**GLOBAL RUSSIAN CINEMA IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE FILMS OF TIMUR
BEKMAMBETOV**

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GLOBAL RUSSIAN CINEMA IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE FILMS OF TIMUR BEKMAMBETOV

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This dissertation analyzes the films of director and producer Timur Bekmambetov, who works in both Hollywood and Russia. He has contributed to the stabilization of the contemporary Russian film industry, and this dissertation focuses on the digital techniques present in his otherwise live-action films. One such technique is a new way of cinematic representation that I term "object perspective." Digital sequences often feature an inanimate, everyday object that acts as a focal point, taking the spectator on a "ride" through cinematic space that rivals video games and the real-world amusement park. "Object perspective" is a device that challenges ideas about point of view, cinematic pleasure, and the way in which even everyday objects may be gendered by cinematic means of representation. This effect is analyzed with attention to product placement and scopophilia within his films.

Other techniques, such as virtual kinetic subtitles and digital dubbing, transform his films to cater to local audiences. These techniques are themselves a form of branding that sends a message to the audience: they are special and deserve a localized form of the product. Other effects—such as digital composites of fan extras—are contextualized in a post-Soviet cinema. These films meet both global commercial demands and the ideological framework of Putin's state cinema industry. Bekmambetov's work struggles to reach local audiences separated by

linguistic and cultural differences in a way that attempts to erase past trauma and to project an image of the present as available to social and economic advancement for all.

I conclude that the organizing principle for these digital techniques is the attempt to garner greater participation for spectators. These films draw on the techniques of the avant-garde (such as revealing the device), but in an effort that does not alienate the viewer. Rather, they function as an opportunity for further immersion, or as an endorsement for a real-world product or a real-world political regime.

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for cinema to be global in the digital age? Global is both geographical and temporal. For media to be global, it must transcend national physical boundaries and have an element of worldwide simultaneity, the capacity to be consumed all over the globe at the same time, whether that is a moment of short duration or an entire season. A YouTube video, a pop song, a Vine, an Instagram or Facebook post, a tweet—in short, culture transmitted primarily via social media—all have the ability to make a global effect, but that effect may occur in a cultural sphere removed from the market of the feature-length narrative film. What if a film has a high enough production investment that—although it may be available on the Internet—it is made for exhibition in theaters from the U.S. to Russia to China?

This dissertation investigates research questions that grow out of a consideration of contemporary digital blockbuster cinema, whose global effect is primarily measured in box office receipts, merchandising, and branding. It approaches these questions through specificity, by looking at the films that have been directed and produced by Timur Bekmambetov. A native of Soviet Kazakhstan, and a figure who is the most well-funded and connected director in Russia, having worked in Hollywood with Angelina Jolie and Morgan Freeman, Bekmambetov is a filmmaker whose cinema typifies the kind of border crossing that has come to characterize big-budget commercial cinema in an age in which capitalism has, it would appear, defeated socialism.

A study of Bekmambetov's work is productive for three major reasons. The first reason is that the distribution, exhibition, and production practices of Bekmambetov's studio operate on both a national and international scale. One strain of his cinema is filmed in Russia with Russian actors and production crews, promotional activities for fans throughout large cities in Russia, and targeted for a Russophone audience in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Another strain of Bekmambetov's cinema collaborates with Hollywood, features internationally recognized American actors, includes production workers from Russia, Germany, and the United States, and targets a global, rather than a regional, audience. A study of Bekmambetov's work shows just how distinct the national and international spheres can be, but it also sheds light on the way these spheres interact. Within Bekmambetov's body of work, there are films intended for a national audience, but manipulated for an international one, and a film intended for an international audience, but catered for a Russophone one.

An analysis of Bekmambetov's body of work reveals the global hierarchies and structures of power, both economic and political, that play a role in big-budget commercial cinema. Internationally, Bekmambetov's *Wanted* (2008) reached the second place at the global box office, while the campy *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012) was a flop both in the United States and abroad. Bekmambetov continues to be active, however, with a remake of *Ben Hur*, filmed in Italy, scheduled for release in February 2016, and co-produced by Paramount Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. In Hollywood, Bekmambetov may be a B-rated director, but one who is entrusted with high-budget action cinema. Furthermore, Hollywood allows for a certain amount of political leeway; he is allowed and funded to make a farcical action film about the most respected president in the history of the United States. A domestically produced equivalent

with a flippant characterization of a Russian or Kazakh leader would be unthinkable in the current political climate of either polity.

In Bekmambetov's Hollywood productions, contribution from Russian workers comes in the form of minor acting roles (such as Konstantin Khabenskii's appearance as a Russian assassin in *Wanted*) or in the visual effects department. If Bekmambetov is just another high-budget director in Hollywood, in Russia he is the premier filmmaker, who can attract the most recognizable actors, the most talented young directors and cinematographers, and continued state support from the Ministry of Culture. Bekmambetov's Russophone cinema, such as *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007), has surpassed previous box office records for domestic cinema, and turned the corner for an entire industry. His trailblazing has made blockbusters from other studios possible, such as *Stalingrad* (2013), and stabilized the industry, transforming it into an ecosystem with a greater number of financially self-sustainable films. What comes with this Russian context? Political compliance with the Putin administration. In the emerging cinematic industry of Kazakhstan—the lowest rung on this global hierarchy—Bekmambetov has an almost god-like status. He neither funds his own projects nor co-produces there. When he does appear, it is in the role of benefactor, where he has, for example, given funding for the best script by a Kazakh citizen at his own action film festival in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

The second major reason that makes a study of Bekmambetov's cinema productive concerns the transition from socialism to capitalism. Bekmambetov's life text is a story of extremes. He began in an environment in which cinema was completely funded by the state, thrived in an environment where there was no state funding, and now runs a production company that is ruthlessly capitalist, even if many of the Russian projects now receive state financial support. Bekmambetov's rise to fame is almost parodic in its embrace of capitalism, to the point

at which some of the films are so filled with product placements that they feel more like television advertisements than feature-length films. His cinema applies capitalist techniques to garner fan participation, increase box office numbers, and create a brand for the Bazelevs Studio and its concomitant film projects.

Bekmambetov's career spans the period of perestroika in the Soviet Union to the present day. At each point in Russian cinematic history from his beginnings to now (2016), his work typifies the cultural atmosphere in Russia, whether it is the Klondike capitalism of the 1990s— when many things were permissible in visual media but there was only funding for the television commercials that he made into mini-narrative films—or the partnership of big cinema and state financing and approval that operates in the Putin administration, and for which he is the prime example of mutual success.

There are two narratives that may be spun around Bekmambetov's rapid rise in Russian cinema. The first is a narrative about Bekmambetov as a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps filmmaker who is able to make commercial cinema work in an environment transitioning from socialism into the spectacle of capitalism. Bekmambetov began to make his name in Russia with television advertisements and music videos in the 1990s before his big break with the blockbuster *Night Watch* (2004), which surpassed domestic box office records, played with subtitles in the United States, and allowed for opportunities in Hollywood with Fox Searchlight. This example is capitalism working for those who "work hard." The second narrative is a more cynical reading of Bekmambetov's life text. Bekmambetov begins his cinematic career in the late Soviet period as an auteur with *Peshawar Waltz* (1994)*,* a shocking anti-imperialist film about Soviet prisoners of war in Afghanistan, who are intentionally bombed by Soviet forces to cover up an international political debacle. The film is a challenging work of art that gives

spectators the impression that they themselves are in the hellish, underground prison where the POWs are trapped. Hand-held camerawork makes mapping the space almost impossible and does little to glorify war. Bekmambetov was displeased with the fact that, despite winning awards at film festivals, few people saw the film. If the point of the work was to make the spectator uncomfortable on both an ideological and visual level, then it seems that after this film, Bekmambetov's works have done exactly the opposite: they seek to engage the spectator on a visual level, create appeal, and take a pro-state, pro-big business stance rather than an oppositional one. Bekmambetov's shameless inclusion of product placement, genre tropes, nostalgia for Soviet films, and arresting digital animation all combine to garner an audience that wants to be entertained rather than challenged. In this narrative, Bekmambetov's career is about the cynical application of capitalist techniques to please spectators and gain state support. It is the transformation of a director who makes artistic and political statements to a director who placates the state and business investors to continue making movies.

The goal of this dissertation is not to cast Bekmambetov in a negative light, but to describe how this transition from socialism to capitalism has been ultimately beneficial to an individual company, which in turn has allowed for a more robust ecosystem of film production in Russia now than there was in the 1990s. The price for success has been a switch from anti-state to pro-state ideology on the macrolevel; however, Bekmambetov has given talented young cinema workers opportunities that would not exist otherwise. A prime example is Aleksandr Kott, an auteur director who has worked on Bekmambetov's *Elki* films, but has also had the opportunity to return to art cinema with a critical film, *The Test* (2014), which is about the detonation of the first atomic bomb on the Kazakh steppe in the Soviet Union during the 1950s.

The third major reason why a study of Bekmambetov's work is productive concerns the unique visual experiences that these films display. Bekmambetov's films have their own authorial stamp, a specific style that this dissertation analyzes, both in terms of what it does with words and without. It is the style of Bekmambetov's work that concerns this dissertation. Style encodes all of the other research questions already mentioned that concern flows of funding and human labor, international genre conventions, economics, advertising, and ideology. Digital animation sequences come across as gaudy and over the top at times, and they are relentlessly action-film oriented. They do not claim to be high fashion or replete with latent meaning in the vein of Andrei Tarkovskii—they are something else altogether.

Instead, these digital sequences in otherwise genre-driven live action films are moments of conceptual art that challenge traditional ways of thinking about perspective, the creation of desire, and the complex relationship of spectator to screen. In addition to creating cinematic sequences with digital tools that would not be possible otherwise, digital animation and manipulation also gives Bekmambetov the ability to cater films for regional audiences in a way much more financially feasible than in the past. The chapters are organized in relation to the visual, with the apotheosis in the last chapter, when it appears as though the digital simulation becomes more real than the real.

Previous scholarship has looked at these films in terms of theme, character, plot, indebtedness to a dominant Hollywood action aesthetic, and the notion that they are a "symptom" of a greater cultural malaise. The dissertation re-invigorates these questions by foregrounding the importance of aesthetics and seeing what grows out of an analysis of these techniques on their own terms. What are these experiences? How are they a product of the cultural, political, and economic environment in which they are produced (whether nationally or

internationally), and to what extent do they fuel and create that very environment? These digital techniques are meant not just to create a specific kind of appeal, but also to allow avenues for fan participation, and, in the process, increase the cache of the brand itself and its money-making potential.

1.1 ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

To answer these questions the four chapters of this dissertation investigate the innovative digital techniques that I term "virtual indices." Each chapter focuses on one kind of virtual index. The first chapter is a theoretical investigation that expands the film studies notion of the index to include images that are not burned onto celluloid film. Rather than a connection and corresponding aura to an actor or director whose image has been physically imprinted on an emulsion, the virtual index corresponds to the possibility of a virtual world that expands outside of the film.

This virtual world is dated and fixed in time in a way similar to the traditional notion of the index, and it has its own sort of aura, in that it characterizes a specific historical moment in the evolution of digital animation and increased pixels. Just as the image of PacMan has associations with the 1980s and the video arcade game, these films correspond to the personal computer games of the 2000s, both in content and technology. The first chapter argues for a virtual world of gaming that is indicated in Bekmambetov's international films *Night Watch* (2004), *Day Watch* (2005), and *Wanted* in a way that glorifies the gamer and creates the illusion of granting spectators agency, as if these spectators were gamers in a virtual world. The virtual index promotes the product of the film and works to expand its popularity outside of the

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cinematic medium and into the corresponding video games that are later sold. The "real world" to which the virtual index ultimately corresponds is not the virtual one, but the material one in which corresponding merchandise is produced to extend the narrative lifespan of the film.

The second chapter describes and accounts for the most salient virtual index in Bekmambetov's body of work, a phenomenon that I term "object perspective" and that I claim is pioneered by Bekmambetov. "Object perspective" is a digital effect. Sequences often feature an inanimate, everyday object that acts as a focal point and takes the spectator on a "ride" through cinematic space that rivals video games and even the real-world amusement park. It accomplishes this feat by giving the spectator the impression of controlling the motion of a "virtual camera" (there is no physical camera, but the impression remains) and reacting with it to defy the laws of physics.

Because object perspective explores the spaces around an object and the object itself, there is a curiosity that arises, sparked not only by the impression of camera movement and fast-editing, but also by the manipulation of time and the shiny arresting exterior of the virtual object itself. The child-like wonder of contemplating the object and a flight through spaces that would otherwise be impossible have a quality that links these sequences to video games, and that simulates the dynamics of desire. The object, always just out of reach, is gendered as female, and the impression of a camera following it, as male. The product placements that usually end these sequences reveal the logic inherent in advertising but, in the process, they aggrandize the film itself with a wink to the spectator that acknowledges that this game is ultimately meant to entertain and enthrall. Object perspective contains within itself a critique of cinematic ways of viewing and a key to understanding how branding and product placement function in Bekmambetov's big-budget films. What appears as just an aberration in *Night Watch* becomes

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the *dominanta* and the organizing principle in *Wanted.* Since object perspective is neither the

normal style of the film nor the simulation of a character's perspective (as if the spectator were

seeing through the character's eyes), the dissertation argues that object perspective challenges

conventional ideas about point of view, visual spectacle, and the complex relationship of the

spectator to the cinematic image.

If the first chapter is about the attraction of the world outside of the diegesis of the film

(extended to include new products and merchandise), then the second chapter concerns the

diegesis within the film. Object perspective occurs when no human character is present. It

tracks the path of electric wires through walls, a rivet as it falls from an airplane down an airshaft

and into an apartment, or a bullet on its trajectory from assassin to victim. The appeal is within

the film itself, a return to the cinema of attractions but with the object functioning as a motif.

The subject of the third chapter is a different kind of virtual index, one that functions

neither within nor totally removed from the diegesis, but across it. The virtual indices are

subtitles and digital dubbing. To admit their existence is to suspend belief in the veracity of the

diegesis, but without them the diegesis cannot be understood by the local spectator. In this way,

they function within and outside of the film. The chapter looks at the ways specific films have

been catered to local audiences to appeal to cinema-going practices. This analysis includes the

way in which kinesthetic English subtitles were made by the Bekmambetov's Bazelevs studio for

the U.S. and U.K. theatrical release version of *Night Watch*, that is, subtitles that vary in color,

size, manner of appearance and disappearance in correlation to the emotional valence of the

speaker and meaning within the film. It also includes the way *Osobo opasen*—the Russian-

language version of *Wanted*—relies on digital manipulation of the images of Morgan Freeman,

Angela Jolie, and James McAvoy's mouths to make it appear as if these actors really were speaking the dialogue of the dubbed Russian version.

Whether it is an Anglophone or Russophone audience, these subtitling and dubbing techniques create a fantasy for the spectator, either of understanding perfectly a different cultural context or being hailed as belonging to a greater, global, cultural context. Subtitles raised the status of the action film *Night Watch* to brand it as an exotic and a, perhaps, contemplative foreign art film, while the dubbing in the Russian version of *Wanted* made a seemingly foreign film with foreign actors more Russian by creating the fantasy that it was Russian. Both present new worlds of imagination. The virtual index is about going places cinematically the spectator could not otherwise go, whether that is in terms of cinematic space with object perspective or language and comprehensibility with subtitles and dubbing.

Chapter 4 is about ideology and virtual indices that appeal to spectators in a different way: by showing digital images of the fans themselves on screen. All of the virtual indices throughout the dissertation are about participating in the film. In Chapter 1, the participation had been as if one were a character with an avatar in a video game. In Chapter 2, the participation had been about an experience more immersive and fast-paced than a video-game could be at the time; it was about making the digital a virtual amusement, but a clever one that fits back into the film. In Chapter 3, the participation had been linguistic. Spectators who watch the subtitled or dubbed version of the film are presented with the illusion of participating in the original, even though their experience is unique to the text they are watching.

By comparison, Chapter 4 characterizes the participation of fans in the actual production of the film. It does this by examining the contests and events surrounding the domestic *Elki* series of four films and one spin off. Virtual indices appear on the Internet as fan Instagram

photos in a monthly contest to promote the film in the autumn before the New Year's release. In the third *Elki* film, fans were organized in provincial Russian cities to form a single letter when viewed aerially. The letters were shot and later digitally composited to form the phrase "Happy New Year" (*S novym godom*). The primary contribution of this chapter is a look at this recent blockbuster family cinema in Russia and its corresponding political valence. If previous chapters were a description of techniques, then this chapter nails down the details of Bekmambetov's trajectory in clearer details that show the way politics and economics combine to create an ideology supporting the current regime, but allowing for enough wiggle room for changes in the future.

What becomes apparent with these last virtual indices is that they are not so much about the experience of the viewer in a virtual world; rather, they reveal the marriage of digital cinema and real, experiential, living, so that it becomes more and more difficult to separate the two. In Boris Groys' terms, it is similar to the total art of Stalinism, but in this case a total art of Russian new capitalism, in which fans themselves share the labor of promoting and producing the film, but receive no remuneration or credit. Instead of arresting digital sequences, the presence of the fans themselves in the flesh of the film is the attraction.

The virtual index is the stamp on the film that brands it as a work by Bekmambetov. In each instance, Bekmambetov's visual effects team innovates to create a new experience for the spectator, featuring this spectator in a central role in the narrative. Whether the spectator is hailed as a gamer, an agent in the action, an all-knowing observer who understands the blend of verbal and visual language, or as a fan who appears in the film itself, technology sutures the audience into the film and the surrounding commercial culture around the diegesis with increasing effect.

1.2   REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This dissertation is the first full-length work that investigates Bekmambetov's films. The

literature on his films and his studio, Bazelevs, primarily consists of interviews and reviews,

which are cited in the bibliography at the end of this dissertation. The most significant scholarly

work in English on Bekmambetov's work is Stephen Norris's book *Blockbuster History in the

New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patritotism* ("Chapter 13: The Production of the Past"). This

work speaks to the production of nostalgia in Bekmambetov's films, especially *Irony of Fate.*

The Continuation. The chapter is insightful for this contribution, especially in dialogue with

Arlene Forman's review of the film for *KinoKultura*. These works provide a helpful framework

for thinking through Bekmambetov's mythologizing of the Soviet past in a Putin-era present, and

the ideas in these works are conducive to expansion, especially in light of the continuation of the

Elki films to four installations and one spin off.

Norris and Foreman, however, pay little attention to Bekmambetov's overall visual style

and the digital sequences that this dissertation investigates. In addition to these short texts, my

own reviews of *Six Degrees of Celebration*, *Six Degrees of Celebration II*, *Elki 3* and *Elki 1914*

in *KinoKultura* identify key characteristics of Bekmambetov's style—such as the penchant for

intensified continuity editing, bright and gaudy lights and sets, transformations from the animal

to the human—and the ideological drive of these films. These reviews provide a base for further

elaboration.

The most exhaustive scholarly work on Bekmambetov comes in the book collection of

articles entitled *Watch as a Symptom* (Dozor kak simptom). The articles focus on *Night Watch*

and *Day Watch.* Many of these articles characterize these films negatively and look at such

issues as narrative inconsistency, the influence of Hollywood style and values, and the notion

that these films are a "symptom" of the degradation of Russian culture by 21st-century global consumerism. The most interesting work in this book for the purposes of this dissertation is Aleksandr Tarasov's "Anti-Matritsa. Vyberi siniuiu tabletku" ["The Anti-*Matrix*. Choose the Blue Pill"], which challenges the way in which comparisons with *The Matrix* have often been intoned but rarely developed in discussions around the *Night Watch/Day Watch* series. Tarasov develops his argument on the basis of reversals in narrative and the shared world-view these films create. Although there is little discussion of the specific stylistics of *Night Watch* and how they relate to those of *The Matrix*, the comparison raises questions relevant not only to the *Night Watch*/*Day Watch* series, but to *Wanted* as well.

This dissertation pushes back not necessarily in direct disagreement with the authors of these scholarly works, but in a reconfiguration of the focusing point: aesthetics, rather than politics, guides the theoretical concerns of this work, even though aesthetics, politics, and economics are intertwined in a way that must be taken into consideration. This dissertation draws on several theoretical works to account for and describe Bekmambetov's aesthetic. They include articles and books by Timothy Binkley, David Bordwell, Bill Brown, Stanley Cavell, Guy Debord, Mary Ann Doane, Tom Gunning, Martin Heidegger, Mikhail Iampol'skii, Lev Manovich, Trinh Minh-ha, Laura Mulvey, and Slavoj Žižek.

This dissertation is relevant for scholars in a variety of fields: area studies, film studies, studies of capitalism, advertising, desire, Russian and global cultural history, visual studies, the effects of digital media, and transmedia in the digital age. It is an examination of contemporary commercial Russian cinema that situates the way a global periphery participates in and contributes to world culture.

2.0   THE VIRTUAL INDEX

2.1   DEFINITION OF THE VIRTUAL INDEX

What differentiates digital cinema from the celluloid film that preceded it? Is it merely a

question of technology and the materiality on which images are stored? Or is there something

more to the way spectators interact with the medium?   Traditionally, Film Studies as an

academic discipline has hung its hat on the idea of the index in celluloid film. A film is more

than just a simulation or a fantasy since there is an actual, physical link to the actors and filming

locations that are featured. Light bounced off them and burned their likeness on an emulsion.

There is a physical link to their presence, and like a bullet hole, it is the proof that they were

there but now are not. In this way, the index has its own aura—the original print can be

duplicated and reproduced, but if it is lost, the original work of art is lost as well. Another film

can be shot, but the images of Marilyn Monroe, for example, cannot be remade on a celluloid

emulsion after she is gone.

The rise and continuing evolution of digital technology has brought into question the

place of the index in cinema. Does it even exist for digital film? And if it does not, what does

that mean for the status of cinema as an art form? Has the aura been lost in an age in which any

image may be constructed from pixels? Stephen Prince, for example, argues for the

disappearance of the index, and creates the concept of "perceptual realism," a correspondence,

rather than a causal or existential link, with a referent (31). Braxton Soderman argues that the

index has not disappeared, but transformed. For Soderman, digital images are an index of the algorithms that produce them through computer software. In discussions of the way films incorporate digital special effects, these authors tend to fetishize the link to a physical, mechanistic process, and either dramatically point to the death of the index, or resurrect and replace the link with a new one, however tenuous. For these arguments to function, emphasis tends towards two kinds of films: those that try to duplicate live-action footage and give an impression of the real—for example, Prince's arguments around *True Lies* (1994) and *Jurassic Park* (1993)—and those that try to lay bare the artifice of cinema with new digital techniques— for example, Soderman's argument about Jim Campbell's *Illuminated Average #1, Hitchcock's* Psycho (2000).

This chapter analyzes a third category of digital animation in film: those works that simulate neither a "perceptionally realistic" style, nor an image that divulges the artificial construction of the cinema, but one that references a virtual aesthetic. Just as there is a usefulness and a desire to qualify specific machinations of computer generated images as exhibiting the movement of a "virtual camera," the concept I term the "virtual index" encodes a similar relationship, in which the image references virtual reality and a virtual world in the same way that a photograph points to existential, physical reality. The "virtual index" sheds the strict adherence to a mechanistic physical referent and replaces it with a far more provocative physical link: to human labor production.

The cinematic texts upon which this chapter draws correspond to a larger project of characterizing the Bazelevs studio aesthetic. The three indices that receive the most attention in this dissertation—"object perspective," virtual subtitles, and digital dubbing—receive greater elaboration in subsequent chapters. This chapter sets up the theoretical orientation of the

dissertation and provides a thick description of the virtual index with an eye to establishing the stakes of the argument. It accomplishes these tasks with an analysis of a fourth virtual index: the "virtual track" or "virtual pan" that appears in *Night Watch* (2004), *The Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007), and *Wanted* (2008). The virtual index does not just reference a virtual reality (which itself is not a stable, inert entity) in an attempt to appeal to a generation used to the conventions of video-game worlds. It also creates a spectacle unique from both the cinematic and virtual worlds that predated it. The virtual index fulfills a spectatorial fantasy of agency and movement that surpasses each medium and functions as a branding device in a greater marketing campaign.

2.2 THEORETICAL STAKES OF THE VIRTUAL INDEX

The basis of the concept of the index in the academic field of Film Studies grows out of the work of semiotician and philosopher Charles S. Peirce, who differentiates among three signs:

> Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them … Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage. (5)

Peirce notes that these categories are not mutually exclusive or scientisticly determined. He claims that, "it is true that one and the same sign may be at once a likeness and an indication. Still, the offices of these orders of signs are totally different" (8). The photograph is an example of a sign that can be read as both an index and an icon. Although Peirce gives a broad definition of the index, in the academic field of Film Studies, the index has come to be equated with the celluloid photographic image, drawn from the following passage in Peirce:

§4. *Likenesses*. Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection. (6)

If celluloid films are conceptualized as a series of photographs that comprise a continuous whole in the experience of the viewer, then the photographic index would seem to be transferable to film as well. The photographic index, though, has a greater agenda since the concept has been used as an implicit argument for the unique status of film as an art form. The index even raises the status of film above that of painting as a mode of representation since film, like the photograph, is "physically forced to correspond point by point to nature," while painting has only a likeness to physical reality.

Although it would be a misreading to reduce the writing of André Bazin to merely indexical concerns,[1] his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" gets at the heart of what the concept of the index has tried to do: to describe the connection to an event that actually occurred and has been captured. It is something that becomes unique and can be reproduced from the original celluloid negative, but cannot be restaged and captured in the same way. Bazin ascribes this impression of reality to a mechanistic process:

This production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picturemaking. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re*–presented, set before us … Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction … [T]he photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. (13-14)

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[1] For a more nuanced discussion of Bazin's work in relation to indexicality, see Daniel Morgan "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics".

This rhetoric de-emphasizes the role of human agency in the cinematic production process. Filmmaking becomes limited to positioning a camera and pressing a button. Close focus on the index tends to ignore the constructed nature of the mise-en-scène and the work of a variety of professionals in charge of lighting, costuming, sound, camera angles and movements, editing, framing, and other contributions that make up a film. In a curious way, film gets conceptualized in two ways. On the one hand, it becomes an evidentiary document. On the other hand, it is viewed as the work of one guiding master, who is limited in the constraints of shooting by a script and physical reality, but who has the final say in the making of the film. Film becomes both reproducible and not reproducible. It can be restaged, but never in exactly the same way that produces an exact copy of the original (unless it is taken from the original film stock). In this way, the idea of the index and its unique connection to a prior event fetishizes film and raises its artistic value, even if it is qualified by careful limitations for the work of the artist. It ultimately elevates this artist (who is almost always the director) as well, since that person, as the guiding hand that controls the work,[2] would seem to have a close connection to existential reality through the index that is produced. It is almost as if this director has a hypersensitivity and unique access to this physical reality.

In "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality" Tom Gunning likewise sees the conventional idea that "only photography can be referential" as "a major error that comes from a diminished view of the index" (38). Gunning claims that "[e]ven if the indexical claim for cinema is granted, I am not sure it really supplies the basis for a realist aesthetic" (47), and qualifies it by saying that he does not wish to claim "no use exists for the

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[2] It could be argued that the director of photography has a greater influence over the visual aesthetic of a film. See Philip Cavendish, *The Men with the Movie Camera: The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s*.

index in theories of film and photography, but simply that it has been entrusted with tasks it cannot fulfill and that reading it back into classical realist theories of the cinema probably obscures as much as it explains" (47). Gunning goes on to say that "[t]he indexical argument can be invoked most clearly (and usefully) for films used as historical evidence. It remains unclear, however, how the index functions within a fiction film, where we are dealing with a diegesis, a fictional world, rather than a reference to a reality" (47). Gunning's solution is the perception of motion.

> Motion, I am arguing, needs to be taken more seriously in our exploration of the nature of film and our account of how film style functions. At the same time, giving new importance to movement (or restoring it) builds a strong bridge between cinema and the new media that some view as cinema's successors. (48)

What ultimately matters to Gunning is the impression of reality, and for him cinematic motion is key in the experience of this impression throughout the history of cinema. The argument would seem to point back to Prince, who mentions motion in his discussion of the CGI ball in *Forrest Gump* (1994), but who does not make more of it in his argument for perceptual realism. Consider the way in which, for example, a still from *Jurassic Park* is fundamentally different from the impression of reality produced by the film. If the film has to do with perceptual realism—looking at dinosaurs moving through a diegetic Newtonian space akin to an existential reality—then the still looks like a highly realistic museum exhibit. The emotion of fear is lost.

It suddenly becomes apparent that the dinosaurs are not living beings captured in a profilmic reality, but computer-generated images. The still looks not so much like a continuous part of the film as a photograph of a set in which stop-animation museum-quality physical models are being used to construct a diegesis. There is neither a virtual index nor much of an impression of perceptual realism. In conceptualizing the virtual index and perceptual realism,

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the role of cinematic motion therefore must be taken into account. The virtual index is not static

in the way that the traditional photographic index is: it encodes specific kinds of motion.

Figure 1. *Jurrasic Park.*

In contradistinction to Gunning, however, this chapter argues that the concept of the

index is still a powerful one, especially since it does not attempt to reread classical film with a

contemporary (and perhaps skewed) perspective. Instead, this chapter conceives of the virtual

index in the digital age in which the concept and popularity of the index already have been long

established. As Peirce points out, the index need not focus on the past. It may also focus on the

present, in the case of a sundial during the day (8). This kind of index unfolds in real time, as

Braxton Soderman points out.

The myth is that in the digital age there is no longer a physical link to "the world we live

in" (Peirce 8). The forced mechanical and chemical processes (of light's traces imprinted on

celluloid) are no longer present, and thus the magic has been lost. These physical links still exist,

but they rely more on context than irreversible mechanical and chemical processes. In the case

of the virtual index, the physical link is the work of the artists: whether it be the addition of jokes

and winks in different versions of films (in the case of virtual subtitling and digital dubbing), or

the trace of movements that artists actually perform in physical reality in order to capture the

movements that they then fine-tune through computer software, which is the process of 3D

previsualisation itself. Lev Manovich claims that cinema has lost its indexicality and become a

type of computer animation in which live action footage is only one element that comprises a

finished film (295). He simplifies the digital editing process by eliding the work that is done

before digital painting occurs. He argues that

> the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to the pro-cinematic
> practices of the nineteenth century, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated. At the
> turn of the twentieth century, cinema was to delegate these manual techniques to animation and
> define itself as a recording medium. As cinema enters the digital age, these techniques are again
> becoming commonplace in the filmmaking process. Consequently cinema can no longer be
> clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a
> subgenre of painting. (295)

Manovich, like Soderman, focuses on the end product, without considering all of the steps that

may be involved in the creation of a film.

Soderman makes a leap by describing the indexical link to an external reality as

conceptual, rather than physical. For him, the index is not just an indication in the present of a

real event in the past—such as a bullet hole or a footprint that marks something that was there

but is not any longer. The bullet hole type of index is the one traditionally associated with

celluloid film. Soderman thinks of another type of index, one that is a physical indication of

something occurring in real time, such as a sundial. He argues for the

> fundamental desire of modern media machines to grasp the present itself, to take hold of the "here
> and now": photography capturing a present instant; film capturing duration, a span of presents;
> closed-circuit video presenting live images; television offering both live images and an ideology

of "liveness"; and then the digital, real-time image enlivening the live—its algorithms, programs, and hardware reaching out from inside the image itself, "signaling through the flames". (171)

From this quotation, it becomes apparent that Soderman conceives of the digital algorithm as an indication of a concept, expressed by an algorithm that unfolds in real time through a program and is displayed by hardware. For Soderman, "the real-time modulations of digital images *expand* [emphasis in original] into another temporality, into the time of algorithmic processing, of the computer carrying out its assigned tasks" (171). This subtle qualification raises the question: does the concept of the digital index have explanatory power (beyond Manovich) for digital films transferred onto DVD or 35mm stock, that no longer unfold in real time (except in the case of digital projection)? What can the idea of the index add to a dialogue around narrative, fictional, digital cinema?

