Rasputin”<sup>28</sup> but also wrote, “There is practically no village prose in Russia today.”<sup>29</sup> Irina Ivanova, on the other hand, refutes Bykov but must broaden the definition of Village Prose in order to do so:

It is difficult to agree that “there is practically no village prose in Russia today.” This is true only if we consider as such the prose of Shukshin, Rasputin or Belov exclusively.... But if it is legitimate to extend this concept to any “adequate work on a village theme,” then one can name a whole series of works from the past five years that are undoubtedly connected, even polemically, with the tradition of village prose...: T[imur] Kibirov’s *Lada, or Joy*, T[at’iana] Moskvina’s *Shame and Purity*, A[ndrei] Dmitriev’s *The Peasant*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 6. See also Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 242.

<sup>28</sup> Sasha Razor, “Citizen Poet, and Then Some: An Interview with Dmitry Bykov,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 24, 2016, accessed September 8, 2020,

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/citizen-poet-interview-dmitry-bykov/#!>

Senchin’s 2015 novel *The Flood Zone* (*Zona zatopeniia*), about Siberian villagers forced out of their homes by the construction of a hydroelectric plant, is, by the author’s own admission, a direct update of Rasputin’s *Farewell to Matyora*, which I will reference throughout this dissertation.

<sup>29</sup> Dmitry Bykov, *Sovetskaia Literatura: Kratkii kurs* (Moscow: Prozaik, 2012).



*and the Teenager*, R[oman] Senchin's *The Eltyshevs*, and A[leksei] Ivanov's *The Cynocephali*.<sup>30</sup>

Other critics propose that the traditionalist Village Prose ethos—which by the late 1980s had increasingly become associated with a growing current of Russian nationalism marked by xenophobia and anti-Semitism—has been inherited by contemporary writers of “New Realism” (including Senchin, Sergei Shargunov, Aleksandr Karasev, Arkadii Babchenko, German Sadulaev, Zakhar Prilepin, Mikhail Elizarov, and Aleksandr Snegirev), a movement described by Natalia Kovtun and Natalya Klimovich as inorganic and fabricated by the state.<sup>31</sup> In Alisa Ganieva's definition, New Realism “marks a crisis of a parodic attitude towards reality and combines the signs of postmodernism (‘the world as chaos,’ ‘crisis of authorities,’ ‘emphasis on corporeality’), realism (typical character, typical circumstances) and romanticism (the discord of the ideal and reality, the opposition of ‘I’ and society) with an orientation toward an existential dead end, alienation, searching, dissatisfaction and a tragic gesture.” She adds, however, “This is not so much a movement as a unity of writers' individualities, a universal perception of the world reflected in literary works that are diverse in their literary and stylistic decisions.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, provincial or village life is a frequent trope but hardly a unifying feature.

Finally, the format of my dissertation and my general approach to the material is modeled after various surveys of Russian and Soviet cinema that compile close readings of a few individual films representative of a particular genre, theme, or tendency. Prominent examples

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<sup>30</sup> Ivanova, “Derevenskaia proza v sovremennoi otechestvennoi literature,” 88–94.

<sup>31</sup> See Natalia Kovtun and Natalya Klimovich, “The Traditionalist Discourse of Contemporary Russian Literature: From Neo-Traditionalism to ‘New Realism,’” *Art of Words (Umjetnost riječi)* 62, no. 3–4 (October–December 2018): 318.

<sup>32</sup> Alisa Ganieva, “Ne boisia novizny, a boisia pustozyonstva,” *Znamia* 3 (2010), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=4213>. Translated by and quoted in Kovtun and Klimovich, “The Traditionalist Discourse of Contemporary Russian Literature,” 319.

include Nancy Condee's *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema*; Vlad Strukov's *Contemporary Russian Cinema: Symbols of a New Era*; Irina Souch's *Popular Tropes of Identity in Contemporary Russian Television and Film*; *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, edited by Birgit Beumers; *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, edited by Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova; and *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, edited by Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone.

*Cinemasaurus: Russian Film in Contemporary Context*, edited by Alexander Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova, and Nancy Condee, was released earlier this year, and it includes a chapter by Zhanna Budenkova titled "Fragments of Empire: The Heartland in Post-Soviet Film." In it the author examines four films chosen for their provincial settings, two of which overlap with my own: *Old Women* and *The Postman's White Nights*. Because of its purely coincidental similarities to my project, Budenkova's essay has proven to be an essential, albeit late-breaking, sounding board for my own generally divergent conclusions. As far as I am aware, *Cinemasaurus* is the first study of Russian film to be at least partially organized according to setting.<sup>33</sup> One book about American cinema that has been particularly influential to my method, however, is Pamela Robertson Wojcik's *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975*, which defines a new genre based primarily on setting.

The four films I have chosen to represent New Village Cinema are, of course, hardly the only recent Russian films set in villages. In order to maintain a manageable scope and coherent focus, I established three principle criteria for selection. First, having acknowledged Strukov's

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<sup>33</sup> *World Film Locations: Moscow*, ed. Birgit Beumers (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2014), dedicates only a single page each to various Soviet and Russian films set in the capital. This approach is more common in literary studies. See, for example, Olga Matich, ed., *Petersburg/Petersburg: Novel and City, 1900–1921* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

conceptualization of a distinct post-2000 period following the “rupture” of Putin’s presidency, I exclude any films released earlier, such as Lidiia Bobrova’s *In That Land* (*V toi strane*, 1997), which is one focus of Budenkova’s essay on “heartland” films.

The second criterion concerns the physical attributes of villages depicted. Adhering to Parthé’s definition of the *derevnia* as a settlement containing little beyond houses, a church, and a cemetery, I disqualify films whose setting boasts a significant infrastructure. This accounts for the omission of Andrey Zvyagintsev’s *Leviathan* (*Leviatan*, 2014), which also exemplifies the necessity to differentiate between the village and the provinces more broadly. Although its small northern fishing town is expressly oriented vis-à-vis its distance from Moscow, Zvyagintsev “is very explicit about the source of human misery—unconstrained authorities, a co-opted judiciary, and corrupt clerics.”<sup>34</sup> The smaller villages and their inhabitants introduced in this dissertation, in contrast, are not oppressed by the powers that be but simply forgotten or abandoned by them. *Leviathan*’s thesis is that a fish rots from the head down, that corruption in the capital reverberates even in the far-flung provinces. The people in positions of authority who populate the film—the mayor, police officers, court clerks, even priests—are entirely absent from the villages of *Old Women*, *4*, *Bite the Dust*, and *The Postman’s White Nights*. Furthermore, despite Zvyagintsev’s broadly allegorical ambitions, the narrative focus on one individual’s loss stands in sharp contrast to New Village Cinema’s emphasis on the shared experiences of unified communities.

Finally, I include only “art films” that, by premiering at international festivals, were guaranteed some audience outside of Russia, no matter how small. The question of intended

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<sup>34</sup> Susanne Wengle, Christy Monet, and Evgenia Olimpieva, “Russia’s Post-Soviet Ideological Terrain: Zvyagintsev’s *Leviathan* and Debates on Authority, Agency, and Authenticity,” *Slavic Review* 77, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 1016.

audience is one that has stirred much debate in recent Russian film criticism and scholarship. Although Strukov states unconditionally that “Russian film-makers maintain a clear focus on the domestic audiences,”<sup>35</sup> *Rossiiskaia gazeta* published the following rant upon the Rotterdam premiere of *4*:

In our post-perestroika culture ... the authors of many films, books and performances no longer focus on the domestic audience—they are anticipating applause at foreign festivals, developing an image of Russia as savage and obsolete.... They do not hope to conquer the “world,” in the sense of a mass audience; for this they have no resources, neither creative nor intellectual. But the festival audience is specific, marginal, eager for any slick sophistication and therefore considers itself elitist [*elitarnaia*]. It is tired of varnished America, carefree Italy and combative China; it is waiting for shocking wonders. And it needs Russia like this: corroded by corruption and cunning, drunken poverty and exotic indecency.<sup>36</sup>

This reactionary narrative about a subsection of Russian filmmakers who actively pursue an exclusively non-Russian audiences has persisted since the 1990s, when Daniil Dondurei, former editor-in-chief of *Iskusstvo kino*, alleged, “For the last several years, filmmakers in Russia have been making films not for their audiences but for international festivals, boards of five to seven people. And what are those seven people expecting? They want to see that Russia is a horrible country, that a killer will never be punished, that there are no happy endings, that moral values will never win. And the director wants to show that he is a courageous boy who shows this to the

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<sup>35</sup> Strukov, *Contemporary Russian Cinema*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Valerii Kichin, “O prirode uspekha nashego kino za rubezhom i predelakh nashei terpimosti,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, February 2, 2005, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2005/02/07/kaktus.html>.

world.”<sup>37</sup> In the following decade, the perceived commercial failure of the “inchoate Russian ‘New Wave’ (e.g., Boris Khlebnikov, Aleksei Popogrebskii, Kirill Serebrennikov, and Vasiliï Sigarev, as well as [Iurii] Bykov),” also known as the “New Quiet Ones” (*Novye tikhie*), would further fuel this argument.<sup>38</sup> At the 2011 KinoTavr Film Festival a roundtable discussion organized by *Iskusstvo kino* and dedicated to this debate joined representative directors and prominent critics such as Elena Stishova, who remarked, “We have lost the [domestic] audience. And this is a disaster. We don’t know anything about them.”<sup>39</sup>

I do not feign to resolve or advance this polemic. Of my chosen films, only *4* can be or has been accused of catering to a foreign audience’s preconceived notions about contemporary Russia. Indeed, as will be discussed in greater detail in their respective chapters, *Bite the Dust* was leaked online by its director in order to reach a wider domestic audience, and *The Postman’s White Nights* premiered domestically on Russia’s highest-rated television station. These four films’ potential accessibility abroad, then, is of consequence to this study not because of what their intended audience means for the Russian film industry but because it supports the reality, to which I will allude throughout and then focus on in a brief concluding chapter, that the dying village is a global concern currently being addressed by various national cinemas.

## Chapter Breakdown

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<sup>37</sup> Nancy Ramsey, “A Grim Reality Check in Russia,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1997, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/24/movies/a-grim-reality-check-in-russia.html>.

<sup>38</sup> David McVey, review of *The Mayor*, directed by Iurii Bykov, *KinoKultura* 42 (October 2013), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2013/42r-major.shtml>.

<sup>39</sup> *Iskusstvo kino*, “Novye tikhie: Rezhisserskaia smena – smena kartin mira,” *Iskusstvo kino* 8 (August 2011), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2011/08/n8-article4>.

This dissertation consists of four chapters, each one focusing on a single exemplar of New Village Cinema whose setting serves as a “central device” that “motivates or shapes the narrative in some key way.”<sup>40</sup> The first chapter is dedicated to the earliest of these films, *Old Women*, released in 2003. I examine this film primarily in terms of its attitude toward Russia’s rural demographic crisis and the formal features that articulate the fluctuating post-colonial relationship between the Russian women of the village and the Uzbek family who moves next door. Sidorov is forthright in his depiction of the harsh realities facing contemporary villagers; the women repeatedly voice their concerns over diminishing pensions, and they lack electric power because, as they lament, “The state has cut [them] off.” He is just as frank, however, in his de-sentimentalization of the *babushki*, the cliché “soul of the Russian village.”<sup>41</sup> These women curse and drink incessantly, flaunt their enduring libidos, and even inspire criminal behavior; through their multidimensional characterization, the film offers a semi-verisimilitudinous glimpse of a unique subculture that will disappear along with the village.

My analysis is framed primarily in response to Stephen Norris’s conclusion that “Sidorov’s old women and their village do not symbolize death and decay, but a new, tolerant life that can inspire postsocialist change.”<sup>42</sup> This reading echoes the director’s own stated intentions, but I argue that it is not supported by the text itself. The Uzbeks, a hardworking and fertile patriarchal family unit, revitalize and repopulate the village without any assistance from the women. Their physical safety depends on their neighbors’ tolerance, and even that is hard-earned. Sidorov thus fails to make a convincing case against the perceived obsolescence of the

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<sup>40</sup> Pamela Robertson Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. and trans. Irina Mukhina (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen M. Norris, “The Old Ladies of Postcommunism: Gennadii Sidorov’s *Starukhi* and the Fate of Russia,” *Russian Review* 67, no. 4 (October 2008): 581.

Russian village and its inhabitants. At the same time, elements of the film's cinematography and, especially, the conspicuous omission of subtitles for entire scenes of Uzbek dialogue—a choice that renders the immigrants exoticized and othered to the audience as it does to the old women—suggest that the village ultimately undergoes (benevolent) foreign occupation rather than resuscitation.

The second chapter will examine a portion of *4* (2004), whose narrative begins in Moscow but eventually splits into three separate threads, one of which follows a young woman returning to her native village for her sister's funeral. In this film, the anxiety about the absence or lack of progeny implicit throughout *Old Women* is made explicit through grotesque folkloric imagery and cinematography evocative of the horror genre, both of which invite a psychoanalytic reading. Khrzhanovsky's adherence to generic conventions, I argue, grants *4*'s witchy hags an elemental power that Sidorov's realist mode denies his old women. Furthermore, even though the village is depicted as a hellscape long past the point of redemption, alien and terrifying even to the protagonist who grew up there, these recognizable horror tropes provide a familiar paradigm through which the audience can better confront and process its demise.

My third chapter concerns *Bite the Dust* (2013), a comedy that also observes generic conventions: those of the disaster film. Its familiar narrative as well as its numerous subtle and overt intertextual references engage New Village Cinema in a direct dialogue with global film culture and alludes to the movement's broader relevance. I interpret the various aspects unique to this film's village—namely, its implausibly sustainable demographics and unexplained material wealth—through an examination of its mise-en-scène, which reveals the villagers' paralyzing obsession with a past they must overcome. Its depiction of an apocalyptic flood, finally, is investigated as a device that both allegorically articulates the village's cultural value and

suggests that the village's greatest existential threat is not of domestic origin; rather, it is an external and massive environmental cataclysm perhaps initiated by anthropogenic climate change.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to *The Postman's White Nights* (2014), in which elements of a contemporary neorealist style—nonprofessional actors, minimal dramatic incident, handheld deep-focus digital cinematography, hidden cameras, and numerous long, uninterrupted takes—foreground the multidirectional flow of time in a manner reminiscent of Village Prose literature and “Slow Cinema,” a category of films that includes the work of Andrei Tarkovsky. By enabling his audience to experience long durations of a real postman's daily, often boring, routine, Konchalovsky invites them to bear witness to the villagers' ongoing process of mourning. I posit, however, that genuine empathy between spectator and subject is impeded by the inherent exclusivity of the Russian village community, a feature repeatedly acknowledged by shot compositions that accentuate various boundary lines. Most important among these boundaries is nature itself, the forests and lakes that physically isolate the village and whose cyclical existence reflects a way of life that is left behind by the forward march of modernity.



## Chapter One:

### *Old Women: The Village in Transition*

And the house you live in will never fall down /  
If you pity the stranger who stands at your gate.  
– Gordon Lightfoot

Director Gennadii Sidorov died of a sudden heart attack in 2011 at age forty-eight, leaving only one completed feature film behind him: *Old Women*, which won the grand prize at the 2003 KinoTavr film festival. Describing this victory in his obituary of Sidorov, Viacheslav Shmyrov wrote, “It was that rare occasion when the reception was unanimous: the public exulted along with the jury, and critics—both international and domestic, who also bestowed awards upon the debutant—had every reason to join them in the euphoric outburst.”<sup>1</sup> This chapter will show, however, that the film’s crowd-pleasing reputation belies a complex polemic about the existential crisis of a Russian village forced to confront its own mortality in the absence of progeny.

Starring an amalgamated cast of professional actors and real residents of the Klokovovo village in the Kostroma region where it was filmed, *Old Women* wastes no time establishing an atmosphere of death. In the first scene Mikolka, the village’s only male inhabitant, cries in agony as he tolls a bell to announce the passing of elderly Anna. After Anna’s burial her grandson Pasha, a drunken buffoon and middling opera singer, arrives from Moscow for one night. He is escorted to the village by Fed’ka, a soldier from the nearby army barracks that serve as the women’s primary means of communication with the outside world. To the women’s surprise, a family of five Uzbek immigrants move into the village shortly after. Though the villagers are

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<sup>1</sup> Viacheslav Shmyrov, “Prazdnik gde-to riadom,” *Seance*, June 20, 2011, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://seance.ru/blog/gena-sidorov/>.

outwardly polite to and curious about their new neighbors, they express fear and distrust when talking amongst themselves. One night, after listening to the women’s racist but facetious rant (“Their families are huge. They’ll arrive in swarms like locusts and squeeze us out of here. Burn their fucking houses down”), Mikolka, who has Down syndrome, fetches a can of gasoline and sets fire to the Uzbeks’ home. Despite the initial shock and terror it causes, this act of arson marks a turning point in the relationship between the women and the Uzbeks. Enlisting the aid of Fed’ka, the women help to rebuild, and the tension that had hung so thickly over the village begins to dissipate. In the end, a communal feast is celebrated to commemorate the Uzbek patriarch’s successful construction of a wind turbine and the birth of a his new child.<sup>2</sup>

Critic Natal’ia Sirivlia explains that *Old Women* “provoked heated discussions: is it Russophobic, xenophobic, or something else? The question is not an idle one. And not because Gennadii Sidorov’s debut deliberately incites ethnic hatred—far from it!—but because it concerns those extremely painful aspects of national life responsible for the appearance of

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<sup>2</sup> How this village found itself without electricity or how its inhabitants have managed to survive without it—especially in the winter—is never mentioned, perhaps because the concluding “electrification” is primarily metaphorical, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Given the village’s proximity to the army barracks, the lack of power surely cannot be due to extreme isolation.

One potential explanation for such a scenario is presented in the short story “Sgushchenka” (Condensed Milk) by Vladivostok author and conservationist Lora Beloivan, which concerns a village in which the only power source (at least until a fantastical turn of events) is an eccentric old man’s personal wind turbine:

“The residents expressed their hostility toward the power company by not paying their bills, believing that paying for low-quality, invisible bullshit is unnecessary, even stupid. But on one winter’s eve the power company sent everyone a bill with a red stripe and then, after waiting a little longer, drove through the village in a utility truck and removed the wires from the poles.” Beloivan, “Sgushchenka,” in *Iuzhnorusskoe Ovcharovo* (Moscow: Livebook, 2017), accessed September 8, 2020, [http://loveread.ec/view\\_global.php?id=63567](http://loveread.ec/view_global.php?id=63567).

various kinds of phobias.”<sup>3</sup> The fraught question of Russian xenophobia is one far beyond the scope of this chapter, but the timing of this film’s release begs a brief contextualization. By 2003 the Second Chechen War had entered its guerilla phase, and a series of high-profile terrorist attacks attributed to Islamist separatists, from the apartment bombings of 1999 to the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis through the 2004 Beslan school siege (to say nothing of the September 11 attacks on the United States) stoked the smoldering embers of Islamophobia. In a case study informed by interviews with Russians in the Siberian town of Bernaul, Serguei Oushakine concludes:

The war in the Caucasus—like the Soviet war in Afghanistan before it—has not precipitated an immediate surge of Russian nationalism, nor has it led to Russian national self-consciousness. In fact, as Anatol Lieven pointed out in his analysis of the first Chechen war, the absence of a clearly defined Russian ethnic identity was a major factor in preventing potential conflicts between nations and ethnicities within the Russian Federation, as well as between Russia and its neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Natal’ia Sirivlia, “Liubit’ po-russki. ‘Starukhi,’ rezhisser Gennadii Sidorov,” *Iskusstvo kino* 11 (November 2003), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2003/11/n11-article6>.

<sup>4</sup> Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, 138. See Anatol Lieven, “Voina v Chechne i upadok rossiiskogo mogushchestva,” in *Chechnia i Rossiia: Obshchestva i gosudarstva*, ed. Dmitry Furman (Moscow: Polinform-Talburi, 1999), 266–70. For one Muslim perspective, see Marat Murtazin, “Muslims and Russia: War or Peace?” *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 1 (2000): 132–41, accessed September 8, 2020, [https://www.ca-c.org/journal/2000/journal\\_eng/eng01\\_2000/17.murtazin.shtml](https://www.ca-c.org/journal/2000/journal_eng/eng01_2000/17.murtazin.shtml).

The author writes: “We, the Muslims, have to bear the weight of actions the powers spearhead against Muslims. With the actual war in Chechnia at the background members of certain ethnic groups are subjected to document and apartment checking and registration. Some of the Islamic educational institutions are deprived of their licenses and closed down. Can all the 20 million Muslims of Russia have suddenly turned into potential bandits and terrorists? Can it be that the state is trying once more to punish ethnic groups for the crimes perpetrated by their individual members? This already happened in the past under Stalin.”