But the index is not only about a physical link to another existing reality—it has to do with a highly specific context, "the world we live in," in Peirce's words (8). Whether the index be from the epoch of the Civil War or Civil Rights, it carries weight as a unique link to its respective time period. An especially lucid example in Pierce that often slips out of scholarship occurs in the following extract:

> [T]here are *indications* [emphasis in original], or indices: which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them. Such is a guidepost, which points down the road to be taken, or a relative pronoun, which is placed just after the name of the thing intended to be denoted, or a vocative exclamation, as "Hi! there," which acts upon the nerves of the person addressed and forces his attention. (5)

Although the physical connection is important to Peirce, it seems that context is equally (if not more) important, especially as it relates to a social context. In addition to context, address is encoded within the index. These aspects become even more apparent in another forgotten passage: "Let us examine some examples of indications … [a] rap on the door is an indication.

Anything which focuses the attention is an indication. Anything which startles us is an indication, in so far as it marks the junction between two points of experience" (8). Soderman, along a similar line, ventriloquizes Peirce: "the essential aspect of the index is its ability to connect our thoughts with external reality" (161).

This address is communicated in specific ways, the most obvious of which is the product placement and branding that runs throughout Bazelevs films. In contradistinction to just any branding, the virtual index references a virtual world; more specifically, it marks the juncture of virtual to real that brings the virtual aspect to light and reifies it. The virtual index, like the first use of CGI in *Tron* (1982), is not just about a correspondence to a virtual reality, but a specific time period, a reference to the status and quality of CGI images of the time.

The loss of the traditional index, replaced by a virtual one, can be theorized in terms of a loss of magic, in the way that Gunning reads Bazin:

> Although Bazin invokes something that sounds like an index in his description of the ontology of the photographic image, maintaining the exact congruence of his claims with a strictly indexical claim seems fraught with difficulty. Rather than an argument about signs, Bazin's ontology of the photographic and filmic image seems to assert a nearly magical sense of the presence delivered by the photographic image. (47)

If this idea was what the index was ultimately about in the first place—a formal, physical description to get at the process of "capturing" reality—then this magic is indeed lost, but it provides the outlet for a new possibility and new magic. It is a possibility for new fantasies to be fulfilled, but these fantasies are removed from an existential reality and transferred into the reality of gaming worlds, which, of course, intersect with lived reality. The fantasy that the virtual pan or track fulfills is one of inspection, rotation, and the ability to control the real time of the diegesis of the story with greater flexibility and speed than in a gaming world. This virtual

camera movement is not just a gimmick. It implicitly draws attention to the work of digital art

and it marks a critical juncture in the narrative of the films in which it appears.

The virtual index punctuates live action and reminds the spectator that the film is a

simulation and not a lived reality. It does not strive for perceptual realism so much as greater

immersion into the fantasy world the film creates. It is a moment that emphasizes the privileged

perspective that the spectator has over the characters in the film. If the traditional Film Studies

concept of the index ultimately provided a fetishistic link to a specific human being (whether it is

an actor or a director), then the virtual index does something different entirely. It is centered

around the illusion of agency and the ability to do and see things not usually on display in "real"

experiential life outside of film. The fantasy it creates for the spectator becomes more important

in that moment than any specific character. In this way, the virtual index is less similar to the

bullet hole or sundial, and more similar to a guidepost that draws attention to itself and what it

can do. The virtual index has an appeal of its own almost as if it were a well-known actor, rather

than merely a device.

2.3   THE VIRTUAL INDEX IN *NIGHT WATCH*

In the Bazelevs' body of work, *Night Watch* features the clearest example of a virtual index that

corresponds to a virtual world. The antagonist Zavulon plays a video game of his own making.

Characters from the film are depicted as avatars in a two-player combat driven format, which is

similar to *Street Fighter* (1987) or *Mortal Combat* (1992). The insertions set up an easy

marketing route for the creation of an eponymous video game after the release of the film, but

the virtual index is more than just a form of appeal and branding aimed at selling video games to

a youth audience down the road. It encodes two fantasies. The first is a fantasy of control, specifically of a male gamer over a female body. The second fantasy is the idea that video games can have an effect outside of virtual reality.

Figure 2. *Night Watch*. Zavulon's avatar is to the left, Anton's to the right.

For Zavulon the video game he creates is not just for entertainment purposes. It allows him to figure out his plan for battling Anton and to devise a sleight of hand so that Anton attacks his own son Egor when Anton would like to attack Zavulon. The first simulation is unsuccessful, but the second time foreshadows Zavulon's eventual victory. In both instances, Zavulon is in his lair, surrounded by screens of his own video game and the live-action concert in which Alisa, the female pop star, performs.   Zavulon is both a gamer and an evil (but cool!) boss. As Greg Dolgopolov points out, Zavulon uses the controller and moves his body as if he

were himself within the video game, in a series of moves that predates and anticipates the Wii

gaming console (56). The film solidifies the connection between his actions in the game and the

"real world" when he makes a call to Alisa. Zavulon convinces her to leave the concert in which

she is the star performer to hunt down Anton. Both the controller and the telephone are shown in

close-up in Zavulon's hands, which suggests that Zavulon can control Alisa remotely as if she

were his personal avatar, but one who operates in lived reality rather than virtual reality.

Figure 3. *Night Watch.* Zavulon holds the controller as if it were his avatar's sword.

Playing video games is a form of labor that has "real" world implications and connects

Zavulon to the object of desire, Alisa. He therefore elides both a stereotype of the gamer as a

sexually-frustrated male, too timid and socially awkward to have real-world romantic or sexual

partners, and also a stereotype of the lazy gamer, who wastes his time on video games rather than

paid labor, creative work, or scholarship. In the final battle of the film, the predictions of the video game come true. Images from the Zavulon's video game are intercut into this final battle scene. The editing suggests that the virtual world has an effect on the "live-action" world in the same way that the vampiric "other" world influences the human realm.
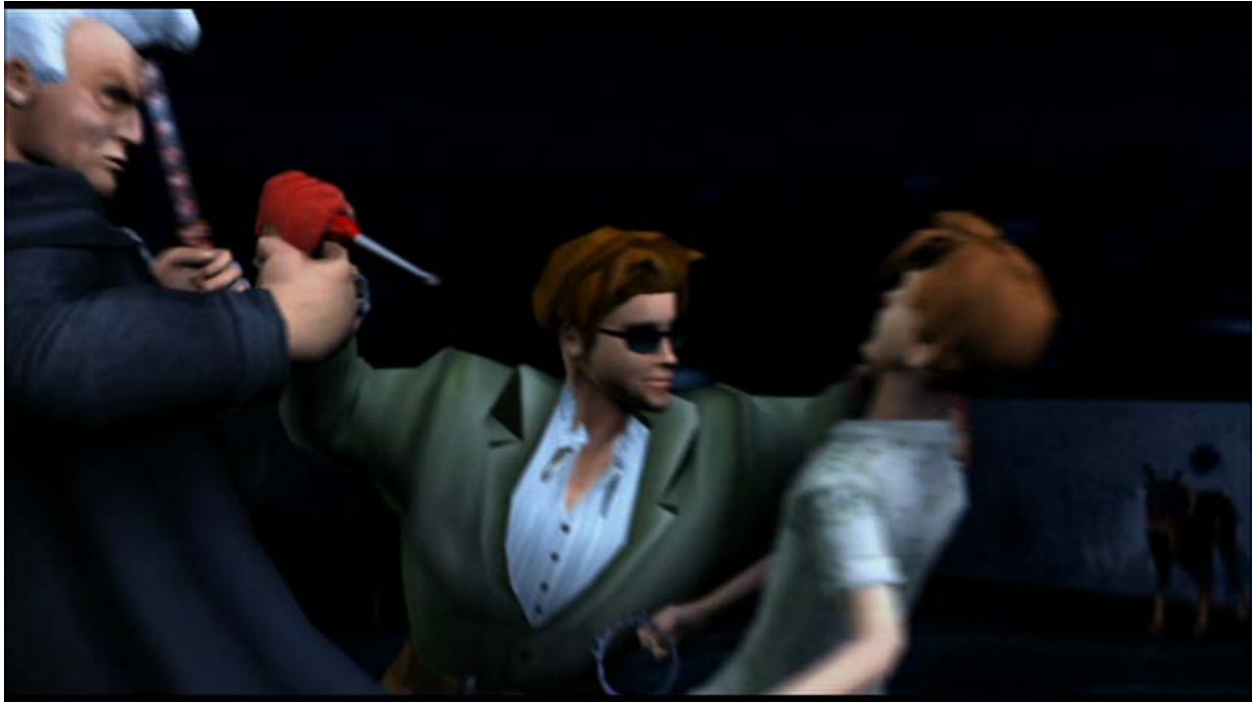
Figure 4. *Night Watch*. Zavulon's avatar stops Anton's avatar from stabbing Egor's avatar.

The scene depicts elements within the video game that were not quite possible in the video games (such as *Street Fighter* or *Mortal Kombat*) that the "fake" game mimics. Specifically, the video game footage that is intercut in the final battle includes the sweeping virtual track that allows the player (spectator) to experience a perspective that would not otherwise be possible. In the depiction of this move, the virtual camera within the game appears to track around the three characters twice, making two complete revolutions. This virtual camera

movement simulates a three-dimensional environment that these games do not usually depict. It is a fantasy of being able to see around the characters in a way that lived experience and video games do not usually satisfy. The combination of computer-generated images of the video game and the live action footage provides another fantasy for the spectator. It is a fantasy of agency and being able to control "real" experiential life as if it were a video game; and to see the situation from a god-like view that allows for the game to be paused or the perspective to be changed. In this way, the virtual index is about the spectator, who is privileged above the characters.

The conclusion is bloodless, but one in which psychological, rather than physical violence, dominates. At this moment the focalization shifts to Zavulon, where it is his perspective—if he were able to see himself from outside—played out as if in the video game. The shift is not just in focalization, but moral justification as well, since at this point in the film Zavulon reveals to Egor that Anton had tried to have him aborted twelve years ago when Anton visited the witch. Alisa reads the report to confirm the details. Zavulon's link to the video game is therefore similar to Anton's connection to the medieval world of the Dark Others since Zavulon's virtual world is able to have an effect on the "real" world of live-action. The important distinction, of course, is that Zavulon is able to control his second world, while Anton cannot.

Zavulon completes the psychological violence against Anton when Alisa reads the report and convinces Egor to come to the side of the Dark Others by his own free will. Zavulon usurps Anton's position as father. This neo-conservative twist rails against abortion in any form in a way that elides female agency and the issue of a woman's right to control her own body. The situation is transformed into a series of decisions made by and effecting men. The presence of

the all-male, and masculine-cultured *Streetfighter*-like video game solidifies the notion that this

is an all male world, in which even Alisa is in a subservient position as either Zavulon's

masculinized henchman or the feminized pop star and object of desire.

Figure 5. *Night Watch*. Zavulon holds Anton back as Alisa incriminates Anton.

What is the virtual index, and how may it be described in light of the discussion of *Night*

Watch? Since, going back to Peirce, the index is "anything that focuses the attention" (161) the

three iterations that show a parallel, virtual world may be called an index of that world. In this

way, it is similar to the guidepost that Peirce mentions. It points away from the live action world

to the possibility of a virtual world outside the diegesis of the film. Furthermore, the link is

physical, but not just because it required algorithms to produce it, in the way that Soderman

describes. The insertion of the video game indirectly points to the digital animators who

produced it and whose work punctuates the narrative with object perspective. Moreover, the

repeated use of the virtual track around the avatars points to the machinations involved in the

process of 3D previsualization, in which artists move through a physical environment to produce

a digital sequence. The interesting twist is that these sequences predict the physical moves of the

actors within the film, rather than the reverse, as in traditional rotoscoping, in which animators

trace live-action footage of human bodies to add greater verisimilitude to the movements of

animated characters. These digital tracks, and thus the game itself, are an inserted plan for

animation put into the film, just as Zavulon's game playing is a plan for outsmarting Anton. The

implication is that the director of the film is an evil hero just like Zavulon! In this way, the

virtual index reinvents the aura surrounding a specific director.

Perhaps a more interesting and useful consequence of the virtual index is its relationship

to time. As Peirce points out, the index points to a past presence (in the case of a bullet hole or a

footprint), but it can also connect to a present presence, for example a sundial during the day, or

a weathervane when it is windy (8). Although the virtual index could be conceptualized as a

present presence in the way that Soderman describes, or a past presence, since the film is

recorded onto a DVD and then played, it is more productive to look at the virtual index's

relationship to the future. It is grounded in the moment of its production to a specific period in

digital animation and technology, but looks forward in time. As Dolgopolov already has argued,

the virtual index in this case predicts the Wii controller and emphasizes the ability to customize

avatars. The virtual index sets up the possibility for marketing video games based on the film,

especially since it glorifies the image of the gamer and includes video games within the film. If

the traditional index was a fetishized link with history and, as a concept, raised the value of the

associated film stock, then the virtual index attempts to create a new form of the "magic" of the index through greater marketing, but on different platforms.

2.4 VIDEO GAMES OUTSIDE THE FILM

After *Night Watch* was released in theaters, a number of unofficial, unsanctioned online video games appeared before the release of the role-playing game *Night Watch*, one year after the premiere of the film. Sergei Luk'ianenko began the story world with the novel *Night Watch*, which was first published in Russian in 1998. Luk'ianenko also wrote the narrative for the game. As Henry Jenkins points out:

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. So, for example, in *The Matrix* franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe.

Although Jenkins is correct to point out the way in which the continuation of narratives appears in *Night Watch* the video game, and then later in *Day Watch* the video game, the marketing campaign that Jenkins discusses is not so cut and dried for the Russian context. Russian-language online games such as *Dozory* and *DozoR: Night Game* appeared on the Internet in 2005 before the video game *Night Watch* could be developed and distributed. As Dolgopolov points out, even though the game draws on the vampiric world of Dark and Light Others and the cache of the film, the graphics have little similarity to the world of the film (60). Characters look totally different, and do not even appear to correlate or intend to correlate to the film. Unlike *Night Watch*, these games could accommodate multiple players, communicating in

a forum and interacting with each other, as opposed to the isolation of the one-player official version. Moreover, in *Dozory* players may choose to be either a Dark Other or a Light Other. That option only became available in the official version of *Day Watch*, the video game.

These role-playing games at first were not licensed, and as Dolgopolov mentions, these non-commercialized versions indicate the level of fan involvement in the evolution of the transmedial *Night Watch* universe (60). Rather than taking away potential revenue for officially sanctioned outlets, they more likely increased the hype and popularity of the *Night Watch* universe, but in a way that becomes increasingly fragmented, as opposed to the comprehensible world that Jenkins suggests.
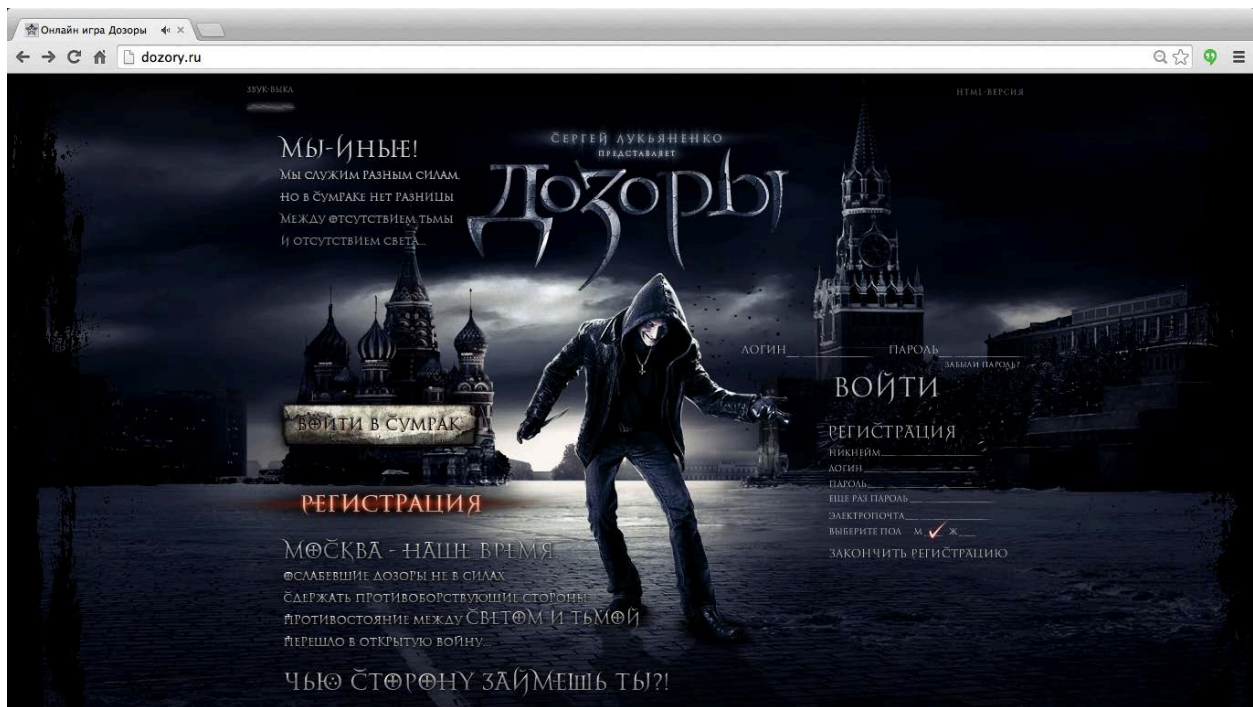
Figure 6. *Dozory*. The graphics of the game bear little resemblance to those of the films.

In the case of *Dozory*, Luk'ianenko actually took over the rights and, according to the website, copyrighted the game for 1998-2003, before these rights were transferred to the Dozory company, which has had them for 2004-2014. In this way, the unofficial outlets have become official and contribute to the original author. Thus, in contradistinction to Jenkins' theory, there does seem to be an element of the ur-text in the *Night Watch* universe, but it is through the author Luk'ianenko, who guides the trajectory of this universe. This world continues to expand. In 2012, Luk'ianenko published *New Watch*, a fifth novel in the series, which was translated and distributed in the United Kingdom in 2013 and the United States in 2014, respectively. Although 20th Century Fox bought the rights to the third installation of the film to be entitled "Dusk Watch" or "Twilight Watch" in 2004 when it also purchased the rights for *Day Watch* ("Business in Brief"), the film is yet to be made. In different interviews at separate times, Bekmambetov has called both *Wanted* (Douglas) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (Giroux) his "Dusk Watch." Although Bekmambetov's joking tone is an ironic redirection, these statements suggest that the boundaries of the *Night Watch* universe are even less clearly defined than has been suggested already. This idea is true especially of the latter film, in which a vampiric world dominates the plot, and Bekmambetov claims a similarity between Anton and Lincoln (Giroux).

Night Watch the game was rushed in its development, with only a year between the release of the game and the film. The algorithms that run the game, the software or "game engine," come from *Silent Storm*, which was released in 1998, several years before *Night Watch* in 2005. Thus when the video game came out, it was already dated in its programming and graphics. In many ways it has little to do graphically with the Bazelevs aesthetic. It is not a repetition of Zavulon's two-fighter video game from the film, but rather it is a role-playing game in which Anton is absent and replaced with a new recruit to the Night Watch, Stas. Although

Zavulon and Gesser are present (the latter voiced in the Russian version by the actor from the film), the absence of Anton and Egor switch the narrative justification from Oedipal conflicts to the task of fighting vampires.

Figure 7. *Night Watch* (video game). The character Vera is featured only in the game, not the film.

Minor characters such as Tiger Cub appear and the universe is continued, but in a way that does not set up the film *Day Watch*. In addition to new characters such as Stas and Vera (see Figure 7), shapeshifting into animals becomes more prominent. The video game was relatively popular domestically, with generally positive reviews and a rating of 8/10 from the Russian online magazine *Strana igr* or gameland.ru (tick_the [real name unknown]). Its international reviews were less positive, earning only a 54/100 on the Metacritics scale,

calculated from an average of twenty-nine critical reviews published in online gaming magazines and newspapers such as *PC Gameworld*, *Digital Entertainment News*, *Computer Games Magazine, Eurogame*r, and even *The New York Times* and the Finnish *Pelit* ("Night Watch PC").

Figure 8. *Night Watch* (video game). The ability to shapeshift becomes an important aspect of the game.

The similarity to *Silent Storm,* the rushed English dialogue translation, and the disparity between Russian and international critical reviews mean that the game's appeal most likely lies in the connection to the *Night Watch* world rather than anything innovative from the perspective of the gamer. As Dolgopolov points out, "[f]or gamers who are not fans of the book or film, *Night Watch PC* as an autonomous property, could be disappointing as a tactical RPG [role-playing game]" (60). Perhaps the most interesting consequence of the virtual index is the way the film set up the possibility for marketing video games. It is something done with far more

control and forethought for *Wanted*, and the video game that followed: *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* (2009).

2.5   THE VIRTUAL INDEX AND *WANTED*

Much of the rhetoric in the media around the visual special effects in *Wanted* argues that the film—through editing, digital doubling, and compositing—attempts to hide the work of several studios and artists, in order to achieve what Prince would refer to as perceptual realism. According to Alain Bielik in the visual special effects online magazine *VFX World,* "[t]he movie required more than 800 visual effects shots, a massive effort initially supervised and produced by Jon Farhat. However, during post-production, Farhat fell very ill and had to be replaced by Visual Effects Supervisor Stefen Fangmeier" (Bielik). Bielek quotes Fangmeier, who explains the difficulty of the experience:

> The majority of the visual effects were being created by Bazelevs Studios, Timur's own company in Moscow. They did almost 500 shots encompassing a very large range of effects. We also had Hammerhead, Hydraulx, PacTitle, Hatch FX and CIS Hollywood and Framestore in London. So, I had to delve into shots that someone else had conceived, with visual effects already well underway and with key creative people based in Moscow. (Bielik)

Fangmeier also seems to revel in the sophistication of the end product, achieved against adverse labor conditions from the standpoint of organization and cooperation. A pride in a version of verisimilitude comes out in Fangmeier's description of a specific shot:

> In one shot, a bullet flies around Angelina Jolie's head in full close-up … [w]hen the bullet passes by her, you can see its shadow on her face and then her hair slightly moving, and finally her eye blinking. We also worked hard on the depth of field to keep the bullet realistically in focus, while Angelina would go from blurred to sharp to blurred again. Since the shot was in very slow motion, we needed all those subtle details to sell it. (Bielek)

The bullet that Fangmeier mentions was created in Autodesk Maya, which is 3D computer graphics software used for creating not only visual effects, but graphics in video games as well. Fangmeier points to the need to "sell it," without noting that, ironically, Jolie's attractive and recognizable face is doing most of the selling. Jolie seems to be the main marketing feature of the film, as the international trailer and the theatrical release poster suggest.

Figure 9. The theatrical release poster features Jolie in the foreground although she is not the protagonist.

The poster is reminiscent of the cover of the *Night Watch* video game. Both brand their product with the image of a sultry, dark-haired femme fatale. The imagery with Jolie goes back further still with her role in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and its sequel *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider Cradle of Life* (2003), big-budget commercial films that were adaptations of the famous video game *Tomb Raider* (1996), in which Lara Croft is the protagonist. In this way, the

imagery of Jolie as a femme fatale already points to a virtual world of gaming, and to the intersection of digital cinema and gaming.

The decision to cast Jolie already indicated that *Wanted* would be digitally sophisticated and, perhaps, linked with a video game available for purchase. The case of *Wanted* fits in more neatly with Jenkins' schema for how transmedia function. The licensed video game *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* was created by Grin, the same studio that made the *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* video games. The publishing studio, Warner Bros. Entertainment, and the distributor, Universal Studios, remained the same as well. *Wanted: Weapons of Fate* is a third-person shooter that relies less on an interesting diegesis and more on the pleasure of vicarious violence. The masked firing assassin on the cover of the video game sheds light on the target audience, young males. The casting of Jolie as the lead character elicits interest in the movie, which is transferred later to the shoot-'em up video game for the same young male demographic.

Figure 10. The theatrical release poster for *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* features Jolie.

Jolie is not the only gesture to the virtual world. *Wanted* does not solely set up a video

game to be sold later, but it is also a product that attempts to show something on screen that the

video games of the time could not or did not do. The virtual track is a device within the film that

fulfills a gaming fantasy of exploring the space and perspective around an object. The virtual

track occurs twice in the film: at Mr. X's assassination and at Sloan's assassination.

Figure 11. The cover of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (video game).

These two moments of the virtual index function as catalysts to the two instances of

"object perspective"[3] that frame the film. Both sequences depict a bullet in slow motion as it

comes through a character's forehead, splatters blood, and reverses diegetic time. The virtual

camera then depicts the bullet as it goes back through the forehead to its original trajectory. The

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[3] For a thorough description of "object perspective" see the next chapter of this dissertation.

virtual track occurs around the bullet and the character in slowed time. Despite the gratuitous

violence, each moment is also comic as it depicts the bullet just before it penetrates the skin of

the forehead, and surprise shows on each character's face.

Figure 12. The cover of *Wanted: Weapons of Fate*, which received the Mature rating.

Figure 13. *Wanted.* Slow motion shows the bullet as it exits the forehead of Mr. X.

Figure 14. *Wanted.* A virtual pan follows the trajectory of the bullet as it exits Mr. X's forehead.

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The combination of humor and a detailed depiction of violence is a defining feature of this

virtual index. In order to achieve this effect, digital stunt-doubles had to be used:

> For especially high-risk sequences, Bekmambetov augmented his flesh-and-blood performers with scanned digital stunt doubles. The scanner rotates around the actors for about 15 seconds to create 3-D models. Downloaded to a computer as a CG mold, the virtual models were then "rigged" with skeletal and muscular systems, layered with textured exteriors, fitted with scanned wardrobes and programmed to move like the actors. (Hart)

The shot is not a stunt, nor is it received as a stunt would be—with a tinge of suspended

disbelief. There is a different relationship to the hyper-graphic nature of the depiction of death

on screen. Death is reversible, mutable, in the hands of digital masters who have manipulated

the rest of the film as well. This fact is known in the same way it is known that killing enemies

in first- and third-person shooting games does not correlate to the real world, but to a virtual one,

where cathartic violence is permitted.

Figure 15. *Wanted*. Diegetic time is reversed and the virtual pan continues.

Violence is hyper-realistic without being documentary—it is not supposed to show something as close to actual death as possible, but point to it with a wink that says this sequence is all in virtual fun. It is similar to a video game in which death is not death but play. It can be enjoyed because it is virtual, not real. It belongs to the virtual world that may be continued and altered in the video game, now available not only on PC, but Xbox and Playstation 3 as well.

Figure 16. *Wanted*. The gory details of Mr. X's death as the bullet is shown in reversed time.

In this sense the virtual index is different from the traditional, celluloid, index. First of all, the scanned image means that the virtual index is not just a likeness of a human—the resulting scanned image is "physically forced to correspond point by point to nature" (Peirce 6), even if it can be manipulated later. The virtual index eliminates all doubt that what is on screen is real, or could even be real. When Soderman references Peirce and characterizes the ability of

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the index "to connect our thoughts to external reality" the external reality is two-fold: the reality of the virtual world that will appear again in a video game, and the laboratory of digital editors who leave their stamp with an impossible stunt and a virtual track that changes perspective in a way not done in video games. The result is startling. "Anything which startles us is an indication, in so far as it marks the junction between two points of experience" (Peirce 8). These two points of experience are the film world of verisimilitude and the virtual world of the gaming experience.

2.6   VIRTUAL TRACK AS MAGIC IN IRONY OF FATE. THE CONTINUATION.

The virtual index references another world, but sometimes this world is not centered around virtual gaming, but virtual fantasy. The same device from *Night Watch* that later appears in *Wanted*—the virtual track or pan—is present in *The Irony of Fate. The Continuation* as well, but it functions differently. It is something that will not be found in video games, but its greater appeal lies in the way it manipulates cinematic time and space to re-infuse the New Year's holiday and Soviet genre of the New Year's film with magic in a post-Soviet Russia. The virtual index therefore depends on context for meaning.

Irony of Fate. The Continuation is a sequel to the Soviet classic *Irony of Fate* (1975), in which a doctor from Moscow mistakenly ends up on a plane to Leningrad on New Year's Eve. The protagonist, Zhenia, who has a low tolerance for alcohol and is forced to drink with his friends, thinks he is in Moscow when he arrives in Leningrad. In a parodic treatment of Soviet urban-planning practices, his address in Moscow turns out to have an identical Leningrad address, which causes him to end up at the apartment of an attractive woman, Nadia. Even

though both are engaged, by the end of the film they have fallen in love, and the film suggests that they will have a future together.

The film had incredible success when it was shown in the Soviet Union. The success of an initial television broadcast led to the premiere of the film on the big screen. In the same way that there have been cults of Lenin, Stalin, and now Putin, the film has received a cult following without necessarily becoming a cult classic. Its popularity has persisted into the present moment, mostly due to its association with the New Year's holiday, and the Soviet and post-Soviet practice of playing the film on New Year's Eve on Channel One Russia. Every generation since 1975 has grown up with the film playing once a year at the most magic time of year—the New Year, the main Soviet holiday that had been re-mythologized from Orthodox Christmas before it, and the Slavic pagan celebration of the winter solstice, Koliada, even earlier still. The original *Irony of Fate* channeled the magic of this moment in time. In the film, both Zhenia and Nadia are unmarried in their mid-thirties, which, within the Soviet Brezhnev-era cultural context, signified their last chance for love and a family. Both are unfulfilled in their current respective relationships and are prepared to settle for suitable, yet ultimately unsatisfying partners.

The magic of the original film is communicated not so much by the aesthetic of the film, as it is by the plot circumstances, the accompanying original music, and the charm of the protagonist Andrei Miagkov, who later renews his success as a diffident lover in *Office Romance* (1977). The sequel to *The Irony of Fate* is not a remake, so much as an expansion of the narrative world, and even, one might argue, a transmedial one as Jenkins describes since the original is celluloid film and the 2007 continuation is digital cinema. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* creates a different formal aesthetic through fast-paced editing techniques, a blue digital sheen, blatant product placement, and the virtual pan that occurs at the stroke of midnight.

In the post-Soviet sequel, both Miagkov and Barbara Bryl'ska (Nadia) appear in cameo

roles, but in a present-day diegesis in which they never married. The new romantic line concerns

Zhenia's son, Konstantin (played by the Bazelevs star Konstantin Khabenskii, who also plays

Anton in *Night Watch*), and the woman's daughter, also Nadia (played by Elizaveta Boiarskaia).

Konstantin follows in his father's footsteps by trying to seduce the younger Nadia when drunk at

her apartment after he supposedly mistakes it for his own (the addresses are still the same). The

meeting this time is no longer an irony of fate, but a contrived situation thought up by

Konstantin. The moment of the virtual index occurs when Konstantin and the younger Nadia

finally kiss at the stroke of midnight and the beginning of the New Year.

Figure 17. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation*. Nadia and Konstantin's kiss begins the virtual track.

The virtual index occurs as a series of tracks around scenes at midnight of the main

characters of the film. Each is a magic moment that is shown as a transition in a continuous

virtual track to the right that begins and ends with the kiss between Konstantin and the younger

Nadia. The two are shown in silhouette before a cork shoots out of a champagne bottle and flies

into the chandelier above them. The CGI cork acts as a catalyst for a montage that depicts all of the other significant characters.

In each successive shot, a virtual camera tracks around characters that appear as if frozen: the would-be fiancée has crashed his car, but is not injured; a policeman and inmate from earlier in the film are drinking vodka together; the elder Nadia is drinking champagne with her girlfriend; Zhenia is arriving on a plane from Moscow to St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) to reunite with the elder Nadia. In one curious shot, a virtual camera tracks around the CGI cork and a satellite to depict earth from Outer Space in an attempt, it would seem, to garner nostalgia for the Soviet space program. The sequence ends with a virtual camera that appears to fly around (and always to the right) the onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square until it reaches a large clock striking midnight. This sequence gives the spectator an illusion of agency, of being able to see several different worlds at once in the same moment, and to be able to halt time and move through space via the identification with the virtual camera. The kiss is a release for the viewer, a moment that has been anticipated for the entire film. The kiss is the magic that begins the magic of the virtual index.

Figure 18. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* The cork from the bottle of champagne reaches Outer Space.

Figure 19. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* Zhenia arrives to St. Petersburg.

There are no other such sequences in the same film and no analogous sequences in the earlier film. The second film acknowledges that it cannot recreate the magic of the original film, but it can feed off it and create a new kind of magic. This time the magic does not come so much through the plot devices, but through a combination of nostalgia and a type of formal experimentation that extends the moment of the New Year. The fantasy that the film enacts is

the desire to be in several moments all at once, to experience the New Year through each

character and to feel the intensity of emotion that each character feels at this moment, whether it

be love, longing, uncertainty, disappointment, camaraderie, or another emotion: all are

heightened at this threshold moment. It is a model of greater consumption—the desire to

consume all "deep" emotions—that contrasts with the rampant product placement that runs

through the film, but is curiously absent in this scene. As Arlene Forman correctly points out,

the film "denies the possibility that intimacy, love, and personal fulfillment could have existed in

the Soviet era. His [Bekmambetov's] happy endings occur in the best of all possible worlds, the

here-and-now" (Forman).

Figure 20. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* The virtual track and the sequence end on Red Square.

2.7   CONCLUSION

The virtual index can point to many things; here, most specifically, it can point towards the

gaming world or the world of pure fantasy. In Bekmambetov's work, it is not about retroactively

fetishizing a material that has a link to a past moment, but rather it is about developing an

interest in the cinematic product that may extend, for the spectator, across media to new products. The model of production has been to start with an ur-text that has already had success—the *Night Watch* novel, the *Wanted* comic book series, the *Irony of Fate* film—and infuse it with digital "magic" in an effort to popularize a narrative world. The real impact of the virtual index is in merchandise and the box office. The virtual index sheds light not only on the devices of the virtual track, object perspective, virtual subtitles, and digital dubbing, but also on the intersection of media that has become characteristic of Bazelevs' recent projects, and in particular, the Elki or *Six Degrees of Celebration* cluster of films, begun in 2010. These films have used fan participation and their websites to promote the Elki brand. They raise questions that relate not just to transmedia, but to the intersection and collaboration of artists and authors on these films. These concerns will be addressed in the final full chapter of this dissertation.

3.0   OBJECT PERSPECTIVE

3.1   DEFINITION OF OBJECT PERSPECTIVE

In 2008 Timur Bekmambetov became the first film director from the former Soviet

Union to make a major impact on the world box office. *Wanted*, an action drama with Morgan

Freeman, James McAvoy, and Angelina Jolie, reached the second-place spot in its opening

weekend and went on internationally to gross over $341 million ("Wanted"). Before

Bekmambetov collaborated with Universal Studios on *Wanted*, he enjoyed economic success in

Russia, where his vampire action film *Night Watch* (2004) surpassed existing domestic box-

office records, only to be outdone by its sequel *Day Watch* (2006) (Beumers 256). Previous

scholarship on Bekmambetov's cinema has looked at these films in terms of theme, character,

plot, indebtedness to a Hollywood action aesthetic, and "symptom" of Russian cultural malaise.

This chapter, by contrast, takes a closer look at Bekmambetov's style, and especially the way in

which computer-animated shots function in these (otherwise) live-action films. Digital

sequences often feature an inanimate, everyday object that acts as a focal point, taking the

spectator on a "ride" through cinematic space that rivals video games and the real-world

amusement park. I term this phenomenon "object perspective," and this chapter argues that the

device challenges ideas about point of view, cinematic pleasure, human agency, and the place of

the spectator in an accelerating world of global consumerism.

"Object perspective" must be differentiated from other cinematic ways of representing perspective. "Object perspective" is not merely the traditional point-of-view shot for a character, with a physical object anthropomorphized as if it were a character, through whose eyes spectators see. Nor is "object perspective" another term for shots that are traditionally considered to occupy no one's perspective and create the "normal" style of the film. It also is not what Noël Burch has called a "pillow-shot," or "cutaway still-lifes," in which "the camera focuses for a moment … on some inanimate aspect of Man's environment" (161). These stationary shots "suspend the diegetic flow" (160) and rely on "the tension between the suspension of human presence (of the diegesis) and its potential return" (160). While object perspective focuses on an (seemingly) inanimate object, it operates not upon tension, but immersion. It privileges motion, rather than stasis. If pillow-shots "demand to be *scanned* like paintings, not like *inhabited shots* [emphasis in original]" (162), then the opposite is true of object perspective, in which the playful objects themselves "inhabit" the shots and steal the attention of the spectator.

Object perspective is something new altogether that none of these paradigms can fully explain. It is a stylistic innovation that occurs when a "virtual camera" itself becomes anthropomorphized and demonstrates a hyper-attentive agency—through virtual camera movements, framing, and editing—to a non-human, non-character subject. This "virtual camera" is not a camera at all, but the result of complex digital manipulation. Object perspective combines two deep-seated fantasies that cinema is uniquely poised to fulfill: the thrill of the ride through otherwise impossible spaces, and the wonder created by a playful interaction between image and spectator.

In Bekmambetov's work, object perspective tracks movement through cinematic space in a variety of forms: with electric wires through the interior of a wall; with a rivet that free falls

from an airplane, through the sky, down a ventilation shaft, and into an apartment; and with a bullet that travels backwards in time through downtown Chicago. Each object functions as the "star" of sequences that last from several seconds to a full minute and punctuate the narrative of Bekmambetov's feature films. And just like a movie star, the object communicates desire through a combination of exterior appeal and its own powers of seduction. These powers of seduction are created by the impression of a camera that coyly reveals and obscures an object always just out of reach, so that the "chase" never quite ends in capture. The effect is achieved by constantly switching the point of view and the virtual angle from which the object is represented, so that the representation of the object is never static; quick cuts with shots of the object from various virtual angles create an impression of how the object fills diegetic space. The virtual camera—complicit in the spectacle—films the object as if it really were a movie star, or at least a subject worthy of the audience's attention.

Although this type of visual spectacle is arresting, object perspective cannot merely be characterized as the cinema of attractions according to the definition Tom Gunning provides. Gunning maintains that it is "pure presence, soliciting surprise, astonishment or pure curiosity instead of following the enigmas on which the narrative depends" (*D.W. Griffith* 24-5). Although the elements of "pure" curiosity and surprise are part of the power of object perspective, they are not just mere breaks in the diegesis. They are integrated parts of the narrative that do more to help create this diegesis, the cinematic world the film creates, than to disrupt it.

The greater similarity between object perspective and the cinema of attractions, though, is an aesthetic aimed at garnering the attention of spectators for profit. As this chapter attempts to describe and account for how object perspective functions, it interweaves a discussion of

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Bekmambetov's studio Bazelevs, and especially the visual effects team led by Pavel Perepelkin.

A break-down of how this studio works—its innovative marketing practices, box office records,

dynamics of transnational funding, and the division of labor in global co-productions—provides

a counter-narrative to the way these films have been traditionally marketed to specific audiences

as "American" or "Russian." These modes of production and distribution operate on an

emergent global model that is by no means unique to the Bazelevs studio. Whether it is the co-

opting of crowd sourcing or the coordination of computer graphics teams, Bekmambetov's

product concentrates on style as such, but also a style that constantly references consumer culture

and relies on the tropes of transnational cinema to which global audiences have become

accustomed.

3.2   THE PROVENANCE OF OBJECT PERSPECTIVE: ADVERTISING

There are several ways to contextualize object perspective. Object perspective participates in a

long narrative history that focuses on non-human objects that become the driving force behind a

film or literary work. François Girard's *The Red Violin* (1998) and John Huston's *The Maltese*

Falcon (1941) are examples in cinema; Sergei Dovlatov's *The Suitcase* might serve as an

example from literature.[4] Although a framework based on Bill Brown's thing theory of

everyday objects and Jane Bennett's description of "vibrant matter" is useful, these theories

either look at the social life of objects or the way conglomerations of inanimate "things" act in

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[4] These works are examples in which objects are used as devices that drive the narrative or link characters. The red
violin and the Maltese falcon serve this function in each of the respective eponymous films. The chapters in *The
Suitcase* are entitled for specific objects that the narrator brings in the single suitcase allowed to him on his
emigration from the Soviet Union to the Untied States. Each chapter tells the story of how the narrator acquired the
object and why it held special meaning for him. In these works objects are at times personified but never
anthropomorphized.

unexpected ways. They focus on the question of how physical objects effect the experiential world, but they have less to say on the question of how represented objects function in texts. Moreover, since object perspective is so heavily reliant on established ways of cinematic seeing, these theories do not always take the dynamics of scopophilia into account.

Although object perspective has a nuanced connection to the narrative of the larger work, it is still a short moment that punctuates the film, rather than dominates it. *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* are first and foremost about vampires, not electric wires and rivets. The narrative connection does not seem to be the place to begin, especially since object perspective concerns, foremost, the interaction of a beautiful digitally-represented object and an engaged spectator.

Another way to look at object perspective has to do with aesthetics and the formal cinematic tradition of CGI shots that follow objects. The flying arrow in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), the floating feather that opens *Forest Gump* (1994) or any video-game that features an avatar-like object that the gamer appears to follow are all examples of a similar phenomenon. This approach also provides insight to the way that object perspective participates in this tradition, but it does not necessarily help to explain the nuanced movement that occurs in object perspective or its larger connection to narrative.

The primary affects that object perspective produces are pleasure through wonder and a balance of filled and unfulfilled fantasy. Perhaps, therefore, the place to start is Bekmambetov's own history in advertising and image production. Object perspective is a characteristic feature of the films and shorts that Bekmambetov has produced, and if by Bekmambetov, the collaborative efforts of the Bazelevs visual effects studio—a team of dozens of digital animators, compositors, painters, and 3D previsualization artistis—is invoked, then the trajectory of Bekmambetov's career in its culling of these workers becomes key to understanding the development of this

device. Object perspective shares much with television and magazine advertising—all are predicated on the dynamics of desire. To push the point further, the play of the image in object perspective is the same as in advertising, and for that matter, all image production. As W. J. T. Mitchell asserts: "The Freudian *fort-da* game of appearance and disappearance, the endless shuttling of the image between presence and absence, duck and rabbit, is constitutive of the image … Images both 'express' desires that we already have, and teach us how to desire in the first place" (68).

A native of Soviet Kazakhstan educated in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Bekmambetov made his name in Moscow in the early 1990s with advertising, and now works in Hollywood. Before he began to make television commercials, though, he worked as a set designer and even co-directed his own film, *Peshawar Waltz* (also known as *Escape from Afghanistan*, 1994), an auteur work that deals with the tragedy of Soviet friendly fire during the Soviet Afghan war. There is nothing in the film that properly could be called object perspective, but the work is significant for the way it maps out space in the underground prison that the Soviet POWs capture. The film consists of footage from a VHS camcorder intermixed with 35mm handheld footage. Close-ups, extreme close-ups, and shots with quick pans and zooms make the establishment of space extraordinarily difficult, especially when the revolt begins and the dark underground labyrinth of tunnels reveals small fires and warring enemies around each corner. At one point, two groups of escaping Russian POWs literally run into each other, arriving from opposite directions. The close-ups of the camera increase the confusion since faces are indiscernible and it is impossible to fully map from where either group has come. The disorientation, though, seems to be precisely the point: to impart to the spectator the sense of

confusion that the characters themselves are experiencing. Issues of space have always, therefore, been a topic of study in Bekmambetov's work.

The film produced strong reactions. It was nominated for Best Picture at Kinotavr, the premier regional Russian film festival, and it won an award for best director at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival ("Timur Bekmambetov: Awards"). Despite the critical success of the film, Bekmambetov was not satisfied with the results, especially the film's failure to reach a large audience.

> "I, at that time [the early 1990s], shot my first film, *Peshavar Waltz*. And I understood that no one needed the film. The film went from festival to festival, won prizes, but people didn't see it. At that time, there were furniture stores and repair shops in the movie theaters. But on television they started to play advertisements. Advertisements were shot without rules: Do what you want. Make a movie if you want, but it has to be a 30-second one."[5] (Denisova)

When theater-going was at an all-time low (Condee 50), Bekmambetov entered his cinematic career through the backdoor—television. He shot a series of eighteen commercials for the newly founded Imperial Bank that featured vignettes from the lives of world historical figures. These commercials, as Bekmambetov suggests above, look more like short films than advertisements. Rather than an argument for the advantages of depositing one's money in that specific bank, they, almost without exception, impart an imperial message that may or may not refer explicitly to Russia. This associative link created an appeal that made sense at a time when Russian citizens had seen the Soviet Empire fall before their eyes and, no doubt, longed to feel proud of their history and country again. The thirty to sixty-second commercials became wildly popular: they were even re-aired on television in 2007, even though the bank itself had failed in 1998

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[5] «Я как раз снял свой первый фильм, «Пешаварский вальс». И понял, что кино никому не нужно. Фильм ездил на фестивали, получал призы, но люди его не видели: в кинотеатрах были мебельные салоны и магазины запчастей. Зато по телевизору стали показывать рекламу. Которая снималась без правил: делай что хочешь. Хочешь—снимай кино, только тридцатисекундное.» *Translation by author.*

(Denisova). The constraints of commercialization and the popularity of the works gave Bekmambetov an opportunity to develop the unique style that would grow into object perspective in *Night Watch*.

The clearest example of early object perspective occurs in the commercial featuring Genghis Khan, "Genghis Khan and Ögedei." The plot of the episode relies on imperialist rhetoric that glorifies Genghis Khan and his successor Ögedei as wise rulers, rather than mass murderers or despots. This message comes across as strange in a Russian cultural context, given Russia's position under the yoke of the Mongolian Empire from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Bekmambetov stretches the limits of the people and things onto which desire can be mapped, or through whom desire can be expressed. Object perspective makes a thing that would be otherwise uninteresting (or potentially dangerous) engaging and attractive; in this instance, historical figures that are remembered with fear or scorn are featured in a comedic or respectful way.[6] Bekmambetov's work creates room for formal experimentation precisely by relying on a creative appropriation of editing techniques popularized by Hollywood, and by referencing Soviet cinematic themes and tropes.

In a simple yurt, an older Genghis Khan with a white beard in medium profile asks his three sons what life's greatest enjoyment is. The eldest answers that it is hunting with a golden eagle. The middle son answers that it is glory in battle. Only the youngest son Ögedei answers with "what his father wanted to hear." Life's greatest enjoyment is taking care of the fatherland.

Despite the heavy-handed verbal rhetoric, the dramatic final two shots of the work are arresting. The virtuosity of these shots, however, is set up by a careful resurrection of Soviet cinema. If the period in which Bekmambetov was working may be characterized by the

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[6] Napoleon appears in two commercials, in both of which he comes across as a comedic character. In addition to Genghis Khan, Tamerlane is shown in one commercial as a sympathetic military leader, who mourns for each soldier that he loses in battle.

dominant genre of the time, *chernukha*, which may be characterized by small interior spaces, conflict, violence, and a contemporary Russian urban setting (Graham 9), then this commercial is a release and a return to Stalinist cinematic aesthetics, in which messages are clear and stated literally. The advent of sound cinema in the Soviet Union coincided with the defining of socialist realism as the official artistic method. Early examples of the genre that would dominate Stalinist cinema in the succeeding decades were with larger-than-life biopics about almost exclusively male heroes, often historical personages and leaders reclaimed for the socialist cause. Examples include *Peter the First* (1937), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and even national quasi-ethnographic films such as *Shchors* (1939, a Ukrainian national hero) and *Salavat Iulaev* (1940, a film about a Bashkir ally of Emel'ian Pugachev). Similar to these films, the Imperial Bank commercials feature biopics with short episodes that exhibit the key characteristics of the leaders they feature. If the advent of Stalinist sound cinema in the early 1930s later led to a domination in the Soviet film industry by these adventure, yet "feel-good" films in a difficult time of political repression, murder, and the horrors of collectivization and industrialization, then these commercials make a similar move by trying to create trust at a time of widespread personal and political upheaval.

Object perspective draws on Soviet cinema thematically but diverges aesthetically. The penultimate shot departs from the conservative formal aesthetics and camera movement of Stalinism by relying on the shot-countershot of traditional Hollywood cinema to suture in—if I may invoke Stephen Heath's term—the spectator with Genghis Khan and Ögedei. In this shot, close-ups feature the boy Ögedei handing his father Genghis Khan a bowl of mare's milk in a symbolic gesture of deference. It is an act, though, that also implies a transferring of power, almost as if Genghis Khan were handing Ögedei the rights to the Mongol Empire, even though

Ögedei offers the bowl to his father. The bowl becomes infused with the symbolic meaning of a pact between father and son. It is similar to the mentor handing the positive hero a party card because he has finally reached class consciousness. In this case it is about realizing the importance of caring for the fatherland, for others rather than the glory of self. This attitude is in contradistinction to the lower-body aesthetics of the two be-furred older brothers, who wield food and an ax in dark colors, rather than the traditionally higher associations of white clothing and the upward movement of the final shot of the commercial.

In this final shot, Ögedei's face appears in deep focus and the bowl in medium close-up, out of focus. It seems as though the film occupies Genghis Khan's point of view as Ögedei is shown straight on in medium close-up. Ögedei hands Genghis Khan the bowl, and the latter holds the bowl of milk in his right hand within the screen. The "virtual camera" then appears to crane up, following the silk ties that run vertically up through the yurt. The bowl—still in a horizontal position, perpendicular to the upward motion—acts as a focusing point until the "virtual camera" exits the top of the yurt to reveal the camp. The effect is one of liberation, of discovering space with a transcendental movement. This dramatic and unexpected ending is not just a contemporary manifestation of the cinema of attractions since the shot is intimately connected to the narrative: the commercial literalizes the idea of watching over the fatherland with dramatic imagery and what appears to be the work of a physical camera, but is in fact digital manipulation. The advertisement ends with a moment that stops spectators in their tracks, and leaves them with a positive association of Imperial Bank. An image of the Imperial Bank logo appears directly after the final frame of the Mongol encampment.

The final shot creates an almost out-of-body experience. As the bowl held by Genghis Khan continues to crane up through the top of the yurt, the spectator begins the ascent by

identifying with the posited diegetic body of Genghis Khan. As the ascent continues to the top

of the yurt and the right hand with the bowl stays in the screen, it becomes impossible to inhabit

the cinematic body of Genghis Khan—Bekmambetov's constructions of the cinematic body and

cinematic space challenge the laws of physics in Newtonian space. An arm cannot move that far

up and a body cannot move through the top of a yurt without some form of propulsion and ability

to move, to dissolve through the narrow spaces between the crisscrossed ties.

Figure 21. "Genghis Khan and Ögedei" in *World History: Imperial Bank*. Ögedei accepts the bowl of milk.

A metaphorical reading becomes necessary since literal identification of point of view is

no longer possible if the traditional rules of Hollywood editing are maintained. Whose

perspective is this? Genghis Khan's? Ögedei's? The bowl of milk unites them. It acts as both a

focusing point and a distraction that makes the final shot so surprising. The object suggests that the perspective is one shared by Genghis Khan and Ögedei and actualized by the spectator's imagination. The spectator is the observing consciousness that completes the scene and occupies the god-like perspective that represents the fulfillment of Ögedei's words. The perspective unites Ögedei, the spectator, and Genghis Khan in a way that makes superfluous a representation of Ögedei as a successful leader. Since the perspective and therefore outlook (in the literal and metaphorical meanings) is shared, success will be shared as well. A whole film is implied and completed, but one that leaves an impression of escape and purposeful relief, rather than the despair and the tenuousness of the current moment.

Desire in this commercial gets fulfilled with the same device as the cinema of attractions, but with a more complex association to both a political and economic agenda. Object perspective raises the stakes by flaunting digital effects that "prove" a physical camera could not have recorded the footage under the current levels of technology—in other words, the revelation of the device (by means direct or implied) becomes part of the device of object perspective. The commercial is evident of trends that will become intensified in later examples of object perspective: dependence on narratives that reference a Soviet past; interest in the way that objects transfer desire from one character to another; the reliance on Hollywood genre codes to give free way to formal experimentation; and an aesthetic that takes an interest in exploring impossible spaces.

3.3   DARK, FORBIDDEN SPACE AND DESIRE

From his commercials in the 1990s until his big break with *Night Watch* (2004) Bekmambetov's only works were low-budget productions with little or no digital effects: *The Arena* (2001), also entitled *Gladiatrix* (a mixture of *Gladiator* and *Matrix*)[7] and his made-for-Russian television series *GAZ: Russian Cars* (2002). It is not until *Night Watch* that CGI becomes prominent again. This section looks at two examples of object perspective within the film to think through the way these shots open up questions about agency, the place of the gaze, and the location of desire.

The film begins with two digital sequences: one set in the medieval period and another in early post-Soviet Moscow. The first establishes the battle between the forces of Dark and Light, in which a ceasefire is announced in favor of a prophecy that a "Great Other" will come to resolve the conflict a thousand years from that moment. The ceasefire announced by main character Geser is a scream that freezes time such that weapons—swords, arrows, shields, maces—are suspended in midair and warriors are fixed in their fighting positions. More than a mere break in the fighting, this sequence simulates a pause, as if the spectator pressed a button on the platform playing the film in a home-viewing environment. Objects that were once just background become fascinating, and their shiny exteriors are on display as if they were museum pieces. The spectator's agency seems increased, since the characters into whom the spectator has been interpellated are able to move through the "paused" scene. In this way, the spectator already has an impression of agency through Geser's action.

If the film stopped with Geser, the question of agency would not be remarkable. In the succeeding sequence, though, the voice-over narration announces that after one thousand years, a

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[7] *The Arena* or *Gladiatrix* is a Russian-US co-production produced by Roger Corman and distributed without theatrical release in the United States by New Horizons Home Video.

"Great Other" will come on the side of the dark and change things forever. As the voice-over

plays, the film simultaneously transfers to 1992 Moscow, and shows a close-up of a finger as it

presses the button to a doorbell outside of a dilapidated post-Soviet apartment. The grimy

aesthetics and the setting reference *chernukha* aesthetics, but the addition of the "Great Other"

points to Stalinist traditions.

Figure 22. *Night Watch*. The finger of the "Great Other" presses the doorbell to begin object perspective.

The finger itself seems to restart the action, the diegesis of the film, almost as if the

spectator were hitting the pause button in the same way that the "Great Other" presses the

doorbell. The doorbell launches object perspective and acts as the start button to a ride along

electric wires and through the space between walls. The spectator has the impression not so

much of occupying the implied diegetic body to whom the finger belongs as being outside of the

film and having the ability to restart it from within. The close-up of the index finger shows that

the digit is a prosthesis itself, a tool not only for the "Great Other" but a vicarious one for the

spectator as well.

If the finger pushing the button "restarts" the narrative of the film in a (more or less)

contemporary era, then the succeeding sequence through the wall seems to be precipitated by the

spectator's own curiosity. As the finger presses the button of the doorbell, the virtual camera

appears to track as it follows two wires that protrude from the button and lead into the wall.

Instead of just a jump cut teleportation to the other side, or going through the "cyperspace" of

electricity (as in *The Matrix*), the spectator follows the "virtual camera" through the wall to

explore a place that cannot usually be occupied in cinema, much less experiential reality. The

camera pans and a mosquito (which first appeared in the beginning of the film with the title)

buzzes around the doorbell. In a cinematic sleight of hand—the "virtual camera" appears to dive

into the hole in the wall to follow the intertwining wires horizontally through a murky space. As

live-action footage moves from the finger along the wires and into the wall, a virtual mosquito

serves as a distraction when the footage goes out of focus, and then comes back into focus with

non-captured "pure" digital animation. It is almost as if the "virtual camera" were just now

discovering its own power to travel through the wall unencumbered. This assigning of agency to

a "virtual camera" is a mere impression since there is neither a profilmic camera nor a profilmic

wall. Desire is communicated without any representation of a human and without an actual

cameraperson behind the footage—it is an effect produced by a collective, rather than a single

individual.

The virtual camera follows the two wires through a dark, greenish space with static

electric sparks that make an identification with the mosquito impossible. The combination of

possible embodiments—the finger, the mosquito, the mind's eye of the implied diegetic body to which the finger belongs, the electricity running through the wires—create an impression of agency that is always disappearing and does not settle in one assumed diegetic body. The object perspective sequence is carefully crafted so that embodiment never solidifies, since it is the subject-oriented (human or otherwise) point of view that object perspective eludes. The impression is that a freely flowing curiosity is the thing that drives object perspective, not embodiment.

Digital animation and 3D pre-visualization have made object perspective possible. The virtual camera appears to move along the electric wires as it traveled along the silk ties in the "Genghis Khan and Ögedei" commercial, but in this episode the electric wires do not function as a mere reference point to track movement through space. Instead, they are axial points around which the camera appears effortlessly to track, as if to get a better look at this object—or is it the electricity that runs through them? The space through which the spectators travel is constructed by object perspective so that the point of view never aligns with the motion of the object. The effect is that cinematic space is constructed in such a way that the sequence feels as if it is a process of discovery—no shot allows the spectator to take in the entire surroundings of the object, where it is ultimately headed, and how long it will take to get there.

It takes only thirteen seconds for the virtual camera to establish this unknown space. Before there is time for boredom to set in or for the spectator to map this space fully, the virtual camera has already come out of the wall to reach the other side. A curious and playful aspect comes with the exit. The "virtual camera" revolves one hundred and eighty degrees in order to have its "back" to the direction of motion; it continues to follow the wires, rather than looking towards the exit on the other side of the wall. As the "virtual camera" and the spectator leave the

in-between space within the wall, the backwards motion suddenly reveals the actual mechanical

ringing bell that displays a reflection of the host on the other side. The first image of this

character (who later turns out to be a sorceress) is one that is mediated through an object that

appropriately indicates alarm. This wink reminds the spectator that trust in the film is necessary

since traveling backwards is usually a frightening and disorienting experience, but one that has

the thrill of a theme park ride, such as the original *Escape from Krypton* ride at Six Flags,

Valencia, California. The aesthetic of having superhuman powers, but ones that are limited, is

the same.

The virtual crane shot at the end of the "Genghis Khan and Ögedei" commercial was an

unexpected twist that led to the revelation of new cinematic space in a dramatic climax. This

sequence in *Night Watch*, however, foregrounds the discovery of new spaces from the beginning

of the work and pushes the limits of cinema from there. The commercial concerns ascension and

transcendence with its upward movement and strong nationalistic message at the end. The

horizontal movement that characterizes the move into the wall around the wires is more visceral.

It is about the ride. It foreshadows things to come in the narrative, and it does not attempt to

impart a specific association with a real-world company, unless it is the Bazelevs film studio

itself. Even though *Night Watch* is radically different from *Peshawar Waltz*, the setting of 1992

Moscow references the genre of *chernukha*, and the scene that follows—in which the "Great

Other" visits a sorceress to effect a miscarriage on his girlfriend—reinforces the connection.

Instead of the littered courtyard, there is the dark, confining, and dangerous (electrically

charged!) space between the walls. Thus, the film combines an impression of a home-viewing

environment and agency, but in doing so it negatively codes the scene with the sorceress, and

references the lack of agency that is characteristic of *chernukha.*

3.4   THE RIVET, NESCAFÉ, AND DESIRE

If the electric wires scene at the beginning of the film was a shot that drew spectators into the

work, then the second instance of object perspective, which lasts over a full minute and occurs an

hour into the film, functions with a more complicated and less easily defined agenda. Instead of

electric wires, a rivet guides the spectator through space, but in this instance the object itself

takes a greater role in articulating the dynamics of desire. Examining the surface of the object

becomes just as important as exploring the cinematic space through which is moves.

The episode opens with an argument between two characters of minor importance inside

an airplane. Their jetliner enters a tornado produced by the forces of darkness, swarming with a

murder of crows. A bird flies into one of the engines. As a middle-aged couple bickers about

whether or not a bird actually flew into the engine, the wing explodes. Instead of the

continuation of the drama inside the airplane, the virtual camera "flies" through the air in a

direction one hundred and eighty degrees opposite to that of the direction of the airplane's

motion. As the virtual camera looks down at the fuselage from a bird's eye point of view, it goes

out of focus (just as in the electric wires sequence), and comes back into focus on a rivet that

holds sheet metal on the airplane together. A close-up shows the rivet as it shakes loose and flies

off the aircraft. As the rivet spins through the air in focus, the "virtual camera" tracks across the

entire length of the fuselage, where the lit passenger windows (it is night) appear out of focus in

the background.

Although it would appear that the tragedy in the airplane is the narrative focus at this

point in the film, footage suddenly follows the inanimate rivet, rather than the people in distress.

Just as the "virtual camera" dove into the wall, it now virtually tracks the rivet as it free-falls

through the night sky and away from the airplane. The identification with this "virtual camera"

that is both present and absent leads to the impression that the sequence was activated by the spectator's own curiosity rather than narrative justification. This curiosity is a complex interaction of the interest created by the opening up of cinematic space, by the editing and virtual camera angle, and by the digital, clean attractive surface of the object itself and the way it moves within the frame of the screen.

In the same virtual tracking shot that began the sequence (and lasts twenty-five seconds), footage goes into "slow motion" as the graceful rivet tumbles over itself, and light shimmers off its reflective surface in the night sky. Just like the finger pushing the doorbell to "start" the action of the film, this effect simulates a home-viewing environment in which the "slow motion" button can be pushed for especially fascinating moments. Since the sequence is entirely digital, though, "slow motion" is only an impression, the result of digital manipulation just like the impression of a camera. It is almost as though the "slow motion," like the sequence itself, were activated by the curiosity of the spectator and the haptic connections to a home-viewing environment that have already been established within the film. "Slow motion" indicates heightened curiosity and interest, whether it is from manipulating visual moving images in a home-viewing environment, or the sensation of heightened awareness in any moment of heightened drama—whether it be the danger of experiencing a car accident, falling, or watching a game-winning sports play, time appears to slow—but here that effect is "artificially" constructed rather than being a reaction to real life or a live recorded event.