This perspective, however, does not preclude attempts to establish a contradictory cultural hegemony. Nancy Condee points out that “the very substance of the emerging culture is haunted ... by its own imperial legacy. In cinema alone Bodrov’s 1996 *Prisoner of the Mountains*, Rogozhkin’s 1998 *Checkpoint*, Abdrashitov’s 1998 *Time of the Dancer*, and Balabanov’s 2002 *War* return to the colonial wars.”<sup>5</sup> The most popular film to grapple with the legacy of these wars, Balabanov’s *Brother (Brat, 1997)*, introduced an instant icon in its protagonist Danila, a young Chechen War veteran who enacts vigilante justice against Moscow’s criminal underworld, which is populated by dark-complexioned Caucasians and Russians who have sold out to America. Condee suggests the futility of debating, as many have, whether Balabanov’s film endorses Danila’s xenophobic attitudes and violence perpetuated against ethnic minorities; she does concede, though, that in “his politics of Russian domestic conflicts ... he functions as a member of the imperial rabble, keen on keeping old superiorities in place.”<sup>6</sup>

A distinction also must be made between the fear of large-scale violence attributed primarily to Chechens and the less fervent but longer-standing economic anxiety, articulated by Sidorov’s old women throughout the film, about immigrants and migrant workers.<sup>7</sup> In his book *National Self-Images and Regional Identities in Russia*, Bo Petersson interviews an anonymous

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>7</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration, “[Russia’s] August 1998 financial crisis, and the resumption of warfare in Chechnya in the fall of 1999, led to a sharp decrease in immigration, especially in 1999. In 2000 there were over 40 percent less immigrants ... than in 1997. During 1998–2000 net migration was 865,605 persons, with immigration three and a half times higher than emigration.... [Russia’s] main migration partners remained Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, which accounted respectively for 46.6 percent, 13.4 percent and 12.8 percent of net migration in 1998–2000. The bulk of the flows continued to be comprised of Russian repatriants.” International Organization for Migration, *Migration Trends in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: 2001–2002 Review* (Geneva: IOM, 2002), accessed September 8, 2020, [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrationtrends\\_europe\\_asia.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrationtrends_europe_asia.pdf).

Volgograd politician whose comments (“What did the Kazaks ever do on their own? Without the participation of the Russians? What did the Tajiks or the Uzbeks ever do? Practically nothing of importance!”), he recognizes, “bordered on sheer racism.” Petersson concludes:

If expanded, the arguments that Russia was drained of its resources by the Central Asian states might serve as a handy device for accounting for not only the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but also Russia’s present-day economic misery. Even though this line of reasoning has not been all that prevalent among my interviewees, it still testifies to the functions of scapegoating and out-grouping in situations of economic and social distress. These practices may reduce the agony and pain, since the blame is put on somebody else’s doorstep. And quite clearly, those respondents that seemed to subscribe to such a logic of events expressed noticeable disdain for the Central Asians.<sup>8</sup>

While the targets of such scapegoating vary, this attitude is a near-universal feature of economically-depressed rural communities. Having grown up among the kind of small-town Pennsylvanians once controversially described by President Barack Obama as “cling[ing] to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations,” I find that this unpleasant but instantly recognizable prejudice renders Sidorov’s old women, despite all their idiosyncrasies, the least exotic characters to a non-Russian audience out of all those in New Village Cinema.<sup>9</sup>

An uncredited review in *Novaia gazeta* published at the time of the film’s release describes *Old Women* as a “tragicomedy” and offers an interpretation of the final scene that

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<sup>8</sup> Bo Petersson, *National Self-Images and Regional Identities in Russia* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 134–35.

<sup>9</sup> Mayhill Fowler, “Obama Exclusive (Audio): On V.P. and Foreign Policy, Courting the Working Class, and Hard-Pressed Pennsylvanians,” *HuffPost*, April 19, 2008, accessed September 8, 2020, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/obama-exclusive-audio-on\\_b\\_96333](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/obama-exclusive-audio-on_b_96333).

exemplifies the “heated” reactions described by Sirivlia: “An oriental dance fills the illuminated village—the image of a velvet Muslim occupation.”<sup>10</sup> At the other end of the spectrum stands Stephen Norris’s thorough and illuminating analysis, in which he summarizes the film as “an optimistic one, for over the course of [Sidorov’s] tale we learn that not all is as it seems in this Russian village and in the world of the old women who inhabit it.” He writes:

The old women of *Starukhi* do not preserve ignorance, but usable traditions. They do not resist progress, but instead separate themselves from a state that does not care for them. The gates that stand at the edge of the village do not mark a dividing line between the dying Russia of the past and the “new Russia” of the present, but a potential entryway into a better future. Sidorov’s old women and their village do not symbolize death and decay, but a new, tolerant life that can inspire postsocialist change. In depicting a town without patriarchs employing what one Russian critic has called “Russian neo-neorealism,” Sidorov reverses nearly two centuries of Russian cultural constructions about Russian peasants and their world—here the old women are actors in the dramas of their lives and suggest a better fate for Russia.<sup>11</sup>

This sanguine reading corresponds to the lighthearted and celebratory tone with which Sidorov concludes the film, but I contend that Norris misinterprets and oversimplifies the seismic physiognomical shift in the longstanding cultural institution of the Russian village to which he alludes. What he seems to interpret as a deliberate and subversive commentary on the utopian potential of a matriarchal community is in fact a bleakly accurate reflection of Russia’s

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<sup>10</sup> *Novaia gazeta*, “Kogda vetriak krutitsia protiv vetra,” November 12, 2003, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2003/11/13/16566-kogda-vetryak-krutitsya-protiv-vetra>.

<sup>11</sup> Norris, “The Old Ladies of Postcommunism,” 580–81.

demographic crisis and the outsized mortality rate of males.<sup>12</sup> Sidorov's casting of real peasant women who improvise much of their dialogue generates an authenticity that liberates these figures from the restrictive maternal stereotype, but his finale demonstrates that the young Uzbek woman's fertility represents this village's only hope for survival.

Nikolai Berdiaev wrote that "the fundamental category in Russia is motherhood."<sup>13</sup> Russia's long and storied culturo-historical understanding of the maternal inseparably links it with notions of home and nationhood. Joanna Hubbs offers a succinct summary:

The unusually deep attachment to the country as mother is everywhere to be found, most strikingly, perhaps, in the representation in popular tradition of the Russian countryside, which seems to recall prodigal children to their primordial home. The historical Mother Russia and the mythological Mother Earth unite in the creative power still attributed to the land. What is named by the peasant in proverb, song, folklore, and folk art is evoked nostalgically by writers, artists, and intellectuals.<sup>14</sup>

"Peasant women," adds Norris, "have long served as symbols of Russian nationhood. The *baba*, the quintessential image of the Russian peasant woman, served as a malleable icon in the hands of artists for over a century, becoming both a timeless symbol of the land or a temptress that prevented progress."<sup>15</sup> In this context, *Old Women's* transference of the symbolic maternal from

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<sup>12</sup> See Vladimir Shkolnikov and Giovanni Cornia, "Population Crisis and Rising Mortality Rate in Transitional Russia," in *The Mortality Crisis in Transitional Economies*, ed. Cornia and R. Panizza (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Following the film's release, the mortality rate in Russia both for women and men declined substantially, though this development has had little, if any, impact on the depopulation of rural villages. See Shkolnikov et al, "Components and Possible Determinants of Decrease in Russian Mortality in 2004–2010," *Demographic Research* 28 no. 32.

<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R. M. French (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Norris, "The Old Ladies of Postcommunism," 581.

Russians to foreign migrants has profound consequences for the conception of the peasant village as a repository of national identity.

Outside of Russia, the *babushka* is often regarded as one cut from the same cloth as Solzhenitsyn's pure-hearted Matryona, a sturdy yet cuddly object of condescension. As a prime example, one need look no further than the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, during which first runners-up the Buranovskiye Babushki became a brief international sensation. Their personas were so lovably kitschy that they even warranted a BuzzFeed listicle, a reliable sign of pop-cultural ubiquity.<sup>16</sup> *Old Women*'s viewers who are only familiar with this image will likely be shocked by the coarse language and often aggressive nature that characterizes its central figures. In their field study of contemporary *babushki*, Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva's separate myth from reality: "[Old women] are the main permanent inhabitants of the Russian village today. They are the face of the Russian village, the backbone of the Russian household farm. [As tourists] we see their attractive open, nurturing side, but we know from history ... that *babushki* can battle with astounding courage and fierceness—as in the context of *bab'i bunty* during collectivization, when women rioted to protect the economic viability of the family household."<sup>17</sup> This tenacious spirit offers the only explanation as to how Sidorov's *Old Women* have managed to survive for so long without pensions or utilities.

Though Mikolka is the only male living in this village before the Uzbeks' arrival, other Russian men play small but significant roles. As the women hold a wake for their departed friend Anna, they discuss her grandson Pasha from Moscow. "He is an actor in the biggest theatre," says one. "He does not have a single coin in his pockets," adds another. When Pasha shows up

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<sup>16</sup> Hillary Reinsberg, "5 Reasons the Women of Russian Singing Group the 'Buranovskiye Babushki' Should Win Eurovision," *Buzzfeed*, March 21, 2012, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/hillaryreinsberg/5-reasons-the-women-of-russian-singing-group-the>.

<sup>17</sup> Olson and Adonyeva, "The Worlds of Russian Village Women," 3.



for the funeral, he is introduced as a pathetic clown. Drunkenly stumbling out of the army tank that escorted him to the village, he throws his hands in the air and proclaims, “Mother Russia, I am your son!” This one statement vividly exposes his character, for it offends on multiple levels. Not only does its ironic tone reveal the urbanite’s condescension toward the heartland of his birth, but it also fails to acknowledge that Pasha’s biological grandmother lies mere feet away in a fresh grave. Pasha, it turns out, is neither a total failure nor a great success, but relocating from the village to the capital has failed to bring him happiness, wealth, or fulfillment. “I’m forty-five and nothing... No Bolshoi Theatre, no Maly,” he confesses to Mikolka as he scarfs down onions and moonshine. “My life passes by uselessly.”

The Pasha subplot is one in a long tradition of Russian narratives concerning a prodigal son’s return to the village of his youth. In *Village Prose*, Kathleen Parthé argues, “the first [narrative] pattern that comes to mind is that of *return*, the attempt of a former village to return—at least for a short time—to his roots.” She continues: “The narrative of return is both melancholy and luminous. As this narrative developed, it began to involve not simply a personal sense of the passing of one’s childhood and the loss of family members, but the acute sense of the end of a way of life, the deracination not just of the hero, but of the Russian people as a whole.”<sup>18</sup> Pasha ultimately is only a minor character in *Old Women*, but his brief sojourn at home encapsulates the preoccupation with irrevocable change and mortality shared by the film and its Village Prose forebears.

Like the most beloved prodigal son associated with Village Prose, Egor Prokudin of Vasili Shukshin’s *The Red Snowball Tree* (*Kalina krasnaia*, 1973), Pasha appears incapable of

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<sup>18</sup> Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, 19.

removing his performative mask.<sup>19</sup> In that film, adapted from Shukshin's own novella, Egor returns home to the village after years of urban crime and a subsequent prison camp term. "Egor is obviously a hyperbolic, theatrical character.... But Shukshin is clearly more concerned with creating an interesting and, most important, an entertaining character than being true to life."<sup>20</sup> Pasha is likewise hyperbolic and theatrical; he sings upon arrival, he sings at his grandmother's grave, and he lies to the women about his career. Even when bearing his soul to Mikolka he is a *Pagliacci*, embellishing his genuine despair with a bathetic performance. Unlike Shukshin, however, Sidorov shows no interest in artifice for the sake of entertainment. Juxtaposed with the old women's naturalistic performance, Pasha's insincerity reveals itself to be the defense mechanism of a man who, upon leaving the village, also lost his values and therefore his true sense of self. By including a portrait of urban life's deteriorative effect on the Russian man, Sidorov implicitly reveals why the village and its associative virtues of hard work, perseverance, and their resulting spiritual fulfillment are worth fighting for. Unfortunately, this same conservative impulse fuels the women's chilly reception of their foreign neighbors.

Because they primarily speak Uzbek that remains unsubtitled, the migrant characters are defined—for the old women and the audience alike—by their actions rather than their words. Therefore, the frequency with which they are shown praying in Arabic to Allah casts their

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<sup>19</sup> Although Shukshin's status as a genuine Village Prosaist has been widely debated, he is irrefutably at least peripheral to the movement. Parthé denies him the *derevenshchik* label while conceding that "some of his stories fall within the parameters of Village Prose" (Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, xi), Geoffrey Hosking argues that he "stands rather to one side of the 'village prose' school" (Hosking, "The Twentieth Century: In Search of New Ways, 1953–80," in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, rev. ed., ed. Charles A. Moser [Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992], 565), and John Givens maintains that his "artistic and philosophical program had much in common with the Village Prose writers" more in theory than in practice. (Givens, *Prodigal Son: Vasilii Shukshin in Soviet Russian Culture* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000], 125).

<sup>20</sup> Givens, *Prodigal Son*, 145.

adherence to Islam as the root of the culture clash. The old women, who are established as believers by the icons adorning their walls but who do not engage in any religious practice outside of Anna's funeral, scoff as they watch the grandfather offer *salat*: "He's not our kin, it goes without question. Our people don't pray that way. Fuck him, let him pray however he wants, beating the earth with his head or his ass." This scene begins with a wide shot of an open field on the village edge and the pristine forest beyond it, stretching to the horizon. The camera slowly tilts down, revealing the man kneeling on his prayer mat in the tall wild grass (Fig. 2). In the next shot, the women stare at him through an old fence, and a close-up of their faces and hands pressed against its pickets frames them as if they were behind prison bars (Fig. 3). Contrasting the self-restricting effect of their parochial mentality with the grandfather's spiritual freedom, the cinematography foreshadows the women's growing tolerance but at the same time orientalizes the Uzbek as possessing an inherently more intimate connection to the natural world.



Fig. 2: The grandfather at prayer (*Old Women*).



**Fig. 3: Watching the grandfather pray (*Old Women*).**

With its focus on tension caused by the introduction of Islam to a Russian village, *Old Women* has a predecessor in Vladimir Khotinenko's *Muslim*, (*Musul'manin*, 1995), a distinctly Yeltsin-era update on the prodigal son trope so common in village narratives. In that film, the soldier Kolia returns home after seven years of captivity in Afghanistan. Now a practicing Muslim who has taken the name Abdallah, he immediately alienates the community and his family, especially his alcoholic brother. In the end, he is murdered by another soldier from his former regiment who sees his pacifism as treason. Alexander Prokhorov argues that "*Muslim* offers its protagonist no place of return. The world that Kolia left seven years before has preserved its cruel, murderous organization from the Soviet past, but now this world has degenerated beyond any possible humanitarian limits and has shed the veneer of Soviet-style

humanistic rhetoric.”<sup>21</sup> If the villagers of *Muslim* are ultimately revealed to be hypocritical Christians and nouveau-capitalistic exploiters, then those of *Old Women* turn out to be the inverse: true exemplars of “Soviet-style humanism” in spite of their own prejudiced rhetoric. One of the women, the self-styled village bard, recites an original composition that expresses the community’s Soviet nostalgia and current disillusionment with an element of xenophobic scapegoating:

How stupid Russians are! What dumbasses!  
They sold all of their plants, mines, restaurants.  
Foreigners are sitting like masters in the restaurants.  
And a foolish Russian slave washes their feet.  
Foreigners are laughing at the Russian people.  
Russians fell from such a rich country into the yoke.  
What will you tell your kids? What will you tell your grandsons?  
Why have you bastards sold everything to foreigners?  
Oh, dear Brezhnev, open your eyes for a second.  
You’ll be surprised what capitalism’s brought us.  
They said there was a stagnation, but the people lived in joy.  
And now everybody is angry and doesn’t care about a thing.

Русский народ такой дурак, такие они болваны  
Попродали все свои заводы, шахты, карьеры, рестораны

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Prokhorov, “From Family Reintegration to Carnivalistic Degradation: Dismantling Soviet Communal Myths in Russian Cinema of the Mid-1990s,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 282–83.

В ресторанах иностранцы как бароны ходят  
А русский раб-мужик-дурак им подметки моет  
И смеются иностранцы над народом русским  
От такой страны богатой в тиски попал русский  
Ну что ж скажите вы детям, ведь растут и внуки  
Ну почему вы все продали иностранцам суки  
Ох, ты Брежнев дорогой, на часок глаза открой  
Сам увидишь, удивишься до чего нас капитализм довел  
Говорили был застой, а люди жили весело и дружно  
А теперь все злые стали, и никому ничего не нужно.

Tellingly, the poet uses a first-person pronoun only once, casting the women as victims who must bear the consequences of the new free market economy that benefits foreigners while excluding the women from the Russian masses guilty of capitulation.

Although I take issue with the interpretation of *Old Women* as optimistic about this village's chance of survival, its final scene of integrated celebration is undeniably a happy one in the moment. Prokhorov explains that "the narrative goal of *Muslim* is ... to explore the possible communal identities that could replace the defunct Great Soviet Family.... On many occasions Khotinenko has noted that the film has very little to do with Islam, and is about a Russian who tries to start a new life and the inert Russian community that does not change its way of life."<sup>22</sup> In contrast, *Old Women*'s matriarchal community proves itself to be dynamic and ultimately receptive to change. In her analysis of the film Zhanna Budenkova writes, "The film's hopeful overtones are largely informed by nostalgic imperial sentiment, which both mourns and revives

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 278, 282.

the phantasm of the Soviet Union, creatively reinterpreting major Soviet tropes.... [T]he increasing isolation of the village plays the role of a utopian island, a place where the organic empire can disappear and reemerge over and over again, following cycles of nature and memory.”<sup>23</sup> Sidorov’s own words (in a statement which suggests that the poem transcribed above expresses his own Soviet nostalgia rather than the characters’) validate such a reading. In one interview he said, “I am madly yearning for that space called the Soviet Union, which we lost. Maybe the situation in our film is a small model of a new society. We wanted to say, ‘People, if a person of a different faith, a different nationality, comes to your homeland without malicious intent, without a machine gun, and begins to do good deeds on your land—restoring telecommunications, for example—God bless him!”<sup>24</sup> Crucially, this quote reveals the director’s didactic intent: this village’s developments occur too late—the women will all be dead soon, leaving only Mikolka and a purely Uzbek community—but other villages, presumably with existing populations capable of sexual reproduction, may have a shot at survival if they pursue and embrace diversification. Further in his article, Norris recognizes Sidorov’s symbolic intent while continuing to overlook the necessity of repopulation:

Sidorov’s film ... stands in a long history of using the Russian village and its inhabitants as a symbol for debating the fate of the Russian nation. At the same time, *Starukhi* reanimates this old debate after it had virtually disappeared from public discussion. Sidorov radically alters the accumulated cultural wisdom by emptying his village of men and using only old women as symbols of the gendered nation. His village is not the brutal patriarchal site created by Chekhov, Bunin, and Gorky. Instead, by using actual residents

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<sup>23</sup> Budenkova, “Fragments of Empire,” 147.

<sup>24</sup> Irina Gordeichuk, “Gennadii Sidorov vyvel formulu absoliutnogo schast’ia,” *Zn.ua*, June 27, 2003, accessed September 8, 2020, [https://zn.ua/CULTURE/gennadiy\\_sidorov\\_vyvel\\_formulu\\_absolyutnogo\\_schastya.html](https://zn.ua/CULTURE/gennadiy_sidorov_vyvel_formulu_absolyutnogo_schastya.html).

from the village of Klokovo in the Kostroma region, Sidorov blends the culture constructions of the Russian village with an anthropological examination of the “real Russia” after socialism. His village may be imaginary and its inhabitants symbols like Matryona, but they are also real in a way that Solzhenitsyn’s heroine is not. As a result, the old women’s residence is not another declaration of the dying Russian village—a death that seems to have been underway for over a hundred years—but a statement on its potential vitality.<sup>25</sup>

That the true sources of this vitality are immigrants who can repopulate the village, however, raises uncomfortable questions about what constitutes a “Russian” village. If in a few years its sole inhabitants are Uzbek, is it still Russian? Is it instead the neo-Soviet space Sidorov envisions?