In the tracking shot, the footage seems to go into "slow motion" before it resumes "normal speed" and the "virtual camera" chases it as travels into the screen and away from the camera, obscured by clouds and appearing smaller or larger according to the impression of proximity created by the film. At this point, not only curiosity, but what it implies—the

dynamics of desire—come into account. The rivet has a haptic quality and in its dance away from the "virtual camera" it appears to look back at the thing that chases it, as if it knew that being just out of reach is the most desirable and seductive place it can occupy. The object creates hypnotic wonder.
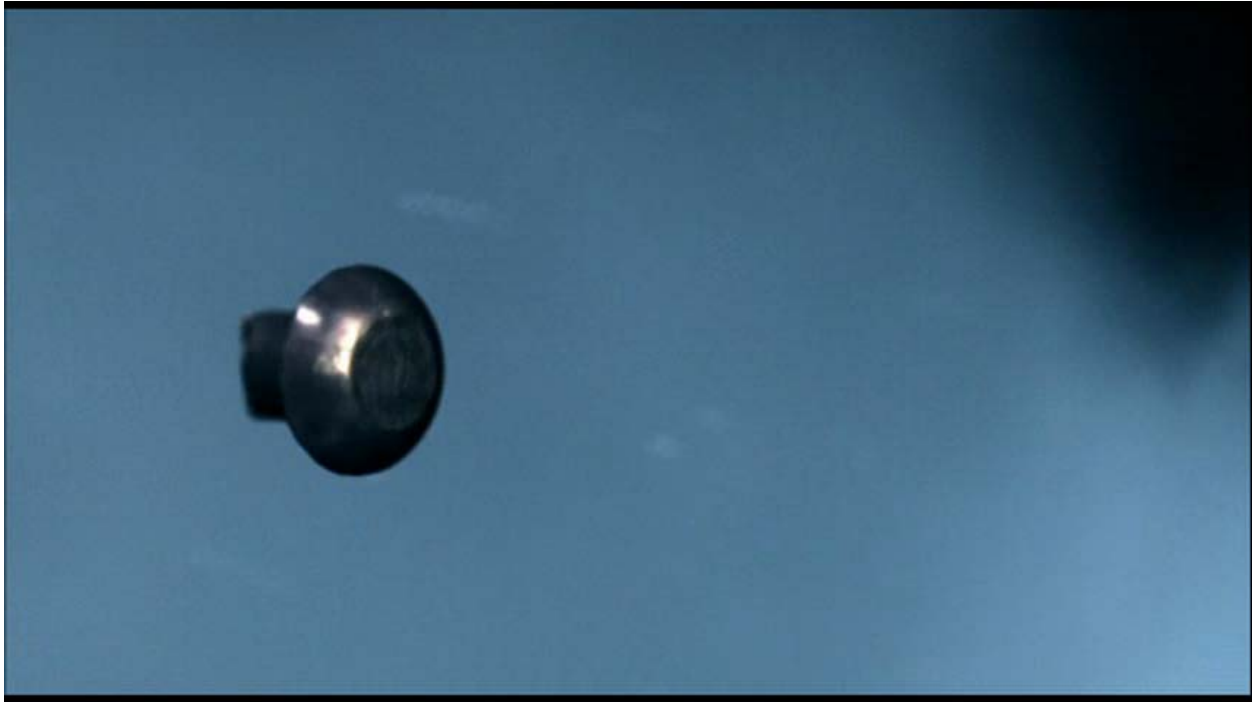
Figure 23. *Night Watch*. A "virtual camera" follows a digitally-represented rivet through the night sky.

The theoretical question that emerges from this sequence is the following: Is there a way of representing desire that does not rely on the gendered cinematic tradition of looking, of a male heteronormative gaze that feminizes the recipient of the gaze? These shots engage in a meta-commentary on editing, camera angle, the sensation of time, and the way all of these formal aspects are able to simulate desire, even through this seemingly banal object. The "virtual"

property of the camera, which allegedly allows an unfettered masculine gaze, can track the object

of desire through any terrain and without regard to the laws of the physical universe (since the

diegesis is a created world where anything is possible). Even though there is no implied diegetic

body behind the "virtual camera," its curiosity to examine the rivet from every angle, to

ceaselessly keep track of it, and to abandon the narrative of human characters, all—it could be

argued—gender it as male. The rivet, on the other hand, is feminized as it remains out of reach,

but seems to enjoy capturing the attention and gaze of the spectator. The interesting thing is the

way the rivet is gendered. Similar to the drink *kumys* (the fermented mare's milk from the

"Genghis Khan and Ögedei" commercial, a word with a masculine gender in Russian), electrical

wires in *Night Watch,* and the bullet that appears in *Wanted*, desire gets mapped onto not just any

object, but ones with a masculine form and association. It is the aesthetics of car, popular

mechanics, and gun magazines: an inanimate object that has a phallic form and masculine

associations is sexualized, often by the presence of an attractive female body. The process of

feminization in this instance, though, is created without the presence of a female body. The

feminine form comes as a revelation. The object is merely masquerading as masculine, when in

fact its movement, its sheen, and what seems to be its wile at the end—all point to its "true"

feminine gender.

Although Laura Mulvey's conceptualization of the male gaze is helpful, Mary Ann

Doane's analysis of the dynamics of crossdressing in classic Hollywood cinema has more

explanatory power. In her discussion of transvestism she notes that the "acceptability of the

female reversal is quite distinctly opposed to the male reversal which seems capable of

representation only in terms of farce. Male transvestism is an occasion for laughter; female

transvestism only another occasion for desire" (25). Bekmambetov complicates these dynamics,

however, by removing the representation of human bodies. Enough agency is behind the object and the "virtual camera" that the relationship of pursued and pursuer is still present. The question that Bekmambetov implicitly poses, however, remains: is this merely a parody of the ways of seeing, and how desire is created? Or is it a larger commentary about the way spectators are trained to see in this way, and an indication, even to scholarship, that it is difficult (and perhaps impossible) to talk about desire without reverting to the language of sexuality and gendered bodies? Bekmambetov shows that desire can be mapped onto any object, providing that the object fits into the gendered ways of seeing into which Hollywood and transnational genre codes have ossified.

As the rivet continues to fall through the night sky, there is a moment in which the implied consciousness behind the "virtual camera" looks down at the illuminated cityscape below, out of focus. The scene comes into focus and it is almost as if the virtual cameraman realizes the danger of this moment, and that it (he? she?) too is freefalling. The hypnotic gaze is broken and the moment becomes almost cartoonish—similar to the way the Looney Tunes character Wile E. Coyote only begins falling after he looks down at his own feet and realizes that he is no longer standing on a cliff, but has merely continued traveling in a horizontal direction after being outsmarted by the Road Runner. As the ground seems to approach more quickly than ever, fast-paced cuts reveal shots of the rivet as it jostles through the screen, causing jerky footage that mimics the rapid head movement of following the back-and-forth motion of a bouncing object. This type of movement is reminiscent of the earliest arcade video games such as *Pong* that operated on action and reaction in the most visceral form. Here it functions to break the impression of seduction and redirect attention to restart it when the rivet finally lands on the top grate of an airshaft to a high-rise Moscow building. These quick jolts heighten desire, as

well, by striking closely in a way that further emphasizes the proximity, but the inability to capture this elusive object.

The impression of the presence of the "virtual camera" throughout these shots is one of a disembodied consciousness that is able to move freely with the rivet, apparently as it pleases. As the footage simulates a camera looking down from a bird's eye view of the rivet as it lands on the grate, a curious thing happens. Footage simulates a camera rotating three hundred and sixty degrees around its own horizontal axis as it moves closer to the grate and travels through it. The sensation is that, like the rivet, this "virtual camera" was twisting to wiggle through the grate and appear on the other side. After this occurs, the "virtual camera" looks "up" from a low angle from inside the shaft to feature the rivet, which is stuck halfway through the grate. Virtual cockroaches swarm the scene and appear from "behind" and "below" the "virtual camera," characterizing the space as grimy and antagonistic to humans. In this simple scene, there is a complex series of identifications that are suggested, but then disavowed. Is the camera occupying "rivet vision" or "cockroach vision"? Both seem unlikely, especially since in the succeeding sequence a piece of wreckage hits the rivet, and the "virtual camera" dives down vertically to pursue it to the bottom, and actually beats it there, thus "proving" that it is not merely falling in this diegetic universe, but has some form of propulsion to move faster.

The suggestion of the film is a complex one: the consciousness and implied body behind the "virtual camera" is both present and absent, but it has certain rules that cater to a specific human fantasy. It is the fantasy of maintaining the physical integrity of the body in its relationship to other things that have mass and take up space, but one that allows for a superhuman ability to move in all three dimensions freely and to occupy open space no matter how small, obscure, or even physically dangerous. The perspective is not, therefore, god-like or

ghostly, but fundamentally human, or at least in simulation of the superhuman.[8] It is object

perspective because the perspective is tethered to the rivet —not physically, so much as through

an extreme, almost hypnotic, curiosity that can only be broken by the return to human characters

within the diegesis.

This perspective therefore only increases the impression of agency that will be broken

with the final, unexpected flare that ends this sequence. Instead of the forbidden, grimy space

between the walls, this sequence travels through the unseen space in a vertical airshaft; just like

the long virtual tracking shot, the "virtual camera" follows the rivet in its descent, where at times

the rivet is closer or farther away, but always seductively out of reach. The "virtual camera"

seems to lose the rivet as it reaches what appears to be the "bottom" of the airshaft. It appears to

"crane" up in the same fashion as the Genghis Khan scene, and similar to that scene, this

movement is one that would seem to be represented as a movement into a higher, less

animalistic, more cerebral or spiritual zone. The swarming virtual cockroaches at the bottom

move in the same upward direction as the "virtual camera" appears to locate a human apartment,

and begins to travel through another small grate that separates the apartment from the air shaft.

The "virtual camera" virtually cranes to feature a close-up of a bright red coffee mug and a hand

stirring the dark contents of the coffee with a spoon. On the right side of the bright mug in white

writing prominently appears the Nescafé logo. In a surprising move, the rivet may be heard as it

hits the sides of the airshaft in its descent. The rivet enters the frame from *behind* the "virtual

camera" to plop down directly into the coffee cup!

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[8] *Day Watch* goes even further with a kind of "x-ray" vision to look through the walls of buildings. In addition, the ability to defy the laws of physics is flaunted by driving a sports car horizontally on the surface of a skyscraper.

Figure 24. *Night Watch*. The rivet falls into the Nescafé cup, which functions as a product placement.

The surprise of hitting a bull's eye, of having a goal when the spectator had no idea that there was one, is not just a slapstick joke. It is a reversal of the impression of agency that the spectator has had throughout the sequence. It marks a point of deflation that leaves the spectator wondering if the point of the sequence was merely to focus desire on an object so that this desire may be transferred onto the product Nescafé. Is this mere product placement with a stylistic twist? More than a plug for the deliciousness of the coffee, it seems to be an associative link between the bright and attractive exterior of the rivet, with all of its feminine charm, and the transfer of this associative link to the bright red masculine exterior of the coffee mug. The curious aspect is that the rivet and the mug are gendered in ways opposite to what would be expected: the straight and turgid rivet is gendered as feminine (masculine would be expected), and the circular red mug is gendered as masculine (feminine would be expected). The event of the rivet entering the mug only makes this reversal more pronounced.

The unexpected end to this sequence is a break that brings the spectator back into the narrative line of the film and solidifies the meta-commentary on the dynamics of desire, with the idea that it cannot only be created by camera angle, rapid editing techniques, and fantasies of voyeurism, but it can also be transferred from one object to the next. These dynamics are further reinforced in the succeeding scene that occurs in Svetlana's apartment. The next shot, from within the apartment, abandons object perspective to return to the normal "objective" style of film, in which the consciousness behind the camera is no longer tethered to the object. After Svetlana is shown in medium shot, a close-up depicts her hand as she places the shiny rivet in her palm. The moment is a realization of the reversal that has taken place: now that the rivet is vicariously possessed, it loses the spectator's, and Svetlana's, interest. The close-up of the hands is another iteration of the motif of hands that began the film—instead of a suggestion that the

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spectator is able to control the diegesis of the film, it is another reversal—it shows how little agency the spectator, who "fell" for the advertising trick, had at all.

This slightly alienating moment is redeemed later in the film, which qualifies the ironic place of advertising and product placement within the film. In the next scene Svetlana makes a trip to the store to buy more coffee. The rivet fell into her last cup and thus it contributes to a narrative necessity, if a strange and forced one. Seducing her and occupying her attention will put an end to the electric storm that threatens the people in the airplane, and thus the character Ignat (Gosha Kutsenko) appears. If the space around the electric wires acted as a foreshadowing element for what would soon happen between the "Great Other" and the sorceress, then the rivet functions similarly, but with a more direct connection between object and character. The rivet and Svetlana have a metaphorical link. The rivet, by its very nature is a banal object that becomes interesting only through the process of chasing it and indulging in the curiosity shared by spectator and "virtual camera." Similar to the the rivet, Svetlana seems ordinary with her glasses, ponytail, and long, unrevealing, dress. In fact, though, she is an undiscovered beauty whom Ignat must discover. The rivet, and object perspective more generally, function as a motif that unites characters throughout the film. Furthermore, the desire for the rivet gets transferred onto Svetlana, where it is expressed and shared with Ignat. Ignat fulfills the task of desiring itself. The complex dynamics of the male gaze are therefore reified with the addition of Svetlana and Ignat.

As Svetlana walks into the store, a high angle shot shows that there are Nescafé advertisement placards hanging everywhere, in a clearly farcical, over-the-top characterization of Nescafé's advertising campaign. Svetlana tries to purchase a large canister of the product, and the cashier unsuccessfully attempts to scan it. As she swipes the canister over the scanner, the

advertisement for Nescafé is perfectly positioned in the mise-en-scène, with a movement that draws attention to the logo again and again. Ignat, with a wig of long black, carefully groomed and effeminate hair, comes to the rescue. Kutsenko, up to this point, had been known to Russian audiences as an action hero—Egor Konchalovskii's *Antikiller* (2002) and a corrupt cop in Maksim Pezhemskii's *Don't Cry, Mama* (1998)—almost the equivalent of a post-Soviet Bruce Willis with his characteristic bald head and tough-guy attitude. When he plays the Casanova in the wig, though, the effect is comedic—the contrast between Kutsenko's well-known overt masculinity and his crossdressing wig disguise produces humor that Doane describes: "[m]ale transvestism is an occasion for laughter" (25). Rather than questioning sexuality, traditional gender roles are reinforced, and Svetlana occupies her place as the object of desire, while Kutsenko interpellates the spectator into the film. He suavely grabs the canister, swipes it successfully, and repeats the Nescafé Russian slogan, "A Great Taste. A Great Beginning."[9]

The scene clearly ironizes product placement by taking it to the point of absurdity, especially since the suave swipe as Ignat comes to the rescue is a good beginning to their would-be relationship. The film is simultaneously disingenuous in its endorsement of Nescafé and curiously sincere. The scene with Ignat and Svetlana mirrors the dynamics of desire that the instance of object perspective provided without representations of human bodies—in both scenes, the vignettes end on a joke that self-ironizes advertising, but is nevertheless product placement for a real-world commodity. For a Russian audience that can be critical of product placement and more aware of it than a Western audience (since only within the past ten years has it begun to become a part of the Russian cinematic experience), this film draws in the audience by making fun of what is so obviously a suspect Hollywood trope. The scene invites the audience to participate in self-irony since they, after all, are quite aware that they are watching a

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[9] «Хороший вкус. Хорошее начало».

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Hollywood-style action film, but one that has novelty value and seems out of place in a Russian cultural and linguistic context. The effect of the entire film is similar to the image of Kutsenko in a wig, surrounded by Nescafé placards. The joke is that the film itself is a product, and by laying this device bare, by distancing itself from straightforward product placement for Nescafé, it ultimately makes the advertisement more memorable by making both scenes fun and humorous in an otherwise serious film.

3.5   *WANTED:* OBJECT PERSPECTIVE BECOMES THE *DOMINANTA*

Wanted marks Bekmambetov's transition from a primarily Russian domestic audience to a global one. Although this transition was marketed as a move into Hollywood while remembering Russian roots[10]—the dynamics are much more complicated than that and reveal a model of transnational cinema production that relies on recognizable American actors and English-language dialogue, funding from several different sources (the film was a German as well as US and Russian co-production), a separation of labor on digital animation, and an action aesthetic that focuses on a "little man" discovering his superhuman powers. Travel within the diegesis of the film and on location in the profilmic world occurs in several different countries, but in a way that de-politicizes or ignores global conflicts and tensions.

Bekmambetov adds another layer to this model of transnational cinema production by making object perspective the dominant device of the film. It is a motif by which the rest of the film may be examined and interpreted. More than merely an attraction or a diversion, it becomes the defining characteristic feature of the film, such that characters are often treated as if they were objects in object perspective. Object perspective is not the mere objectification of women as sexual objects—the entire film becomes about surface and the connection each character has with the object of desire, the elusive specialty bullets that occur throughout the film. It is a global form of branding that as yet has not been copyrighted. This section looks at the apotheosis of object perspective in the film and differentiates it from other digital effects—chiefly, bullet time, a registered trademark of Warner Brothers.

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[10] Two different digital imprints of the film were made (in addition to international versions that were dubbed or subtitled into local languages)—one in English, and one in which mouths were digitally manipulated to make it appear as if the American actors really were speaking fluent Russian. The next chapter provides a discussion of the implications of the differences between these two versions.

The primary branding of the film for an international audience comes with the casting of big names, Angelina Jolie and Morgan Freeman. It is no surprise that the fast-paced action plot reached the second-place in the world box office, grossing over $341 million internationally ("Wanted"), ten times the amount that *Night Watch* accumulated just four years earlier at $33.9 million ("Night Watch (Nochnoi Dozor)"). It would be difficult to point to *Wanted* as a characteristic Bekmambetov film were it not for the inclusion of a token, but key Russian actor, Konstantin Khabenskii, who plays the "Great Other" in *Night Watch* and appears in many Bazelevs films, but plays the role of an explosives expert, "The Exterminator," in this film. The position of Khabenskii reveals the place of Russia in this global dynamic—a participant, but one who cannot be the protagonist carrying the film. In addition to this aspect, Perepelkin is one of the senior supervisors of the Bazelevs' visual effects team, who worked out of Moscow's KraftWay studio. Once again, Russians may labor behind the scenes to do the work necessary to complete the film, but that aspect gets downplayed in the international version, even if it is highlighted in the domestic case by a creative dubbing practice.

The plot is remarkably similar to *Night Watch* in the way it revolves around easily communicated Oedipal conflicts laid out in a more-or-less linear fashion. *Wanted* even begins in a similar way, with a voice-over that tells of a secret society that began one thousand years ago, before the film enters the contemporary moment. The only difference is that the society is a "fraternity" of assassins, not vampire hunters or watchers, and the setting is six weeks from the present day in "anywhere" urban America (Chicago, although it is not overtly stated), instead of 1992 post-Soviet Moscow and then current-day Moscow. Instead of a "Great Other," the hero is a "Great Loser." Wesley Gibson (played by James McAvoy) is in fact an unrealized "Great Other" with untapped superhuman powers.

Object perspective does not start off the film immediately; rather, there is an exposition on the "Great Loser" Wesley as he narrates the conditions of his depressing, mundane life. The film begins with conservative camerawork that suggests a "normal" perspective as Wesley describes his day in the office. He enumerates the details of what has become the archetype for a contemporary miserable existence: a low-level, low-paying office job with a domineering boss. If this position were not enough, Wesley's best friend is cheating on him with his girlfriend in Wesley's own apartment. After Wesley explains his insignificant job title, footage switches from the office to the apartment, where a camera tracks from the floor up to depict what Wesley describes in disembodied voiceover: "That's my best friend Barry fucking her [Wesley's girlfriend] on an Ikea kitchen table that I picked up for a really good price." It appears as though the footage is from no specific character's point of view (since Wesley is stuck in the office and physically removed from the action). Although it is not Wesley's literal perspective, his address to the audience and knowledge of the situation function as if he himself were watching the film with the spectator. Similar to the Genghis Khan commercial, the point of view is something between an objective point of view and the subjective "mind's eye" of the central character. The sinister thing is that Wesley can do nothing about it—he is physically removed from the space but still able to see it, along with the spectator, in vivid detail. The most painfully pathetic part of the scene, though, is the comedic element: sweaty sex on top of the table fully clothed and Wesley's best friend checking his watch, in short, the tropes of office sex, but in Wesley's apartment rather than the office. The scene is not so much sensuous as crassly humorous (Wesley's friend's backside is the only exposed skin in the scene). Even though object perspective has not yet entered the film, Bekmambetov begins to play with point of view and associate Wesley with the confining mind's eye perspective that characterizes him. Furthermore,

the humorous addition that the table was bought at Ikea suggests that the acquisition of the object makes up, in small part, for the humiliation of what is happening. The humor, though, is complicated by the fact that Ikea is a real-world company that receives recognition, whether it is a paid advertisement for Ikea or not. It is similar to the insertion of the Nescafé coffee mug in *Night Watch*.

The way that Wesley is filmed and characterizes himself contrasts sharply to Mr. X, the protagonist of the next episode that leads into object perspective. In the transition of one scene to the next, Wesley continues his voice-over with a musing of what his biological father, who left him when he was just a week old, must have thought upon Wesley's birth: "Did I just father the most insignificant asshole of the 21st century?" The voiceover in combination with a high-angle crane down in fast motion that stops to fixate on a close-up of a forlorn Mr. X, both suggest that Mr. X is indeed Wesley's father, but one who shares the same thought that Wesley has ventriloquized for him. After this one moment of interiority, Mr. X exits a cab to enter a skyscraper in the downtown (Chicago) area, and unlike the visual characterization of Wesley, footage privileges Mr. X by filming him as if he were an object in object perspective. Mr. X becomes surface, an exterior that the camera examines from every angle. Several shots in the style of intensified continuity editing feature him from straight on in medium-shot with short syncopated jump-cuts that increase the impression of urgency and importance to his visit before a shot shows him from behind as he enters the revolving doors of the building. Footage depicts the back of his head in focus, a low-angle shot of him in full view as the elevator opens, a close-up of his black leather shoes as he steps out of the elevator, and even a close-up of his hand, palm-down, as he keeps track of what is clearly a weapon underneath his trench coat. Mr. X is an assassin, and the camerawork suggests that he is moving with purpose not only for himself

but also for the advancement of the plot itself. But it is not only the camerawork that the film

relies upon for this impression—the actor playing Mr. X, David O'Hara, is typecast as the

quintessential endearing action hero, with his raspy voice, stoic expression, and hardened

features. O'Hara is recognizable: he played William Wallace's quirky and fiercely loyal

companion, Stephen, the Irishman in *Braveheart* (1995), the sidekick bank robber, Allan Heyl, in

Stander (2003), and a minor gangster in *The Departed* (2006). His presence signals visceral

visual and auditory appeal, but an actor who does not usually take the leading role.

Mr. X has come on a mission to find out the origin of an intricately decorated and

hollow-tip, spiraled bullet. The bullet garners fascination, but it comes across as less interesting

than the attractive, female Indian ballistics expert who examines the bullet and concludes that it

is untraceable. As she pronounces this verdict, a sniper from an adjacent skyscraper assassinates

her with a bullet straight through the red bindi in the middle of her forehead. The bullet almost

seems to usurp desire, literally to kill (within the diegesis of the film) any object of desire that

may compete with it! Mr. X sprints down the hall into an open elevator to make a pathway to

get a running start. In the office with the ballistics expert, shot counter-shot contrasted with the

way Mr. X was filmed upon his entrance. Before the footage again treats him as if he were an

object in object perspective, the film occupies Mr. X's perspective. His heart can be heard

diegeticly beating at an abnormally rapid pace. The window that appears in focus and in the

center of the frame has borders that pulse and ripple as footage zooms in on the building, through

the window, where the snipers responsible for the murder are positioned. Mr. X has the ability to

see with superhuman distance; he has the scopic ability to see what others cannot; unlike Wesley,

though, he is not a passive witness to things he cannot change. Mr. X has agency to change

things within the diegesis, and granting him a point of view shot reflects this subtlety.

As Mr. X accelerates out of the elevator, the "virtual camera" tracks in front of him from

a low angle as the film speed changes into fast motion. The "virtual camera" switches to a

perspective from outside of the window. In slow motion the reflection of the top of the

skyscraper where the snipers are appears in focus, but this gives way to the surface of the

window itself. A close-up shows Mr. X's face break through the window and send shattered

glass in all directions. An aerial shot looks down to feature Mr. X flying laterally out of the

window towards the adjacent skyscraper. As soon as he began his run, the camera filmed him as

if he were indeed an object, a bullet, shot out of the skyscraper and through the glass.

Figure 25. *Wanted*. Mr. X breaks through a window. He is filmed as if he were an object in object perspective.

Mr. X flies through the air and quickly dispatches the snipers who attacked the ballistics expert. Mr. X is able to shoot bullets that travel around corners, and the "virtual camera" follows these bullets as if it were tethered to him—Mr. X garners more attention from the "virtual camera" than the bullet does at this point. As Mr. X puts a bullet in the back of the last sniper's head, a cellular phone rings and Mr. X answers it to find Cross (Wesley's biological father) on the other end. As Mr. X chides him for leaving the fraternity and tells him to "never send sheep to kill a wolf," Cross informs Mr. X that "they were just decoys." At this point, footage switches from a close-up of Mr. X on the phone to a high-angle shot of Mr. X's feet that appears to be from his point of view. The spot on which he is standing has literally been marked with an X. The shot, however, is not from Mr. X's literal subjective point of view. The "virtual camera" cranes up and spins three hundred and sixty degrees to show Mr. X on the top of the building from a bird's eye point of view. Similar to the Genghis Khan shot and the shot of Wesley's girlfriend cheating on him, it is a camera movement that seems to be from a perspective that imparts the "mind's eye" and the emotion of the character that it features, but one that reflects the way the spectator has more agency and a different position in relation to perspective than the character. As the camera climbs upward and spins, it imparts not only Mr. X's feeling of vulnerability (for the first time), but also the realization that he has not understood the space around him as well as he had thought. He has been treated like a human character, not an object, in this last sequence, and therefore he may die (he has no more justification, narrative or otherwise) as desire gets transferred from his cinematic body to the bullet that enters the back of his head, pushes through the skin of his forehead, and spirals out with a splattering of blood. The film speed switches to slow motion. As the bullet exits Mr. X's forehead, it stops spiraling and freezes in time. The camera tracks horizontally to the right to change from looking straight at the

front of the bullet to the bullet in profile. As the "virtual camera" tracks, the bullet appears

prominently in the mise-en-scène. It has the same spiraled indentations that the first bullet had,

but it has a much more fascinating surface, which is covered in beautiful fleurs-de-lis.

The succeeding sequence follows the bullet backwards in causal time to its point of

origin, but forward in narrative time. Because the bullet has already done violence to Mr. X, the

film positions the spectator in a privileged position—there is a promise of being safe from

vicarious violence on the bodies with whom the spectator may identify. Because the violence is

frontloaded, the instance of object perspective becomes an entertaining and engaging ride in

which the discovery and exploration of the space through which the bullet travels and the bullet

itself is just as important as finding out the identity of the sniper.

Figure 26. *Wanted*. A "virtual camera" follows a bullet backwards in causal time.

Similar to the free-falling rivet, the bullet has a two-fold appeal: one that is generated by the shiny, attractive exterior of the represented object itself; and one that comes from the chase, the fact that the bullet is always just out of reach, and traveling away from the spectator into the screen before the spectator can get a full enough and long enough view of the bullet to become satisfied. The playfulness of the sequence in its relationship to the spectator is even greater than in the rivet sequence in *Night Watch*. At one point, footage appears merely to depict a view of the city skyline, in which the bullet is nowhere in sight. As the "virtual camera" appears to track back, though, it becomes clear that this view is just the reflection of the city on the head of the bullet! As the "virtual camera" draws even farther back, it becomes clear that it is not the rounded head, but the smaller rounded tail that is reflecting the city skyline. The "virtual camera," still moving in synchronization with the bullet, virtually tracks around from the back of the bullet to the front to examine the bullet in profile. Successive stages are added to the bullet until it gains its third and final stage. The "virtual camera" appears to track around and under, switching from a profile of the bullet to a low-angle shot that shows the whole bullet from below. The camera then tracks upward so that the head of the bullet faces the spectator in a direction opposite to that of the motion of the bullet—similar to the exit from the wall in *Night Watch*. The bullet daringly threads through two cars of an above-ground metro before it heads into the window of the house from which it was fired. Like traveling through the wall, part of the fun comes through occupying tight spaces that spectators and physical cameras would not be able to go through (or would have tremendous difficulty) under other conditions.

The "virtual camera" maintains a playful attitude by withholding the identity of the sniper until the very end, as the bullet goes back into the barrel of the high-powered rifle and follows it along the shaft. The shooter remains out of focus until the final shot when Cross appears to give

the spectatorial pleasure of repetition, by saying the last words that Mr. X hears—"They [the other snipers] were just decoys"—but from a different point of view, both in terms of visual representation and the knowledge of the event that took place. The scene maintains suspense and the engagement of the specators with a close-up of Cross's finger just as he begins to squeeze the trigger. Before the action is completed, the film cuts to a new scene. The vicarious tactile sensation of being able to alter the film by pulling the trigger as if in a home-viewing or video-arcade environment in which a controller allows the gamer to alter what goes on in the diegesis, is denied, but in a way that suggests that agency could somehow be fulfilled later. In contradistinction to the ending of the rivet sequence in *Night Watch*, which is at first alienating, but perhaps able to redeem and reclaim the spectator through humor, the device is laid bare early (in the reflection of the skyline), and thus done with more sophistication, but a sophistication that is aimed at immersing the spectator more deeply into the diegesis, without the examination of the dynamics of desire that are at work throughout the film. The meta-critique of advertising seems to be displaced for the time being.

The obsession in this sequence with the bullet, the flaunting of the abilities of a "virtual camera" over a physical one, and the play with representations of cinematic time and space would all seem to point in the direction of bullet time. Bob Rehak describes the phenomenon, and points to the famous scene of Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) dodging bullets in *The Matrix* (1999).

> Graphically, bullet time consists of an extended take during which the camera seems to move in a circle, holding a central actor in focus as action unfolds at different rates and indicating that hero and audience alike are perceiving events at "bullet speed." Ambient noise drops to a lower, sludgy register, only to rev back up to normal as the distortion ends. Often the mise en scène contains floating elements—bullets, spent ammunition, water droplets—whose slowed or still trajectories enhance the visual uncanniness. (27)

Lisa Purse goes even deeper into describing bullet time, noting that "slow motion is used during the action sequences to emphasize the spectacular nature of the event shown, giving the spectator plenty of time to take pleasure in the image and the movement of the action" (154). She also states that "in bullet-time's defining camera movement, the spectator is drawn fully into the diegetic space, disrupting the conventional relationship between the spectator, the screen, and the filmic world" (157), by which she means the way the impression of a camera probes into the three-dimensionality of the scene.

Although there are clear links between bullet time and object perspective—especially in the way they both appear as the latest digital attraction in blockbuster film—the differences are significant. Object perspective is not so much about getting a full look at a scene, as it is about the creation of a space through multiple perspectives (several "virtual camera" angles). Object perspective privileges fast cuts and several shots, whereas bullet time is invested in the impression of the long take that "freezes" characters. Both bullet time and object perspective rely on the impression of a single, "virtual camera," but bullet time creates this effect through several physical high-speed cameras, whereas object perspective does it without needing to digitally capture a profilmic event.

As Rehak's description confirms, bullet time is ultimately focused not on bullets, but characters, and the connection of the spectator to the character. Both perceive bullet time the same way—as a slowing down that allows one to see high-speed objects and react faster than the "normal" flow of time. Object perspective, on the other hand, abandons character perspectives to take the spectator on a ride that establishes a complex interaction of the object that appears on screen, the presence behind the "virtual camera" that "films" it, and a spectator who is never fully able to take pleasure in seeing this object static. The source of pleasure comes in the chase of the digital sequence as much as the raw effect of a new digital technique.

The connection of object perspective to characters is still present, but it occurs in a more complex way. As the film moves forward in time, object perspective becomes less about exploring otherwise unseen spaces, and functions more as the organizing principle, a motif that points to whom the spectator should pay attention and think is "cool," that is who should be desired or emulated. In addition to Mr. X, who is killed off at the beginning, and Wesley, for whom the work of the film consists in working him up to a level "worthy" to control the bullet, two characters are associated with object perspective: Fox (Angelina Jolie) and Cross, Wesley's father. From her introduction towards the beginning of the film until her death near the end, Fox is the assassin most closely associated with object perspective. She "saves" Wesley by fending off Wesley's father (whom Wesley does not yet know, and who is actually trying to contact him) with bullets that bend around corners and are tethered to a "virtual camera." Although the curiosity of the "virtual camera" does not exhibit the same level of curiosity in Jolie as it does in Mr. X, the association with object perspective and the bullet is clear—especially in the way that, like the mysterious bullet that always flies just out of the screen, Jolie is the locus of the spectator's and Wesley's desire. The desire to possess and examine the bullet gets mapped onto

Jolie's body. Although Jolie's entrance into the league of assassins is established with a weak

psychological justification, her exterior appearance is ultimately more important. Similar to the

bullet, she is the object of desire, and just like the bullet it is her exterior that matters—the tattoos

on her character's body, which are revealed as she seductively exits a revitalizing bath and bear a

striking resemblance to the designs on the bullet. Both command a male gaze, where the

exteriors (the bullet, the role of assassin) have a masculine form that eventually reveals feminine

appeal underneath, rather than any sort of deeper psychological interiority. Fox thinks she is

helping Wesley all along, but by the end of the film she realizes that she assisted him in the

murder of his own father. The idea of a male gaze is solidified by the end of the film when she

sacrifices herself in order to kill the other assassins (except Wesley and Sloan). She

accomplishes this feat by shooting a bullet that is able to travel in a circle and strike every

assassin in the temple before it makes a complete revolution and ends in Fox's own death. Fox

is able to control the bullet only insofar as it helps Wesley.