The director’s Soviet sympathies perhaps explain his decision to omit subtitles for non-Russian dialogue, thereby establishing a linguistic hierarchy. In a similar recent, high-profile example, American filmmaker Wes Anderson’s 2018 stop-motion animated film *Isle of Dogs* was met with a critical debate over its portrayal of Japanese culture. Set in Japan and featuring the voices of Japanese and Anglophone actors, *Isle of Dogs* features canines speaking English and Japanese characters speaking Japanese without subtitles unless diegetically motivated (i.e., subtitled for the benefit of American characters within the film). A title card at the film’s outset reads, “The humans in this film speak only in their native tongue (occasionally translated by bilingual interpreter, foreign exchange student, and electronic device). The dogs’ barks are translated into English.” According to Los Angeles Times critic Justin Chang, “all these coy linguistic layers amount to their own form of marginalization, effectively reducing the hapless,

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<sup>25</sup> Norris, “The Old Ladies of Postcommunism,” 584.



unsuspecting people of [fictional Japanese metropolis] Megasaki to foreigners in their own city.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Moeko Fujii tells of the privilege she enjoyed “pick[ing] up cues hidden from the rest of the audience” while watching the film with Americans who did not understand Japanese: “No one else in the theatre got it, but I couldn’t contain my laughter.”<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of one’s position in this debate, the creative team behind *Isle of Dogs* (including Japanese artist Kunichi Nomura, who shares a “story by” credit) were obviously cognizant of the diverse audience it would enjoy—it was released in over fifty countries and earned \$1.6 million in Japan<sup>28</sup>—and thus made overtures toward their Japanophone and Japanophile viewers through the inclusion of linguistic and cultural “Easter eggs.” Given both the limited appeal and limited release of a humble arthouse film like *Old Women* (total reported gross of \$11,500, entirely domestic),<sup>29</sup> it is unlikely that Sidorov took a hypothetical Uzbek audience into consideration when omitting subtitles. Indeed, the ethnicity or origin of the “Central Asian” characters (as Norris refers to them exclusively) are never even specified in the film. Norris states in his article that the family speaks Tajik, and Budenkova repeatedly identifies the characters as Tajiks, but they are in fact speaking Uzbek (and Arabic when they pray) with the occasional exception.<sup>30</sup> Based on this, and because the actors are Uzbek, I have chosen to identify the characters as such. Still, Sirivlia correctly discerns Sidorov’s attitude when she

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<sup>26</sup> Justin Chang, “Review: Wes Anderson’s ‘Isle of Dogs’ Is Often Captivating, but Cultural Sensitivity Gets Lost in Translation,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2018, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-isle-of-dogs-review-20180321-story.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Moeko Fujii, “What ‘Isle of Dogs’ Gets Right about Japan,” *New Yorker*, April 13, 2018, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-isle-of-dogs-gets-right-about-japan>.

<sup>28</sup> Box Office Mojo, “Isle of Dogs,” accessed September 8, 2020, [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt5104604/?ref\\_=bo\\_tt\\_ti](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt5104604/?ref_=bo_tt_ti).

<sup>29</sup> KinoPoisk, “Sbory: Starukhi,” accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/77349/box/>.

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Naomi Caffee of Reed College and Amita Vempati for clarifying this matter.

writes, “They are played by Uzbek actors, but it does not matter—suffice it to say, they are ‘non-Russians.’”<sup>31</sup> Like the old women themselves (who ask, “What should we do with these Asians?”), the film shows little concern for the specifics of the immigrants’ experience.

The family’s ethnic ambiguity in a narrative that invites discussions of colonialization and assimilation represents a particularly egregious oversight in light of the tumultuous relationship between Tajiks and Uzbeks resulting from the 1924 “national delimitation” (*natsional'noe razmezhevanie*) that established the borders of the Central Asian Socialist Republics. Terry Martin describes the fallout of the 1926 census:

Kurds in Turkmenistan declared themselves Turkman out of fear they might lose their land. Kazakhs and Uzbeks did likewise out of a fear of repression. In Uzbekistan, Tajiks either masked their identity or were declared Uzbeks by the census-takers to such an extent that a Control Commission (Rabkrin) report declared the results meaningless. In Samarkand, 1925 city data registered 76,000 Tajiks, whereas the 1926 census counted only 10,000. Uzbekistan, in fact, actively forced the assimilation of Tajiks. A 1929 Central Asian Biuro report described the Uzbek position: ‘The Tajiks are a disappearing ethnicity and there is nothing wrong with the fact that Tajiks are Uzbekifying, because the culture of the Uzbeks is higher.’ In a 1929 report to the Orgburo, Uzbek First Party Secretary Ikramov admitted this policy: ‘Even [Tajik] Party members were afraid and hid their national origin and declared themselves Uzbeks.’<sup>32</sup>

When the Uzbeks first arrive half an hour into the film, nearly five minutes of untranslated dialogue elapse. They talk amongst themselves as their horse-drawn carriage

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<sup>31</sup> Sirivlia, “Liubit’ po-russki.”

<sup>32</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 72–73.

emerges from thick fog to cross the village threshold, the grandfather pauses to pray, and, once inside their house, the visibly pregnant mother falls to the floor crying and shouting (Fig. 1). This mother represents the most convincing argument against the prospect of genuine integration between the Uzbeks and the Russians. Her husband speaks Russian, her father-in-law takes a lover, and her daughters play with Mikolka, but she is never shown socializing with her neighbors. The reasons for her initial anguish are not revealed (though obvious assumptions can be made), and, after a later scene in which she speaks to her husband wearing a skeptical expression as he builds the turbine, her personality remains opaque.

Another scene shows the Uzbeks contentedly enjoying tea in their home, which is now fully furnished with colorful rugs and pillows. They converse for ninety seconds, again without subtitles. In a film with relatively unassuming cinematography, the transition into this scene is conspicuous but ultimately misleading. It begins with a close-up of a hanging embroidered tapestry, which is then pulled down to reveal a second tapestry, which in turn is pulled down to reveal the elder daughter, whom the camera follows with a pan as she folds the tapestries and joins her family in the den. This sequence implies that we are receiving a privileged glimpse literally “behind the curtain,” but the focus on ethnic fabrics followed by unintelligible conversation instead serves to other these characters further without divulging anything about their domestic life away from the old women.

Yet while the omission of subtitles undeniably alienates the non-Uzbek-speaking audience, the relationship between the old women and the Uzbek family is not as simple as that of oppressor and oppressed, respectively. *Old Women* presents a complex web of colonialist relationships reflective of Russia itself, which “has been both the subject *and* the object of

colonization and its corollaries, such as orientalism.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the language barrier obstructing communication between the women and the Uzbeks does situate the former in a dominant position, at least initially. Sirivlia interprets the entire narrative arc, from conflict to resolution, as a reenactment of “Russian colonial policy, after which the eastern people, with their alarmingly alien vitality, become ‘normal,’ that is, completely dependent subjects of the empire.”<sup>34</sup>

Mikolka’s act of arson, she argues, renders the family “broken” (*slomlennye*) and diffuses the perceived threat they pose: “Now you can feel sorry for them, love them with all your heart, take them home, warm them.”<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, as rural peasants the women themselves represent subjects of multiple colonizations. First, as Budenkova notes, there is an inherent power imbalance between filmmaker and subject:

The fact of directorial imposition on real villagers who, as a result, are enjoined to perform modified versions of themselves for urban audiences can be perceived as a colonizing practice that simultaneously regards the village population as a curiosity in need of cataloging and attempts to structure this population under the rubric of Other. In this scheme, the inhabitants of the Russian heartland serve as the exotic background of tradition that highlights the modern quality of an urban lifestyle.<sup>36</sup>

This dynamic, a longstanding and universal symptom of filmmaking in the neo-realist style with non-professional actors and on-location shoots, will be of greater consequence in the fourth chapter. Its specific occurrence in Russia’s countryside, however, highlights a history of internal

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011), 2.

<sup>34</sup> Sirivlia, “Liubit’ po-russki.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Budenkova, “Fragments of Empire,” 142.

colonization traced to the Petrine reforms, which resulted in the newly westernized nobility's orientalizing of the peasantry.<sup>37</sup> According to Alexander Etkind:

The empire colonized the Russian population.... A huge and unknown reality, the people were the Other. They were excluded from the public sphere and relations of exchange. They were a source of public good and collective guilt. They were subjected to scrutiny and love, subjugation and sedation, surveillance and concern, classification and discipline. They spoke Russian, the first or second language of the metropolitan intelligentsia, but they pronounced the same words differently and invested in them different meanings.<sup>38</sup>

As Etkind illustrates, linguistic hierarchies exist within individual languages, and the organic quality of the old women's folk speech—with its sing-song intonations and occasionally obscure, frequently raunchy lexical patterns—is juxtaposed with the standard Russian of the soldier Fed'ka, who, Norris observes, embodies the state apparatus.<sup>39</sup>

From one more perspective, the Uzbek father fulfills the role of colonizer. Norris concludes that the film “certainly engages with debates about the perceived crisis in masculinity, but it does not reassert male values as a key to reviving the Russian nation. Instead, it is the old women who revitalize the Russian nation, redeem the village, and redefine its meanings.”<sup>40</sup>

While no doubt well-intentioned, this argument is a confounding erasure of the Uzbeks' central role in sustaining the village. Throughout the film, the old women toil and survive, but they do not create or innovate. Their attitudes prove to be dynamic, but their circumstances are

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<sup>37</sup> See Boris Grois, *Utopiia i obmen* (Moscow: Znak, 1993), 358.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Etkind, “Vremia britogo cheloveka, ili Vnutrenniaia kolonizatsiia Rossii,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2002): 281–82.

<sup>39</sup> Norris, “The Old Ladies of Postcommunism,” 585.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

determined primarily by external forces, particularly the actions of the father, who symbolically reenacts the Soviet project of colonization by electrifying the countryside à la Lenin.

Lenin's imperial designs are commemorated in Dziga Vertov's montage documentary *Three Songs of Lenin* (*Tri pesni o Lenine*, 1934), which depicts the literal and figurative "lifting of the veil" from the eyes of women in the Central Asian Republics. Gregory Massell explains:

[T]he implications of freeing a Moslem woman from her veil were far more dramatic than the mere reversal of a physically undesirable condition. It would mean, in effect: to liberate her eyes—to enable her to look at the world with clear eyes, and not just with unobstructed vision; to liberate her voice, a voice deadened by a heavy, shroud-like cover ... to free her from a symbol of perpetual degradation, a symbol of silence, timidity, submissiveness, humiliation.<sup>41</sup>

This act of liberation and enlightenment, ostensibly performed in opposition to an oppressive patriarchy, is problematized by the propagandistic purpose of the film itself. Free of one patriarchy, these women now pledge fealty to the cult of personality surrounding Lenin (and, given the film's release date, Stalin by proxy). In Sidorov's film the old women of Koklova, self-reliant for so long after a gradual male exodus, suddenly find themselves similarly reliant upon a new, albeit benevolent (and, ironically, Muslim) patriarch not only to improve their living conditions but also to increase the village's population.

Despite the presence of these various paradoxical inter- and intracultural dynamics, *Old Women* ultimately suggests that the village's success demands the restoration of Soviet imperial order. In their book *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin observe that "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is

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<sup>41</sup> Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 138.

perpetuated.” But, they argue, “Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice.”<sup>42</sup> The omission of subtitles denies the Uzbek characters such a voice and reaffirms a power structure that nevertheless is rendered ephemeral by the concluding birth of their child, which promises an irreversible demographic shift.

The closing reveal of the newborn infant mirrors the opening scene of Anna’s death, and in doing so it underscores one of the film’s dominant motifs: the cyclical nature of destruction and creation. The Uzbeks initially move into a dilapidated hovel that they transform through hard work into a vibrant, comfortable home, only to have Mikolka set it ablaze (Fig. 4). In the context of Village Prose, this is a hugely symbolic event, for the “destruction [of the peasant house] will be one of the surest signs of the end of the rural way of life.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the best-known example of this trope is found in Solzhenitsyn’s *Matryona’s Place*, in which the saintly old woman’s home is dismantled by rapacious relatives before she herself is crushed by a train. The narrator concludes with a eulogy: “We all lived next to her and failed to understand that she was that righteous person without whom, as the proverb goes, no village could stand. Nor any city. Nor our entire land.”<sup>44</sup> While the destruction of the Russian peasant house represents a terminal event, *Old Women’s* Uzbek family recovers from the conflagration like a phoenix. Terrified and devastated at first, they soon construct a new house with the assistance of their neighbors, who

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<sup>42</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, 8.

This is applicable to precursors of Village Prose as well, such as Chekhov’s novella *The Peasants* (*Muzhiki*, 1897), which climaxes with the (accidental) burning of a rural home.

<sup>44</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Matrenin dvor,” *Novyi mir* 1 (1963): 63.

are horrified to learn that Mikolka took their drunken ravings at face value.



**Fig. 4: The Uzbeks' house burns (*Old Women*).**

Any aficionado of Russian cinema will connect the image of a rural house on fire to the finale of Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice* (*Offret*, 1986), whose characters are haunted by the specter of an apocalypse that fails to arrive. The protagonist Alexander, anticipating a nuclear holocaust, predicts, "This war is the last war, the terrible war after which there will remain neither victors nor vanquished, neither towns nor villages, neither grass nor trees, neither water in the springs nor birds in the firmament." But upon realizing the threat has passed, he loses his mind and burns down his own house, effectively delivering his own minor apocalypse. Sidorov's women, working side by side with the Uzbeks, devise a novel solution to the destruction of the home, one that rarely occurs in Russian literature and cinema: they simply rebuild it. *Old Women* thus concludes that the village does not have to die; it can be rebuilt and survive. Yet although Norris sees the narrative's denouement as evidence of a "new, tolerant life



that can inspire postsocialist change,” Sidorov fails to reckon with the new reality of his village’s unbalanced social dynamic: namely, that the Uzbeks require nothing from their neighbors. Except when recovering from arson the women themselves inspired, the family proves to be entirely self-sufficient. In the process of demythologizing the *starukhi* via a semi-neorealist approach that lays bare their impoverished circumstances and celebrates their multi-faceted nature, he also exposes them as superfluous and inconsequential to the village’s potential future.

## Chapter Two:

### 4: The Village Infernal

Red sun rising in the sky /  
Sleeping village, cock'rels cry.  
– Black Sabbath

*4* (directed by Ilya Khrzhanovsky, 2004) shares with *Old Women* a village setting defined by its geriatric female population and likewise depicts, albeit in a considerably different manner, an anxiety about sexual reproduction or a lack thereof. If, as Olson and Adonyeva write in their study of Russian village women, that “Russian rural culture offers an intense sense of biological immortality, the idea that one lives on through one’s descendants,” then this film, even more so than Sidorov’s, is concerned with the realization that this supposed “biological immortality” may in fact have a finite end.<sup>1</sup> As critic Igor Manstov describes it:

[*4*’s mythological register] marks the final and irrevocable break with the ideology of previous generations.... After all, what does it mean to be grannies living for yourselves, without men and children, long incapable of reproduction and instead creating homunculi? This is the uncultivated, unfertilized *raw Mother-Earth*—a refuge of dead bodies, a cadaverous stench, and the end of all living things.<sup>2</sup>

Written by the erstwhile *enfant terrible* of Russian postmodernism Vladimir Sorokin, *4* begins with the meeting of three strangers in a Moscow bar. Volodya, Marina, and Oleg lie to one another about their true identities, but the bizarre autobiographies they divulge turn out to contain elements of truth. Volodya reveals a top-secret government cloning project dating back to Stalin, alleging the existence of entire village populated solely by failed cloning experiments.

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<sup>1</sup> Olson and Adonyeva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 278.

<sup>2</sup> Igor’ Mantsov, “Debiut kak problema,” *Seance*, March 24, 2017, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://seance.ru/articles/debyut-kak-problema/>.

Marina happens to be a quadruplet, and when one of her sister Zoya dies, she returns to her native village—perhaps the one described by Volodya—to bury her.

As soon as Marina boards the train to her village, she enters a liminal space that offers a preview of the grotesqueries that await at her destination. Seated at a booth with three strangers (tetrads being one of the film’s dominant visual motifs), she stares blankly out the window, avoiding eye contact as her fellow travelers attempt small talk. Whether she is experiencing the “persistent unease at confinement in the close presence of unknown others” long associated with public transportation or simply attempting to mourn her late sister in peace, Khrzhanovsky’s camera renders her neighbors utterly estranged.<sup>3</sup> The cramped space is emphasized by handheld close-ups and extreme close-ups of the passengers’ weathered faces and hands as they gorge themselves on vodka, hard boiled eggs, and herring, refusing to pause their interrogation of Marina as their teeth noisily rend meat from bone. This unappetizing feast, which will be mirrored in the film’s climax when the old village women devour a roast pig, establishes a Gogolian association between insatiable eating and the sinister (in *Dead Souls* [*Mertvyie dushi*, 1842], for example, “Sobakievich’s gluttonous gorging at the dinner table implicitly suggests his mental, moral, and emotional malnourishment”),<sup>4</sup> and, even more importantly, a connection between Marina and Julia Kristeva’s idea of the abject, which she defines as “the jettisoned object [that] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.... A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Bailey, “Adventures in Space: Victorian Railway Erotics, or Taking Alienation for a Ride,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 9, no. 1 (2004): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald D. LeBlanc, “Food, Orality, and Nostalgia for Childhood: Gastronomic Slavophilism in Midnineteenth-Century Russian Fiction,” *Russian Review* 58, no. 2 (April 1999): 248.

a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.”<sup>5</sup> Food loathing, according to Kristeva, is “perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection.... Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two entities or territories,” so Marina’s rejection of the ravenous travelers’ food and drink suggests that this train traverses not only the border between Moscow and the village but also the one between Marina’s present and repressed past, her sense of self and that which threatens it.<sup>6</sup>

Michel de Certeau’s definition of the train as “a travelling incarceration” is supported by the view from Marina’s window: a wall lined with barbed wire that obscures any other scenery.<sup>7</sup> Although, as David Gillespie points out, “the train [has] been imbued with an apocalyptic symbolism throughout Russian literature, from Pushkin to Tolstoi, from Tolstoi to Babel’, from Babel’ to Solzhenitsyn and Venedikt Erofeev,”<sup>8</sup> the journey from urban center to rural periphery is often associated with increasing natural beauty as the industrial city fades into the rear view.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 111.

<sup>8</sup> David Gillespie, “Apocalypse Now: Village Prose and the Death of Russia,” *Modern Language Review* 87, no. 2 (April 1992): 409.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), which describes the hero’s train ride to the Urals and includes lyrical passages about the arrival of spring even as the civil war’s horrific effects on various villages and their inhabitants are witnessed along the way: “While Yurii Andreievich slept his fill, the spring was heating and melting the masses of snow that had fallen all over Russia, first in Moscow on the day they had left and since then all along the way—all that snow they had spent three days clearing off the line at Ust-Nemdinsk, all that thick, deep layer of snow that had settled over the immense distances. At first the snow thawed quietly and secretly from within. But by the time half the gigantic labor was done it could not be hidden any longer and the miracle became visible. Waters came rushing out from below with a roar. The forest stirred in its impenetrable depth, and everything in it awoke. There was plenty of room for the water to play. It flung itself down the rocks, filled every pool to overflowing, and spread. It roared and smoked and steamed in the forest. It streaked through the woods, bogging down in the snow that tried to hinder its movement, it ran hissing on level

Marina's ride and her subsequent walk toward the village do recall, however, the scene from Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) in which the main characters travel by trolley car into the mysterious Zone:

Occasionally the camera permits a focused glimpse of what they are passing through—mist, a brick building, piles of discarded pipes, crates, a river (or possibly a lake)—but even then, even when we can see clearly, we are not sure what we are seeing. Outskirts, periphery, abandonedness. Buildings that are no longer what they were once intended for: sites of decayed meaning that may, as a result, have acquired new and deeper meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the Stalker and his companions, though, Marina's destination is not a "human environment in decay reclaimed by nature"<sup>11</sup> but rather what Mark Lipovetsky describes as a perversion of Bakhtin's medieval carnival: "the land of death, with no hope for rebirth or a new life ... a festival of death with no return."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the "sentimental pastoralism" adopted by metropolitan Russians in the nineteenth century, which promoted the rural sojourn as a remedy for the complexities of urban life, is ironically reversed here.<sup>13</sup> No longer a site for physical and mental nourishment as it was for *Anna Karenina*'s Levin, this countryside instead illustrates the

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ground or hurtled down and scattered into a fine spray. The earth was saturated. Ancient pine trees perched on dizzy heights drank the moisture almost from the clouds, and it foamed and dried a rusty white at their roots like beer foam from on a mustache.

The sky, drunk with spring and giddy with its fumes, thickened with clouds. Low clouds, drooping at the edges like felt, sailed over the woods and rain leapt from them, smelling of soil and sweat, and washing the last of the black armor-plating of ice from the earth."

Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 223.

<sup>10</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Zona: A Book about a Film about a Journey to a Room* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 45.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Thing from Inner Space: On Tarkovsky," *Angelaki* 4, no. 3 (1999): 227.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Lipovetsky, Review of *4*, directed by Ilya Khrzhanovsky, *KinoKultura* 10 (October 2005), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R10-05chetyre-1.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hughes, "The Russian Nobility and the Russian Countryside: Ambivalences and Orientations," *Journal of European Studies* 36, no. 2 (2006): 131.

chorus of “Derevnia,” a song by Russian rap group Krovostok: “Cities are fucked up, only villages are scarier / The closer you are to earth, the closer worms are to ya.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, fear pervades 4’s village sequence, reorienting the film toward the realm of horror. Before I dip my toes into the murky waters of genre theory, I should stress outright my acknowledgement that taken as a whole, 4’s postmodern surrealism certainly satisfies no strict definition of genre film. I contend, rather, that the Marina subplot utilizes a number of recognizable generic signposts that announce its intended emotional response.<sup>15</sup> After all, the jury of the 2005 Rotterdam Film Festival, which awarded the film its top prize, called it a “devastating nightmare” and evoked the horrific practice of cannibalism when describing the plot as “showing the collapse of a society that is devouring itself.”<sup>16</sup> The remainder of this chapter will examine the ways in which existing theories about the horror film genre elucidate 4’s oddly empowering tribute to the Russian village’s last remaining sentinels vis-à-vis the film’s sound design, cinematography, and blatantly Freudian mise-en-scène.

When Marina exits the train, the platform is enshrouded by fog. While the fog enveloping *Old Women*’s village gate could be understood as a symbol for ignorance waiting to be dispersed by the sun of enlightenment, here its visual obstruction suggests something more sinister; the silhouettes of four figures approaching Marina on the platform evoke the revenants of John Carpenter’s *The Fog* (1980), harbingers of doom (Fig. 5). Her surroundings have been almost completely desaturated of color, yet she wears a neon orange jacket, its brightness designating he

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<sup>14</sup> “Derevnia,” Spotify, track 12 on Krovostok, *Studen'*, self-released, 2012.

Города – это пиздец, страшнее только деревни / Чем ты ближе к земле, тем ближе к тебе черви.

<sup>15</sup> See Noël Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 51–59.

<sup>16</sup> Alena Karas', “Il'ia Khrzhanovskii: ‘Eto byli zvuki ada,’” *Polit.ru*, February 18, 2005, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://polit.ru/article/2005/02/18/hrzh/>.

the living being that will try but ultimately fail to reintegrate into this place of death. Next, Marina transgresses the village threshold, that enchanted boundary of Russian folklore portending harm to outsiders.<sup>17</sup> The particularly uninviting threshold here, more appropriate for a prison camp than a village, is a series of tall barbed-wire fences through which she must crawl, and the increasing anxiety over what evil spirits they enclose is even further heightened by a roving pack of wild dogs and a sign that reads “Danger! High voltage” (Fig. 6).

Marina’s trek from the train platform to the village cemetery lasts six and a half minutes, and although there is not a single word of dialogue in this time, the accompanying soundtrack is an ominous collage of diegetic sound effects and a non-diegetic ambient drone: the train’s metal clangs violently, dogs snarl and bark, wood creaks as if in a haunted house, insects hum, and an eerie rattling is emitted from an unseen source. This soundscape alone qualifies *4* as a horror film according to musicologist Guido Heldt’s analysis:

[The] distinction between music and noise is often less clear-cut than in other genres.... Hearing is less sharply discriminatory than sight, which gives sound its potential for unsettling effects at a basic psychological level. While spatial definition is an inherent feature of visual stimuli (to see something normally also means to know where it is; misjudgement of distance is one exception), we are much less precise in determining the spatial origin of sounds; and sounds separated from the visual presence of their source can be difficult to identify. This potential lack of clarity in the localization and identification of sounds means that they can be used to engender the anxiety of

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<sup>17</sup> See page 2.

uncertainty—things that go bump in the night. This makes sounds a valuable resource for the horror film-maker.<sup>18</sup>

4's soundtrack once more recalls *Stalker*, whose sounds “are disturbingly abstract and strange: clangs, squeaks and rustles.”<sup>19</sup> Both films' scores guide their protagonists into phantasmagoric realms, but whereas *Stalker* abruptly and gloriously switches from sepia to color when the Zone is reached—a flourish often compared to the one accompanying Dorothy Gale's arrival in Oz—4's visual palette remains desaturated, eschewing Oz's technicolor but boasting its own coven of crones.



Fig. 5: Marina on the train platform (4).

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<sup>18</sup> Guido Heldt, *Music and Levels of Narration in Film: Steps across the Border* (Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 176.

<sup>19</sup> Maya Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema As Poetry*, trans. Natasha Ward (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 110.





Fig. 6: Marina approaches the village (4).

The camerawork throughout Marina’s scenes is defined by a technique often associated with horror genre: a “searching” handheld camera that lapses in and out of focus and restlessly, anxiously refuses to hold its gaze on any one subject for long.<sup>20</sup> Once Marina crosses the village boundary, the audience enters an entirely unfamiliar space. Now in the realm of horror, we “are insistently made aware of not being in a privileged position of knowledge about the diegetic world.”<sup>21</sup> 4, of course, is not a found-footage horror film with a diegetic camera apparatus, yet Adam Charles Hart’s psychoanalysis of the unsteady found-footage camera aptly explains how cinematography informs this village:

Here, when the camera is handheld, the bearer of the look is vulnerable precisely because he or she is looking; and when the camera is not aligned with a diegetic body, it indicated

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<sup>20</sup> See Adam Charles Hart, “The Searching Camera: First-Person Shooters, Found-Footage Horror Films, and the Documentary Tradition,” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58 no. 4 (Summer 2019), 73–91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

impotence, utter powerlessness to intervene in the events recorded. The film's spectator position coincides almost perfectly with that of the cameraperson ... in that both are searching unfamiliar, unseen territory for potential threats, and both are reliant on a mediated view that is always inadequate. In found-footage horror, the task of the cameraperson both within the film and as the spectator's avatar is to do his or her best to compensate for that inadequacy, to vainly attempt to achieve ... mastery over filmic space.<sup>22</sup>

Marina and her two surviving sisters feel anxious and threatened in this space despite having been raised here. Considering themselves outsiders, they agree to stay only one night: "It's a madhouse here. I can't imagine how Zoya lived here, the *horror* [*uzhas*, emphasis my own]. These dolls and old crones, I'd bury them all. We should eat and get out of here. It's time to run. Before we're covered in mold." Like them, the camera appears to be searching eagerly for a way out of the village, so repulsed by the grotesqueries its gaze happens upon them that it hurriedly looks elsewhere, resulting in countless frames lacking deliberate composition: a canted shot of the ground with a foot in the corner, an unfocused close-up of a wall's peeling paint. Yet the true avatar of the camera's impotence, as we shall learn, turns out to be Zoya's boyfriend Marat.

Whatever meager economy the village can claim is supported entirely by the selling of handmade dolls, a motif that imbues the narrative with Freud's *unheimlich* or the uncanny, "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar."<sup>23</sup> In their uncanniness the dolls become metonyms for the village and its old women, who have traditionally been "depicted as victims of oppressive patriarchy, or celebrated either as symbols of inherent female strength or as one of the original sources of one of the world's great

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>23</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 124.

cultures.”<sup>24</sup> As Ellen Rutten explains, “[T]he ideals and idylls of that Soviet style *par excellence* are here mercilessly knocked down. Rather than harmless old sweeties, the Soviet *babushki* in 4 reveal themselves as mean cynics and hardcore alcoholics.”<sup>25</sup> Introduced as familiar and sympathetic as they grieve at Zoya’s burial, the village women are quickly revealed to be frightful distortions of their cultural image. What Marina experiences upon returning to her childhood home is precisely *unheimlich*, etymologically translated as unhomey.

Dolls have been considered embodiments of the concept of the uncanny since Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 article “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” which informed Freud’s influential psychoanalysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tale *Der Sandmann*. In that story, the protagonist Nathaniel becomes enamored with Olimpia, who he learns is an automaton only after seeing the eyes that have been removed from her mechanical body. While Freud paraphrases Jentsch’s belief that feelings of the uncanny arise “if intellectual uncertainty is aroused as to whether something is animate or inanimate, and whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living,” the main focus of his analysis concerns anxiety about our eyes; for Freud, the eye is a substitute for the penis, and blindness is therefore linked with castration.<sup>26</sup>

The dolls crafted by 4’s old women are not lifelike in appearance—their shapes are formed by molding clumps of chewed bread—but they do have genitals and are sexualized by their creators, who fondle their stuffed penises and grind them into Marat’s face (Fig. 7). Offering the grieving young man an anatomically female doll, one woman tells him, “Here, we found this for you. So puffy. And the pubes so soft. Just asking for it.” To further push the

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<sup>24</sup> Olson and Adonyeva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 5. See also Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, and Christine Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Ellen Rutten, “Art as Therapy: Sorokin’s Strife with the Soviet Trauma across Media,” *Russian Literature* 65, no. 4 (May 2009): 551.

<sup>26</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 140–41.

Freudian subtext to its breaking point, all of the dolls have empty sockets where their eyes should be, and the women accuse Marat of sewing a penis on one doll's face instead of a nose. Marat is thus surrounded by reminders of his impotence; he and Zoya represented the village's only opportunity to produce offspring, and they failed. Zoya's substitute children, he explains to Marina, were the dolls: "Zoyka sculpted every face herself. She said, 'Each one has its own personality'" (a detail that retroactively adds an incestual element to the women's harassment of Marat). Desperate to appease his geriatric torturers, Marat creates a mold of his own face and applies the visage to four dolls—essentially cloning himself, an aberration of Zoya's method and yet the only means of reproduction for a symbolic castrate—before taking his own life.



**Fig. 7: An old woman kisses her doll (4).**

The women's physical molestation and symbolic castration of Marat, acts that contribute to his suicide, further support the film's horror credentials. Writing on the horror genre, Stephen Neale claims, "[I]t is woman's sexuality, that which renders them desirable—but also

threatening—to men, which constitutes the real problem that horror cinema exists to explore, and which constitutes ultimately that which is really monstrous.”<sup>27</sup> While Neale concedes that most movie monsters are characterized as male, Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* and its concept of abjection influenced a wave of contemporary feminist film theorists dedicated to the understudied female monster. Barbara Creed explains that *Powers of Horror* “suggests a way of situating the monstrous-feminine in the horror film in relation to the maternal figure and what Kristeva terms ‘abjection,’ that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules,’ that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order.’”<sup>28</sup> 4’s villagers who embody this monstrous-femine are, in essence, witches. According to Robert Briffault, “The power of witchcraft belongs particularly to old women, for it is a common notion that such a power is counteracted by child-bearing, so that a mother is not so dangerous as a woman past child-bearing age.”<sup>29</sup> Erin Harrington elaborates:

The barren body also reaches into a variety of registers of abjection, for its corporeal unruliness and volatility (through menstruation, or the varied vasomotor expressions of menopausal changes) as well as its conceptual boundary confusions evade a clear division between subject and object. The barren body refuses to ‘behave’ in a culturally-sanctioned manner, or to sit within the social categories that are made available to and that therefore construct the female body. The barren body, as a type of specifically *female* body, both signifies the potential capacity and refusal to reproduce.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 61.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Briffault, *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 557.

<sup>30</sup> Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (London: Routledge, 2017), 225.

If barrenness itself is a cultural misbehavior, then the acts performed by Khrzhanovsky's women are truly anathema to preconceptions of geriatric decorum. In the film's notorious climax, they engage in a veritable orgy as they devour a hog with their bare hands along with countless bottles of wine and moonshine. In a minute-long unbroken shot, two women remove their tunics and brassieres and proceed to squeeze their own and each other's breasts as a third pours red wine over them (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 8: The old women's bacchanalia (4).**

By associating his hags with the horrific, Khrzhanovsky situates them within the tradition of Baba Yaga, a Slavic folklore goddess-witch figure whose complex and contradictory nature has been so simplified through the years that her name now conjures only images of a wicked sorceress in popular culture. Joanna Hubbs describes her as “the expression of realized potential, the fulfillment of the cycle of life associated with woman. She has known all things: virginity (she has no consort), motherhood (her children in plant and animal form are legion), and old age

(she gathers all things into her abode to die). In her the cycles of feminine life are brought to completion, and yet she contains them all,”<sup>31</sup> but Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba laments that, with the decline of gender-egalitarian societies, “the deity Baba Yaga lost her motherly functions, although she kept its attributes, such as large breasts, and only retained her power over animals and the dead.”<sup>32</sup> 4’s kitchen orgy, in turn, evokes the motif of Yaga’s cooking and eating, which should be “an act of life-affirmation, fertility, and abundance, as well as one through which nature destroys its creation,” and diminishes its dualistic symbolism, retaining only the aspect of cannibalistic destruction—a horrific act made explicit when one woman feeds the hog’s head to others in the sty.<sup>33</sup>

Critically, this scene is juxtaposed with its immediate predecessor, in which the camera virtually caresses the naked bodies of Marina and her sisters in the banya. Marina is shown, in extreme close-up, rubbing her breast like the old women do. That this shot was used as the cover image for the film’s DVD release stresses the thematic importance (while conveniently doubling as an attention-grabbing provocation) of the maternal, whose abjection is made manifest in the village. Marina and her sisters, this scene reminds us, are of prime reproductive age and therefore cannot be reintegrated into their former home. Sure enough, the three young women prove unable to participate fully in the bacchanalia, breaking down in tears and escaping outside—“I don’t want to go there anymore. I can’t live there,” one sobs—while their grannies only grow more uninhibited. The true abject horror of 4’s old women, then, comes from their disruption of the sisters’ identities via the vulgar co-existence of their unbridled sexuality and inability to reproduce. More broadly, this represents the contemporary anxiety about the increasing

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<sup>31</sup> Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *Fierce Feminine Divinities of Eurasia and Latin America: Baba Yaga, Kali, Pombagira, and Santa Muerte* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 43.

<sup>33</sup> Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, 38.

obsolescence of the village as cultural signifier, as a space long inherent to national identity that must now undergo the process of extinction.

Unsurprisingly, some critics expressed indignation over the film's treatment of its villagers. In Valerii Kichin's review the author resorts to *ad hominem* attacks by evoking Khrzhanovsky's father Andrei, a beloved animator of the Soviet era: "It is a pity that such a glorious surname will now be associated no longer with the father's Pushkin adaptations but with lecherous spying on old women having sex."<sup>34</sup> According to Sorokin, a man approached him after a screening of *4* and accused him of denigrating the Russian village; true to his reputation, the director replied, "Have you been to this village? No. Then go fuck yourself."<sup>35</sup> Yet although the old women are once again played by nonprofessional actors, this particular village does not really exist. When one interviewer discussing the film with Khrzhanovsky calls the village scenes "quasidocumentary," the director bristles and describes an artificial production distinct from the location shoots of *Old Women* and *The Postman's White Nights*: "We shot this part in a huge village where more than a thousand people live, not five grandmothers like in ours. The village is located south of Arzamas-16 [today Sarov].... The entire film was shot in the summer, but in the film it is early spring. Outside it is 25 degrees [Celsius], and the poor grandmothers are in winter sheepskin coats. Some documentary!"<sup>36</sup> At the same time, he admits to capturing the women's authentic behavior: "While drinking, our grannies occasionally undressed. They proposed doing this on film: 'May we?' I said, 'Yes, of course.'"<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kichin, "O prirode uspekha nashego kino za rubezhom i predelakh nashei terpimosti."

<sup>35</sup> Igor' Svinarenko, "Oprichnik na eksport," *Medved' 8* (August 2007), accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.srkn.ru/interview/oprichnik-na-eksport.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Karas', "Il'ia Khrzhanovskii."

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



Harrington might argue that while there is an undeniable element of exploitation in *4*'s depiction of its characters (if not its actors)<sup>38</sup>—she refers to “films that leverage the grotesque monstrosity of the older woman” as “hagsploitation”—the film’s overwhelming sense of despair is mitigated by a certain degree of agency and power gained by the old women through their transgressive behavior:

[F]ilms that leverage the grotesque monstrosity of the older woman ... are coloured by loss and longing. This might be for themselves, for a past that cannot return, and for the loss of agency and relationships. They may express a fear of ageing. They present alternatives to normative, idealised, youthful femininity as horrific. As such, these representations of monstrous, ageing femininity act as both threat and cautionary tale, for if women’s core source of strength and power is youthful femininity (with its implied reproductive potential), then age qualifies as a palpable loss. The surge of power that is expressed through menarche and menstruation in menstrual horrors is perhaps lost, despite the early promise of renewal, but this loss is railed against—or, perhaps more transgressively, this power is re-routed into a space that is unaccounted for within the normative construction of the female subject.... As such, these films offer ambivalent representations of ageing, for they expose, quite explicitly, the sorts of negative stereotypes of the ageing women that are present in the social and cultural discourses that inform attitudes toward the physiological and psychological changes that accompany the

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<sup>38</sup> It bears mentioning that Khrzhanovsky was once again met with accusations of abuse toward his female (non-professional) actors upon the premiers of the first two parts of his massive *DAU* project, *Natasha* and *Degeneration*, in 2020. For an overview of the controversy, see Manori Ravindran and Rebecca Davis, “Russian Press Take Aim at ‘Dau’ Competition Selection at Berlinale in Searing Open Letter,” *Variety*, February 29, 2020, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/actors/russian-press-open-letter-dau-natasha-berlinale-ilya-khrzhanovsky-1203519822/>.

cessation of menstruation. They revel in the degradation of the female body, and in the dissolution of both actor and character. And yet, they offer a space of significant resistance, and a way of interrogating the fictions that underpin value-driven constructions of feminine worth by revealing the nature of the boundaries that are created and enforced through the act of abjection.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, Lipovetsky's Bakhtinian analysis of the film is absolutely necessary—as he observes, Bakhtin modeled the carnivalistic grotesque body on terracotta figurines of pregnant and laughing old hags discovered in Kerch'—but by focusing solely on the barrenness of 4's women he overlooks the significance of their near-constant laughter. Female laughter, Hélène Cixous writes, is an act of resistance against the patriarchy: “Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women—which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen.”<sup>40</sup> 4's *babushki*, like those of *Old Women*, display humor and healthy sexual appetites in spaces long devoid of a patriarchal presence. After all, “[t]oo much grief, and especially grief expressed privately via crying, is not viewed positively in Russian rural communities, as numerous [folk] stories attest. Many of these legends were about widows who cried too much, and were visited by their husbands in his own form, or in the form of a fiery snake—in either case, the devil in disguise.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, these women's laughter creates a space of their own, while their tears would prevent this by summoning a patriarchal specter.

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<sup>39</sup> Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film*, 257–58.

<sup>40</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?”, trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 55. See also Ib Johansen, “The Semiotics of Laughter,” in *Signs of Change: Premodern → Modern → Postmodern*, ed. Stephen Barker (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996): 14.

<sup>41</sup> Olson and Adonyeva, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women*, 290.

Although the communities depicted in both films are facing the loss of these spaces—the former to a changing demographic represented by a benevolent foreign patriarch, the latter to oblivion—they choose to bid farewell on their own terms: with plenty of moonshine and uproarious laughter.

If Sidorov's earlier film proposes an ostensibly optimistic but ultimately flawed vision of the Russian village's future, then Khrzhanovsky's offers an alternate fate. The former entertains the idea that the village is engaged in a resolvable existential struggle, but *4* posits that the battle has already been fought and lost; when these witchy women die, so will the village (whether they will subsequently haunt the space is a question for another analysis). By manipulating the village narrative of loss into the recognizable contours of genre filmmaking, though, Khrzhanovsky introduces a novel method of processing it. An effective horror film is frightening, revolting, and shocking by design, but its adherence to the conventions of genre paradoxically provides its audience with the comfort of familiarity. When Marina flees her childhood home at the end of *4*, then, the traumatic loss of the village is rendered as a narrative trope akin to the resolution of *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), in which the protagonists escape their haunted house just as it implodes. As the following chapter shows, *Bite the Dust* similarly employs the generic conventions of disaster films to grapple with the village's impending doom.

## Chapter Three:

### *Bite the Dust: The Village Destroyed*

Lord, here comes the flood.  
– Peter Gabriel

In May 2017, twenty-five-year-old Polina created an Instagram account named PolyazDerevki (Polya from the village). Having recently moved to an unspecified village five hours from Moscow by train, Polina began posting satirical videos of herself as a young cosmopolitan woman acclimating to rural life, a sort of modern Eva Gabor in *Green Acres*. She takes selfies with goats, chops wood in trendy designer clothes, and shares exercise routines using pieces of scrap metal as free weights. As of this writing the account boasts 1.9 million followers. The ironic tone of Polina’s content is characteristic of her generation’s approach to social media and not necessarily an indication of condescension toward the contemporary Russian village. Indeed, Polina maintains that she resettled in the village by choice and is quite content there: “In general, it seems to me that life is fuller here than in the city.”<sup>1</sup> When an interviewer credits her with popularizing the village and asks if she believes she is changing young Russians’ attitudes about the provinces, her response is forthright in its civic apathy: “My followers see the village through the prism of my perception. But I don’t show reality, I consciously omit some of the village’s problems. Probably because I don’t totally understand how to convey them properly.... In general, the development of domestic tourism and the popularization of the village is a good thing, but it’s too heavy a burden for me.”<sup>2</sup>

Polina’s *laissez-faire* attitude toward the unarticulated problems facing her village raises difficult ethical questions about economic privilege and how she stands to benefit from the

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<sup>1</sup> Olia Stepanian, “Polia iz derevki – o russkoi glubinke i populiarnosti,” *RBC*, August 7, 2019, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://style.rbc.ru/people/5d4972769a794723f4cea5a6>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

commodification of a whitewashed lifestyle (she admits that financial assistance from her family allowed her to move to the village, and she has since earned enough ad revenue from her Instagram account to build a new house and launch her own clothing line), but I introduce PolyazDerevki not in order to debate moral imperatives but rather to illustrate that consciously apolitical (superficially, at least) depictions of the Russian village still persist in popular culture.

The focus of this chapter is Taisia Igumentseva's *Bite the Dust* (*Otdat' kontsy*, 2013), which depicts another unnamed village with a single-digit population. When the close-knit community hears news reports warning of an impending apocalypse, each character processes the situation differently and acts out in surprising ways, throwing long-complacent relationships into disarray. The dull routine of village life gives way to chaos, but rather than acting as a destructive force this disruption of the status quo results in varying degrees of peace and contentment. The anticipated "magnetic cloud" (*magnitnoe oblako*) caused by a "coronal emission" (*koronal'nyi vybros*) never materializes, though, and a deluge of rain falls instead. In the end, the villagers find themselves alone together in a house on stilts, the world around them apparently drowned.