The associations with Wesley's father and object perspective are already clear—he is the

assassin who kills Mr. X—but in contradistinction to Jolie and Mr. X, desire is not mapped onto

his body. In an interesting twist, he stands in as a substitute for Wesley. Both characters are able

to control not only the trajectory of the bullet, but the course of the diegesis of the film as well.

Wesley's father does it in the climax of the film after Wesley has already shot him in the chest.

He reveals to Wesley that he is in fact Wesley's father, and not just his father's assassin. After

this moment the resolution becomes inevitable—Wesley must take revenge on the people who

fooled him into murdering his father. The most fascinating stylistic aspect of the gun fight

between them that ends in death is not the bullets that meet head on in midair and "cancel" each

other out, but the way in which the train where the gun fight takes place is digitally represented.

Similar to the opening sequence instance of object perspective and the poster of the film with Jolie on it, the descent of the train off its tracks and down a ravine was not only planned, it also served as one of the images that organizes the film. In contradistinction to a Soviet and general history of filmmaking, *Wanted* operates on 3D previsualization and an image-based form of production rather than a logocentric, script-based form ("3D Previz"). Thus object perspective really is the driving force behind the film. As the train descends, the "virtual camera" races after it—similar to the rivet in *Night Watch*—until it reaches the point where the virtual train has gotten stuck between two rock walls. It inspects the exterior of the train, and travels around it to look from a low-angle up at the windows, then the "floor" of the train, where Wesley and his father are lying. Footage then abandons this perspective to enter the interior of the train, in which Wesley's father reveals his true identity.

The larger question is the visual aesthetic of the film, even though desire is important and the train is a fitting object with its masculine associations and its ability to move horizontally through space. All of the important scenes in the film (those that advance the plot) are infused with object perspective such that the film follows the strict genre conventions of a contemporary action film but expresses these conventions with the unique style of object perspective. Branding, not in the form of product placement, but of the film as a product is the work that object perspective does, in addition to granting Wesley agency. The film concludes by fully associating Wesley with this perspective. The end point is set up by a reversal of the beginning of the film and by several points throughout when Wesley slowly learns how to shoot and bend bullets around targets (at one point around Fox).

The ending is comedic, and even though it contains branding and product placement, it is foremost about agency. It seems that Wesley has resumed his place in the mundane office world

in which he began. Wesley makes an address to the audience, but this time it is not in an act to

engender sympathy. He almost seems to be in self-denial, as footage shows his old office, and a

person who looks like him with his back to the camera, typing in Wesley's cubicle and typing his

name into an Internet search engine. Wesley's voice-over keeps repeating that, "this is not me."

Footage is shown from a perspective that clearly belongs to a character who is sneaking up on

the person who appears to be Wesley. It turns out to be Sloan with a gun, and just as Sloan

rhetorically asks, "so, you thought you could leave the fraternity," the person posing as Wesley

turns around to reveal that he is not Wesley.

　　　After the moment of realization that Wesley narrates—"this is not me, it's just a

motherfuckin' decoy"—footage switches to Sloan's point of view as he looks down at his feet to

see an X made of post-it notes. Sloan is shown in medium-shot straight on in his moment of

surprise as he says, "Oh, fuck" and the bullet comes through his forehead and towards the

spectator, with blood splattering. For the second time in the film, footage slows, stops and

begins to run in reverse motion, in a similar fashion to the first sequence and Mr. X's

assassination.

　　　The "virtual camera" follows the bullet into the screen and backwards in time out of the

window. The sequence is not so much about exploring the bullet and the space around it—that

was the job of the first sequence—rather, it is an exhilarating method to show Wesley's revenge,

the way he asserts his identity and punishes all of the people who have hurt him throughout the

film in his office job as the little-man clerk, a trope itself of Russian literature[11] but also now of

world cinema. The sequence therefore appears to be about agency—Wesley gains the agency to

control the bullet, thus the diegesis and his life. Because the spectator is interpellated into

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[11] Akakii Akakievich in Nikolai Gogol''s 19th-century work "The Overcoat" is an example of such a character.
Akakii, unlike Wesley, only gets his revenge after his death.

Wesley, agency gets shared here, especially with the addition of the humor that characterizes the scene, which is empowering, as opposed to the self-deprecating humor at the beginning of the film.

Sloan suffers violent death, but one that becomes almost cartoonish in its digital representation with the bullet shown in slow motion coming out of his head. Sloan is the object of revenge, and he is already typecast as the evil head of an evil business, who engineered and fooled Wesley into murdering his own father. The scene, though, with computer graphics and with Freeman's line ("Oh fuck!") comes across as comedic, while the violence lacks the element of verisimilitude. It is, therefore, more about the action genre as entertainment than a sobering representation of death. The bullet exits (enters in reverse) the back of Sloan's head, and the "virtual camera" switches to deep focus to show the window it traveled through and the cityscape behind Sloan's head. The next shot shows a high-angle bird's eye view that tilts down and then rushes toward the bullet just in time to see it rejoin its last stage. These shots establish object perspective and reference the beginning of the film. Since the bullet has killed Sloan, the spectator has a similar feeling of security that the first sequence provided—not of being free of the possibility of vicarious violence, but of being done with revenge. It is a sigh of relief that the inevitable has been completed, but there is still fun to be had at the expense of other characters. After Sloan's assassination, footage shows the ways that Wesley takes his revenge in more innocuous and humorous ways that are more humiliating than physically harmful. Wesley narrates the shots in voiceover. As he says that he is taking his life back from Janice, his old office boss, the film shows the bullet go backwards through the window of her car and the center of a doughnut that she is about to eat. The effect, which references Wesley's moment of lambasting her in the office for using food as a way to deal with her emotional problems, is

clearly meant to be comedic. As Wesley talks about taking his life back from a bad girlfriend and a backstabbing best friend, the bullet travels through the city and the "virtual camera" pans to depict it heading towards Wesley's ex-girlfriend and ex-best friend. The camera shows them from straight on in medium shot as they descend a flight of stairs. The ex-best friend holds a Power Horse energy drink that the bullet travels through. The drink explodes all over him. This is humorous not only for the prankish revenge that Wesley exacts, but also for the play with product placement. The person associated with the product is made light of, and in so doing, product placement is revealed as being as disingenuous as the character. The characterization disavows itself of product placement by hiply ironizing it: Power Horse gets associated with the daily life and morning of a hyperactive office worker who makes other people's lives miserable.

This ride with the bullet ends in the same way as the one at the beginning of the film, through the same apartment. Instead of Cross as the end of the barrel, Wesley is there. Object perspective has made him likeable, whereas before sympathy for him grew out of his descriptions of his miserable life. He has become an action hero like his father—in fact, he has been so strongly associated with Cross that it is no longer relevant that he killed his father. This final sequence is ostensibly about agency, especially since it ends with a direct address to the audience, "What the fuck have you done today?" The creation of an impression of agency that is disavowed at the end, as if to inspire people to take charge of their lives, is itself a form of branding. It is almost an advertising slogan for the film, similar to Nike corporation's slogan "just do it." Both are unspecific, but voluntarist. Object perspective, like bullet time, is about making the film stand out, but unlike *Night Watch*, the branding is done with more subtlety and sophistication.

Figure 27. *Wanted*. The last instance of object perspective in the film features a product placement.

3.6   CONCLUSION TO THE CHAPTER

Object Perspective is a new way of representing point of view that does not easily fall into the

dichotomy of subjective character shots and the "normal" or "objective" shots that characterize

how film constructs narrative. It may be seen as an attempt at rapid multi-perspectivalism where

shots taken from all angles examine an object as it moves through cinematic space. Although the

narratives of the films in which it occurs are indebted to a Soviet cinematic tradition, object

perspective has only become possible in the digital age, when artists are no longer tethered to

capturing footage with a physical camera. It shares many similarities with the cinema of

attractions, but, as this chapter has argued, object perspective has a playful self-conscious aspect

that ties it to narrative and the endorsement of real-world products. Although it has become a

characteristic of many of the films that Timur Bekmambetov has produced, it has fallen out of his most recent works, most notably the American 3D blockbuster *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012). The diorama-like feeling of 3D, with its series of planes, is not conducive, it would seem, to creating depth and volume around an object. In a last curious reversal, object perspective gives a more thorough sensation of three-dimensionality than 3D cinema. Object perspective is a digital device with an agenda of creating greater appeal. In this way, it bares a similarity to the kinetic typography of English subtitles in *Night Watch* or the use of digital dubbing in *Wanted*.[12] All of these techniques give an indication to the spectator of a greater virtual world, and an investigation of the latter two are the focus of the succeeding chapter.

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[12] See the next chapter for a thorough discussion of the way in which each film was produced in two theatrical release versions: one targeted toward an Anglophone audience, and another toward a Russophone audience.

4.0 DIGITAL DUBBING, VIRTUAL SUBTITLES, AND THE ECONOMICS OF GLOBAL CINEMA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

4.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTER

Americans hate reading subtitles. Russians do, too. Subtitled films in the United States are elevated, de facto, to the status of high art—why should the time be taken to read dialogue? In order to fill a niche, mere action, plot, and special effects are not enough. There must be an additional "something," the simulation of an interaction with another culture and that culture's philosophy for the film to be profitable. This extra "something" is part of the contract of going to see a "foreign" film, which becomes a de facto genre for an American audience, used to the designation of "foreign film" as a category among genres on the Netflix interface. Dubbing, in contrast, has the valence of low-brow culture. The prototypical example occurs in martial art films produced in Hong Kong and dubbed into English. Countless jokes in popular culture and films such as *Kung Pow: Enter the Fist* (2002) spoof the obvious lack of correlation between the movement of actors' mouths and the English-language dialogue. Dubbing in the Russo-Soviet context, however, has an entirely different valence. A film dubbed into Russian is intrinsically other, but it is also a cultural artifact that gravitates toward becoming something more culturally Russian since the original verbal language is absent. Timur Bekmambetov and his studio Bazelevs understand these two cultural conventions well. They market to two specific audiences: Anglophone and Russophone. Subtitling that reveals "deeper meaning" in the

Anglophone market, and dubbing in the Russophone context are the actions most likely to be profitable in the domestic context and the global cinema market.

In this global market, Russia occupies a strange place. It is not quite the European "other" that Randall Halle describes in "Offering Tales They Want to Hear: Transnational European Film Funding and Neo-Orientalism."

> The cinema of the "other" became associated with high cultural film art, most clearly evidenced by the cinemas of the various postwar national new waves. Participants in the various new waves understood their work as aesthetically superior to industrial film, especially the American productions that crowded the screens … By the 1960s national subsidy systems … in principle accepted this condition as a natural foundation for film financing. German film—or Danish, Dutch, French, and Italian film for that matter—was meant to provide artful tales told by a people to themselves. (303)

A different historical trajectory meant that Russia—as a member of the Soviet Union—did not participate in global cinema in the same way, but, nevertheless, contemporary Russian cinema has the ability to cash in on this expectation of high cultural art film. Russia is also not the non-European "other" for whom contemporary films are subsidized primarily by European coproduction. "The coproduction strategy thus runs the risk of instituting a cycle of Orientalism, offering Euro-American audiences tales they want to hear, about people fundamentally different from themselves, keeping as distant strangers people who live around the corner or down the hall" (Halle 304). As Halle points out, "[t]here is a market for films that tell the tales of foreign cultures and distant peoples, and thus the for-profit system seeks to respond to the interests of this commercial audience" (304). The interesting thing about Bazelevs productions is the way they are catered both "to provide artful tales told by a people to themselves" and to "tell the tales of foreign cultures and distant peoples," depending on the audience for whom the digital imprint is made.

This chapter examines two films that were altered for a non-domestic audience. The first example is *Night Watch* (2004), a Russian-language film that was released in American theaters with English-language subtitles that translate visually the auditory elements of intonation and gesture that often fall out of traditional subtitles, and in the process, market the film as high art through greater visual expressivity. The second example is *Wanted* (2008), or more appropriately, *Osobo opasen* (literal translation: Incredibly Dangerous), an originally English-language film with Angelina Jolie, Morgan Freeman, and James McAvoy. In this film, the actors' mouths were digitally manipulated in post-production to naturalize the Russian dubbing, making it appear as though Jolie, Freeman, McAvoy and the rest of the cast really were speaking fluent Russian. This chapter argues that these works contain not just standard translations, but dynamic ones that intrinsically critique previous subtitling and dubbing practices through the use of new technologies. CGI allows for greater flexibility and experimentation in converting a verbal, aural text into a visual one. Although this chapter credits these films for these translation projects, it also reveals the way in which each version of each film is a unique film in and of itself that has a completely different ideological valence and message than its original, contingent upon the cultural context to which it is marketed. While this chapter recognizes that creating different versions of a single film for different national audiences dates back to the birth of cinema (even in the Russian Empire[13]), this work argues that the move from the indexical quality of traditional celluloid film to the hyper-manipulability of digital cinema has led to new possibilities for catering to audiences separated by linguistic difference.

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[13] For example, Iakov Protazanov's *The Passing of a Great Old Man* [Ukhod velikogo startsa] (1912), a bio-pic about author Lev Tolstoi, was never shown publicly in Russia because of protestations from Tolstoi's widow (Leyda 51). The work did receive release abroad, where it was shown with a scene added to the end of the film (Ginzburg 174). The final shot shows images of Tolstoi embracing Jesus Christ (officially banned by Russian censors), superimposed on footage of a cloud-filled sky.

These possibilities, though, come at the cost of an industry that expands American

cultural hegemony and supports global corporations. Although jokes, cultural references, and

dialogue are changed for the two respective versions of each film, product placements with brand

names in Latin script for Power Horse energy drink, Trojan condoms, Google, Nescafé, and

many other products remain the same. Artistic innovation is ultimately in the service of a greater

money-making potential.

Virtual subtitling and digital dubbing are themselves a form of branding in an effort for

greater appeal. These techniques are about communicating a message to the audience: they are

special and deserve a localized form of the product. *Night Watch* gives spectators an experience

of the foreign that is not quite foreign, whereas *Wanted* creates the impression that a foreign

product is not so foreign after all. This chapter analyzes the strategies by which these

impressions were accomplished, and it looks at the possible implications for an increasingly

accelerated global cinema.

4.2   SUBTITLES AND THE IDEOLOGY OF TRANSLATION

Subtitling is a project of distortion. In *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* Abé Mark

Nornes even goes so far as to call it "corrupt" and note the ways that it is inherently violent.

> Facing the violent reduction demanded by the apparatus, subtitlers have developed a method of
> translation that conspires to hide its work—along with its ideological assumptions—from its own
> reader-spectators. In this sense we may think of them as *corrupt* [emphasis in original]. They
> accept a vision of translation that violently appropriates the source text, and in the process of
> converting speech into writing within the time and space limits of the subtitle they conform the
> original to the rules, regulations, idioms, and frame of reference of the target language and its
> culture. It is a practice of translation that smooths over its textual violence and domesticates all
> otherness while it pretends to bring the audience to an experience of the foreign. (Nornes 155)

Although the subtitles in *Night Watch* stretch the formal terms and possibilities of appropriating the source text, each film hides its "ideological assumptions—from its own reader-spectators." In this discussion of subtitling, however, Nornes privileges the Ur-text and suggests a sense of the value of the original and the violence done against it in translation. Rather than trying to preserve absolutely the sense of the original, Bekmambetov creates an entirely new text with slightly altered ideological assumptions. This new text fulfills the words of Lawrence Venuti, but in a way that Venuti may not have expected:

> Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there. The foreign text, then, is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. (Venuti 482)

And this is exactly what happens in both the English subtitled version of *Night Watch* and the Russian dubbed version of *Wanted*—shamelessly so, in a way that plays to each audience and changes the messages of each film. In both Venuti's and Nornes' work there is the notion that the Ur-text is not already hybrid, not already somewhat inscribed with "foreign" culture. In the case of *Night Watch*, however, the Ur-text is already somewhat foreign to a Russian audience. Aesthetically, its fast-paced editing style has roots in Hollywood. Thematically, it is fixated on vampires that grow out of a Western cultural tradition (Russian vampires eat flesh and are more akin to zombies; they do not necessarily suck blood). Economically, it is viable and able to earn back more money than was invested in the film. Despite the fact that these films are not "pure" Russian texts in the way that Venuti implicitly sets up his argument, the process of inscription for a new domestic audience takes place through the text of the English translation itself or the

creative visual manipulation of the subtitles. The same is not necessarily true of *Wanted*, and thus the process of inscription is much easier to detect and identify.

The effect of all of these visual manipulations is a new ideology, but one that each film overtly claims rather than allows itself to be subjected to. In *Framer Framed*, experimental documentary filmmaker Trinh Minh-Ha articulates the fact that translation is "interpellated by ideology and can never be objective or neutral"; it is "a politics of constructing meaning" (128) that "consists of grafting several languages, cultures and realities onto a single body" (184). Minh-Ha speaks more specifically about the ideological potential of subtitling with ideas that speak to the effects of dubbing as well.

> The duration of the subtitles, for example, is very ideological. I think that if, in most translated films, the subtitles usually stay on as long as they technically can—often much longer than the time needed even for a slow reader—it's because translation is conceived here as part of the operation of suture that defines the classical cinematic apparatus and the technological effort it deploys to naturalize a dominant, hierarchically unified worldview. (207)

Despite the virtuosity of these subtitles and the unique method of translation in these two films, the translation is *naturalized*. There are no points in these films that draw attention to the dissonance between what is said and what is read, or of the ultimate cagey, elusive, and even problematic aspects of translation. Although Minh-Ha's critique is general, she articulates what these films do, despite their adventurous attempt to forge a new style of translation and novel practice of reading:

> The success of the mainstream film relies precisely on how well it can hide (its articulated artifices) in what it wishes to show. Therefore, the attempt is always to protect the unity of the subject; here to collapse, in subtitling, the activities of reading, hearing and seeing into one single activity, as if they were all the same. What you read is what you hear, and what you hear is more often than not, what you see. (207)

In light of these critiques, the project of this chapter is not so much to praise these subtitling and dubbing techniques or to claim that they somehow improve upon and critique techniques of the past, but to acknowledge that translation in cinema is primarily a marketing, rather than an artistic, project. The task of this chapter therefore becomes one of accounting for and describing the way that these films maintain and communicate the unity of the spectator-subject, by creating a new type of text and a new way of "reading" that incorporates visual as well as verbal language. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to divulge the ideological implications and valences of the films as they are inscribed for the domestic audience, and to reveal the artifices that redirect the violence of translation itself. Ultimately, these films' technique is intended to reinfuse the mise-en-scène with greater meaning and constantly to re-immerse the spectator into the diegesis of the film, rather than to draw attention to the artifice of the film and the gaps inherent to any translation project.

4.3   VIRTUAL SUBTITLES IN *NIGHT WATCH*

Night Watch surpassed previous box office records for domestic film in Russia (Beumers 256). In the United States, it played for seventeen weeks in one hundred fifty-eight theaters and earned one and a half million dollars of its thirty-three million dollars worldwide ("Night Watch"). Russian scholarship and audiences have consistently received the film as a genre-driven American-style blockbuster. In the United States it took on a different valence. The specificity of the American audience favors subtitling, where a film has the opportunity to bridge a niche between art cinema and foreign blockbuster. Dubbing without the synchronization of oral movement, however, puts a foreign film into a category of the ridiculous if the film itself is not self-conscious about the internal dissonance of the dubbed version. *Night Watch* is conscious of

the dissonance that the presence of subtitles adds, but it smooths over this dissonance with subtitles that change size, color, and position; shift into italics; appear and disappear with wipes; and occupy positions in the screen that direct the gaze back into the mise-en-scène. These subtitles draw on practices used in "low-brow" contemporary genres and media—advertising, video games, and graphic novels, specifically—to enrich the cinematic text, infusing it with the impression of a "deeper meaning." The exact content of this "deeper meaning," however, is never quite articulated.

Despite the creativity of the approach, *Wanted* proves that ultimately the effort may not be worth it financially. It is more profitable, these two films suggest, to shoot a film in English with recognizable American actors, and then cater that version to local audiences on a global scale, than to produce a version in Russian with Russian actors and attempt to make the film appeal to an English-language audience. *Wanted*, as opposed to *Night Watch*, played for twelve weeks in 3,175 theaters in the United States and earned $134.5 million of its $341 worldwide in the United States; after the United States, the film earned the greatest amount of money in Russia and the former Soviet Union, where it earned over twenty-six million dollars, more than in Japan, in the United Kingdom, or in South Korea ("Wanted"). The film earned almost as much money in Russia as *Night Watch*, but it earned vastly more globally.

In the additional layering of the subtitles in the American theatrical release version, the subtitles are not just a text forcefully palimpsested onto the Ur-text. They interact with the mise-en-scène in three specific ways: they "get out of the way" and allow the Ur-text to speak for itself in a fashion that draws attention back to the visual and the aural qualities of the original. They visually translate the intangible aspects of gesture and intonation through the creative movement and enlargement of the words themselves on screen. And they produce a form of

branding that must be differentiated from its Russian equivalent. It is achieved through the use of the color red, the decision to cut one scene from the original Russian theatrical release, and the positioning of the text that makes reading subtitles an interactive, attention grabbing experience that relentlessly draws the spectator back into the diegesis of the film—something subtitles, as a non-diegetic element, have always struggled to do. The subtitles are a part of the story world in a way that affects characters, but in ways these characters do not quite realize. The subtitles become fleshy parts of the screen that add a layer to the violent torture these characters experience. It is as though translation is another level of violence and torture through which they must proceed.

The opening sequence of the film in which Anton visits a sorceress to bring about a miscarriage on his girlfriend—something at which he is ultimately unsuccessful—demonstrates how digital subtitles function within the film. It is different from cinematic texts in which mere words are superimposed on top of the original film, in block images of one or two sentences that last for a few seconds and cut to more block images, but of different text. The action of the scene—in which a Night Watch team in 1992 Moscow invades the apartment to stop the sorceress's spell and the miscarriage—is framed by the careful and unusual positioning of the subtitled text at the beginning and end of this sequence.

The scene begins when Anton presses the electric doorbell and initiates the sequence of object perspective[14] that brands the visual style of the film. There is no verbal language, and thus no subtitles or voice-over at this point of the film. The unique visual style of the film is the main attraction that unites the Russian language and English subtitled versions of the film; it is the paramount appeal that differentiates the film from other vampire works. A medium shot depicts Anton outside of the sorceress's dilapidated apartment. The succeeding shot shows a

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[14] For a thorough discussion of object perspective, see the preceding chapter of this dissertation.

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mail slot in the door with the word *pochta* (mail) embossed in Cyrillic, which is not translated. The mail slot flips open to reveal the eyes of the sorceress. The first words between them occur as subtitles in the place the spectator would expect: centered in the lower third of the screen. As a photograph is mentioned and then transferred from Anton's hand into the mail slot, the words occur in a position right of center, between the hand and the slot, tucked away in an unassuming spot, in a place that makes reading easier and guides the eye in synchronization with the movement of Anton's hand. In this way, the film immediately takes on the valence more from a graphic novel than a subtitled film since the position of the text is not predetermined. Something similar happens at the end of the episode when the Night Watch crew has captured the sorceress and begins to interrogate her. As the dialogue unfolds, its translation appears in the upper right corner of the screen, digitally superimposed on a hand that is filling out a report. The Latin script does not touch the Cyrillic words on the document, and the document is not translated. Both the document and the mail slot are realia, props that firmly place the film in a Russian-speaking world, a post-Soviet realm of official documents and stamped metal. They remain as objects that need no translation and give the impression of what Nornes calls the "experience of the foreign" that directs the eye back into the original cinematic text and assigns it "authentic" value.

4.3.1   Kinetic Typography and the Struggle of the Protagonist Against Language

The subtitles do more than just keep the attention of the audience in creative ways that borrow from other media. The words of the subtitles themselves may morph in various, performative, often violent, ways. They fade in and out, flicker, or wipe in and out. They become enlarged in a font bigger than the normal one. They dissolve and disperse as if they were blood in water.

They even fly through the frame and bridge cut from one shot to the next. The fact that much of

the film's subtitles appear in blocks of two lines as in standard practice allows for innovation and

the puncturing of the diegesis with words that extend beyond these restrictions. They are more

than just an address to the audience—they actually interact with the characters and the mise-en-

scène of the original film. They occupy a position on the border of the diegetic and non-diegetic

in that characters seem to be aware of them, but they are never fully able literally to grasp them.

They are similar to the Night Watch for Anton in 1992 in that he knows they exist and he can

feel and hear them, but he cannot quite see them. Anton cannot see what the spectator sees, and

thus the spectator is in a privileged position, even more privileged in the English subtitled

version than the original Russian language film. Anton struggles with the trappings of language

itself in the subtitled version.

On another level, Anton is a protagonist on the historical edge of a global shift in cinema

economics that demand things of him he cannot fulfill. He is trapped by his native language, and

he has inconstant access to the hegemonic language in global circulation. This language

subjugates him through the translation itself and the alienating products in Latin script, such as

the Nescafé coffee that Geser drinks when he argues with Anton (see Figure 37).

The clearest example of Anton's struggle occurs at the beginning of the film in the

meeting with the sorceress. Language appears powerful, violent, and harmful as the sorceress

casts a spell to make Anton's former girlfriend fall out of love with her current romantic interest

and to bring about the miscarriage of this woman's unborn child. The spell advances and Anton

begins to regret his decision. In successive close-ups of his face the word for "*net,*" "No…"

appears to the left of his nose, and then "Stop" appears on his nose. As the sorceress recites an

incantation to kill this unborn child, close-ups of her clenching bloody hands seem to grab and

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do away with Anton's new desire to cancel the spell, as the word "Stop" appears blurred in red, simulating an effect in which it appears as if she is grasping Anton's word and disposing of it.

Figure 28. *Night Watch.* The sorceress appears to dispose of Anton's request to stop.

Anton in his protestations eventually yells out and a medium shot depicts him as he falls back in surprise and the horror of his previous desire for the miscarriage. The tint of the frame switches to blue and his desperate protest is communicated in the "No" and "Stop" that appear in different sized font and look as though they emanate from his body, which falls back in desperation, away from the spectator. The shift in the vertical justification of individual letters adds to the instability and near chaos Anton experiences as he loses control of the situation.

The subtitles in this scene occur as the literalization of Anton's and the sorceress's actions and states of mind. They are direct addresses to the audience that heighten the drama by

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acknowledging the lack inherent in logocentric translation and compensating for it with added visual representation. In other instances, however, there is an added layer to the way the subtitles function. In the Russian-language version of the film, Anton attempts to swat buzzing mosquitoes in an almost delusional state after the Night Watch arrives, stops the spell just in time, interrogates the sorceress, and fills out an official report. The members of the Night Watch team speak among themselves in Russian and Anton seems to hear them, even though as a human (and not a vampire) he should, in principle, not be able to. In the English subtitled version, Anton appears straight on in medium close-up as he moves his arms, swatting away not just the mosquitoes (which are heard but not seen), but also the dialogue of the Night Watch, which disappears in coordination with the swinging of Anton's arms. It is almost as if the words being spoken, the subtitles themselves in the mise-en-scène, were evading him. He fights a losing battle with language since he can neither block out the words completely nor control them now that he has become a vampire. Furthermore, the official written report, drawn up in this scene, serves as evidence against him twelve years later when he attempts to save his son, but gets tricked into almost killing him. Anton loses his son's faith and trust when the document that attests to Anton's attempt at abortion is revealed.

As the film progresses, Anton attempts to take control over language, but he finds himself victim to the words of other characters. The language that bombards Anton in the subtitled version heightens the process. At one point, Anton seems to take control of his life, his tragic position in the vampiric world, when he speaks back to Geser. For a brief moment, he is articulate. His temporary agency is paralleled with a corresponding control of the subtitles. Anton denounces the Night Watch for hypocrisy. They spin rhetoric about keeping the balance, when in reality they lure the Day Watch into conflict by using live, innocent humans as bait, so

that they can find the Day Watch guilty of breaking the "truce" and punish them. These actions, of course, have negative repercussions for the humans used in the process. As Anton voices these concerns, words that he emphasizes through pausing and intonation fade in and out as single-word translations in the subtitles, adding a layer of nuance to the process of reading and the way that subtitles can reveal rather than just abruptly appear and disappear.

Figure 29. *Night Watch*. Anton falls back in desperation. The tint has switched from red to blue.

This scene visually references the previously mentioned scene, in which a confused Anton was swatting mosquitos away after the arrest of the sorceress. Anton appears straight on in medium close-up with Geser in the background, whose voice and speech become as important as Anton's. When Geser asks Anton "*A kto eto skazal? Ch'i eto slova?*" (literally: "But who said that? Whose words are those?") the two phrases are translated simply and elegantly as "Says who?", a phrase that Anton's downward movement out of the frame wipes away. Geser's words do not

have power over Anton any longer. Their disappearance with the wipe makes it look as though

Anton himself removed the words from the mise-en-scène. Anton's words and body movement

reveal his increased agency when he lifts his ailing body up from out of the frame and answers

"*Eto moi slova*" (literally: "Those are my words."), translated by the subtitles as "Says me."

Figure 30. *Night Watch*. Geser throws a stuffed owl towards Anton.

Despite what seems to be a transformation in Anton and a corresponding control over

language, the dynamic breaks down in two succeeding scenes, one with Geser and one with the

neighbor Dmitrii. After Anton's rant, Geser tells Anton that Zavulon will be after Anton for

killing a member of the Day Watch. Geser says, "You need protection" and throws a

taxidermied owl at him. Geser tells him "It's Olga," and that "*Ona pomozhet tebe*" translated

faithfully by the subtitles as "She'll help you." As Geser throws the owl through the mise-en-

scène, the subtitles fly through the frame too, but in a way that blurs the words. The next cut

shows Anton catching the bird, and the subtitles travel from one frame to the next, bridging the

two shots.

Figure 31. *Night Watch*. The subtitles follow the owl to move through the mise-en-scène.

Anton responds with a "Why the fuck do I need this?", a considerably stronger linguistic version

of the Russian "*Zachem mne eto?*" (literally: "For what to me this?") which contains no explicit

coarse language, but is quite colloquial and informal. The violence of language as an expression

of power is visualized and the theme of language bombarding and harming rather than helping

Anton gets established. The translation reflects Anton's defensiveness as he attempts to

counteract the demands that Geser puts on him.

Anton becomes less and less in control of the language around him as the film goes on. When the owl Olga comes to Anton's apartment, she transforms into a nude human, and Anton needs clothes for her. He asks his vampire neighbor Dmitrii to borrow some. Anton's relationship with Dmitrii, who knows Anton has killed an "other" vampire, gradually becomes worse as the scene progresses. Dmitrii claims that the vampire "*byl prikol'nyi*,"artfully translated as "he was a cool guy." Anton grabs the back of Dmitrii's neck and pulls him inside. As he does so the subtitled translation, the words themselves, are smacked away horizontally, out of the screen.

Figure 32. *Night Watch.* Dmitrii laments the fact that the vampire was killed.