The neatly balanced demographics of *Bite the Dust*'s village are arguably the most far-fetched element in a film that frequently flirts with the fantastical. Recently-widowed Nina and bachelor amateur scientist Vanya appear to be in their early thirties. Two married couples, Misha and Nastia and Senya and Olga, are roughly the same age; the latter couple has two young sons. "Grandpa" Andrei Vasilich is an old man, and, shockingly, "Granny" Zina is the only old woman around. Neither is specified to be of any relation to their younger neighbors. As the plot's various romantic intrigues will indicate, biological reproduction is possible, and in multiple configurations.

The tepid reviews that greeted *Bite the Dust* at its 2013 Cannes Film Festival premiere and its negligible domestic box office gross suggest that this is the least appreciated and likely least seen film among those of my study.<sup>3</sup> It is inarguably, however, the most accessible to mainstream audiences, brimming with slapstick humor, romantic hijinks, and broadly-sketched characters that adhere to popular Russian stereotypes. *Bite the Dust*'s premise situates it within a wave of similarly-themed international films released concurrently during a period of renewed anxieties about impending global catastrophe, anxieties that manifested themselves in a widespread fascination with the ancient Mayan calendar's prediction of a 2012 apocalypse. It will therefore be crucial to trace the effect of Igumentseva's remove from her village subject via ironic intertextuality with Western cinema. Furthermore, despite its fixed setting, *Bite the Dust*'s apocalyptic narrative allows Igumentseva's concerns to transcend the local to the global; the survival of a village is, to say the least, a pyrrhic victory if the planet is otherwise annihilated. While the other three films examined in this dissertation position the natural world as constant and indifferent to the threatened village, here the inverse is hypothesized. For this reason, I consider it necessary to engage with the film via the young but rapidly growing field of ecocriticism.

Igumentseva is a fascinating and sympathetic character within the Russian film industry. As a student at the All-Russian State University of Cinematography (VGIK) she was mentored by Alexei Uchitel, and her short film thesis *The Road to...* (*Doroga na...*, 2011) was subsequently awarded the Grand Prix in the Cinéfondation competition at the 65th Cannes Film

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<sup>3</sup> Even the most positive available review condescendingly describes it as a light, unchallenging piece of entertainment: "Igumentseva's light, unchallenging film makes no claim to philosophical depth, but it diligently provides entertainment, a good mood, and hope for long, sunny days." Evgenii Ukhov, "Retsenziia na fil'm 'Otdat' kontsy'" *Film.ru*, October 22, 2013, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.film.ru/articles/na-poslednem-dyhanii>.

Festival when she was only twenty-three. Whatever professional doors were opened for her by this achievement, however, were just as quickly slammed shut after the release of *Bite the Dust*, her feature-length debut, just one year later at Cannes (her previous prize guaranteed the film a slot in the festival's non-competitive Official Selection lineup). International reviews were largely negative, but Igumentseva found her reputation more seriously damaged when Uchitel, whose Rock Films company co-produced the feature, sued her for making the film available to stream free-of-charge on her personal V Kontakte page. Only a few weeks later, producer Anatolii Sivushov announced that Igumentseva had been hired to helm a film about Russia's annexation of Crimea that would be funded by the Russian Ministry of Culture's Cinema Fund.<sup>4</sup> The backlash was swift and severe, as she recalls: "A terrible mess arose around the project, and it acquired the stench of propaganda."<sup>5</sup> Plans to shoot the film were soon aborted, and influential colleagues assailed her to the press. Late documentarian filmmaker Alexander Rastorguev, for example, reportedly called Igumentseva "the new face of prostitution [*novoe imia prostitutsii*] in Russian cinema" and regarding his lawsuit Uchitel told interviewers, "She caused me a great deal of pain. It's a very sad story.... It seems to me that, unfortunately, the girl let fame go to her head."<sup>6</sup>

Rock Films' press release for *Bite the Dust* quotes Igumentseva as saying, "My work exists in order to break stereotypes. I believe that our people are free, vibrant, and emotional, and I want to display these traits of our national character on the screen. I tried to be inspired by real

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<sup>4</sup> Katerina Kitaeva, "Krym otpravliaetsia 'Domoi,'" *RosBiznesKonsalting (RBK)*, May 16, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, [https://www.rbc.ru/society/16/05/2014/56beb1fd9a7947299f72d0a5?utm\\_source=amp\\_full-link](https://www.rbc.ru/society/16/05/2014/56beb1fd9a7947299f72d0a5?utm_source=amp_full-link).

<sup>5</sup> Viacheslav Kuznetsov and Artem Sarafanov, "Taisiia Igumentseva, piratstvo i Krym: kinoscandal mesiatsa," *Snob*, May 27, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/76685/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

life and real people. You have to understand that in the Russian village everyone is open and free, and such passions happen there that one can only envy. I wanted to show that there is life there, and it's beautiful in its own way.”<sup>7</sup> This statement intimates the conservative character that Igumentseva's critics have attacked and which she has displayed to a greater degree in interviews promoting *Bite the Dust*:

The subject [of the film] may not be so edgy—no one curses, no one has sex in an outhouse.... It's not mandatory to film only the edgy and radical. For some reason there's an opinion that this is the only thing film festivals expect from Russia. Why does everyone buy into this? Maybe because it's so easy to perform? When I studied as a documentarian at VGIK, everyone tried to follow this simple path—to take on topical subjects. What does the word “conflict” call to mind? Rape, gays, sadomasochism, and other extremes. But the director must be forced to work their brain in a different direction.<sup>8</sup>

With these words Igumentseva is attempting to revise her curriculum vitae. Her prize-winning short, after all, contained a “scandalous” amount of profanity; one news headline read: “Russians Brought a Vulgar [*maternyi*] Film to Cannes.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for *The Road to...* Igumentseva received the lowest grade among her VGIK classmates solely, according to Uchitel, on account of its

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<sup>7</sup> Rock Films, “‘Otdat’ kontsy’ Taisii Igumentsevoi pokazali v Kanne,” March 19, 2013, accessed September 8, 2020, <http://www.rockfilm.ru/?q=статьи/отдать-концы-таисии-игуменцевой-показали-в-канне>.

<sup>8</sup> Andrei Zakhar'ev, “Taisiia Igumentseva: ‘Mne ochen’ khotelos’ sniat’ satiru na obshchestvo,’” *Proficinema*, June 3, 2013, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.proficinema.ru/interviews/detail.php?ID=143867>. Although *Bite the Dust*'s screenplay is credited solely to Aleksandra Golovina, in this same interview Igumentseva describes a collaborative writing process and claims that the village setting was her idea.

<sup>9</sup> Viktoriia Fomenko, “Rossiiane privezli v Kanny maternyi fil'm,” *Trud*, May 22, 2012, accessed September 8, 2020, [http://www.trud.ru/article/22-05-2012/276449\\_rossijane\\_privezli\\_v\\_kanny\\_maternyj\\_film.html](http://www.trud.ru/article/22-05-2012/276449_rossijane_privezli_v_kanny_maternyj_film.html).



coarse language.<sup>10</sup> If this casts doubt on the veracity of the filmmaker's comments about her own work, one can hardly blame her for wanting to mitigate controversy (after all, she experienced more in her twenties than most artists do in a lifetime) and make nice in order to survive in a cutthroat industry. Worth examining, however, are her concerns about the film festival circuit and its international audience's perceptions of Russia and its film culture, which inform the content of *Bite the Dust*, as well as her conviction that people behave differently—more honestly—in the village, a sentiment that echoes comments made by Khrzhanovsky about 4's setting: "I filmed the village as a place where people are more transparent in their light and dark manifestations than in the city. In the city I will never know how you cry, get angry, or wash your hands if I don't spend a lot of time with you. The city is huge, people there communicate at the level of 'How are you? – OK!' In the village they'll tell you all about how they're doing."<sup>11</sup> *Bite the Dust* treats this emotional honesty not as an immutable quality but as an aspirational condition that requires conscious effort to maintain, lest it become damaged or lost at great cost to the village community.

The villagers organize a "last supper" before the world ends, but as a communal ritual it turns out to be a failure. Only Zina, Vanya, Nina, and Misha attend, and the mood at the meal's outset is predictably dour. "We obviously weren't living right," Zina tells the others, "if the end is like this." Nina thinks she is referring to the apocalypse as a divine judgment—"I think it's just a natural disaster"—but Zina is talking about the fractured community. "We lied to ourselves a lot, and this is the price we have to pay. Since we're sitting here now, let's tell each other the truth: who thought what, who held back. Come on, this is our only chance." She then offers to begin the exercise herself: "You didn't love each other. You all live together, but everyone's

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Karas', "Il'ia Khrzhanovskii."

looking out for themselves.” Her switch from first-person to second-person pronouns as her tone grows more accusatory betrays a psychological projection, but the ensuing airing of grievances she initiates proves to be a turning point; after the villagers begin to be honest with one another and themselves, the dreaded magnetic cloud of doom fails to materialize as scheduled. Instead, a cleansing rain begins to fall.

Zina’s candor is consistent with the *babushki* of the previous two films, but her petite, androgynous appearance and her passionate political allegiance make her a unique figure in New Village Cinema. Whereas *Old Women*’s coterie makes the occasional offhand remark favorably comparing the Soviet era to today, Zina’s character is defined almost entirely by communist kitsch. Theresa Sabonis-Chafee delineates three types of communist kitsch that persist in contemporary Russia: utopian-nostalgic and ironic-nostalgic—which she derives from Svetlana Boym’s categories of nostalgia—and camp.<sup>12</sup> Dressed in a Red Army trench coat and adorning her home with busts of Lenin and Soviet posters and banners, Zina expresses an ironic nostalgia that is “inconclusive and fragmentary” and which “remembers the past as a place from which one is exiled and has no plans to return” (Fig. 9).<sup>13</sup> According to Boym, the ironic nostalgic “remembers the city of one’s birth or the neighbors, but not the abstract ideas of citizenship or neighborhood.”<sup>14</sup> Zina’s nostalgia appears to be innocuous, but—to literalize Boym’s metaphor—it has created a physical barrier between her and her current neighbors in the form of Soviet memorabilia. The present neighborhood (or village, or nation) cannot be synthesized successfully if the melancholy of nostalgia has not been confronted and processed.

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<sup>12</sup> Theresa Sabonis-Chafee, “Communism as Kitsch: Soviet Symbols in Post-Soviet Society,” in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). See also Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Sabonis-Chafee, “Communism as Kitsch,” 367–68.

<sup>14</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, 285.

*Bite the Dust* was not filmed amidst the realia of an extant village. Although it was shot on location near the village of Kelkolovo outside of Saint Petersburg, Igumentseva and her crew reportedly built the set entirely from scratch.<sup>15</sup> As such, every element of the film's production design belongs to a semiotic paradigm that is purely diegetic and not equally or more readable as a system of extra-filmic signifiers like those of *Old Women, 4*, and *The Postman's White Nights*. When each character is introduced, the objects and spaces around them immediately define them in ways that will become clearer as the narrative progresses. Misha is first shown returning home from a scavenging expedition in a truck filled with repurposable junk, while Senya is sitting by the lake whittling a wooden figurine; this contrast between the former, a proactive provider, and the latter, a moon-eyed idler, is an essential factor in their eventual romantic rivalry. Nina is introduced hanging a poster for her movie screening, a ritual she continues in memory of her husband, whose tragic death now defines her existence. Vanya, finally, is seen distilling moonshine in a Rube Goldberg machine on the deck of his half-built house, indicative of a brilliant mind going to waste. Zina will later admonish him at the dinner party by saying, "All you do in life is slosh back the moonshine with Vasilich, when instead you could have built something big and wonderful." Connoisseurs of contemporary American melodrama will be reminded of the titular central metaphor central of *Life a House* (Irwin Winkler, 2001), in which an architect experiencing personal upheaval erects a new house from the ground up as he works to repair damaged relationships. "I always thought of myself as a house," concludes the protagonist, "I was always what I lived in. It didn't need to be big. It didn't even need to be beautiful. It just needed to be mine. I became what I was meant to be. I built myself a life. I built myself a house." The house/life will not be complete until its builder achieves personal

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<sup>15</sup> See Zakhar'ev, "Taisiia Igumentseva."

fulfillment, and Vanya's budding romance with Nina proves to be the remedy for his arrested development.

Because these various early signifiers cannot be decoded fully until the narrative reveals later information, they may not draw individual attention to themselves upon first viewing. What catches the eye from the outset, however, is the sheer amount of decoration in nearly every scene: Ivan's tools and contraptions great and small, Nina's trove of DVDs, Senya and Olga's kitchen table covered in a sumptuous array of snacks and preserves. Aside from Misha's scavenging, no explanation is offered for the villagers' accumulation of stuff. An uncharitable reading of the film might consider this evidence that Igumentseva, like PolyazDerevki, has chosen to ignore the unpleasant economic reality of the contemporary Russian village. Indeed, money or income is never mentioned in *Bite the Dust*. The younger characters do not appear to work for a living, the older ones make no mention of pensions, and all of their conflicts are interpersonal and bourgeois. On the other hand, the generally inexplicable existence of all these possessions compels the viewer to consider more carefully their semantic value not only as individual elements but also as a collective whole.

In their book *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative*, Charles and Mirella Jona Affron provide a framework by which to determine the influence of set design on its film's ultimate effect. They list five levels of design intensity ranging from the "denotative set" ("low-budget, often stock, forgettable") to the "set as narrative," in which "the circumscribed set enjoys a privileged relationship to the narrative."<sup>16</sup> Based on this scale, *Bite the Dust* straddles the third and fourth levels, "set as embellishment," which "oblige[s] the spectator to read design as a specific necessity of the narrative," and "artifice," which boasts overtly metaphorical set

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 37, 158.

designs and which the authors define in part by quoting Susan Sontag: “a greater range of ethical values is embodied in the decor of these films than in the people.”<sup>17</sup> Because *Bite the Dust*’s villagers are more vividly characterized by the objects surrounding them than by any of their own words or deeds, the climactic flood that subsumes all but the most essential material things reveals their ethical value—namely, that they are superfluous distractions (and, in the case of Zina’s collection of communist kitsch, obsolete ideologies) that impede their possessors’ self-actualizations and the subsequent reification of the community.



Fig. 9: Zina among her communist kitsch (*Bite the Dust*).

To this cinephile, the most amusing set design is Nina’s personal movie theater, the walls of which are adorned with hand-painted recreations (by artist El’dar Karkhalev) of international (but mostly American) film posters, including hits like *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) but also more surprising choices such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and the pornographic *Caligula* (Tinto Brass, 1979). Nina’s weekly film screenings for her neighbors provide

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 82–83. Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, 1966), 216, quoted in Affron and Affron, *Sets in Motion*, 136.

Igumentseva with an opportunity both to satirize prevalent Russian attitudes vis-à-vis Western cinema and situate her own film within a broader cultural context. Therefore, *Bite the Dust* all but demands to be placed in conversation with the Western films it either closely resembles narratively or explicitly references by name. The apocalypse blockbuster was a Hollywood mainstay from the late nineties through the supposedly terminal year 2012, as films like *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), and Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009) depicted the planet's demise via interstellar or environmental disaster. These action-packed dramas eventually gave way to lighter riffs on the theme like the raunchy *This Is the End* (Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen, 2013) and the romantic comedy *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Lorene Scafaria, 2012), the latter of which itself bears a striking resemblance to Canada's pre-millennial *Last Night* (Don McKellar, 1998).

David Christopher writes that *Last Night* “follows the interconnected narrative trajectories of various characters as they live out their final moments on earth and concerns itself with an ... open ended question: ‘If you found out the world was going to end, what would you do?’”<sup>18</sup> *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* similarly prioritizes interpersonal relationships over the macro scale favored by its blockbuster predecessors; in the film's opening scene the protagonist's wife leaves him immediately upon learning that a meteor will collide with Earth in three weeks. In the same vein Igumentseva describes the end of the world as “nothing other than an opportunity to analyze your life, to understand how useful you've been, and, if possible, to do a ‘reset.’”<sup>19</sup> Just like Nina, *Last Night*'s central character Patrick is a recent widower, and “the emotional fallout from [his wife's] death is likened to the end of the world for him—an

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<sup>18</sup> David Christopher, “Constructions of Non-Diegetic Hope in Don McKellar's *Last Night*,” *Cineaction* 92 (2014): 60.

<sup>19</sup> Zakhar'ev, “Taisiia Igumentseva.”

apocalypse that has already occurred.”<sup>20</sup> Throughout both films they slowly learn to open up emotionally and let someone new get close to them. As Christopher concludes, “The social lessons seem clear: don’t be consumed by the past, get out and live life, know thyself, and don’t wait until it is too late to reach such revelations.”<sup>21</sup> Appropriately, Nina experiences the strongest emotional catharsis of any of the villagers. When the torrential downpour begins, she jumps onto the outdoor dinner table, kicks the dishes off, raises her hands and face to the sky and screams, “Rain! Rain! The heavenly floodgates!”

Nina invites her neighbors to watch Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’s *Lorna’s Silence* (*Le silence de Lorna*, 2008), a selection Igumentseva plays for easy laughs: a languidly-paced slice of gritty Belgian realism for a backwoods Russian audience (even Nina herself incorrectly identifies it as a French film). “Are there going to be any naked ladies?” asks Andrei Vasilich. “If it’s about sex again, I’m leaving,” scoffs Misha. Zina, confused by the plot, is appalled to learn that Lorna is in a green card marriage and shouts at the screen, “They’ve all gone crazy in that Europe of theirs!” Beneath this gag lies one more subtly satirical, though: the myopia of Zina’s provincial morality prevents this outspoken communist and Lenin devotee from realizing that the Dardenne brothers are among world cinema’s most dedicated critics of late-stage capitalism and its dehumanizing effects. Igumentseva may have chosen *Lorna’s Silence* specifically as a winking reference to her status as Cannes debutante—the Dardennes are perennial competitors and frequent prizewinners at the festival—but that film’s superficial differences from *Bite the Dust* should not preclude a more meaningful intertextual relationship.

*Lorna’s Silence* is not an apocalyptic film but a crime drama centered on immigrants in urban Belgium. Lorna, an Albanian who dreams of opening her own cafe, finds herself entering

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher, “Constructions of Non-Diegetic Hope in Don McKellar’s *Last Night*,” 63.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

into a string of sham marriages in order to obtain money from a Russian gangster. Having become an accessory to murder and realizing that she has compromised her morals in pursuit of her personal happiness, she develops a psychosis that convinces her she is pregnant with the murdered man's child—a life she can save in atonement—and flees to a cabin in the woods outside the city. Like the villagers staring down Armageddon, Lorna finds that a different world, one devoid of order and human decency, has snuck up on her. Analyzing the importance of space in the Dardennes' oeuvre, Benoît Dillet and Tara Puri emphasize “the effects of the ruins of the post-industrial landscape: the ruin of a stable morality that has been supplanted by the cynicism that represents a world without meaning.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast, “the woods become, for Lorna, a space of refuge and of amelioration in what is otherwise a moral wasteland.”<sup>23</sup> *Lorna's Silence* therefore adheres to the standard conservative urban/rural dichotomy that is hardly restricted to Russian thought: when the capital becomes a “corrupt metropolis,” the provinces “function as the abode of spirituality and moral wealth.”<sup>24</sup> *Bite the Dust's* village, situated amid the “protectively sealed space of Russia's mythical northern forests,” similarly provides an isolated haven whose inhabitants, like Lorna, seek shelter at the end of the film in a wooden room that protects and mollifies them.

This wooden room on the edge of the forest belongs to Vanya's unfinished house, whose skeletal frame, in addition to its metaphorical value as an extension of the character's self, is another evocation of Baba Yaga. Vanya has situated the inhabitable heart of his home on the construction's second story, leaving nothing below it where the ground floor should be other than wooden support beams. This design eventually serves a crucial narrative purpose, but when

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<sup>22</sup> Benoît Dillet and Tara Puri, “Left-Over Spaces: The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers,” *Film-Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2013): 370.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>24</sup> Parts, *In Search of the True Russia*, 19.



it appears as the film's first image—a long shot dominated by the foregrounded lake with Vanya's house standing on the distant foggy shore—the most obvious association within the Russian cultural context is the witch's *izba* (peasant home) elevated by chicken legs. As the rain continues for days and the floodwaters rise, the ten characters (together with Candy [Konfetka] the cow and Rambo the dog) seek refuge in Vanya's second-story room and patio, the village's highest point.<sup>25</sup> The film's final scene, which follows a fade to black, reveals that the flood has not receded in weeks or months. Although precipitation has stopped, winter has arrived, and the water surrounding them is now a hinterland of ice and snow (Fig. 10). Everyone is happy, for the chaos brought upon by impending doom has given way to the restoration of order; both married couples have reconciled, and Ivan and Nina profess their commitment to each other. Olga sits her sons on her lap and tells them a story about two little boys who live on a cloud in the sky. The fairytale is clearly intended to allegorize their own situation—she includes in her narrative a cow, a dog, and a loving father to appease Vasilich, Zina, and Senya, respectively, as they listen in—and raises at least two divergent but equally viable interpretations of *Bite the Dust's*

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<sup>25</sup> In what may be the film's most subtle joke—and further evidence of the worthlessness of Zina's communist nostalgia—the old woman has named her dog, whose house has a hammer and sickle hanging over its door, after an American action hero defined by his status as a Vietnam War veteran.

conclusion.



**Fig. 10: Vanya's house above the floodwaters (*Bite the Dust*).**

The first reading, one initially suggested to me and shared by the majority of undergraduate students for whom this film was screened in a Russian language class, assumes that the villagers, like the rest of the world, perish in the flood—a fate suggested by the fade to black—and that the final scene in Vanya's home takes place in the afterlife. Baba Yaga's dwelling, after all, is understood by Vladimir Propp to be a liminal space connecting the realms of the living and the dead.<sup>26</sup> Having assembled in Vanya's elevated home, the villagers proceeded to cross over into some sort of exclusive heaven. The end of Olga's story depicts the villagers' analogous characters as celestial or even angelic beings who no longer live on Earth but maintain a causal relationship to it: "So they are sailing along, and other clouds sail past them like ships, with other people living on them. And when the people are sad on those clouds, they cry, and then rain falls on the earth from the sky. And when they laugh, stars appear and scatter

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<sup>26</sup> See Vladimir Propp, *Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki* (Leningrad: Leningradskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1946), 146.

all across the sky in bright constellations.” To punctuate this final sentence as if to affirm its veracity, an exterior long shot of the house presents a clear night sky blanketed with stars. Two shooting star fly across the sky, and the camera pans up to reveal the “Star Cow” constellation identified in Olga’s tale.

A second and arguably more constructive reading posits the corporeal survival of the villagers. The first evidence supporting this assumption is a statement uttered by Nina after the fade to black. “It’s amazing how much a person has to live through in order to feel this one second of happiness,” she sighs, using the verb *perezhit’*, which can be translated as *to survive* or *to outlive*. Her mention of the ephemeral nature of happiness, taken together with the coexistence of laughter and tears in Olga’s story, imply that they can still experience a range of human emotions. Furthermore, the liminal status of Baba Yaga’s *izba* does not guarantee the death of those who enter. According to Sibelan Forrester, Baba Yaga “mediates the boundary of death so that living human beings may cross it and return, alive but in possession of new wisdom, or ‘reborn’ into a new status.”<sup>27</sup> In this context the flood represents a purifying baptism that enables the villagers’ spiritual rebirth. Liberated from their possessions and therefore from their damaged former selves, they can now begin a new life in which they value the interpersonal relationships of family and community above all else.

*Bite the Dust*’s resolution also depicts a kind of inverse Rapture. Rapture—the belief that Christ will return to earth anon to take the faithful with him to heaven and leave the rest of humanity behind to endure tribulations—is a minority fundamentalist protestant Christian dogma

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<sup>27</sup> *Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales*, edited by Sibelan Forrester, Helena Goscilo, and Martin Skoro (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), xxxiv.

that nonetheless has had an enormous impact on American popular culture.<sup>28</sup> The *Left Behind* series of novels by evangelical writers Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have sold over 50 million copies since 1995 and evolved into a multimedia empire, while bestselling author Tom Perrotta’s secularized take on such an occurrence, *The Leftovers* (2011), was adapted into one of the most critically-acclaimed television series of the past decade. Even Marvel’s multibillion-dollar-grossing *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (Joe and Anthony Russo, 2018 and 2019), two of the most commercially successful films of all time, concern a Rapture-like event in which supervillain Thanos snaps his fingers and causes half of Earth’s population to suddenly vanish into dust. In Russia, however, Rapture theory is considered at best heterodox and at worst heretical by the Orthodox Church and has had virtually no religious impact. Yet it merits mention here because of comparisons that critics have raised between *Bite the Dust* and the most high-profile recent eschatological Russian film, Alexei Balabanov’s *Me Too (Ja tozhe khochu....*, 2012), in which a higher power spirits away some characters while leaving others behind in anguish.<sup>29</sup>

In *Me Too*, a St. Petersburg bandit leads a small group of people to a nearby village with a “bell tower of happiness” (*kolokol'nia schast'ia*) that either rewards a person by spiriting them off the earth upon entry or causing them to fall down dead shortly after exiting in disappointment. According to popular belief, all people living in the vicinity of the church tower

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<sup>28</sup> For a summary of the evolution of dispensational premillennialism from its conception in the mid-nineteenth century through the dawn of the twenty-first, see Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15–22.

<sup>29</sup> See Patrick Gamble, “Russian Film Festival 2013: ‘Bite the Dust’ Review,” *Cinevue*, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://cine-vue.com/2013/11/russian-film-festival-2013-bite-the-dust-review.html>; and Neil Young, “Bite the Dust (Otdat Konci): Cannes Review,” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 18, 2013, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/bite-dust-otdat-konci-cannes-524958>.

were killed by electromagnetic radiation years earlier, and the emptied village now rests in a perpetual, literal nuclear winter.<sup>30</sup> Although the characters are told that the Patriarch sanctions entry to the tower, and critic Aglaia Chechot describes the film as an “Orthodox road movie in which everyone gets what they deserve,”<sup>31</sup> another critic writing for the *Moscow News* recognizes the anomaly: “The mention of the Patriarch ... has puzzled me, because the film cannot be called Orthodox. This is a fairy tale, but from a religious point of view, perhaps it is heresy.”<sup>32</sup> Heretical though Balabanov’s premise may be, the same critic notes that the director—in what turned out to be his final film before dying at age fifty-four—engages in a last judgment of his own: “In the end it’s important whom the bell tower takes and whom it rejects, leaving to die in the snow—this indicates which people Balabanov himself considers ‘clean’ and who is ‘unclean.’”<sup>33</sup> Religious dogma is ultimately beside the point, superseded by artist’s social commentary and assessment of contemporary Russian values—in a (characteristically Orthodox) display of self-abasement, Balabanov appears as himself at the end of *Me Too* and is rejected by the tower.

*Bite the Dust* likewise would not withstand scrutiny in search of religious coherence, but it shares Balabanov’s millenarian concern: at the end of the world, who will be rewarded, who will be punished, and why? Rather than borrowing Rapture theory’s decree that the worthy will ascend from the earth, however, Igumentseva determines that they must stay and rebuild after all

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<sup>30</sup> An obvious source of inspiration here is once again Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, or at least Arkady and Boris Strugatsky’s source novel *Roadside Picnic (Piknik na obochine, 1972)*. For an intertextual analysis, see Anna Nieman, “A Picnic on the Road to the Temple,” *KinoKultura* 40 (April 2013), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2013/40-nieman.shtml>.

<sup>31</sup> Aglaia Chechot, “Pozovi menia, nebo,” *Seance*, March 15, 2012, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://seance.ru/articles/call-me-sky/>.

<sup>32</sup> Iurii Gladil’shchikov, “Posledniaia kolokol’nia,” *Moskovskie novosti*, December 13, 2012, accessed September 8, 2020, [https://www.mn.ru/blogs/blog\\_cinemagladil/85243](https://www.mn.ru/blogs/blog_cinemagladil/85243).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

other life has perished. Like the biblical Noah's Ark, Vanya's house rescues and preserves those who possess the potential to rebuild a better society. The film's Russian title, a pun whose meaning is lost in translation, further supports this nautical association. *Otdat' kontsy*, literally "to give the ends," is a phrase colloquially used as a wry euphemism for dying, akin to "to bite the dust," but it originated in naval jargon in reference to untying a ship from its pier.<sup>34</sup> Yet if the image of the villagers huddled safely together in a wooden craft waiting for floodwaters to subside recalls the Old Testament, then it also evokes by that association the conclusion of Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (*Russkii kovcheg*, 2002). In that film's final shot, the Hermitage doors open outward to reveal a watery expanse as the narrator proclaims, "The sea is all around. And we are destined to sail forever, to live forever." Still, although Tim Harte concludes that the former Winter Palace, "this Russian vessel of world art, will help ensure the survival of the country's own cultural values and its permanence in the face of persistent historical turmoil," the fact that the Hermitage-ark's cargo is indeed a trove of "world" (primarily Western European) art suggests that Russia itself is not endangered but, on the contrary, serving a messianic role.<sup>35</sup> Jeremi Szaniawski writes:

For Sokurov ... the West was the place where all the most important art was once produced, but is now in decline. Russia, to the contrary, survived the dark age of communism and might, by virtue of its never-distinguished appreciation for the legacy of Western art, but also thanks to the strength of its national soul and faith—the delicate heritage of Western Christianity, Russian religiosity, and Eastern spirituality—serve as

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<sup>34</sup> A. P. Evgen'evoi, ed., *Slovar' russkogo iazyka v 4 tomakh* (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1999), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://feb-web.ru/feb/mas/mas-abc/15/ma267319.htm?cmd=0&istext=1>.

<sup>35</sup> Tim Harte, "A Visit to the Museum: Aleksandr Sokurov's 'Russian Ark' and the Framing of the Eternal," *Slavic Review* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 44.

the redeeming ark where European culture will remain intact, while another historical deluge, which has yet to occur, drowns the decadent old civilisation.<sup>36</sup>

*Russian Ark*, then, promotes an exceptionalism that echoes Dostoevsky's idea of Russia establishing a "universal brotherhood of peoples" that will inevitably absorb and rectify Europe.<sup>37</sup> *Bite the Dust*'s house-ark, in contrast, retains only domestic cargo; Western art, explicitly represented in the film by Nina's DVDs, is expelled to the ash heap of history (Fig. 11). The villagers themselves sufficiently represent the Russian nation.



**Fig. 11: Nina salvaging DVDs in the flood (*Bite the Dust*).**

Émigré poet Vladislav Khodasevich argues in an untitled poem ("Ja rodilsia v Moskve...", April 25, 1923) that Russia is not defined by political borders but rather by its culture, in this case represented by the complete works of Alexander Pushkin:

I am a son to Russia, but to Poland

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<sup>36</sup> Jeremi Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 172.

<sup>37</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, "Pushkin (ocherk)," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 26 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 147.

I myself do not know who I am.  
But eight little volumes, no more,  
And in them my entire homeland.  
  
You'll place a yoke around your neck  
To live a life of exile, melancholy,  
But with me, my Russia,  
I bring along in a traveling bag.

России – пасынок, а Польше –  
Не знаю сам, кто Польше я.  
Но: восемь томиков, не больше, –  
И в них вся родина моя.

Вам – под ярмо ль подставить выю  
Иль жить в изгнании, в тоске.  
А я с собой свою Россию  
В дорожном уношу мешке.<sup>38</sup>

Discourse about the Russian diaspora tends to support Khodasevich's conception of the "imagined community" of Russia determined not by physical space but by the preservation of its language and culture, most often its literature.<sup>39</sup> But while scholarly consensus affirms the

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<sup>38</sup> Vladislav Khodasevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Soglasie, 1996), accessed September 8, 2020, [http://az.lib.ru/h/hodasevich\\_w\\_f/text\\_0500.shtml](http://az.lib.ru/h/hodasevich_w_f/text_0500.shtml).

<sup>39</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).



possible existence of a “Russia abroad” or “Russia beyond borders” (*russkoe zarubezh'e*),<sup>40</sup> *Bite the Dust* raises a hypothetical question: what determines a nation when *all* borders are rendered obsolete and all material cultural signifiers are destroyed? Igumentseva’s answer is a sentimental one; as she says in the previously-quoted interview, the Russian *narod* is defined by a uniquely emotional character, one further heightened in vibrancy and honesty among village dwellers. As a motion picture, then, *Bite the Dust* strives to accomplish the necessary task of concretizing an abstract notion of community that anticipates not only the impending disappearance of the Russian village but also a large-scale, world-changing, environmental catastrophe.

Introducing Valentin Rasputin’s seminal work of Soviet Village Prose, *Farewell to Matyora*, will serve as a convenient segue to my final chapter, since it informs both *Bite the Dust* and *The Postman’s White Nights*, which follows. The novella traces the final days of a Siberian island and the peasant village that resides upon it. When the construction of a hydroelectric dam begins, the village is flooded in order to create a reservoir, and its inhabitants are permanently displaced. Violetta Iverni describes the story as an “eschatological picture, something akin to a modern apocalypse,”<sup>41</sup> and David Gillespie summarizes its conclusion—featuring imagery akin to that of *Bite the Dust*—in similar terms: “The last of the villagers huddle together in the last remaining structure on the island as a motor boat sets out from the opposite bank to pick them up. A fog descends, thicker and more impenetrable than anything they had seen before, the boat gets lost.... The villagers think they may already be dead. This is the end of a world, the end of

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Petr Evgrafovich Kovalevskii, *Zarubezhnaia Rossiia – Istoriiia i kul'turno prosvetitel'naia rabota russkogo zarubezh'it za polveka 1920–1979*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librarie des cinq continents, 1971–1973); John Glad, *Russia Abroad: Writers, History, Politics* (Washington, D.C. and Tenafly, NJ: Birchbark and Hermitage, 1999); and Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Violetta Iverni, “Smert'iu – o zhizni!,” *Kontinent* 15 (1978): 312.

history, if not of time.”<sup>42</sup> He also observes that “[the village] Matyora is to Russia as is Noah’s Ark to the biblical world: the last refuge of God’s world before the Flood.”<sup>43</sup> For Village Prose writers and their characters, the apocalypse is represented by man’s domination of the natural world, but today the village, like most habitats, is understood to be threatened not only by rapid modernization but also by man-made climate change. *Bite the Dust*’s flood, after all, is not the localized consequence of a construction project but a global disaster.

Although the topic of climate change was hardly pervasive in Russia’s public discourse at the time of the film’s release, its threat potential was openly acknowledged by the media and the government.<sup>44</sup> In February 2010, for instance, President Dmitry Medvedev delivered a speech in which he “issued a wake up call to heads of state and social organizations and requested the creation of economic incentives to address climate change, pointing out that Russia is still quite a long way behind most developed countries in monitoring and forecasting climate change.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, even though nothing in *Bite the Dust*’s text directly attributes the flood to climate change, the topic had emerged in the background as a source of global anxiety, and today one finds it difficult to view the occurrence of such a catastrophic natural disaster outside of this context. In her recent book Jennifer Fay provides a model for retroactively ascribing such a context by reframing the entire history of cinema as both a product and commentary on the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch marked by significant human influence on Earth’s

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<sup>42</sup> Gillespie, “Apocalypse Now,” 415.

<sup>43</sup> Gillespie, *Valentin Rasputin*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> For a summary and analysis of Russian media coverage of climate change in the early 2000s, see Nina Tynkkynen, “A Great Ecological Power in Global Climate Policy? Framing Climate Change As a Policy Problem in Russian Public Discussion,” *Environmental Politics* 19, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>45</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russia’s Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014), 85.

ecosystems.<sup>46</sup> She writes, “[C]limate change may put us in the thrall of end times and apocalyptic fantasies of collapse. This future-orientation is what Srinivas Aravamudan has critiqued as ‘the catachronism of climate change,’ which borrows predictions from science in the service of a quasi-messianic projection that ‘re-characterizes the past and present in terms of a future proclaimed as determined but that is of course not fully realized.’”<sup>47</sup> *Bite the Dust*, unlike the other films of New Village Cinema, exemplifies this catachronism by positing that in an eschatological narrative the past and nostalgia are unproductive and that the present is not a stagnation but a period of spiritual stocktaking.

Vanya experiences a dream near the end of *Bite the Dust*, after the rain begins but before the flood, that is revealed to be a pseudo-premonition. He gets out of bed, follows Nina outside, and watches from his deck as she dances across a frozen tundra that has buried the surrounding village. She shouts, “I’m leaving you! I’m going through the snow!” and he calls after her as she disappears out of frame. In the final scene, after the floodwaters have frozen, Vanya looks out onto the same landscape, framed in a long shot identical to that in his dream, only now Nina is standing beside him. “Don’t leave me,” he tells her, clutching her hand. “I never will,” she promises. Examining climate change anxiety in contemporary film and literature, E. Ann Kaplan focuses on what she calls “pretrauma,” the traumatic anticipation of future catastrophe, and describes the symptoms of “Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome,” which include nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, depressions and paranoia: “These fantasies function as warnings, a

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<sup>46</sup> See Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeil, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature,” *Ambio: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36, no. 8 (December 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19. Contains a quote from Srinivas Aravamudan, “The Catachronism of Climate Change,” *Diacritics* 41, no. 3 (2013): 8.

kind of ‘memory of the future.’”<sup>48</sup> Igumentseva gets to have her cake and eat it too by depicting both the fulfillment of Vanya’s vision of environmental catastrophe and an ostensibly happy ending grounded in romantic coupling, but this choice does not render her characters’ pretrauma uninformative. Kaplan argues that viewers of these films, by bearing witness to potential traumatic futures, may experience a kind of vicarious pretrauma that instills an ethical imperative that involves “taking responsibility for injustices in the past and preventing future human-based catastrophe.”<sup>49</sup> Even in its lighthearted and comedic register, *Bite the Dust* tacitly warns that much more is at stake beyond the village.

*Bite the Dust* is unique among this dissertation’s films in that it portrays loss without assigning implicit or explicit blame to some internal factor like administrative neglect or immigrants. Even the issue of climate change, which has become a political lightning rod across the world in recent years, is commonly framed by domestic policy-makers as a threat Russia is ameliorating, not exacerbating. Nikolai Kliuev of the Russian Academy of Science’s Geographical Institute, for example, insists that “Russia’s positive ecological role is more significant than its harmful impact on global geocological processes.”<sup>50</sup> Igumentseva’s film illustrates, then, that New Village Cinema as a movement is defined not by a cohesive political agenda but instead by its accommodation of various formal schemata that enable its audience to comprehend and cope with the village’s expiration.

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<sup>48</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> N. N. Kliuev, “Rossiia na ekologicheskoi karte mira,” *Geografiia* 47 (2001), accessed September 8, 2020, <https://geo.1sept.ru/article.php?ID=200104702>.

## Chapter Four:

### *The Postman's White Nights: The Village Elapsing*

Put me in a movie, and everyone will know me.  
– Weyes Blood

Andrei Konchalovsky believes that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who eat popcorn at the movies, and those who do not. His films, he said at a 2016 press conference, are made for those who do not eat popcorn, and he would prefer to prohibit the sale of it at screenings of his work.<sup>1</sup> Such innocuous provocations are hardly uncharacteristic of Konchalovsky, one of world cinema's most capricious filmmakers for the past half-century. Despite his enduring status as a living icon of Russian cinema, Konchalovsky is perhaps best known for his distinct lack of a signature, auteurist style.<sup>2</sup>

Few filmmakers of his stature can boast a filmography as generically or thematically diverse. After co-writing Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966), he made his directorial debut with the Kurosawa-inspired Chingiz Aitmatov adaptation *First Teacher* (*Pervyi uchitel'*, 1965), followed by the kolkhoz drama *Asya's Happiness* (*Istoriia Asi Kliachinoi, kotoraiia liubila, da ne vyshla zamuzh*, 1966), which was censored in the Soviet Union until 1988, and adaptations of Turgenev's *A Gentry Nest* (*Dvorianskoe gnezdo*, 1969) and Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (*Diadia Vania*, 1970). Broadening his ambitions, he next helmed the popular musical *A Lover's Romance* (*Romans o vliublennykh*, 1974) and the sprawling family saga *Siberiade* (1979) before moving to the United States in

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<sup>1</sup> TASS, "Konchalovskii budet prepiatstvovat' prodazhe popkorna na ego fil'makh," December 15, 2016, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://tass.ru/kultura/3875938>.

As of September 2020, no moratorium on popcorn has been enacted.

<sup>2</sup> In his biography *Andrei Konchalovskii: Nikto ne znaet...* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2017), Viktor Filimonov describes Konchalovsky's periods in the Soviet Union, United States, and post-Soviet Russia as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, respectively. His attempt to educe thematic coherence from these periods, however, is ultimately unpersuasive.