The visualization is clear—Anton cannot discredit Dmitrii's words, he can only push them away. Anton attempts to explain to Dmitrii that the vampire was not "cool," since he killed people and

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turned an innocent girl into a vampire. Dmitrii counters that perhaps the two wanted to be

together for all eternity, and that, in any event, the Night Watch granted the license to turn the

girl into a vampire. Anton can only answer with the weak moral justification of "I was doing my

job," something that sounds tautological in Russian ("*Ia sdelal svoe delo*").

Figure 33. *Night Watch.* The subtitles move in reaction to the movement of Anton's hand.

The subtitles visually represent the switch in the power dynamic and the intonation in Dmitrii's

voice when the latter finally explodes verbally and tells Olga "yes" in answer to her question of

whether he will feel hunger and act on it again. The "yes" moves to the right of the frame

towards Olga, increases in font, and then decreases in font and settles closer to the speaker

Dmitrii. The "yes" is not present in every frame, and thus it appears to flicker as it changes font

size and mimics the forward and backward motion of a sound wave. Dmitrii's language has

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become violent, almost as if it were a boomerang weapon that is thrown at Olga and returns to its master.

Figure 34. *Night Watch.* Dmitrii answers Olga's question unequivocally.

Dmitrii then tells Anton that he will go to Anton's office and Anton will give him a "fucking license" (no expletive present in Russian). The subtitled words translate the intonation and violence of his words not only through the addition of an expletive not present in the Russian, but also through subtitles that move towards Anton. Dmitrii's last words reflect his disappointment, with a "s*osed*" (literally: "neighbor") in Russian and the words "Won't you—neighbor?" in reference to the license. The subtitles fade out, rather than abruptly disappear, revealing visually the lingering quality of Dmitrii's words on Anton. Dmitrii has had the last say and has been able to switch the power dynamic.

Figure 35. *Night Watch.* The size of the font increases dramatically to reflect the volume of Dmitrii's voice.

By the final scene of the film, Anton has become the victim of language, his very own words. He tries to justify himself in front of his son, knowing that he tried to abort the child through black magic. Even though he did not know it was his, he remains guilty. Language controls him and the subtitles reflect it as Zavulon's words "kill" and "lie" appear and then fade out on Anton's chest in medium close-up in the mise-en-scène. These words stick to him as if they were the scarlet letter A, but instead of adultery, Anton is guilty of a far worse offense, attempted infanticide. The original report from the beginning of the film provides the evidence and leaves no doubt about Anton's fate. The film is set up for a sequel with an ending that condemns Anton for the moment, but not for all time.

4.3.2   Branding and the Voice of Advertising in Subtitles

Subtitles, similar to object perspective, brand *Night Watch* with claims of providing a unique

product that is authentically Russian but accessible to an American audience. It is a product that

contains advertisements for other products as well as the film itself. Although this chapter

focuses on the way that verbal speech is translated into visual language, the verbal translations

into English themselves are quite colloquial. They contain strongly marked and charged

language that is not found in the Russian version. Many of these liberal translations occur at

moments of rupture in the film, when the subtitles visually morph in ways that have already been

discussed.

For example, when Geser throws the taxidermied owl at Anton and tells him "*ona*

pomozhet tebe" translated faithfully as "she will help you," Anton throws the owl back with his

subtitled speech as well.   The Russian "*Zachem mne eto*" is well-translated but with an expletive

that is not present in Russian: "Why the fuck do I need this?" The phrase communicates Anton's

distraught emotional state and reflects the violence of language that is already visualized through

the subtitles that bridge frames. Course language becomes a marketed feature of the American

theatrical release version of the film, and, most likely, contributed to the "R" rating the film

received in America. Other than the physical violence and Olga's exposed breast when she

bathes herself, there are few reasons other than the subtitles to account for the rating. This rating

appears to be another calculated move that legitimates the film as representative of the thriller

genre[15]. The "R" qualifier gives the impression that the film holds nothing back, that it is an

"authentic" expression of dark Russian cinematic culture.

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[15] Another possible explanation is that the US government is less likely to intervene in the language in a film than its Russian counterpart.

In addition to the appearance of course language, the American theatrical release version brands itself through the use of white and red color in the subtitles themselves. The overwhelming, "normal," color used throughout the film is white. It stabilizes the visual terrain and gives spectators a dynamic with which they are familiar and comfortable. It allows for the innovative use of red text in situations that, predictably, correlate to the vampirism of the character speaking the words. The most striking example occurs with Dmitrii when he interrogates Anton and tells him "*Ty znaesh' nash golod*," faithfully translated as "You know what our hunger is." When Dmitrii reaches the Russian word "*golod*" the corresponding English subtitle "hunger" turns red, which is matched by the way in which Dmitrii's eyes turn red in both versions of the film. The word is even capitalized. Once again the mise-en-scène interacts with the subtitles to create a cohesive text with an added layer of expression in the English version. Furthermore, the timing of Dmitrii's spoken word and the change in text color to red correlates to Nornes' point about the way subtitles "pretend to bring the audience an experience of the foreign." The anticipation of reading the subtitles before the words are spoken simulates a kind of language learning that never actually takes place. The red text is sutured into the original mise-en-scène to an even greater degree in the succeeding shot that shows Anton's eyes, which also turn red.

Figure 36. *Night Watch.* The word "Hunger" first appears in white.

Figure 37. *Night Watch.* The color of the word "Hunger" switches from white to red.

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The most prominent and consistent use of red subtitles though, concerns the off-screen diegetic voice of the female vampire that attempts to lure Anton's son. The words *"idi ko mne"* are accurately translated as "come to me" and always appear in red. They do not change from white to red in the way the word "hunger" does. They appear throughout the film and make an otherwise unremarkable aural element more pronounced. Spoken language becomes more prominent, and the intimation is that language has a hypnotic effect, but one that, similar to the spell, has negative consequences for the speaker and recipient of this language. The "come to me" like the "What the fuck have you done lately?" at the end of the English language version of *Wanted* is a challenge to action with an ultimately nebulous message. Come where? Do what? What should I have done lately—kill someone?! More than a mere narrative detail, the phrase marks the text of the American version of the film with this slogan, as if it were an advertising text itself urging the viewer into greater and greater immersion.

In addition to the Althusserian call to become integrated into the film, the red words "come to me" themselves often appear as if they were made of blood. They dissolve as if they were in the water in the pool with Anton's son. This action suggests that the subtitles are part of the diegesis itself, especially since they correlate to the nosebleed of this character. Later they dissolve when they appear under a battered and bruised Anton. The subtitles in this instantiation function as a bridge from the previous scene to the current one and as a visual connection of Anton to his son. The red indicates the ghost-like presence of the vampires, the added level of omnipresence that leaks into the visual aspect of the scene. It is also a cause for alarm, as indicated in the all-capitalized subtitle "TORNADO WARNING FOR MOSCOW" in which the word "warning" appears in red. The subtitle is a translation of words in Russian on a computer

screen in the mise-en-scène. The tornado is the vortex of crows that surrounds Svetlana's

apartment.

Red text occurs not only as a subtitle, however. It brands the film with a unique style and

it inflects the intertitles that appear in the Russian version since markers of setting (such as

"Moscow 1992") and the names of the actors, producer, and director in the final credits appear in

the same shade of red that the subtitles employ. After the major characters and filmmaking crew

appear individually in a series in red, the rest of the credits roll in white. The choice of color

suggests a hierarchy and the idea that vampirism, blood, and the "cool" aspect of danger, the film

itself, have had a significant aspect on the people who have worked on the film. They are not

just fulfilling genre conventions to make another blockbuster, but are also artists invested in the

film. The power of their names and thus their identity has been subsumed by the contagious

aesthetics of the film itself.

Advertising, product placement, and branding intersect in a way that solidifies the idea

that the creative use of subtitles in the American theatrical release version function more as

marketing technique than artistic flourish. In addition, these captions help guide the viewer

through a very complicated narrative line. The red and white subtitles make the Nescafé plug—

the red and white mug of coffee with the corporation's name prominently on the side after the

instance of object perspective—naturalized, and even partisan to vampires. The audience is used

to seeing red and white script throughout the film in unexpected places, where subtitles do not

usually occur. It comes across in the American version as more subtle and in keeping with the

larger aesthetic of the film. Since words are constantly on screen in the American version, the

product placement for Nescafé in the form of a glass canister on a table at one point in the film

(with Geser and an injured Anton in the apartment) becomes more prominent and recognizable precisely because the mise-en-scène is so full of words.

Figure 38. *Night Watch.* Nescafé appears as a product placement.

What comes across as a clear plug in both instances in the Russian version is just another object, word, in the American version, and thus product placement does its job by both prominently imprinting the name of the company in a mise-en-scène in which the spectator has become an active reader, and by inviting less attention and contemplation since the spectator has become inured to seeing words on screen.

The clearest acknowledgment that each version of the film is a unified work for a specific audience is revealed by the editing decision to cut an entire scene from the original Russian film. In this Russian version, Gosha Kutsenko woos Svetlana in a parodic, over-the-top scene in which

placards and signs in the store where Svetlana ventures to buy more coffee announce Nescafé in a way that is clearly ironic. Product placement ultimately draws attention to the company Nescafé, a real-world corporation about which the spectator is left thinking after the end of the film, even if the device of product placement itself is laid bare and ridiculed. In the American version this scene is completely absent.[16] The overt product placement in the Russian version is dealt with through irony for an audience that is hyperaware of product placement and the "foreign" Hollywood techniques of the film. For the American audience and version of the film, however, product placement is smoothed over. It is either a quick joke or a part of the mise-en-scène that attempts to imprint its name on the audience while drawing little attention to itself. The American version relies on expressive and dynamic subtitles that ultimately brand the work as a foreign art film that is accessible to a broad audience, but maintains its own brand of "authenticity" by preserving the Ur-text (with the exception of the aforementioned absent scene). It fills a void through these subtitles that add another layer of meaning to the text and attempt to compensate for the inherent inadequacy of translation.

4.4   DIGITAL DUBBING IN *WANTED*

The action drama *Wanted* (2008) seems like just another global blockbuster. It features internationally recognizable actors: Angelina Jolie in her usual role as *femme fatale* and Morgan Freeman as the evil head of a secret society. It relies on a linear plot indebted to Oedipal conflicts and shootouts between assassins. It is set in the United States, but features location shooting in a popular European location (Czech Republic). It had tremendous success at the

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[16] The humor would have been lost since the reference to Kutsenko, and the reversal of his type-cast from bald action hero to sensitive lover with a long wig, relies on a familiarity with Kutsenko as a celebrity.

international box office, grossing over $341 million worldwide ("Wanted") with a strong

showing at theatres in the United States, Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and the countries of

the former Soviet Union—with limited success on the international film festival circuit. The

film spans and connects media as well: it is based on Mark Millar and J.G. Jones' comic book of

the same name (published by Top Cow in 2003-5), and it led to the creation of the video game

Wanted: Weapons of Fate, released by Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment in March 2009

for Microsoft Windows, Playstation 3, and Xbox 360 (Geddes). Although the external sheen of

the film reflects contemporary Hollywood themes, casting, and editing style, the production

history presents a much more complicated dynamic. The making of the film involved a

multilingual and multicultural collaborative effort among a director, Timur Bekmambetov,

originally from Kazakhstan; a Moscow-based digital animation studio, Kraftway; a German

production company, Ringerike Zweite Filmproduktion; a Hollywood film studio in Universal; a

Russian actor, Konstantin Khabenskii, and a primarily American cast. The discrepancy between

the homogeneity of the text produced and the heterogeneity of the people producing it is by no

means unique to contemporary modes of transnational film production. What is unique,

however, is the fact that there were two base digital imprints of the film: one in English (later

dubbed into various languages for distribution in different countries), and one in Russian.

For the Russian version, all of the actors' mouths were digitally manipulated in post-

production to make it appear as though Jolie, Freeman, the protagonist Wesley (James McAvoy),

and the other actors really were speaking Russian. Beyond this sophisticated dubbing technique,

the film directly addresses the audience—not through a character, but written words that appear

on objects that are integrated parts of the mise-en-scène. Digital editing and animation make

these differences appear seamless. There is no necessary privileging of one text over another.

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The most interesting thing about these changes is that they occur with jokes, but ones that make more sense in Russian than English. They are not just humorous aberrations; they are distinct selling points for the Russian version of the film. The three most prominent jokes structure the Russian trailer and appear at the beginning, middle, and end. Digital effects market the film as a Russian product, not just a Hollywood film dubbed into Russian, especially since there are changes in the script and the meaning behind the actors' lines in addition to the manipulation of the visual text. The appeal of the main American and international trailer, in contradistinction, lies in the flirtatious invitation to find out how a cubicle-confined nobody (McAvoy) could be in a relationship with the voluptuous Jolie.

The decision to produce a polished Russian digital imprint of the film in addition to the English one paid dividends. Aside from the United States, the film grossed more in Russia and the CIS (former Soviet states, Ukraine excepted) than any other foreign market at twenty-six million dollars—more than in the United Kingdom, France, Japan, South Korea, or China ("Wanted").

Making more than one linguistic version of a film is no stranger to the cinema, but it has been a relatively rare occurrence. When it first became popular with the advent of sound cinema, two versions of the film had to be shot with the same actors speaking (or at least moving their lips the right way). Josef von Sternberg's *Der Blaue Engel* (German version, 1930) and *Blue Angel* (English version, 1931) showed Marlene Dietrich speaking in German or English, depending on the audience to whom it was played (Nornes 20). Under these technological conditions, two versions demanded actors flexible enough to be articulate in two languages, and shooting speaking scenes for each version of the film. Now the work lies with the digital animation team, rather than the actors, camera operators, lighting technicians, and other people

working on a physical set. The contemporary process is ostensibly cheaper since it may be streamlined without the need to organize and coordinate disparate groups of (often high-paid) workers.

The interesting paradox with digital dubbing is that the actors look as though they are speaking Russian when the spectator is most likely sure that they do not in the profilmic world. This complicated and uncanny situation becomes even more strange—both alienating because of the mismatch, but compelling because of the recognition of voices—when one considers the fact that several voices were used for the film from a cast of Russian actors who have worked closely with Bekmambetov over the years and have appeared in his previous films, such as *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*.

In this dubbing project, domestically prestigious Russian actors of a specific typecast fill in the voices of the corresponding American actors of the same typecast. The most recognizable voice is the one for Wesley (McAvoy), dubbed by Sergei Bezrukov, who is famous for his role as a diminutive, but ruthless gangster in the *Brigada* television series. His celebrity resonance is more complex than that, though, since he also played the role of the petty businessman in *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007). Fox (Jolie) is dubbed by Galina Tiunina, who plays Olga in *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, the sidekick female action star who comes to help Anton. Thus, these are not just voices, but actors who have appeared on Russian screens in prominent Bazelevs films in the last several years. The most interesting link in the two versions of the film, perhaps, is Konstantin Khabenskii, the protagonist Anton from *Night Watch*, who plays the Exterminator in *Wanted*.   In the English version, he speaks English with a Russian accent, and in the Russian version he speaks his own part with unaccented Russian. The same is true of the "butcher" Dato Bakhtadze, the knife specialist who trains Wesley and speaks his own part in

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English or Russian, depending on the version. These two actors add a level of authenticity to the work that would not otherwise occur in the Russian version and—because their voices match their on-screen faces—the rest of the voices are naturalized.

Dubbing famous actors' voices not only brands the film as a Russian product, but it also creates a specific type of pleasure based on adherence to genre expectations. Since the voices fit the associations of the genre in the Russian context, a suspension of disbelief is possible, even if, upon closer inspection, the text reveals a lack of cultural verisimilitude, since the audience knows that Jolie, Freeman, and McAvoy do not really speak Russian. Steven Neale, drawing on Tzvetan Todorov, draws the distinction between generic and cultural verisimilitude in a mode applicable to dubbing in *Wanted*.

> [I]t is often the generically verisimilitudinous ingredients of a film, those elements that are often least compatible with regimes of cultural verisimilitude—singing and dancing in the musical, the appearance of the monster in the horror film—that constitute its pleasure and attract audiences to the film in the first place. (Neale 160)

Drawing upon Neale, then, it is perhaps the very dissonance, the knowledge that something unlikely is being achieved and naturalized on screen, that produces more pleasure than dissatisfaction. The dubbing is bolstered by a general privileging of the visual aspect of the film over the verbal elements of the work, which is reflected in the model of production that Bazelevs has adopted at least since *Night Watch* ("3D Previz"). Before Bazelevs even decides to fund a project, a series of ten still images is produced in lieu of a script. These images then drive the narrative of the film and establish its aesthetic. Angelina Jolie brandishing a gun is more important than whether or not she can speak Russian. Furthermore, other aspects of the film— such as the shadow of a bullet on Jolie's face when Wesley shoots "around" her (Bielik)—

establish a correlation based on a visual connection to a profilmic reality, even if the cultural connection is absent.

4.4.1 Digital Manipulation of the Mise-en-Scène and Global Branding

Besides the dubbing, there are five major changes in the Russian digital imprint of the film from the English version. All five are integrated into the mise-en-scène, but two occur as substitutions on an interface within the screen, whereas the other three are featured on objects within the mise-en-scène that are not necessarily interfaces. The former appear earlier in the film and set up the latter three. These latter three are direct messages to the audience, as if they were the cinematic version of the theatrical aside.

The first two translated texts appear as print messages on electronic interfaces, screens that function as modern-day intertitles. It is clear that changing the text in the digital composition of these frames amounts merely to changing the words, rather than the objects themselves. Within the diegesis of the film, they appear early and correlate to the voice-over and short scenes within the film, such as the one in which Wesley's girlfriend is shown cheating on him with his best friend in Wesley's apartment. These scenes reinforce the idea that Wesley lives an embarrassing and unfulfilling life as a marginalized office drone. The two instances appear from Wesley's point of view and are direct addresses to the character, but indirect addresses to the spectator. The first happens when Wesley's boss Janice accosts him at work and demands reports as she snaps her stapler at him. A medium-shot of Wesley shows him anxiously turn to his computer. In both versions, a webpage of English text appears in front of him. In the English version, the words "why" "are" "you" "here?" appear at different points in focus as the rest of the text fades to white. In the Russian language version, the same phenomenon occurs,

but in a digital sleight of hand, the words "*pochemu*" "*ty*" "*zdes'?*" (a literal translation of "why are you here?") appear in the same places, although the original text even in the Russian version is in English. Despite a suspension of disbelief, and an acceptance that Wesley is somehow Russophone in the film, the address in the Russian version is also to the Russian audience. It is an attempt to draw this audience into the diegesis of the film without necessarily considering linguistic difference. More than a simple identification with Wesley's perspective, it is a direct aside from the digital animators that becomes a rhetorical question to the audience—why are you at this blockbuster Hollywood action film? The answer is clear: because we (the digital animators) manipulated the film for you (the Russian audience). In this way, the Russian version has an added layer of meaning that slips out of the English version, which does not carry the same valence of rupture.
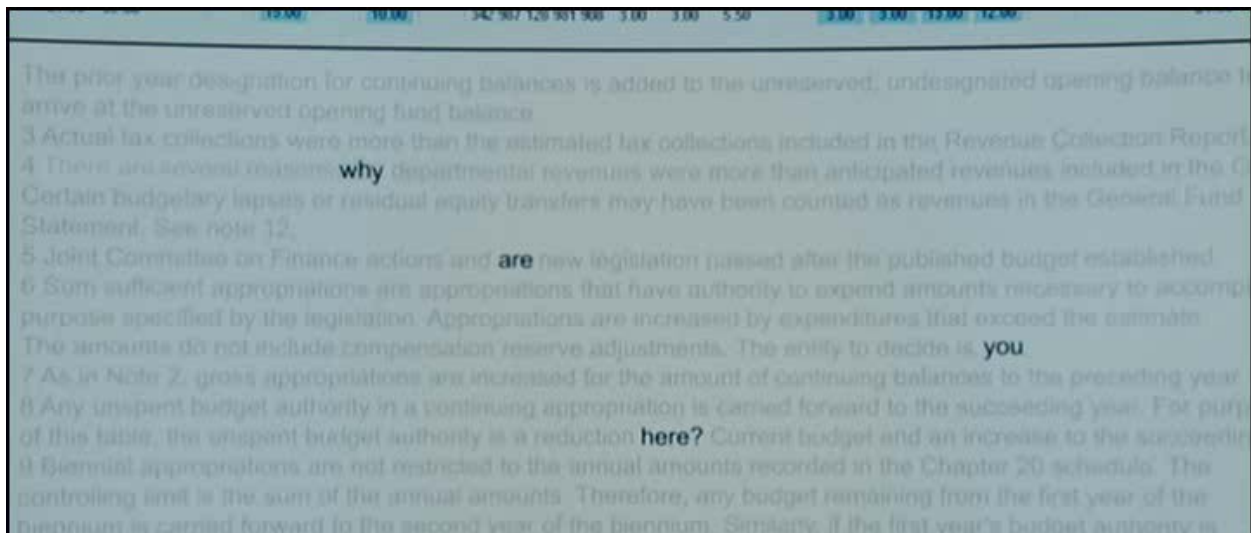
Figure 39. *Wanted*.
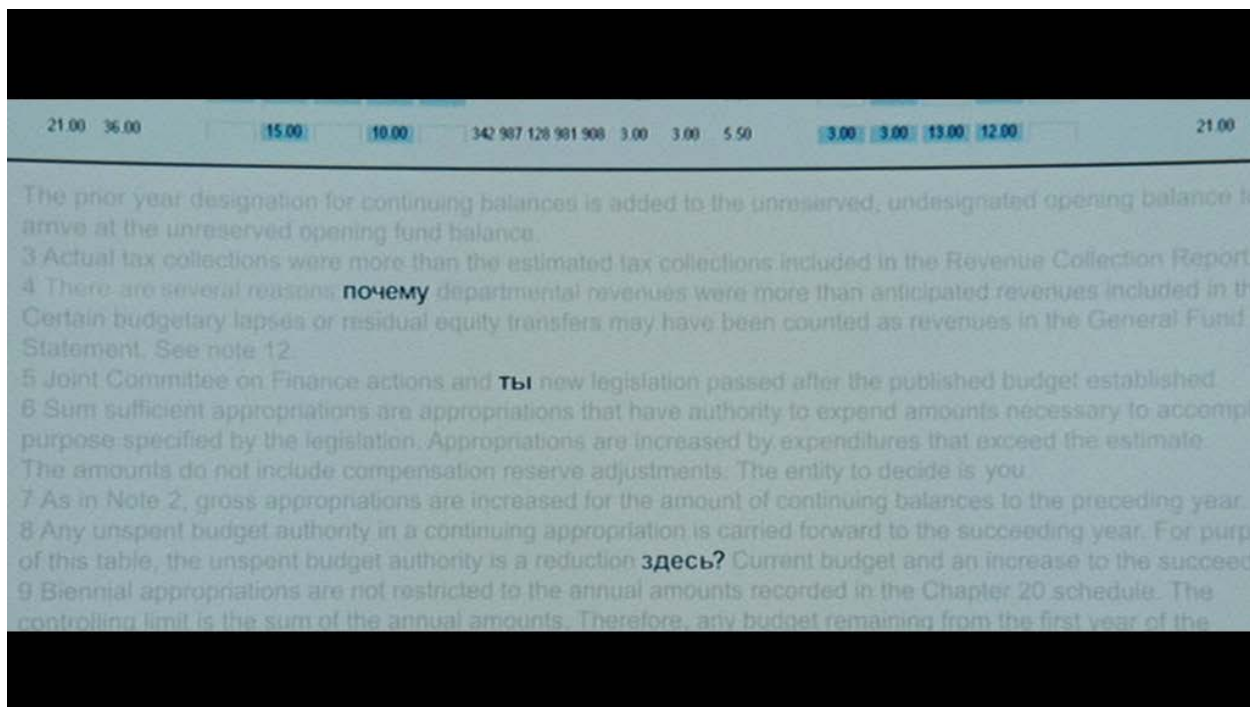
Figure 40. *Osobo opasen.* Words appear in Cyrillic even though the text is still in the original English.

The answer for Wesley to this question is obvious. He has no good reason to work as office detritus, but he does it anyway because he needs the money. The translation of the text from English to Russian does not present too many linguistic subtleties since the phrases in Russian and English are more or less equivalent, with the exception that the Russian version uses the personal, familiar form of the pronoun you. The significance of this informal address becomes greater in a later scene, at the end of the film when the words "Goodbye" ("*Proshchai*" in Russian) appear on the bullet that kills all of the assassins including Fox, but that kills neither Sloan nor Wesley.

This initial moment of translation in the mise-en-scène references two moments in the film prior to this scene. The first reference is almost seamless, and since it appears before the manipulation of the computer screen with Russian text, it almost falls out of purview. It occurs

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at the beginning of the film when Wesley types his full name into the Google search engine to

discover the English message "No Results" and the familiar interface of the real-world website.

Thus the screen on which the message in Russian and later in English occurs is a location where

branding and product placement may appear, but in a way that does not initially draw attention to

itself since it has narrative justification. The result, however, is product placement for a global

corporation.

Figure 41. *Wanted*. A close-up of Powerhorse energy drink.

The second reference is to the scene in the combination pharmacy and grocery store, to

which Wesley goes with his "best friend" Barry to purchase his anti-anxiety medication. When

Barry and Wesley approach the register, the next shot shows two Powerhorse energy drink cans

stacked one on top of the other in front of Barry. Barry searches for his wallet, but as the

spectator knows from the previous scene in which he was having intercourse with Wesley's

girlfriend in Wesley's apartment, the wallet has fallen out of his pocket and is now at the

apartment. Wesley offers to pay for the energy drinks, and Barry grabs a bright two-toned neon

green pack of Trojan condoms to boot.

The joke on Wesley is clear—he literally funds his own cuckolding by paying for

condoms and the overtly virile energy drink. The imagery of the bright and masculine Trojans

on the condom box and the image of the stallion on the energy drink characterize the friend and

show his sexual superiority over Wesley. The scene has narrative justification and humor,

especially in the Russian version since Ivan Urgant, a comedian and late night host of a talk

show on Channel One Russia, dubs Barry. The humor and the images of virility distract from

another justification for this scene: shameless product placement, which occurs for Powerhorse

on a sign in the background as well.
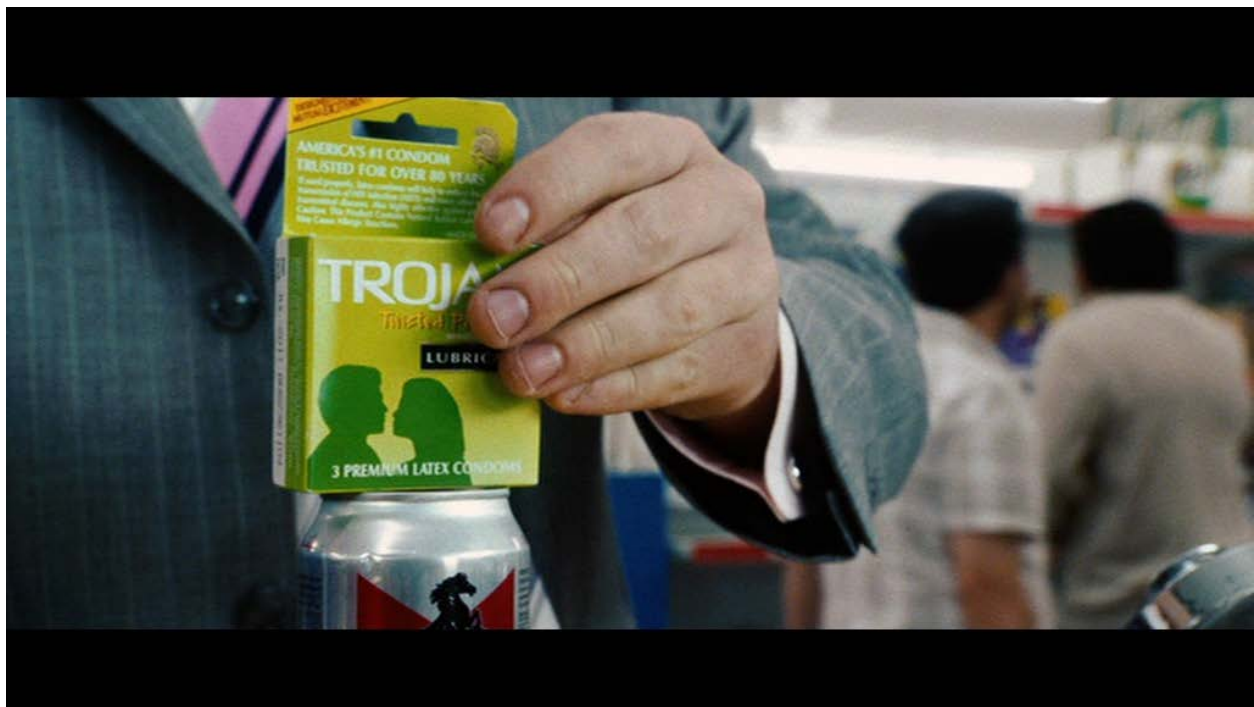
Figure 42. *Wanted*. Trojan condoms also feature as a product placement.
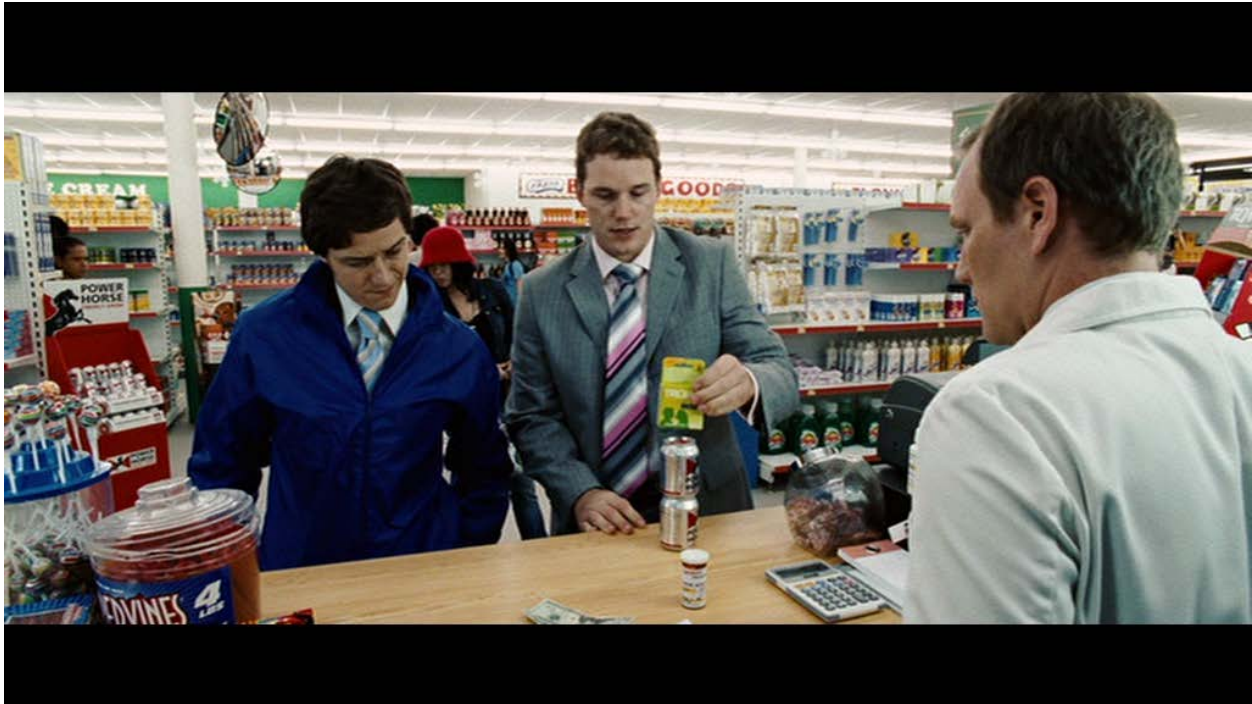
Figure 43. *Wanted*. **An advertisement for Powerhorse energy drink appears in the background.**

The connection of product, humor, branding and the changing of text from English to Russian for the Russian version gets repeated in Wesley's next visit to the same store to buy his anti-anxiety pills. He meets Fox (Angelina Jolie) at the same register. Fox tells him that his father was assassinated just the day before, and she grabs him to protect him (ostensibly) from the sniper who seems to be after Wesley. The succeeding scene in the store is a shoot out between Jolie and the assassin after Wesley. The narrative justification for the setting comes from the previous scene with Barry. Product placement occurs as if it were a natural outgrowing of the location of the scene, but the setting creates an opportunity to feature internationally recognized brands such as Cheerios and Heineken.

All of the products appear in Latin script, and even a store sign in green and white advertising eggs remains in English for both versions. The close-ups of signs from Wesley's

point of view that seem to be manifestations of his own unconscious, rather than actual parts of the mise-en-scène, change. Signs that should advertise produce read in succession "*ne upusti*" (do not miss) and "*tvoi shans*" (your chance). In the English-language version "Don't Miss" and "Last Chance" appear more naturally as exhortations to the shopper that carry a double meaning for Wesley. The Russian version is more of a direct translation. When Fox and Wesley finally exit the store, another green and white sign that seems to be from the diegesis of the cinematic world, and not just an imagined part of Wesley's consciousness, reads "Thank you for shopping. Come again!" ("*Spasibo za pokupku. Prikhodi eshche*"). In contradistinction to the non-translated product brands, these translated signs move the plot forward and function as a type of humorous commentary that marks the film as playful and fun. The "come again" sign at the end of this sequence is ironic because it should carry a positive, inviting connotation, but every time Wesley goes to that store, something bad and humiliating happens to him. In these instances, the decision itself to translate—and in so doing mark the film—is more significant than the differences between the two translations and their valences in the two respective languages, which are minimal in this case.

The aspect of the film that solidifies these changes and makes the connection to branding most obvious is, of course, the bullet that Jolie shoots at the end of the film to kill herself and the rest of the assassins in the fraternity, except Wesley and Sloan. The Russian and English texts on the side of the bullet are almost identical, "Goodbye" in English, and "*Proshchai*" in Russian; the Russian has more finality, "farewell," and it appears in the personal "you" ("thou") form upon which advertising in the Russian context frequently relies. In addition to this difference, there is the presence of the imperative verb "forgive," "*prosti*" (also informal), which shows the greater attention to visual detail in the Russian version.

Figure 44. *Wanted*. The word "goodbye" appears on the bullet as a message to the spectator.

Figure 45. *Osobo opasen*. The word "*proshchai*," "farewell," is engraved on the bullet.

Figure 46. *Osobo opasen.* The word "*prosti*," "forgive," on the bullet occurs only in the Russian version.

This sequence, in which the change occurs, is the only place in the film in which text

appears where it has no overt justification. All of the other instances appear on either interfaces

(ATM, computer screen) or signs (grocery store), but this example functions only as a direct

address to the spectator. In both versions of the film, the writing on the bullet has no literal

narrative justification or motivation. Is the audience to believe that Fox knew of the conspiracy

before the unmasking of Sloan in this scene and loaded the bullet with the word "goodbye" on it?

And even if this were allowed, for whom is the text on the bullet directed since none of the

victims see it in profile? The address can only be to the viewer. It is almost a goodbye from

Jolie herself, who refused to appear in a sequel of the film since her character dies. Her refusal

first stymied the plans for a *Wanted 2* (Wales). The address is also a goodbye from *Wanted* to

the spectator, since the film and the flying bullet rides will soon end. More than these aspects,

though, it is a branding of the film that is done as an image with words, but one that advertises through itself without latching on to a single word. The lasting image of the film is the bullet that is able to create an experience that had not yet existed before, but one that had not been copyrighted in the same way as "bullet time" was for Warner Bros.[17] The animation implies that no official logo is needed because the film is already branding itself with the bullet.

4.4.2 Branding and Ideology: Two Cinematic Texts, Two Messages in *Wanted*

The two scenes that occur in the store draw attention to one more instance in which words on the screen are transposed into Russian for the Russian version: the interface of the ATM when Wesley checks his balance for the first time and finds it is a mere $14.59. The scene occurs directly after he has to take his anti-anxiety pills and sees the words "Why are you here?"

The hardware of the ATM is not changed for the Russian version. Information on the screen appears first as a voyeuristic shot next to Wesley's hand and then as a point-of-view shot. The words "this operation cannot be completed" appear when Wesley tries to withdraw the conventional minimum: $20. The American setting is maintained—dollar amounts are used in both versions—even when the text is entirely in Russian. The sassy backtalk of the ATM has significant breaks in the English and Russian versions that encode a different relationship to Wesley, and in turn, Wesley's attitude towards the spectator. Although this chapter focuses on the visual differences in the two versions of the film, there are verbal differences that play an important role when they are the translations of Wesley's voice-overs at the beginning and end of the film: his only addresses to the audience. The translations of the dialogues and monologues were completed by Sergei Luk'ianenko, who also wrote the script for *Night Watch*, and the

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[17] "Bullet time" was first used in 1999 in promotion for the film *The Matrix* (Green). Warner Bros. copyrighted the term in May 2004 ("Notice of Publication under 12(a): US Serial Number 78285661").

novels on which *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* are based. Luk'ianenko is an artist in his own right, and the differences in the monologues correlate to the differences in the ATM message. The result is that each version of the film projects a different ideological message.

The English version of the film is less playful, more direct, and more vulgar than the Russian version. When Wesley tries to withdraw $20, the ATM informs him that he has "Insufficient funds." The next line of the ATM, surprisingly, seems to mirror Wesley's internal thoughts: "You're an asshole" underneath which the options "correct" and "incorrect" appear. Wesley punches "correct." The word "asshole" is a reference to the beginning of the film when Wesley recounts the conditions of his mundane life and the painful memory that his father left him and his mother when Wesley was still an infant. He ventriloquizes what he thinks his father must have asked himself: "Did I just father the most insignificant asshole of the 20th century?" The ATM repeats Wesley's own words. The next screen is more biting than mere self-reflection. The ATM's critique of Wesley becomes aggressive through a combination of blunt truth and insult: "You're broke./ Your best friend is fucking/ Your girlfriend./ You know it,/ And you are too big a pussy/ To do anything about it./ —correct/ —incorrect." The ATM's indictment of Wesley is that he is inactive. He is not "doing anything" about the fact that his "best friend" is having sexual intercourse with his girlfriend. Wesley is gendered as feminine in the English version, a "pussy." The previous scene with the Trojan condoms and Powerhorse suggests that the "best friend" Barry is more virile and masculine than he. The implication is that Wesley should be the one who is active, "fucking" the girlfriend—who is a passive object grammatically—but it is Barry who fulfills this role. The work of the film, Wesley's task, therefore in the English version is to become more masculine, more active, and more desirable to women generally. The primary English language trailer for the film confirms this idea.

The Russian text has a significantly different encoding. The translation is creative and accurate to a certain extent since it follows the English line for line. Upon closer inspection, though, the differences are not just linguistic accommodations. They encode a different relationship to Wesley. The same sequence occurs in the Russian version. First the ATM tells him about insufficient funds, but instead of calling him an "asshole," the ATM writes "*ty pridurok*" "you are *pridurok*." The word *pridurok* is significantly less aggressive and vulgar than the English "asshole"; *pridurok* is close to the word *durak*, idiot, but it also has the more endearing valence of "little fool."[18] And indeed, it seems more fitting than "asshole" since Wesley is more guilty of being negligent, insignificant, and generally unsuccessful, than being a mean or spiteful person, as the English "asshole" would imply.

The reference to slang that originates specifically from the gulag is not isolated to "*pridurok*." In Russian the ATM screen reads "*Ty na meli./ Tvoia podruga trakhaetsia/ s tvoim koreshem. / Ty eto znaesh./ I molchish' kak poslednii chmo./ —da/ —net.*" The first line is a colloquial translation of "you are broke" (literally, "you are on the shoals") in the meaning of having no money. The second line has a different valence than the English version. A literal translation would be: "Your girlfriend is screwing [in the vulgar sense of having sex with] your *homie.*" Instead of best friend, the more intimate "*koresh*" appears, which derives from the word for "peasant." The syntax is significantly different since it is the girlfriend who is the subject of

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[18] *Pridurok* has a complex linguistic history. The origin of the majority of contemporary cursing in Russian is derived from the language of the camps, the gulag, where argot allowed prisoners to speak a language that was less comprehensible to the guards and authorities than standard Russian. According to Solzhenitsyn in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* a *pridurok* in the gulag was a person who was a prisoner in cahoots with the camp administration (175). As a result, a *pridurok* received lighter work (in the kitchen with the food, for example, rather than outdoor work in subzero temperatures). A *pridurok* was a bad or immoral person in the eyes of the rest of the prisoners. "Snitch" or "narc" may be the best English equivalent since both encode this type of relationship and come across as strong insults even if they are not "proper" four-letter curse words. In the same place that the English version uses the word "asshole" in Wesley's opening voice-over, Wesley's Russian voice Bezrukov says the word "*pridurok*."

the sentence, not the best friend. The verb indicates that she has agency since she is actively

"screwing," and that the action is mutual since the verb is reflexive. The text suggests that the

girlfriend is to blame. She is the seductress in cahoots with the *homie* against Wesley. Wesley is

at fault not only for not being masculine enough, for not "doing the fucking" himself, but also

because he is at the butt of a joke as the cuckolded boyfriend. The Russian lines that proceed

confirm this idea, in literal translation: "You know it./ And you keep silent [*molchat',* to keep

silent, an active verb in Russian] like the last [worst] *chmo*." Schmo may be the best translation

for *chmo*, but the word is significantly less sexually and linguistically charged than "pussy." It

too, comes from the gulag, but before a discussion of the etymology of this word ensues, it must

be said that in the Russian version there is an unspoken call to action. It is not as simple as in the

English version, in which the line "too big of a pussy" implies the need for a confrontation, and

perhaps physical violence.
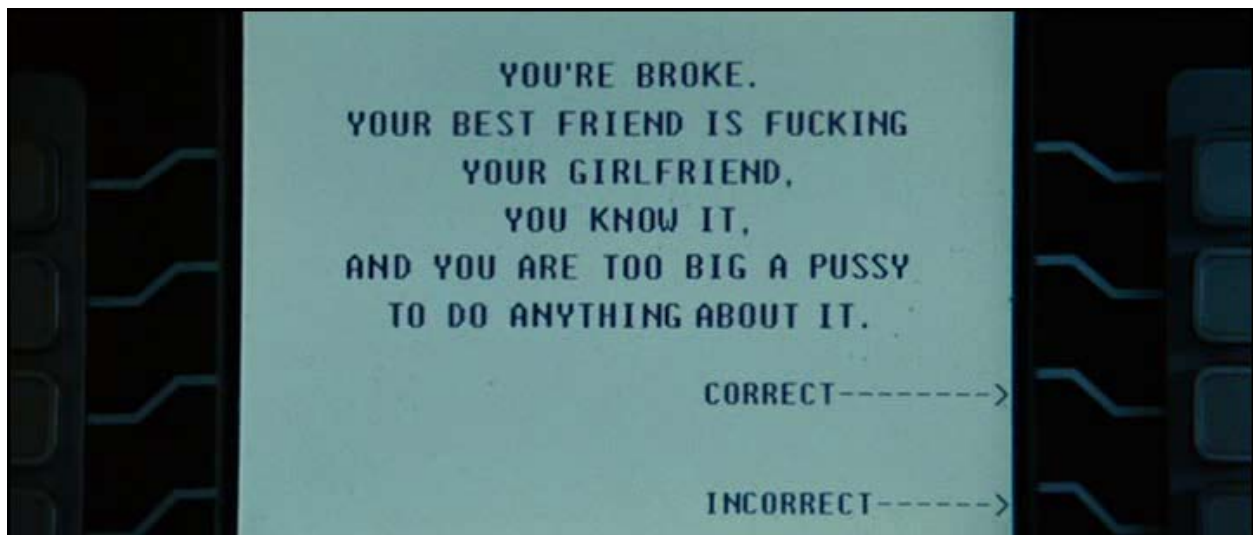
Figure 47. *Wanted*. The interface of the ATM.
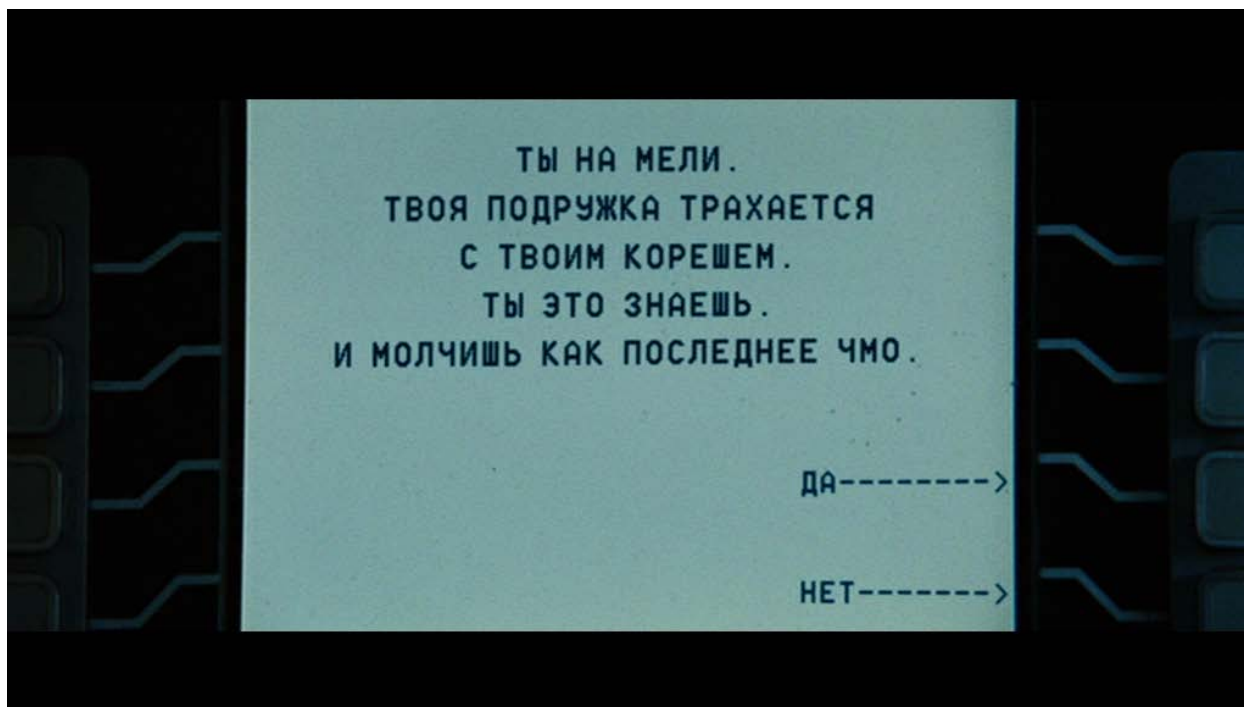
Figure 48. *Osobo opasen*. **The interface of the ATM.**

The etymology of the word *chmo* has at least two explanations: one is from Yiddish, and

thus "schmo" would seem to be a reliable translation. The word is gendered as masculine in

Russian, and with the association of the word "penis" from the original Yiddish, it is clear that in

Russian, Wesley is gendered as male, but not necessarily masculine: he is a weak male. His lack

of masculinity does not seem to be the issue so much as his willingness to keep silent, and his

inability to become "master of his own life" ("*khozain sobstvennoi zhizni*" as the back of the

Russian DVD case characterizes his task). Gulag jargon is another source of the word, which

was an abbreviation for *chelovek moral'no opushchennyi*, a morally downcast person, by which

was meant *pridurok*, a prisoner who collaborated with the camp authorities and administration.

It also implies someone in the receiving position of sexual intercourse. There is more internal

coherence in the Russian version and less vulgarity and feminine gendering than in the English-

language version. Wesley is at fault because he is, in his office job and life, a *chmo*, someone

who adheres to the status quo in order to eek out an existence. He is someone who never

challenges this status quo and remains subservient to it. He is too cowardly, negligent, and full

of self-disgust to change his situation. Even the inanimate ATM is aware of his status as a *chmo*.

These differences run throughout the Russian version of the film, such that it becomes

necessary to have a different reading for each film to account for these two disparate texts. The

analysis of the ATM scene puts a succeeding moment in which Wesley quits his job and walks

out of the office into perspective. In both versions, Wesley has returned to work after his

adventurous car chase with Jolie. He is not sure whether or not the whole experience was a

dream, so he checks the news on his computer to see if what Jolie said about his "father" being

assassinated on a rooftop in the downtown area is factual. The pictures that Wesley finds are

convincing. As his boss approaches him to nag him about the reports he is supposed to fill out,

he unloads on the overweight woman in an episode reminiscent of *Jerry Maguire*. He humiliates

her in front of everyone by telling her that the people in the office would pity her and forgive her

domineering attitude if she were not such a "bitch." Once again the Russian version is less

vulgar than the English. On "behalf of everyone" Wesley tells her in the English version "Go

fuck yourself" while in the Russian he uses the euphemistic "*idi v zadnitsu*" instead of the more

vulgar "*idi v zhopu,*" both of which literally mean "go up a bottom/ass" and more colloquially

correlate to the sense of "go fuck yourself." The less explicit version is preferred, ostensibly to

keep from alienating the audience who might be offended by more explicit language.

Wesley grabs his ergonomic keyboard on the way out and when his "best friend" walks

towards him to congratulate Wesley on his office explosion, Wesley strikes him with the

keyboard across the face. A medium shot from behind Barry shows Wesley straight on as he

does the striking. It sets up a direct address to the spectator. As blood splatters, the keys that have been forced loose from the keyboard and Barry's tooth spell out a phrase in each of the respective versions. The English version is more direct, vulgar, and less playful—the scene is about revenge by violence, about Wesley "not being a pussy." The keys spell out "f-u-c-k y-o-[tooth]" The upside down tooth which has been torn out from the root makes a perfect "u" for the final letter of the word "you" since the first "u" needed to be used for the word "fuck," if verisimilitude is to be maintained. Wesley's message to Barry is presented as an image to be read by the spectator, and like the bullet, it is one that none of the characters in the diegesis actually sees. The branding is a joke that, in the English version, revolves around the surprise and the cutesiness of the tooth forming the final letter. The tooth is literally a part of the "you" of Barry. The scene relies on synecdoche, a part to whole relationship, rather than a substitution. One is left wondering why the upside down tooth "u" was not used in place of the entire word "you"; but then again, the message in that case would have been the confusing "fuck [tooth]."

The Russian version is far more complex and subtle. It seems as though the Russian version of the joke is the real one that animators and the producers wanted all along since the joke makes more sense in the Russian version than the English one. In the Russian version, only the letters on the keys are changed. The sense is the same, instead of "fuck you" the equivalent Russian, literally "go to/on the ***expletive for the male sexual member***" is used. Where the letters for "f-u-c-k" are the Cyrillic "*P-sh-e-l*" appear. It is a contraction, and thus a more abrasive and colloquial version of "*poshel*" since the "o" is omitted. For the "y-o" the on "*n-a*" is used, but the tooth remains in the same spot. In this way, the Russian curse word is omitted and replaced with the euphemistic tooth. Tooth, *zub*, like the word for the Russian male member, is a masculine three-letter word, and a clear phallic symbol, a part of Barry that, like the

phallus, is not just a part-to-whole association, but a replacement to stand in for the subject. In

the Russian version, therefore, the joke is two-fold. Wesley is still telling the "best friend" "fuck

you" but he is doing it with double entendre and less vulgarity. He is playing a joke on Barry

and also vicariously (in simulation) castrating him with the removal of the tooth. Moreover, the

Russian phrase "to have a tooth on someone" ("*imet' zub no kogo-libo*")—meaning to have a

bone to pick with someone—is also at play. The English language version glorifies being tough,

taking action, and standing up to the former friend. In the Russian version all of these elements

are maintained, with the added layer of playing a joke on Barry and making a joke exclusively

for the benefit of the audience.

Figure 49. *Wanted*. Wesley strikes Barry with his keyboard.
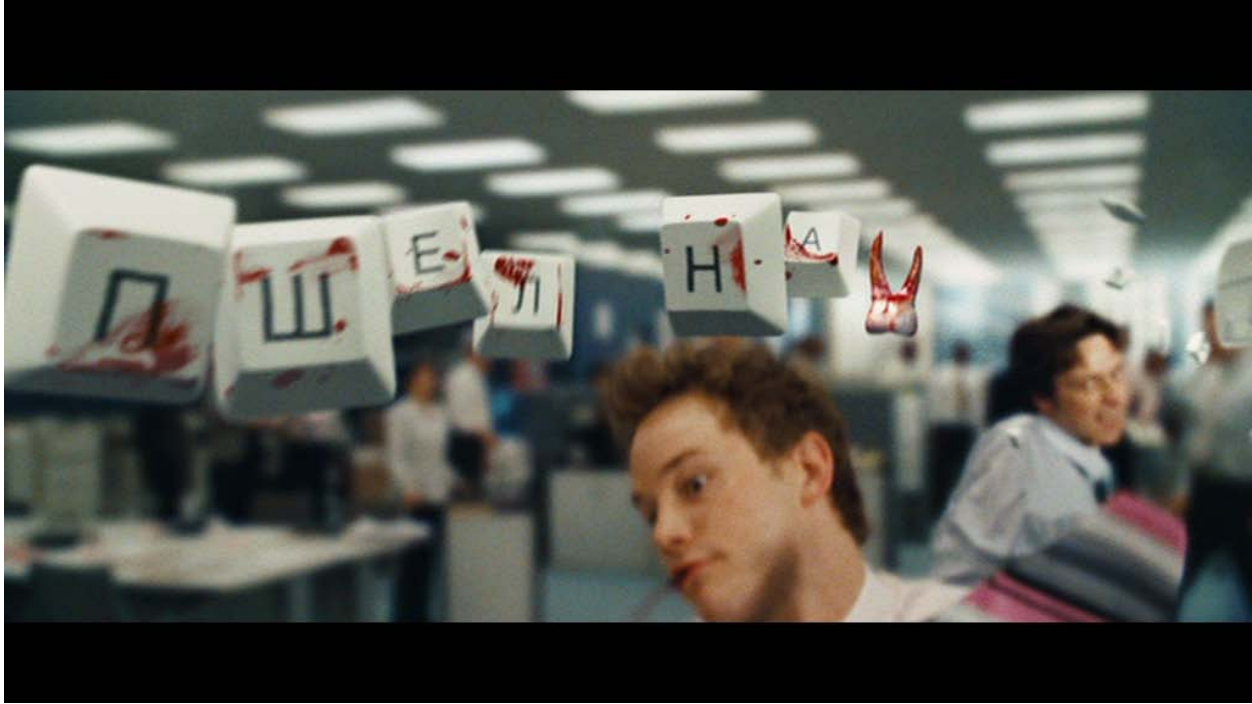
Figure 50. *Osobo opasen*. Wesley strikes Barry with his keyboard.

The added level of complexity and irony is characteristic of the Russian version

generally. It shows up not just in the ATM scene and the tooth scene, but in the final scene of

the film as well. In both versions, the digital sequence that ends the film is the same instance of

object perspective that references the beginning of the film when a bullet travels backwards in

causal time to its source. The first sequence concerned the assassination of Mr. X, a playful ride

with the bullet through downtown Chicago, and the ending at the source, the barrel of the gun

and into Wesley's real father's apartment. Part of the motivation of the scene at the beginning of

the film was the safe ride for the spectator with the bullet, and part of it was finding out the

identity of the shooter. In this later scene, however, the voice-over and the trick that is played on

Sloan make the identity of the shooter clear from the beginning.

The digital sequence that ends each version of the film is identical, but the differences in the words of the voice-over encode each version differently. Sloan, gun in hand, approaches a character, alone in the office, who appears to be Wesley, but who the voice-over reminds spectators is "not me"/"*ne ia.*" This office worker searches Wesley's name on the prominently displayed Google interface. The screen shows the words "No Results"—a reference to the beginning of the film that naturalizes the decision to include the search engine as product placement. The character turns around in his swivel chair to surprise Sloan that he, indeed, is not Wesley. A shot posited from Sloan's perspective from a bird's eye point of view shows sticky notes on the floor marking an X, and Sloan realizes that he is in fact the target. Sloan's last words in Russian "*chert*," literally "the devil," more colloquially, "oh damn" or "ah well" is significantly less charged than the English "Oh fuck." In cartoonish fashion a bullet pushes through and finally pierces Sloan's forehead from behind. The bullet stops as the film begins to play in "reverse motion," backwards in causal time to follow the bullet back to its source. In this trip backward, Wesley is able to exact revenge not just on Sloan, but also on his domineering boss, ex-girlfriend, and ex-best friend through the bullet itself. The "virtual camera" follows this bullet as it travels through the windows of parked cars, and through the hole in a donut that the boss Janice is about to eat. The bullet harms Janice in no way, but plays a joke on her. It is a wink directed to the spectator since Wesley, ostensibly, cannot see literally what is happening, but knows what is occurring, which is similar to the beginning sequence of his girlfriend cheating on him with Barry.

Another joke is played on the ex-girlfriend and Barry as they descend a staircase off a public train. The bullet pierces the Powerhorse energy drink. The explosion of the liquid out of the can is another joke, a simulation of a pre-mature and unexpected sexual ejaculation that

decreases the friend's virility and masculinity. Similar to the Nescafé advertisement in *Night Watch*, it is a type of hip irony that reinforces product placement by drawing attention to it with a self-conscious wink. By this point of the film, the bullet is the only "product" associated with Wesley. It is the "real thing" (of Coca-Cola lore) that brands the film, even though it is just a collection of pixels that does not exist independently outside of software and hardware. The clearest indication that the bullet brands the Russian version of the film is the cover of the DVD case, which features the title of the film and a bullet running through a dark background. In the Russian DVD menu, the trailer that plays in the background begins with the first instance of object perspective in the film.

The other products are somehow *not* the "real" thing, or, at least, subordinate to the bullet, since they do not really connote the masculinity that becomes associated with Wesley by the end of the film. This masculinity is expressed through revenge, but a revenge in which ridicule is more important than violence. The combination of humor and vengeance creates the appeal. Sloan deserves death for tricking Wesley into killing his own father, but the people who tortured Wesley before he became an assassin are somehow more culpable. Their punishment is humiliation, not death. The film suggests that assassination is somehow honorable since it elevates the status of the enemy, whereas humor reduces the enemy to a non-threatening being.

In the English language version, these jokes lose some of their power when juxtaposed to Wesley's final line of the film: "What the fuck have you done lately?" The aggressive valence of these words closes down the playful encoding this digital sequence otherwise has. The intimation is that the sequence is more about revenge through violence than tomfoolery. Wesley comes across as humorless in this moment. His characterization as a prankster gets lost. The goal of the film for him is reduced to overcoming his inactivity. He is now "doing something,"

so he can no longer be accused of being a "pussy." In this reading, Sloan's assassination becomes the most important element in the sequence, the thing in which Wesley is most justified.

Figure 51. *Osobo opasen*. The title of the film in Russian on the DVD menu.

The Russian version is far subtler. It shows a greater coherence between the digital sequence and the transformation of Wesley's character. In the Russian version, Wesley's primary fault is being negligent and the butt of the joke. His final line reveals his transformation—not into a violent and vengeful assassin, but into someone who is able to joke back and take revenge, but in a way appropriate to the situation. The rhetorical question switches from the aggressive and nebulous call to action in the English version, to a playful rhetorical question and address to the audience that draws spectators into the product of the film.

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It ends with the polysemous "*Popal*?" which may be translated as "Did [I] hit [the target]?" It is clear that Wesley knows he did, but the question can also be interpreted as "Did [the film, masculine gender] hit [the target]?" The Russian wording is more self-referential. It makes the film about playfulness and having fun with life, instead of the exhausting and trite need for violent revenge. The rhetorical question contextualizes the death of Sloan as a step in the revenge process. It explains why this death occurs before the other "more important" stages of revenge that characterize the bullet through the donut and energy drink, respectively.

The Russian version, along with the digital sequences, shows that the film does not take itself so seriously. It marks itself as advocating hip irony, the ride of object perspective, and revenge through humor. *Osobo opasen* is more than just a mere action flick with the humorless and blunt slogan at the end "What the fuck have you done lately?" that marks a considerable similarity to typical American-global branding. The Russian one-word question is purported to have been learned and spoken in Russian by McAvoy himself ("Osobo opasen: Wanted"), a fascinating return to the production practices in early sound film in which actors actually performed and practiced for each scene in each different linguistic version. The new method is far more economical—just one word—but it reveals something deeper about the ideology behind each version. It is important that it is authentically McAvoy's voice, and thus the phrase, too, is a form of branding, but one that relies on "authenticity" more than the nebulous call to action. It brands the Bazelevs product as a playful experience, rather than a single line that encodes a world view and philosophy in one phrase.

4.5   CONCLUSION OF THE CHAPTER

The English subtitled version of *Night Watch* and the Russian dubbed version of *Wanted* draw on methods of the avant-garde that reveal the device and the constructedness of the cinema, but in a way that is never quite alienating or challenging. In each instance, the text for the non-domestic market necessarily becomes more complex since it must be palimpsested for it to work. At the time of this chapter, it can be difficult to find the subtitled version of *Night Watch* since some DVDs include only a dubbed version, and the DVDs of *Day Watch* available for purchase in the United States do not include the original subtitles of the theatrical release. The subtitles are maintained in the version available for streaming on Netflix, one of the few Russian films consistently on the website. *Osobo opasen* is available for purchase in Russia, but since watching pirated versions of films online is much more common in the Russian context than the American one, it would seem that making a Russian version of the film was always about bringing spectators into the theater and boosting box office receipts.

Despite these limitations, these films are case studies with larger implications for the way that local cinema interacts with global cinema outside of the festival circuit. In a project of crafting a product for a wider audience *Night Watch* gives spectators an experience of the foreign that is not quite foreign since "foreign" is defined not so much by visual style or the attributes of a specific culture, but through each character's relation to hegemonic, US and European-dominated global culture. The mark of being foreign is feeling out of place in this culture, the only one that "matters." *Wanted* creates the impression that a foreign product is not so foreign after all. The implication is almost an erasure, a watering-down, of local culture in which there is nothing unique about a national, linguistic context other than a set of inside jokes and

recognizable voices. Values and world views have been co-opted completely from the dominant culture. Any culture can be graphed onto this product with the correct flourishes.

These films change depending on the digital imprint or the presence of the subtitles. The people creating these visual effects and performing the translations have just as much of an influence on the message of the film as the actors, editors, and scriptwriters. The succeeding chapter takes a deeper look at the ideological valence of digital effects in films produced by Bazelevs, but it does so with a greater eye to the way that the ideologies expressed in these films are not only influenced by economic concerns, but by political alignment as well.

5.0   CINEMA IDEOLOGY AND CAPITALISM IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

5.1   THESIS OF THE CHAPTER

The primary thesis of this chapter is the following: the particular ideological orientation of films

directed or produced by Timur Bekmambetov is a key determinate of broader trends that run

throughout Russian popular and consumer culture of the corresponding contemporary moment.

A close analysis of the works made for a domestic Russian audience reveals the investments of

the larger political, economic, and social environment in which they are produced. This strain of

cinema is heavily subsidized by the state (through Channel One Russia, Russia-1, and the

Cinema Fund[19]), and it is dependent on corporate endorsement, which appears in the form of

product placement. In the course of this investigation, two key questions arise: To what extent is

Bekmambetov creating and fueling these cultural trends? To what extent is his studio producing

a consumer product carefully calculated to, at the least, pass censorship, and at an extreme,

promote the Putin government?