1980. Even working within the Hollywood studio system, Konchalovsky's projects varied wildly in style and quality: *Maria's Lovers* (1985), *Duet for One* (1986), and *Shy People* (1987) are mostly-forgotten intimate character studies, while *Tango & Cash* (1989), from which he was ultimately fired, and Whoopi Goldberg vehicle *Homer and Eddie* (1990) were would-be-blockbuster fiascoes. Only the action thriller *Runaway Train* (1985), nominated for three Academy Awards, can be argued to have made any significant impact on American film culture. The next two decades found Konchalovsky alternating between festival fare like the belated sequel *Asya and the Hen with the Golden Eggs* (*Kurochka Riaba*, 1994) and the controversial anti-Chechen War dramedy *House of Fools* (*Dom durakov*, 2002), and lavish English-language television productions *The Odyssey* (1997) and *The Lion in Winter* (2003).<sup>3</sup>

Konchalovsky chose a curious moment in his career to wage a war on concession snacks and defend the sanctity of the movie theater experience. Just six years earlier he experienced his most devastating professional failure: *The Nutcracker in 3D*, an international co-production—and a “popcorn movie” if there ever was one—that recouped a small fraction of its \$90 million budget, received savage reviews, and compelled the director to denounce Hollywood once and for all. His following film, *The Postman's White Nights* (*Belye nochi pochta'ona Alekseia Triapitsyna*) was an immediate critical success, winning the Silver Lion at the 2014 Venice Film Festival, but Konchalovsky eschewed a domestic theatrical release entirely, opting instead for a televised premiere on Russia's Channel One. He explained this decision in an interview, saying, “I want the viewer to watch my film for free, so that at any moment he can go to the toilet, make tea, or change the channel to [talk show host] Urgant. So that at any moment he can say ‘I’m

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Konchalovsky's life and career, see Konchalovsky, *9 glav o kino i t.d....* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2013), *Nizkie istiny: 7 let spustia* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), and *Nizkie istiny: Vozvyshaiushchii obman* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2014).

bored' and leave—I don't want audiences to pay to sit and suffer. But those who watch until the end—they will be my audience."<sup>4</sup> I will eventually return to the significance of Konchalovsky's acknowledgment of boredom as a predictable response to the film, but for now it suffices to state that audiences were generally receptive, as *The Postman's White Nights* was watched by 19.7 percent of Russia's active television viewers upon its October 19, 2014 premiere, making it the second-most successful film or series of the week.<sup>5</sup> Even if many of these viewers were indeed going to the toilet or making tea instead of watching the film in rapt attention, it was undoubtedly seen by more people than if it had received a traditional theatrical release.

The average shot length (ASL) in *The Postman's White Nights* is 9.5 seconds.<sup>6</sup> This figure is significantly higher than the ASL of English-language films between the years 2000 and 2013 (4.7 seconds) but actually slightly lower than the ASL of non-English language films of the same era (10.9 seconds).<sup>7</sup> While this film's tempo, then, is positively breakneck compared to those by contemporary titans of glacial pacing like Béla Tarr (*The Turin Horse* [*A torinói ló*, 2011], ASL 245.8 seconds) or even Nuri Bilge Ceylan (*Climates* [*İklimler*, 2006], ASL 28.8 seconds), I feel confident in contending that it, at the very least, approaches the definition of what is known as "slow cinema."<sup>8</sup> Emre Çağlayan summarizes slow cinema as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Igor' Karev, "“Ia khochu, shtoby zritel' posmotrel moi fil'm besplatno,”” *Gazeta.ru*, October 9, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, [https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2014/10/09/a\\_6254913.shtml?updated](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2014/10/09/a_6254913.shtml?updated).

<sup>5</sup> Kseniia Genina, "Telereitingi fil'mov i serialov Rossii s 13 po 19 oktiabria: Tri proekta 'Pervogo kanala' popali v Top-5, lideruet melodrama 'Dom s liliiami,'" *FilmPro*, October 21, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.filmpro.ru/materials/32048>.

<sup>6</sup> I calculated this myself using the free software provided by *Cinematics*, a "movie measurement and study tool database" developed by Yuri Tsivian and Gunārs Civjans. [www.cinematics.lv](http://www.cinematics.lv).

<sup>7</sup> James E. Cutting and Ayse Candan, "Shot Duration, Shot Classes, and the Increased Pace of Popular Movies." *Projections* 9, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 46.

<sup>8</sup> Cinematics, "Cinematics Database," [www.cinematics.lv/database.php](http://www.cinematics.lv/database.php).

As a discrete strand of contemporary art cinema, slow cinema's distinguishing characteristics pertain ultimately to its aesthetic design, which comprises techniques associated with cinematic minimalism and realism. These films retard narrative pace and elide causality, displacing conventional storytelling devices for the benefit of establishing and sustaining a mood and atmosphere, which are often stretched to their extreme in order to impel the viewers to confront cinematic temporality in all its undivided glory.... The films' aesthetic trademarks include a mannered use of the long take and a resolute emphasis on dead time: devices that foster a mode of narration that initially appears baffling, cryptic and incomprehensible, but offers, above all, an extended experience of duration on screen.<sup>9</sup>

Additional characteristics are offered by James Quandt, including “*adagio* rhythms and oblique narrative; a tone of quietude and reticence, an aura of unexplained or unearned anguish; attenuated takes, long tracking or panning shots, often of depopulated landscapes; prolonged hand-held follow shots of solo people walking.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout this chapter I will not attempt to prove that *The Postman's White Nights* is a textbook example of slow cinema, but rather I will utilize the fluid paradigm of slow cinema to argue that the most conspicuous formal features of the film articulate a process of loss and mourning through their emphatic rendering of temporality.

*The Postman's White Nights* captures the quotidian existence of the titular Aleksei Triapitsyn and his native village of Kositsyna, situated on Lake Kenozero in the northern

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<sup>9</sup> Emre Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema: Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), ix–x.

<sup>10</sup> James Quandt, “The Sandwich Process: Simon Field Talks about Polemics and Poetry at Film Festivals,” in *Dekalog 3: On Film Festivals*, ed. Richard Porton (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 76.



Arkhangelsk Oblast. According to the 2010 Russian census, Kositsyna boasts a population of eleven, and the film accurately depicts it as a village on the verge of death.<sup>11</sup> Only a few children are seen, one being the son of the mayor who eventually relocates her family in search of better opportunities. All other residents appear to be middle-aged or older, earning very modest wages or living off pensions, and either current or—in the protagonist’s case—recovering alcoholics. Aside from a bittersweet romantic subplot involving Triapitsyn’s unrequited affection for the mayor, Irina, the story’s inciting incident is the disappearance, or presumed theft, of his boat’s motor, without which he cannot navigate the lake and properly fulfill his duties. Growing increasingly frustrated, tired, and lonely, Triapitsyn lashes out at his friends and neighbors and retreats from the village before ultimately returning to make peace and accept his lot.

From the first frame of the opening credit sequence, Konchalovsky establishes a juxtaposition between truth and fiction, history and myth, realism and aestheticism. Triapitsyn is looking through a stack of old photographs that evoke some fond memories but convey a life intimately familiar with loss—the loss of his wife, of a friend, and of his sobriety. His hands, weathered by decades of labor, are shot in close-up, discarding one photo at a time until the frame is dominated by the surface upon which the photos were stacked: a kitschy tablecloth depicting a lakeshore, with seabirds, swans, and rabbits among colorful wildflowers along the water’s edge (Fig. 12). Most of the animals appear to have been superimposed onto the scene, and they are not sized to scale. Thus before the film’s setting is even revealed, Konchalovsky hints that it will be simultaneously real and unreal. Just as the tablecloth introduces foreign elements into a pre-existing setting, so does Konchalovsky situate a cinematic narrative within

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<sup>11</sup> See Federal’naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoi statistiki, “Vserossiiskaia perepis’ naseleniia 2010.”

the framework of authentic life in Kositsyna.



**Fig. 12:** Triapitsyn looks through photographs (*The Postman's White Nights*).

To tell this story, a near-seamless mix of fiction and *cinéma vérité*, Konchalovsky returns to the form he had last used half a century prior in *Asya's Happiness*, employing various elements associated with neorealism (“perhaps the watershed in the history of slow cinema”): nonprofessional actors, hand-held camerawork, deep-focus cinematography, numerous long, uninterrupted takes, and minimal dramatic incident.<sup>12</sup> Critic Elena Gracheva draws an explicit connection between *Asya's Happiness* and neorealism, arguing that by the 1950s artists and audiences of all post-totalitarian societies craved a return of truth: “They missed life, just life. No matter whose, as long as it is real.”<sup>13</sup> Konchalovsky’s realist depiction of a love triangle among

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<sup>12</sup> Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Elena Gracheva, “Posleslovie,” *Seance*, January 30, 2008, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://seance.ru/n/35-36/story-asya/posleslovie/>.

kolkhozniks, however, was (despite its offense to Soviet censors) ultimately more an aesthetic exercise than an expression of an ethical imperative. If neorealism can be described as “the inherent ‘realism of the medium of cinema exploited for disseminating knowledge in the service of social justice,’”<sup>14</sup> an attitude shared by its Italian progenitors including Luchino Visconti, Cesare Zavattini, and Roberto Rossellini—who called it “above all a moral position”—then *Asya*’s screenwriter Yuri Klepikov was more of a neorealist in spirit than the director himself.<sup>15</sup> “[Konchalovsky] was not interested in the life of the Russian village, or the Russian soul, or, by and large, this story itself about a girl who loved, but did not get married. The main thing is that this story should be filmed as if it were not preconceived and acted out, but snatched from life in all its fullness of random texture and charm of unpremeditated details ... for Klepikov, the authenticity of this story lay in the ethical plane, for Konchalovsky—in the aesthetic.”<sup>16</sup>

A single frame in both *Asya’s Happiness* and *The Postman’s White Nights* plainly illustrates the point at which Konchalovsky’s films converge with and diverge from neorealism. The former begins with a title sequence that states, “This film was made with the participation of three professional actors. All other roles were performed by workers and kolkhozniks of the Vladimirskaja and Gorkovskaia Oblasts.” Similarly, *The Postman’s White Nights* ends its title sequence with a note that states, “This film was shot in northern Russia, on the shores of Lake Kenozero. The protagonists are real people living in Kenozero villages.” In contrast, Visconti’s 1948 neorealist Marxist epic *La Terra Trema* boasts a title card that reads:

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema: An Aesthetic Approach* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>15</sup> Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson, “Introduction,” in *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*, ed. Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Gracheva, “Posleslovie.”

The events in this film take place in Italy. Sicily, to be more precise, in the town of Acitrezza, not far from Catania, on the Ionian Sea. It's the same age-old story of man's exploitation of man. These are the houses, streets, boats and people of Acitrezza. All the actors were chosen from among the townspeople: fishermen, farm laborers, bricklayers, and fish merchants. They speak in their dialect to express their suffering and hope, for in Sicily, Italian is not the language spoken by the poor.

In his study of Italian neorealism, Christopher Wagstaff writes that performances by non-professional actors “narrow the distance between the icon and its referent and, since viewers were told about the performers in promotional material, a form of ‘proximity’ to the referent was used to suggest greater ‘authenticity.’”<sup>17</sup> Konchalovsky's films boast of this authenticity upfront while omitting any mention of social issues like those introduced by Visconti. His title card also omits the fact that the major roles of Irina and her son Timka are played by professional actors. Despite Konchalovsky's efforts to distance himself from the class-oriented ethical concerns of Italian neorealism (and, for that matter, the neo-neo realism of recent American cinema identified by A. O. Scott), his adherence to its aesthetic principles compels his audience to contemplate and share in the characters' ennui by consciously experiencing the duration and passage of time.<sup>18</sup>

One way Konchalovsky conveys the monotony of Triapitsyn's existence is through repetition. According to a popular anecdote shared by Cesare Zavattini:

A well-known American producer [...] told me: ‘This is how *we* would imagine a scene with an aeroplane. The plane passes by ... a machine-gun fires ... the plane crashes....

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<sup>17</sup> Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, 31.

<sup>18</sup> See A. O. Scott, “Neo-Neo Realism,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2009, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html>.

And this is how *you* would imagine it. The plane passes by.... The plane passes by again ... the plane passes by once more....’

He was right. But we have still not gone far enough. It is not enough to make the aeroplane pass by three times; we must make it pass by twenty times.<sup>19</sup>

Four times throughout *The Postman’s White Nights*, the same three-shot sequence shows Triapitsyn rising in the morning: a long shot of him sitting up in his bed, a point-of-view shot of him looking down at his bare feet and the pair of sandals between them, and another long shot of him standing up and putting on pants and the sandals. Triapitsyn’s face exhibits a permanent weariness; the physical and emotional effort required simply to begin a new day is palpable, and this is not merely a performance. “I gladly agreed to be in the film,” recalls the real Triapitsyn in an interview, “because our life is boring.”<sup>20</sup> Joseph Brodsky wrote that “the reason boredom deserves such scrutiny is that it represents pure, undiluted time in all its redundant, monotonous splendor,” but for the villager living from paycheck to paycheck or pension check to pension check, such splendor proves elusive.<sup>21</sup> During a frank discussion over tea, Triapitsyn’s friend Yura reveals his struggle with depression. “My soul hurts all the time,” he says. “If I am working, I can forget for a while.” Triapitsyn, less candidly verbose, nonetheless agrees: “Yes, life hurts. And if you push back, sadness [*toska*] overcomes you.” Vladimir Nabokov’s oft-cited remarks on *toska* bear repeating here, as they articulate with great precision the pain wordlessly expressed by Triapitsyn throughout the rest of the film:

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<sup>19</sup> Cesare Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema,” trans. Pier Luigi Lanza, in *Vittorio de Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 52. Unbracketed ellipses in original.

<sup>20</sup> Svetlana Tsygankova, “Aleksieia Triapitsyna Konchalovskii spas ot skuki zhizni,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, October 19, 2013, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2014/10/19/reg-szfo/film.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “In Praise of Boredom,” in *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995), 109.

No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody or something specific, nostalgia, lovesickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.<sup>22</sup>

This gradient scale illustrates the emotional proximity between anguish and boredom, a paradigm that stands in stark contrast to the ideas of Siegfried Kracauer, who wrote that if “one has the patience, the sort of patience specific to legitimate boredom, then one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly.”<sup>23</sup> *The Postman’s White Nights*’ formal reflection of its subjects’ boredom and *toska* sets it apart from the previously-discussed New Village Cinema films, whose characters’ existences are hardly bereft of dramatic incident. As it is chronologically the final film in this series, its dearth of action—not to be confused with routine activity, described below—appropriately articulates the emotional register of this later, near-terminal phase in the village’s process of disappearance. After all, according to the influential model of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the final stage of grief is acceptance.

Even if Triapitsyn and his brethren appear unreceptive to Kracauer’s euphoria, boredom can at least be a productive experience for their audience. As Konchalovsky mentioned, he anticipated that the film would bore many watching it at home on television; but those who do not change the channel may find themselves becoming keenly attuned to the postman and his

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<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, commentary to *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, by Aleksandr Pushkin, vol. 2, trans. Vladimir Nabokov, Bollingen Series LXXII (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 141.

<sup>23</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Boredom,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 334.

distinctly rural *toska*. If, as Roger Ebert famously claimed, movies are “the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts,”<sup>24</sup> and if, as Peter Toohey argues, “boredom offers an unusual and rare enforced opportunity to see yourself as another,” then a film as leisurely paced and astoundingly quiet as *The Postman’s White Nights* should, theoretically, ensure that the woebegone Russian villager is seen and understood, not merely pitied.<sup>25</sup>

Tarkovsky wrote of “the one precious potential of the cinema—the possibility of printing on celluloid the actuality of time” and (naively) assumed, echoing Ebert and Toohey’s statements, that “a person normally goes to the cinema for *time*: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person’s experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer.”<sup>26</sup> *Nostalghia* (1983), the slowest of his slow films, uses long takes and a scarcity of dialogue and incident to evoke the “melancholic stasis” of its protagonist Andrei, a Russian exile in Italy (and a Tarkovsky proxy).<sup>27</sup> “As the film slows down,” observes Christy L. Burns, “its emphasis tips back into the mind, a place of obsessive remembrance. This insistent interiority may counter postmodernity’s habitual haste, but it also provokes questions about the dangers of nostalgia as a refusal to work through mourning.”<sup>28</sup> Tarkovsky’s attempt to overcome postmodern haste (i.e., the urban) with a poetics of slow interiority is revived by his erstwhile collaborator Konchalovsky, but Triapitsyn represents a proletarian alternative to the former’s

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<sup>24</sup> Roger Ebert, “Ebert’s Walk of Fame Remarks,” *RogerEbert.com*, June 24, 2005, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/eberts-walk-of-fame-remarks>.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Toohey, *Boredom: A Lively History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 186–87.

<sup>26</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 63.

<sup>27</sup> Christy L. Burns, “Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia*: Refusing Modernity, Re-Envisioning Beauty,” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 104–5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

typically bourgeois daydreamers. Although the postman, like Andrei, shows signs of suffering from what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia,” which “dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance,”<sup>29</sup> it does not lead to the same “stagnation that prevents [Andrei] from pursuing the usual plot-worthy trajectories.”<sup>30</sup> Despite his occasional reveries (to which I will return) and the relatively relaxed pace of country life, a perpetual state of near-poverty denies a contemporary villager like Triapitsyn the luxury of stasis. Rural *toska*, then, contradictorily entails frequent movement, no matter how slow. The mobility necessitated by Triapitsyn’s daily duties as a postman distracts him from successfully working through his mourning, but it also sustains him, like the proverbial shark that will die if it stops swimming.

Konchalovsky’s preoccupation with the repetitive nature of daily routine recalls Village Prose’s characteristic depiction of cyclical time. In fact, nearly all the defining features of that literary movement are present and accounted for here: the village setting, the urban/rural dichotomy, elderly characters, environmental concerns, and nostalgia. The film cannot be considered a truly authentic revitalization of the Village Prose ethos, though, because a village prosaist must himself be a villager, a *derevenshchik*. Konchalovsky, the cosmopolitan Muscovite whose aristocratic family roots have been traced back hundreds of years, is decidedly not a *derevenshchik*. This film, then, captures the village through a privileged outsider’s gaze, and its inhabitants are unavoidably othered as a result. Konchalovsky’s own condescending words about his subject support this argument: “This film is my perception of life among very simple Russian people ... they are remarkable, fairytale [*skazochnye*] people living in another century.”<sup>31</sup> Critic

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<sup>29</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Burns, “Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia*,” 115.

<sup>31</sup> Konchalovsky, interview by *Novosti kultury*, July 24, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, <http://konchalovsky.ru/works/films/Belye-nochi-pochtalyona-tryapitcina/>.



Andrei Plakhov, while praising the quality of the film, references Konchalovsky's background as a "noble soviet" and describes the film as an "immersion in an exotic reality."<sup>32</sup>

In a 2016 interview with the Russian news site *Meduza*, Konchalovsky explains, much to journalist Katerina Gordeeva's surprise, the apparent turn towards conservatism he experienced while filming in the village:

My life on Kenozero greatly influenced me ... life with people who are harmonious in everything they do, who are not concerned with Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Pozner, 'having to pay for past sins,' or anything at all from our hectic life. They live in some kind of wonderful, completely archaic world of their own Shakespearean harmony, or even of ancient tragedy.... They cannot be driven into capitalism or private enterprise.... Beyond Moscow, people have completely different values: they want the state to leave them in peace.<sup>33</sup>

Aside from the assumptions, hyperbole, and projection in this loaded statement, *The Postman's White Nights* and Konchalovsky's own actions after filming wrapped directly contradict his last sentence. In a 2017 *Novaia Gazeta* piece that interviewed the stars of the film to assess how their lives have and have not changed since its release, Triapitsyn reveals that "[Konchalovsky] saved me." After filming, the director donated money to repair and update the post office and even—

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Konchalovsky's attitude is echoed in critic Tat'iana Moskvina's fawning but uncomfortably classist essay on the film, "It is a pity that the villagers cannot fully appreciate the beauty of their land and love it properly—perhaps in order to do this one must wander and suffer in a foreign land, as the director himself did." Moskvina, "Udivitel'nyi fil'm rezhissera Andreia Konchalovskogo," in *Kul'turnyi razgovor* (Moscow: Redaktsiia Eleny Shubinoi, 2018), 147.

<sup>32</sup> Andrei Plakhov, "Dlinnaia distantsiia: Andrei Konchalovskii," *Seance*, August 3, 2018, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://seance.ru/articles/dlinnaya-distanciya-andrej-konchalovskij/>.

<sup>33</sup> Katerina Gordeeva, "'Nel'zia vo glavu ugla stavit' prava cheloveka': Interv'iu Andreia Konchalovskogo o *Rae* i neobkhodimosti tsenzury," *Meduza*, December 26, 2016, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/12/26/nelzya-vo-glavu-ugla-stavit-prava-cheloveka>.

according to rumor—bought the postmen a snowmobile to use in the winter.<sup>34</sup> Knowledge of Konchalovsky's notoriously fickle personal beliefs may complicate the ideological slant, if any, one perceives in the film, but they do inform his spatial perception of the village, which in turn influences his audience's heightened awareness of time.

Throughout the film Konchalovsky offers no sense of the real geography of Kositsyna. The two-minute sequence immediately following the opening credits is comprised of twelve standard establishing shots introducing the setting and characters. That we are in a rural village is clear. When viewed one after another, though, these shots become spatially disorienting, lacking the cohesion of classical narrative space. Henri Lefebvre observed that one obvious consequence of the production of social space is the disappearance of natural space. Still, he wrote, "Natural space has not vanished purely and simply from the scene. It is still the background of the picture; as decor, and more than decor, it persists everywhere, and every natural detail, every natural object is valued even more as it takes on symbolic weight."<sup>35</sup> The initial establishing shot of Kositsyna, however, subverts this axiom by foregrounding and thus privileging the forest edge, its fir trees and grassy hillocks partially obscuring our first glimpse of the village in the background. This shot, and those that follow it, also serve to further reinforce Konchalovsky's—and by proxy, the audience's—outsider status in this milieu. We do not begin inside the village boundary; rather, we are looking toward it, curious about the spaces, people, and happenings within.

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<sup>34</sup> Viktoriia Odissonova and Anna Bessarabova, "'Pochtal'on' Triapitsyn ustal byt' brendom," *Novaia gazeta*, January 17, 2017, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/01/18/71191-pochtalon-tryapitsyn-ustal-byt-brendom>.

<sup>35</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 30.

This opening series of shots can be divided into three types, all of which distance the spectator from the subject in some manner. Like the first example, there are those which physically distance the village through the use of a long shot. The natural landscape in these shots, and throughout the film, is, in Derrida's terms, both the "ergon" and the "parergon," the main focus and the ornamentation, the work of art and its frame.<sup>36</sup> Total stillness—the camera remains static, and no musical score plays—again slows the film's pace to promote contemplation, in these instances about the temporal (and temporary) relationship between man and nature. The first establishing shot, for example, features fir saplings in the middle-ground, a sign that regardless of human history, life—to quote *Jurassic Park's* Dr. Ian Malcolm—finds a way. In *Village Prose*, similarly, the "cyclical structuring of life seems to lift the village out of history and put it down in a protected place in the primordial forest."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the growing saplings serve as a reminder that natural space will eventually overtake the social space once the latter no longer serves its purpose.

The next type of shot in this sequence more explicitly highlights the subject-spectator divide by featuring a physical boundary in the form of a wooden fence. Once again the village threshold plays an important symbolic role. Konchalovsky tacitly recognizes that we must tread carefully, lest our transgression of this border be perceived as a threat. Any potential conflict resulting from an outsider's infiltration of this tight-knit community, however, is diffused by a key feature of the digital cinematography used here: its capacity for intimacy and immediacy. Digital cinematography allows for a smaller set with equipment that requires fewer crew members to operate. If the director or cinematographer can handle a single mobile digital camera themselves, then they gain mobility to explore, and their inexperienced actors will likely perform

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<sup>36</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," trans. Craig Owens, *October* 9 (Summer 1979).

<sup>37</sup> Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, 54.

more naturally than if they were surrounded by a traditional film set. On the verisimilitudinous benefits of this approach, scholars routinely reference and quote directors of the Iranian New Wave's hybrid documentaries. In Ariel Rogers's *Cinematic Appeals*, for example, Samira Makhmalbaf states that "the digital revolution once again allows the centrality of the human aspect of cinema to overcome the intermediary function of its instruments."<sup>38</sup> Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second* relates Abbas Kiarostami's fondness for the "intimacy" of the "new, less cumbersome technology,"<sup>39</sup> and Ohad Landesman argues that "Kiarostami makes use of digital video to bring cinema back to its 'point-zero' and fulfill the Bazinian aesthetic responsibility in its full extremity: observing life without judging it or intervening in its natural flow."<sup>40</sup> Konchalovsky's aesthetic ethos need not be compared to Kiarostami's, but his digital camera crucially enables him to observe this same "natural flow" of life so integral to his linkage of slow time and the process of loss.

Many critics have pointed out *The Postman's White Nights*' previously-mentioned debt to Italian neorealism (even narratively, the theft of the postman's motor slyly nods to De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*), but a neorealist style does not necessarily guarantee intimacy. In Gilles Deleuze's understanding, neorealism "is the cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent," a definition to which Konchalovsky explicitly commits through the third type of shot introduced in the film's opening sequence: footage captured on video cameras mounted inside the actors'

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<sup>38</sup> Ariel Rogers, *Cinematic Appeals: The Experience of New Movie Technologies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 116.

<sup>39</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 142.

<sup>40</sup> Ohad Landesman, "In and Out of This World: Digital Video and the Aesthetics of Realism in the New Hybrid Documentary," *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1 (2008): 38.

houses.<sup>41</sup> These shots capture the villagers at their least self-conscious; as they lie in bed, get dressed, and make tea, it is impossible to tell if they even realize they are being filmed—these are moments that surpass realism and approach *cinéma vérité*, or at least reality television (Fig. 13). At the same time, however, they are overtly voyeuristic and therefore only reinforce the othering of their subjects. Although we as spectators have crossed the village threshold, we are not immediately assimilated; we remain outsiders who frequently gaze upon these people as if studying them under a microscope, a vantage point which fulfills Konchalovsky's stated ethnographic intent: "I simply wanted to take a camera, go far from Moscow to the North, gaze at people, understand them.... I would call it a close reading of life, a biography, a cognition of the world."<sup>42</sup> The use of "hidden" cameras also functions as a meta-commentary on the voyeuristic nature of Triapitsyn himself, whose position as postman grants him access to his neighbors' homes, which he regularly enters unannounced. In one scene, he goes so far as to peer through Irina's ajar bedroom door as she masturbates.

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<sup>41</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Konchalovsky, interview by *RIA Novosti*, July 26, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, <http://konchalovsky.ru/works/films/Belye-nochi-pochtalyona-tryapitcina/>.



Fig. 13: “Hidden” camera footage of Triapitsyn in bed (*The Postman’s White Nights*).

Another voyeur with seemingly unlimited territorial access is introduced early in the film, this time in the form of an enigmatic recurring symbol: a gray cat that periodically appears to Triapitsyn and watches him while he sleeps. Though the insertion of this creature into the narrative “reality” is among the most glaring instances of directorial intrusion, Konchalovsky has remained characteristically mum about its significance. In an interview with the magazine *Ogonek* he says, “Of course, I can lie to you and make up any sort of answers.... You liked the cat in the film? It seemed to you to be a specter haunting the postman? You’re right. Think whatever you want.”<sup>43</sup>

The cat’s first appearance to Triapitsyn while he is in bed raises the possibility that he might be dreaming. In one of the film’s more conspicuously composed shots, an eyeline match from Triapitsyn’s point of view reveals the cat perched atop a dresser, seated in front of a tri-fold vanity mirror. This *mise-en-scène* serves a practical purpose—the glass of the mirror captures the

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<sup>43</sup> *Ogonek*, ““Rossiia – strana srednevekovaia,”” September 15, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, <http://konchalovsky.ru/press/interviews/rossiya-strana-srednevekovaya/>.

limited natural light (it appears to be early morning) in the room and backlights the cat to dramatic effect—and a symbolic one, for the cat’s reflection in the three panels creates the illusion that he is facing every direction at once and possesses a complete field of vision. The cat thus appears mysterious and omniscient to the audience and to the protagonist; the camera cuts away to Triapitsyn with a look of bewilderment on his face, and when it cuts back to the mirror, the cat is gone. He later confides to his sister, “A gray cat appears to me every night. There are no gray cats in our village.” She responds by asking if he has relapsed.

While the cat’s metaphorical significance remains ambiguous within the context of *The Postman’s White Nights* as a standalone text, it acquires intertextual meaning in relation to Rasputin’s *Farewell to Matyora*, “by common consent the single most important work in this movement, and the one that seemed to both its author and the critics to ‘logically complete the village theme.’ The apocalyptic finale of the work was the strongest possible image for expressing the sense that the traditional village had reached the end of its history.”<sup>44</sup> As the novella’s characters reluctantly evacuate their village before the state floods it, a spirit referred to as the “Master of the Island” (*Khoziain ostrova*) observes their prolonged exodus and finally vanishes along with his home. The Master is described as being “small, no bigger than a cat, a beast unlike any other,”<sup>45</sup> and an illustration by Sergei Eloian featured on the Rasputin Museum’s website portrays it as having a distinctly feline body with humanoid hands and facial features (Fig. 14).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Parthé, “Foreword: Master of the Island,” in *Farewell to Matyora*, by Valentin Rasputin, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), ix. Contains a quote by Liliia Vil’chek, “Vniz po techeniiu derevenskoi prozy,” *Voprosy literatury* 6 (1985): 72.

<sup>45</sup> Rasputin, *Farewell to Matyora*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Musei V. G. Rasputina, “Illiustratsii k proizvedeniiam,” accessed September 8, 2020, <http://vgrasputin.ru/illjustratsii-k-proizvedenijam>.



Fig. 14: *The Master of the Island*, illustration by Sergei Eloian.

David Gillespie identifies the Master as the personified “life-force of Nature.... It knows everyone and everything on the island, it can sense the breathing of plants and feel the pain of trees as they are cut down.”<sup>47</sup> Parthé elaborates:

The Master of the island ... who knows everyone and everything past, present, and to come, is an extension of the folk idea of the place spirit. There was hardly a peasant home, barn, bathhouse, or threshing floor that did not have a resident spirit. The woods had its wood goblin, the water its water sprite, but chief among these was the *domovoi*, the guardian spirit of the peasant dwelling, its second ‘master’ whose origins lay in an ancestor cult. He took an active interest in the life of the household and was especially upset by loss or change.... The Master is the *domovoi* of the whole island of Matyora.... He knows that the dead come to the living at night in what seem to be dreams but which

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Curiously, Elem Klimov’s lyrical 1983 film adaptation, *Farewell (Proshchaniye)*, features no visual representation of the Master. The camera itself fulfills the role, silently and passively bearing witness to the destruction of Matyora.

<sup>47</sup> Gillespie, *Valentin Rasputin*, 41.



are really recollections. And the Master also knows that he is the last in his line; as a place spirit he cannot survive the disappearance of his kingdom beneath the waves.<sup>48</sup>

Triapitsyn's apparition evokes this Master both in its feline nature and in its adherence to the village boundary; it is the *domovoi* of Kositsyna. When the postman spends a night at his sister's home in a neighboring town, the cat does not appear to him as expected. He wakes up in the middle of the night, and an eyelid match shot reveals an unoccupied bedside floor. According to Heide Wüst's analysis of Rasputin's story, "In the Matyora-world, developing in organic unity with the 'eternal cycle,' there is the 'Master,' and only here can he rule."<sup>49</sup> The village is intertwined with the cyclical time of the natural world yet, paradoxically, its existence is terminal. The gray cat then, like the Master, also portends the inevitable demise of its home.

The gray cat appears outside of Triapitsyn's room only once, a scene in which he is additionally haunted by literal echoes of the past that transcend time. Having shown Timka around the now-abandoned schoolhouse he attended as a child, Triapitsyn later returns alone and hears a sonic collage of children singing the Soviet national anthem and "May There Always Be Sunshine" (*Pust' vseгда budet solntse*) and a woman reciting a poem about Young Pioneers (Fig. 15).<sup>50</sup> The latter song was written in 1962 by Arkady Ostrovsky, a popular composer of light music perhaps best remembered for contributing to the long-running children's television program *Good Night, Little Ones!* (*Spokoinoi nochi, малыши!*). If the lyrics of its chorus, expressing a yearning for stability ("May there always be sunshine, / May there always be sky / May there always be Mom, / May there always be I"), feel particularly naive, that is because they

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<sup>48</sup> Parthé, "Foreword," xiii–xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Heide Wüst, *Tradition und Innovation in der sowjetrussischen Dorfprosader sechziger und siebziger Jahre* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1984), 199.

<sup>50</sup> "Ty sevodnia vstaesh' / Pod krylatoe znamia otriada..." (Today you wake up / Under the detachment's winged banner...), author and date unknown.

were written by a four-year-old boy.<sup>51</sup> The almost seamless mashup of this song, the national anthem, and the poem indicate that Triapitsyn is experiencing not only a longing for the optimism of childhood but also nostalgia for Soviet life. Serguei Oushakine accurately observes that “in the scholarship on cultural changes in postsocialist countries it has become a cliché to single out nostalgia as an increasingly prominent symbolic practice through which the legacy of the previous period makes itself visible,” but recent studies nevertheless suggest that this symbolic practice really is spreading.<sup>52</sup> A survey conducted in 2018 by The Levada Center, an independent polling organization, found that 66 percent of Russians feel life was better before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number that has continued to climb steadily since 2007.<sup>53</sup>



**Fig. 15:** Triapitsyn and the gray cat at the old schoolhouse (*The Postman's White Nights*).

This schoolhouse scene encapsulates the elegiac tone prevalent throughout *The Postman's White Nights*, but the film does not accommodate what Fredric Jameson called

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<sup>51</sup> See Kornei Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, trans. Miriam Morton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 78–79. The song's verses were written by Lev Oshanin.

<sup>52</sup> Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia,” *Russian Review* 66, no. 3 (July 2007): 451.

<sup>53</sup> Levada Center, “Nostal’giia po SSSR,” December 19, 2018, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/12/19/nostalgiya-po-sssr-2/>.

postmodernity's "nostalgia mode of reception," which debases memory through capitalistic recycling of a glossy, ersatz past. Discussing one illustrative example, Jameson writes, "[F]rom the outset, a whole battery of aesthetic signs begins to distance the officially contemporary image from us in time.... Everything in the film ... conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time."<sup>54</sup> In contrast, Konchalovsky's sets, displaying sedimentary layers of actual objects imbued with historical depth, suggest that the village's amalgam of past and present signifiers can impede nostalgia. Unlike Tarkovsky's emphasis on nostalgia, which "denies modernity's forward narrative thrust and teleology," the layers of Konchalovsky's mise-en-scène—wooden architecture, ruins of Soviet infrastructure, post-Soviet infrastructure collapsing at present—draw attention to the ebb and flow of modernity in the village.<sup>55</sup>

Nor does the film's temporality adhere perfectly to the model of Village Prose, in which the "approach to time ... would combine elements of the cyclical, the historical, and the personal, with an emphasis on the past over the present or the future."<sup>56</sup> As Geoffrey Hosking has observed, *derevenshchiki* tended to depict the village "not as it was *at the time of writing*, but as it used to be somewhat earlier."<sup>57</sup> The immediacy offered by digital cinematography buoys *The Postman's White Nights* in the present; even now, more than five years removed from the time of production, we are persuaded by the illusion that the actions onscreen, especially those captured on hidden cameras, are unfolding in real time.

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<sup>54</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 20–21.

<sup>55</sup> Burns, "Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*," 108.

<sup>56</sup> Parthe, *Russian Village Prose*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Hosking, "The Russian Peasant Rediscovered," 724n26.

Like the *derevenshchiki*, however, Konchalovsky perceives the changes occurring in Kositsyna as an ongoing process of loss, a perspective he makes explicit by cueing Verdi's *Requiem* over the closing credits.<sup>58</sup> Dmitry Bykov, who describes the film as "a great event of our cinema," draws his own comparison to Village Prose when he concludes with characteristic irony that "there is no point in crying over the Russian village or Russia's fate: Russia, according to Konchalovsky, has returned to its natural condition. The violent modernization of the Soviet project has come to an end."<sup>59</sup> Yet throughout the film Konchalovsky demonstrates that modernization does indeed continue, albeit away from the village and in a manner that is no longer explicitly violent but also not entirely without consequence. Triapitsyn periodically talks about—and in one scene, visits with Timka—the nearby Plesetsk Cosmodrome, currently Russia's largest operational missile testing and space launch facility. In 2011, not long before filming began, Aerospace Defense Forces spokesman Colonel Aleksei Zolotukhin announced that the cosmodrome would be receiving an investment of over 5 billion rubles (170 million US dollars) from the state in order to ensure its continued development.<sup>60</sup> Near the end of the film a long shot captures Triapitsyn smoking a cigarette with a friend as they sit on the edge of the lake; in the background, a rocket silently launches from behind the distant forest (Fig. 16). The men take no notice of it, and only the chirping of crickets can be heard. The contemporary village, Konchalovsky illustrates, is not obliterated by modernity like Rasputin's Matyora but merely expelled from and abandoned by it. The postman, who in addition to delivering the mail also provides his neighbors with groceries, medication, and other essentials from across the lake, is

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<sup>58</sup> See Parthé, *Russian Village Prose*, 64.

<sup>59</sup> Bykov, "Konchalovskii, Shekspir i Triapitsyn," *Novaia gazeta*, March 15, 2014, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/03/15/58764-konchalovskiy-shekspir-i-tryapitsyn>.

<sup>60</sup> *RIA Novosti*, "RF vlozhit v razvitie kosmodroma Plesetsk svyshe 5 mlrd rub – Minoborony," September 7, 2011, accessed September 8, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20110907/431834474.html>.

identified by Budenkova as “a kind of provincial Charon, connecting the dying village with the urban space that still inherits the future.”<sup>61</sup> After his boat motor is stolen, though, his mobility is hindered and this already-tenuous connection is threatened further.



**Fig. 16: The cosmodrome launches a rocket (*The Postman's White Nights*).**

The final scene of the narrative is separated from the fourth wall-breaking end credits by an epigraph from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: “Where should this music be? i' th' air, or th' earth? It sounds no more!” These words, spoken in the play by Ferdinand shortly after being marooned, reinforce Konchalovsky's status as a stranger in a land of wonder and mystery, a place he cannot fully comprehend and from which he must inevitably depart. After this, the last shot breaks the verisimilitudinous spell that had been cast over the previous ninety minutes. The entire cast is seated in a row on a boat sailing across the lake as the credits begin to roll: a curtain call, essentially, to match the theatrical intervention of Shakespeare's iambs.

In an article summarizing the first twenty years of post-Soviet cinema, Seth Graham concludes by pointing out two “recurring motifs” but leaving their significance open to

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<sup>61</sup> Budenkova, “Fragments of Empire,” 154.

discussion: “the prevalence of rural and provincial chronotopes” and “films in which the final scene features a boat, usually a rowboat, and usually on open water,” including *Russian Ark*, addressed in the previous chapter.<sup>62</sup> *The Postman’s White Nights*, which, like *Bite the Dust*, features both of these motifs, ends not in Triapitsyn’s postal boat but in a larger one shown earlier in the film transporting an old woman’s casket from the village to the cemetery. If Triapitsyn is indeed his community’s Charon, then this second vessel becomes his stygian ferry. Although his profession and accompanying mail boat exemplify cyclical time as well as Konchalovsky’s near-obsessive dwelling on the slow and quotidian, without a motor he ends up with the rest of the villagers in a floating hearse, another reminder that village time must also be linear. This scene, however, like the conclusions of *Old Women*, and *4*, defers showing the village reach its terminus because of its backward-facing orientation. Despite its association with uniquely American ideas of desire and progress, *The Great Gatsby*’s immortal final line paints an apropos image: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”<sup>63</sup> In the village of contemporary Russian cinema, the communal “we” struggles together and persists together for a little longer, unable to overcome the past but still short of reaching its fatal destination of modernity.

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<sup>62</sup> Seth Graham, “Two Decades of Post-Soviet Cinema: Taking Stock of Our Stocktaking,” *KinoKultura* 21 (July 2008), accessed September 8, 2020, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/21-graham.shtml>.

<sup>63</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner’s, 1953), 182.

## Conclusion

I can see the sun has gone down on my town, on my town /  
Goodnight.  
– Iris DeMent

The previous four chapters have advocated for the consideration of a prominent movement within Russian national cinema unconsciously unified by the narrative centering of a contemporary and terminal village setting. Taken as a whole, these analyses demonstrate that New Village Cinema is not limited by strict formal constraints or even a cohesive political ideology. It is precisely this versatility, though, that affirms the true value of my research for contemporary Russian film scholarship. At present the village's disappearance is all but empirically assured, but these films exemplify the plurality of physical, psychological, and emotional responses to this certainty—experienced both by villagers and outsiders—which are reflected accordingly in a plurality of aesthetic modes.

By establishing a foundational canon of New Village Cinema, this dissertation also argues that throughout the past twenty years the contemporary Russian village has remained a distinct chronotope that merits a more thorough investigation either within or without the broader field of provincial studies. While scholarship on cultural representations of post-Soviet tropes of loss—namely, the losses of empire and coherent ideology—and mourning continues to thrive, I maintain that a narrowed focus on the ongoing loss of a physical space and its typical occupants allows us to keep examining those abstract losses while highlighting a more tangible experience that resonates far beyond the Russian context.

My decision to research this topic, after all, was inspired by the pangs of familiarity I felt upon watching these four films for the first time. I was not born in a village, but the Allegheny Rust Belt region of my roots is predominantly rural and in the midst of its own prolonged

demographic crisis (and my hometown was even destroyed by a flood). I have witnessed firsthand the sadness, confusion, and anger that accompanies the gradual disintegration of once tight-knit communities, and to recognize these emotional processes articulated in the pathos of Russian films was as comforting as it was surprising. Before long I began noticing variations on this theme in recent movies from around the world, including but hardly limited to: the United States (Gus Van Sant's *Promised Land* [2012], about a small Pennsylvania town threatened by fracking), Italy (Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy As Lazzaro* [*Lazzaro felice*, 2018], in which corruption forces a peasant family to abandon their village), and China (Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* [*San xia hao ren*, 2006], a particularly Rasputin-esque story of a mining town demolished and flooded to make way for the Three Gorges Dam). Ideally, my dissertation would lead to an investigation of the ways in which various national cinemas converge and diverge in their representations of a shared anxiety about the spaces succumbing to any combination of industrialization, declining birth rate, and rural flight. As E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang warn, "Corporate-sponsored globalization is blurring the distinctive traditions and eroding native cultural heritages."<sup>1</sup> A larger research project on global New Village Cinema, however, would promote cross-cultural exchange by simultaneously recognizing these traditions and heritages unique to each nation's village chronotope—as this dissertation does with regard to Russia—and revealing the elements of commonality that generate empathy.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, "Introduction: From Traumatic Paralysis to the Force Field of Modernity," in *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 11.



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