The argument in this chapter, however, is more than a mere explication of the political

valence of recent Russian commercial cinema. The style of these films becomes a central

concern. Political ideology is expressed in a way that marks a firm break with the Soviet

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[19] Channel One Russia provided substantial funding for *Night Watch* (2004), *Day Watch* (2006), and *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007). Russia-1 has underwritten most of the subsequent Russian domestic films made by the Bazelevs studio.

cinematic visual legacy. Specifically, the films foreground communication technologies so as to

re-politicize them, or, better put, shift their political orientation from a potentially subversive

pole to a more compliant one. Whether it is the hand-held video camcorder, the cellular

telephone, television, or Internet social media, each potentially subversive technology is co-opted

to make it a tool for "good." This "good" is always aligned with a state represented as

benevolent and a subject who is unambiguously loyal to this state and the corresponding

economic order. The re-politicization of technology extends beyond the diegesis of the film.

Various technological platforms, from home videos to websites and online video games, are the

spaces in which consumers participate in the production and consumption of the film itself, in a

cycle geared to keep the consumer economically engaged in the franchise. Political obedience is

an added effect.

The initial work of this chapter concerns the political orientation of these films and the

way that communication technology is represented. As this relationship is characterized, a

consideration of fan culture surrounding and promoting these films leads to a conclusion: the

subject is mirrored on the screen through a double interpellation. The first interpellation is in the

socialist, Soviet sense of hailing the spectator as a loyal subject of the state. The second is in the

Western capitalist sense of hailing the subject as a potential consumer, not just of the products

placed in the mise-en-scène, but also of a franchise such as *Six Degrees of Celebration* (2010) or

Elki[20]. Interlocking unrelated vignettes structure these films. A separate production team with

actors unique to the episode films each vignette. This model ostensibly provides economic

flexibility since any individual episode may be discarded or included at will. The films always

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[20] The original international release title of *Elki* is *Six Degrees of Celebration*. *Elki* in Russian literally means fir
trees, with the connotation of the New Year's tree that people in the territory of the former Soviet Union put up in
their homes for the holiday. Subsequent films did not receive international release, so they will be referred to by
their transliterated Russian titles: *Elki 2* (2011), *Elki 3* (2013), *Elki 1914* (2014). The franchise itself will also be
referred to as Elki.

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leave open the possibility for new installments, for sequels of sequels. This business model,

however, is occluded by Soviet and Russian ideals of collaborative work, Soviet nostalgia, and

the tropes of Russian folk culture.

This chapter focuses on films targeted to a Russophone and domestic Russian audience.

Although Bekmambetov's entire body of cinematic work is considered relevant to the argument,

special emphasis is placed on the recent Elki franchise, which currently consists of four

installments, all theatrically released independently for the New Year's holiday, the biggest

cinema event of the year, in terms of box office receipts. With the exception of the fourth

installment, each film made more than its predecessor, with *Elki 3* the third most lucrative

domestically-produced film of all time. Only *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007) and

Stalingrad (2013) have surpassed it ("Samye kassovye fil'my")[21]. *Irony of Fate. The*

Continuation is a sequel to the biggest Soviet "blockbuster" *Irony of Fate* (1975), and *Stalingrad*

is indebted to several Soviet films about the most famous battle of World War II. In light of this

cultural context and the fact that the first two Elki films are in the top fifteen of the most

lucrative domestically-produced films to this day ("Samye kassovye fil'my"), it is clear that the

Elki franchise is by far and away the most economically successful and stable post-Soviet

cinematic invention. It references Soviet culture at times, but it relies on its own branding more

than Soviet nostalgia.

The official international release title for the franchise works thematically for the first

film, but obscures the actual title, *Elki*, literally "fir trees." The literal association is the New

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[21] *Six Degrees of Celebration* earned over twenty-two million dollars at the box office with a theater attendance of just over four million ("Elki"). *Elki 2* and *Elki 3* surpassed these figures with twenty-six million dollars and thrity-eight million dollars at the box office, and just under five million and just over five million theater spectators, respectively ("Elki 2"; "Elki 3"). *Elki 1914* had a significant fall off with over twelve million dollars at the box office and just under three million spectators. The latter film still made a profit since it had a budget of five million dollars ("Elki 1914").

Year's tree that people put up in their homes for the holiday, which has a striking affinity to the American version of the Christmas tree, with the same pagan roots. The symbol is, to a certain extent, an empty container with all of the positive associations of the Soviet and post-Soviet New Year's holiday, but no particular political or religious affiliation. It is unambiguously positive, but open to be filled with ideological meaning—an ideal brand. It is telling that after the first film, there were no official international release titles—no *Six Degrees of Celebration 2*, *3*, and so on—since the films are for a Russophone audience, not necessarily the global audience that is otherwise at the center of Bekmambetov's collaboration with Hollywood. For this very reason, these films are fascinating for their calculated political orientation, which holds the Putin and Medvedev leadership in high esteem. This esteem, however, comes across as contrived, in light of Bekmambetov's current directorial career in Hollywood. His most recent Hollywood film lacks any type of reverence for political leaders. It is a postmodern mash-up of the period piece and the vampire movie: the most venerated president of the United States is the hero of the campy *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012). There would never be a *Vladimir Putin: Vampire Hunter* or even *Vladimir Lenin: Vampire Hunter* produced domestically in Russia—the simulation of the life of the leader is too sensitive a topic for satire in a state-controlled cinema industry.

In addition to the political orientation, the mode of production for the Elki films themselves is interesting, and not only for the way in which they are based on an economic model aimed at maximum profit and minimum risk. Each film consists of several interlocking vignettes, each of which is a mini-film unto itself with its own director, cinematographer, cast, lighting crew, and other production workers. These films become an opportunity for directors, such as Aleksandr Kott, who has returned to making art house films with *The Test* (Ispytanie

2015). And this process of developing broader talent is the kernel of positivity in an otherwise

unsettling cinematic landscape: the highly commercialized films create the opportunities for

more interesting projects. The Elki films are a forum for experimentation with old Soviet genres,

such as the New Year's film,[22] in novel cinematic language. The downside of this process is a

form of cultural amnesia that comes with films that young people are most likely to see. What

begins as a practice in garnering Soviet nostalgia to increase box office receipts evolves into a

franchise all its own that creates nostalgia for itself and for a pre-Soviet Empire that never

existed (as portrayed in *Elki 1914*). *Elki* repositions the present by rewriting or erasing the past

for a generation born after the fall of the Soviet Union, and even after the turmoil of the

uncertain 1990s. These films are for those who know only the Putin era.

5.2   RETRO-STALINESQUE THEMES WITH A NEW VISUAL EXPRESSION

Unlike the fantasy films *Night Watch* (2004) and *Day Watch* (2005), in which only a few can

sense the supernatural, the *Elki* films are based in a fantasy world predicated on possibilities for

economic and social advancement for all, but this world does not admit that it is mere fantasy

structured on the folktale genre with little connection to lived reality. Although there are no

dragons or talking animals, magical helpers nevertheless continuously appear to assist in the

marriage of princes and princesses. In this return to the universe of fairy tales, all of Russia's

contemporary social problems are absent, with the ugly and inconvenient truths of war, legalized

gender discrimination, xenophobia, underpaid and often illegal Central Asian migrant work, a

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[22] For a more thorough discussion of this genre see Birgit Beumers, "Father Frost on 31 December: Christmas and New Year in Soviet and Russian Cinema," and Alyssa DeBlasio "The New-Year film as a genre of post-war Russian cinema."

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decrease in population, poor standards of living, limited educational and economic opportunities, and a brain drain that sends Russia's best and brightest to Europe and the United States—are all swept under the rug.

As Russian journalist and film critic Anton Dolin points out in an interview with Timur Bekmambetov, the Elki films and *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007) must be differentiated from fantasy films such as the *Night Watch* films, *Wanted* (2008), and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, in which there is a clear delineation between a "good" side and a "bad" side. The "good" side of course triumphs, but in the Elki films and *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* there is only a "good" side with an absence, it would seem, of fantasy. Dolin, however, does not go far enough in this implied critique, especially in the relationship of these films to the Soviet cinematic legacy (Bekmambetov).

This projection of a perfect present in a tumultuous social environment of disaffection (and even protest) finds a parallel in the period of late Stalinism, the cultural atmosphere between World War II and the death of Joseph Stalin. Both contexts may be characterized by *lakirovka,* the varnishing of reality, in which the present is projected as fecund, full of opportunity, and devoid of trauma, when in fact the opposite is true. *Lakirovka* comes with a specific super-saturated color palette. Its apotheosis is achieved in *Cossacks of the Kuban* (1949). For Bekmambetov there is a switch, however, from the reds and yellows of Soviet socialism and fertile fields of grain, to the digital sheeny blues that are associated with Russia-1. The effect is the same: a projection of a bright and beautiful, yet monochromatic, present that radiates stability not just of a state post-crisis, but also of a film industry post-crisis. The return of the film industry after evacuation to Central Asia during World War II might polemically be compared with the current revitalization of the film industry after the erasure of funding for the film

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industry in Russia in the 1990s. In both contexts, the moment is one of revitalization and

investment to produce cinema with aims of entertainment and diversion.
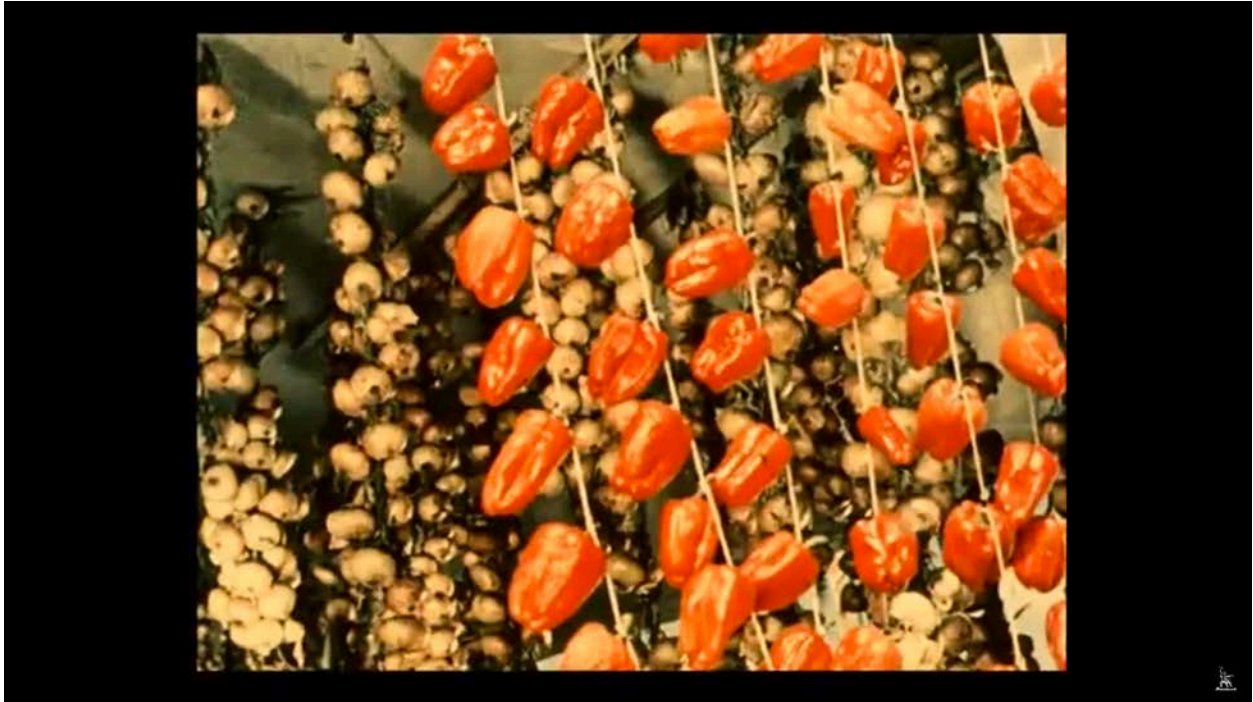
Figure 52. *Cossacks of the Kuban*. Abundant red peppers and garlic at the local fair.

The turning point in Bekmambetov's body of work towards a domestic resurrection of *lakirovka*

came with *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* (2007), a sequel to the Soviet "blockbuster" classic

Irony of Fate (1975), directed by El'dar Riazanov, who makes a cameo appearance in the sequel

to the original film. This original has become an integral part of Soviet and post-Soviet culture

since watching the film on television has become a ritual for the New Year's holiday, the most

important celebration in Russia to this day. Rampant product placement—for Beeline mobile

telephone service provider, Toyota, Russian Standard vodka, Nokia, Aeroflot, and Nestle,

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amongst others—characterizes the sequel and became a source of audience criticism.[23] The film, however, still surpassed previous domestic box office records, making almost fifty million dollars. Nostalgia for Soviet culture brought audiences in, but partially alienated them with a reversal of ideology from the original. The original film is a satire on the lack of variety in Soviet life and the lack of consumer goods in the Soviet Union. It comments on the uniformity of Soviet material culture and the absence of any discernable "consumer" decisions.

Figure 53. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* Even the hallway of the apartment building is blue.

The plot of the original revolves around a Muscovite protagonist who is mistakenly put on a plane to Leningrad after becoming intoxicated with his friends at a bath house. When he arrives in Leningrad, he is under the impression that he is in Moscow, and he ends up in the apartment

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[23] For a more detailed discussion of the critical and audience reaction to the film, see Stephen Norris *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* pp. 287-91.

of an attractive woman since he goes to the same address he has in Moscow: Third Construction

Workers' Street, Apartment Building 25, Apartment 12. Even the key to the apartment is the

same. In the sequel, there is no longer the hint of satire. Rather, the film is a straightforward

endorsement of a consumer lifestyle,[24] a turning of the moral compass that does not jibe with the

tacit endorsement of socialism in *Irony of Fate*, which ultimately supports the stability of the

Soviet regime, even as it gingerly pokes fun at it. This gap of ideological difference between the

Soviet Union and the Putin administration grows in the Elki films in direct relation to the gradual

disappearance of references to the Soviet Union and the concomitant reliance on nostalgia for

Soviet culture. In each successive installment, these references decrease to the point where they

disappear altogether in *Elki 1914*, set both before the revolution and in the Putin era, but without

a hint as to what happened historically in between.

In the sequel, the plot is quite similar. The original is hopeful but cautious about the

future of the couple. The two lovers are reunited by the end of the film, but the mother of the

male protagonist Zhenia is skeptical that the relationship will pan out. This seed of doubt in the

original grows exponentially in the sequel. In Bekmambetov's film, the relationship never quite

worked out. The two protagonists have had children with other partners, and their respective son

and daughter, almost reincarnations or updated copies of the original protagonists, are able to

achieve what they could not have achieved in the Soviet Union. The plot, however, depends less

on chance, since the son Konstantin purposely goes to the apartment of the daughter Nadia

intoxicated in an effort to repeat the antics of his father, but to success this time.

The political orientation of the sequel is not just implied. It is overt, with a portrait of

Putin in the background watching over the benevolent police force that detains the two for a

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[24] In addition to the Russian sequel, *I Love New Year* (2013) is an unauthorized remake of the Soviet original. It is an Indian film in Hindi, about a musician and a Wall Street banker who fall in love. This remake reveals that the plot itself is highly marketable even without the presence of Soviet nostalgia.

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short while before they are reunited. Arlene Forman has a compelling reading to account for

Putin's presence in the film and the larger implications for what is means for the world view that

the film projects. The current moment is open for economic and social advancement in a country

that is *now* politically stable, but only if one buys into the ideology. "Bekmambetov's revisionist

remake denies the possibility that intimacy, love and personal fulfillment could have existed in

the Soviet era. His happy endings occur in the best of all possible worlds, the here-and-now"

(Forman). The argument is one that resonates with what Randi Cox has to say about

"advertisements" in *Ogonek* and other Soviet magazines for vacations, perfumes, bank accounts

and other luxuries that were out of the reach of the vast majority of Soviet citizens of the Stalin

period:

> The most likely explanation is that advertising did not merely incite desire; it incited desire for
> goods that only the state could provide. Higher incomes and access to rare goods came only by
> ingratiating oneself with the Stalinist order. Advertising was thus part of the disciplinary
> apparatus, a reminder of what could be had in exchange for appropriate behavior. (Cox 157)

The image of Putin is similar to a product placement, one that the spectator can endorse

in the same way that a product can be bought. Going to the film and paying to see it is a form of

endorsement, regardless of the actual political orientation of the spectator. As Slavoj Žižek

argues in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* "even if we do not take things seriously, even if we

keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*" (30). In this sequel, both Andrei Miagkov and

Barbara Bryl'ska, the two protagonists from the original film, play the same characters, now

appropriately aged for the contemporary setting. In combination with the cameo by the original

director, they are the material manifestation on the screen, the proof in the pudding, that the

sequel is approved by and in harmony with the original. They endorse the product of the film in

a way that makes the sequel "authentic" for a Russian audience: how can it not be when the

original two protagonists and director appear? More than an endorsement, they themselves are

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product placements for the sequel. Even if the original film is better, the present of the film in

the sequel, by implication, is better than the present of the film in the original. In this way,

economic and political goals are aligned.

Figure 54. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* A portrait of President Putin in the background.

In this sense, the sequel is doing its job, since it does not attempt to take the place of or

improve upon the original, but rather it banks on the success of the original and the promise of

featuring the original cast in the sequel. Furthermore, the film is not an anomaly, it is the

beginning of a trend of films and the Elki franchise, which marks a break with the Soviet legacy

with a new brand. The Soviet tradition of playing the original film on Channel One Russia has

been maintained past the time of the Soviet Union, with the addition of the sequel, which now

plays right after it and contextualizes the original film. The programming is structured as if to

say: it is okay to be nostalgic, but things really are better now. The sequel is a gateway out of the

Soviet cinematic legacy and into the commercial films of the present day. Soviet nostalgia is a commodity that is packaged and then made into a desire for something new that can be consumed in the territory of the former Soviet Union: from Almaty (Kazakhstan) to Dushanbe (Tajikistan), both of which appear in Elki installments.

The presence of the political leader as if he were a product placement occurs even more strikingly in *Six Degrees of Celebration* (Elki) in which (then) president Dmitrii Medvedev appears on television with a message catered to the characters within the film, but also to the audience outside of the film. *Six Degrees of Celebration* is a family-friendly film with a plot consisting of interlocking vignettes. In the master vignette, a 12-year-old young girl in an orphanage makes an outrageous claim that President Medvedev is in fact her father. To prove it, the doubting orphans make her agree to give the president a secret message, to be announced at the stroke of midnight for the New Year's holiday, as the president wishes the nation a happy new year. The action of the film involves the girl's would-be boyfriend, who sets a series of connections in motion, much like the idea of the "seven degrees of Kevin Bacon," in which the young boy thinks that through enough personal connections—via the technology of the mobile telephone—any person, no matter how powerful or important, can be reached. In the end, through *deus-ex-machina*, the cellular telephone calls do not work, but Iusuf, the Central Asian chaperone at the orphanage, turns out to have connections with another Central Asian who works as a janitor on Red Square. The janitor writes the message in huge letters in the snow so that Medvedev, looking down from on high in the Kremlin, understands the phrase in time and delivers it on television.

Figure 55. *Six Degrees of Celebration*. **President Medvedev delivers the secret message on television.**

The secret message that Medvedev passes along at the stroke of midnight on the New Year's holiday works for both the diegetic and non-diegetic audience: "Father Frost helps those who help themselves," (*Na Deda Moroza nadeisia, a sam ne ploshai*) a Russian equivalent to Benjamin Franklin's "God helps those who help themselves," that staple of protestant capitalism so often mis-attributed to the *Bible*. The message is one familiar to a Western audience, but slightly alien, perhaps, to a Russian one: if you are poor, needy, the victim of social unrest and lack of state support, it is your own doing. All oligarchs or, at least, the middle class, are justified in their actions. It is a capitalist fairy tale that assumes there are opportunities for work in diverse sectors in Russia. The irony is that it claims to be a form of motivation by promoting a rags-to-riches fairy tale experience, but in reality, this motivating phrase merely maintains the status quo. Instead of coming to class consciousness, no one comes to consciousness, and everyone decides to keep doing what they are doing, only with more intensity.

In this universe, the Central Asian guest worker can be a magic helper, but one who will always remain in the mostly undocumented labor market. Even if he is able to reach Medvedev, it is not for himself and his people, but it is a favor for a worthy, yet pitiable ethnically Russian orphan, the saddest victim imaginable in this landscape. Although the film has bright moments that suggest collaboration of Russians with Central Asian guest workers is possible, and it even admits that guest work is a social fact, the overarching valence is retro-Stalinesque, in which Medvedev becomes the surrogate father of the orphan.

Medvedev comes across as the *deus ex machina*, when in fact the guest worker is the *deus ex machina*, since there is no doubt that Medvedev will deliver the message if he receives it on time. The scene is reminiscent of late Stalinist culture, specifically *The Fall of Berlin* (1949). In both the Soviet classic and *Six Degrees of Celebration*, the function of the political leader is the same: to bring the protagonists together and resolve the conflict through a god-like speech act. Unlike *The Fall of Berlin* where simulated presence matters, in Bekmambetov's films the simulation on television is the "real" Medvedev, or, at least, the only one that really matters. Medvedev becomes an indication not only of the political valence of the film, but of how one is to participate in politics—passively, through mediated technology, faith, and the power of personal connections. It is a perverse blueprint for how one must deal with the bureaucracy of an increasingly present state authority.

The break with Soviet cinema and especially late Stalinism is that Medvedev's image is mediated through a television screen within the frame. Even within the diegesis of film, Medvedev's "aura" (in the Benjaminian sense of physical presence) is removed. The simulation of the leader—even on the screen—becomes more important than the physical presence of the leader. Because the leader appears on screen removed by another layer of technology, a special

aura surrounds the technology of the television itself and makes the products that appear on it more desirable since they, too, are part of the simulation that has become more important than actual presence. The state, as represented by the political leader, becomes part of everyday life, of everyday expectations, rather than a once in a lifetime event. In the cinematic projection of reality during late Stalinism, the simulation on the screen was quite different: the goal was to meet Stalin in person, as in *The Fall of Berlin*, where Stalin arrives on the Berlin airfield and reunites the two protagonists, Alesha and Natasha. The two lovers do not see each other after the war until they are in the presence of Stalin, who sanctifies their union.

If the simulation of the actual presence of the political leader were the norm for Soviet cinema, then in Bekmambetov's post-Soviet Putin-era statist cinema, the simulation on screen, the simulation of a simulation, becomes paramount. It is more reliable and "real" than any physical presence (within the context of the film), since the physical encounter is more ephemeral than a digital recording that can reach millions through television or Internet. Even if the cult of the individual political leader still exits, the message shifts to include a broader sphere of influence through television, which becomes sanctified as the dominant state medium. Everything that comes from it is sacred, not just the image of the leader. The difference from Soviet television and other modes of Soviet propaganda is that the television now masquerades as if it were no longer dependent on a state, but only on an economic capitalist order as if it were a Western import of neoliberalism, when in fact programming is state-controlled, as it was in Soviet times.

Figure 56. *The Fall of Berlin*. Stalin sanctifies the union. The banner with his likeness endorses the shot.

5.3   THE LEGACY OF DISSIDENCE IN BEKMAMBETOV'S WORKS

The painfully ironic aspect of the political projections in *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* and

the Elki series is the way in which Bekmambetov's previous works had advocated a

diametrically-opposed political orientation. These early works are fundamentally anti-imperialist

and anti-statist. They are about the arbitrary nature of power and the way in which it affects

people who do not belong to the political elite. They reference a world view that represents

empire as a state in which every citizen is a potential enemy of the people. Citizens need only

speak out in the wrong manner or find themselves in inconvenient political situations to become

victims of state repression and violence.

A close inspection of Bekmambetov's larger body of work suggests that this is not just a conversion story, but it is the result of a growing sensitivity to the advantages of state subsidy and endorsement. The two most striking examples of anti-statist cinema occur towards the beginning of Bekmambetov's career with the film *Peshawar Waltz* (1994)—released in the United States, United Kingdom and Netherlands as *Escape from Afghanistan* (2002)—and the series of television commercials *World History: Imperial Bank* (1992-8). The latter was an interesting space in which Bekmambetov could experiment. The basic structure of each commercial is a brief narrative about a world historical leader who makes decisions that reveal the wisdom necessary to guarantee the stability of each respective empire. By association, Imperial Bank was shown to be a stable place to put one's money in the uncertainty of the political and economic shambles of 1990s Russia. In an ironic twist, the bank failed in 1998.

A striking aspect of these commercials is the way in which figures that would usually be terrifying in a Russian cultural context—Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Napoleon—become sympathetic or comic. In contrast, Ivan the Terrible, that complex figure at once lauded by Stalin and shown in a negative light by Sergei Eisenstein, becomes a reflection of the uncertainty and arbitrary power embodied in the moment in which the television commercial was released (1995). It was a time characterized by the recent fall of the Soviet Union and the constitutional crisis of 1993, when incumbent president Boris Yeltsin used military force to dissolve the parliament. Yeltsin, a notorious alcoholic, wielded arbitrary power in a new "democracy" as if it were medieval times and he were Tsar.

In the context of the time, a twentieth-century analogue to Ivan the Terrible is not (as is customary) Stalin but Yeltsin. Ivan's arbitrary abuse of power destabilized the Empire he built and led to the Time of Troubles, when the Polish Lithuanian league conquered, occupied and

ruled Russia in a way that Hitler or Napoleon never quite achieved. With a change of regime,

the power of gangsters, and a lack of stability, work, and social benefits, the 1990s must have felt

like an era on the precipice of destruction. The commercial featuring Ivan the Terrible reveals

that Bekmambetov is by no means naïve when it comes to characterizing a political (albeit

historical) figure in a way that is in keeping with the Zeitgeist of the time, deploying what people

would like to see and hear reflected on the screen. The advertisement is more a political warning

of the arbitrary nature and possibility of autocratic power than an endorsement of Imperial Bank.

Figure 57. *World History: Imperial Bank.* Ivan IV proclaims his right to absolute power.

In contrast to the strange way in which historically menacing characters are made

benevolent and sympathetic, Tsar Ivan IV is shown in all of this tyrannical cruelty. The message

comes through in both the verbal and visual aspects of the short television commercial for

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Imperial Bank, which begins with the ominous beginning title: "Darkness is Upon Us" (*T'ma nad nami*). Elements of the horror genre code the work from the beginning, which starts with a murder of crows in stationary medium shot that fly up to reveal Ivan the Terrible as he addresses a crowd of common people. Close-ups of his crazed face and snow-covered beard, a close-up of his ringed right hand clutching a scepter, and a shot of Monomakh's Cap (the Rus'ian crown) that places the cross on top of the hat in the foreground and an orthodox Russian church in the background, combine to produce an ominous characterization of Ivan as part religious fanatic, part crazed ruler.

Figure 58. *World History: Imperial Bank.* A commoner questions Ivan IV's right to absolute power.

As he addresses the crowd and announces his right to rule autocratically, a baby-faced blond ethnic Russian man asks "On what conditions?" (*Na kakikh usloviiakh?*) to which the response is

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"you'll find out later!" (*potom uznaete*!). The next shot shows a medium close-up of the body of

the now bloody peasant as he is being dragged away, out of the crowd.

Figure 59. *World History: Imperial Bank.* The result of the commoner questioning Ivan IV.

The commercial is an allegory to the political conditions of the time. The answer to the question

of "on what conditions" is clear: there are no conditions; the church is a tool of Ivan, not an

entity that constrains him. Religion is emptied out of any symbolic force other than the arbitrary

power of an Old Testament God that puts the subject in a position of fear, ignorance, and

supplication. Outside of the aesthetics of the commercial, Bekmambetov suggests that television

is the playground of truth, that advertisements were an opportunity to make short films

(Denisova) that were works with associative endorsements as an afterthought, rather than an

argument for the benefits of or information about banking activity. With comedy, horror, and

inspiration, Bekmambetov already had begun to code the television as the playground of truth, rather than fantasy or fairy tales.

The big idea of this particular commercial is that Russia has a history of arbitrary rule, and that the 1990s mark a return not to just the imperial past but to the times of Ivan the Terrible, in which questioning the regime could result in violent counteraction. This concept, however, is tame to those expressed in Bekmambetov's earlier work, his directorial debut *Peshawar Waltz* or *Escape from Afghanistan* which is even more poignant in its criticism of arbitrary state power.[25] The film is a "true story" about the Badaber uprising in 1985 in which Soviet prisoners of war, who had been captured in the Soviet Afghan war, are able to take control of the underground labyrinthine prison in which they are being held. The Soviet Afghan War itself was a failed Soviet imperial project that is often compared to the American Vietnam War. It is a war for political control of a region, promulgated by people who do not belong there. The prison is in Peshawar, in northern Pakistan, on the border with Afghanistan. An English journalist Charlie Palmer (an American in the later international version) and a French doctor Viktor Dubois arrive to document the experience of the POWs and to provide medical care.

The visual aesthetics of the film reflect a message that is against war. Hand-held camerawork throughout the film makes mapping the space inside the underground prison difficult. The fighting is never glorified or particularly well choreographed, so that it becomes difficult to distinguish the rebelling POWs from the Pakistani and Afghan Mujahideen guards. Spectators have the same sensation of confusion as the characters within the diegesis do. The film is also anti-imperialist as it shows what happens to people who are squeezed between two

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[25] There are two versions of the film, the original *Peshavarskii val's*, the Russian language version, which was shot in 1991, premiered at Kinotavr in 1993, and officially released in 1994, and another version, *Escape from Afghanistan*, which differs significantly from the original in terms of editing, but that maintains the same plotline and politico-ideological valence. It was released in the US, UK and the Netherlands in 2002. The analysis, however, is relevant for both versions.

empires who do not want them. The POWs liberate themselves inside the prison, but they cannot leave the prison safely. The Pakistanis and Afghans who are allied with the Americans want them dead, so that the American offer of peace seems suspect. Even the Soviet government wants them dead since the POWs are an inconvenient reminder that the Soviets have gone too far and crossed the Afghan border into Pakistan. The prisoners find to their horror that they have no hope, and the film ends with the conscious Soviet bombing of the prison, which kills all of the prisoners.

The film does not stop its critique there. There is no hope. Western liberalism and journalism cannot help these subjects of the state since the journalist is killed (he actually commits suicide so as to avoid being burned alive) and the footage of the POWs and their conditions never reaches the West. Western medicine (science) cannot help the POWs either. The doctor cannot handle the number of injured soldiers. The journalist suggests that he is perhaps torturing the wounded by keeping them alive. These POWs are quite literally damned. The underground prison, which is always on fire, is a hell that they cannot escape. The paradox is that there is no god to save them, but hell still exists.

In this film, war is depicted as a political game about the control of territory, rather than a fight for good against evil. It is not just a case of friendly fire, of mistaken identity, but of active cannibalization by the state of its own people for perceived political gain. The film is a firm break with the aesthetics of Soviet cinema, especially in the use of technology and the handheld video camcorder. The handheld footage represents objective truth, but a truth that does not ultimately matter because it reaches no one within the diegesis of the film, and few outside of the film, in terms of the audience. Few have seen the film, even if it did make a shock when it premiered at Kinotavr.

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Bekmambetov notes that:

> I, at that time [the early 1990s], shot my first film, *Peshavar Waltz*. And I understood that no one needed the film. The film went from festival to festival, won prizes, but people didn't see it.[26] (Denisova)

It would be tempting to judge Bekmambetov for the switch to advertising and commercial cinema after such a powerful art film, but financial necessity required flexibility when state funding ran out. A more useful way to look at Bekmambetov's body of work is to see that his films have been indicative of the time in which they were made. Even *Peshawar* Waltz, with all of its visual experimentation, is a film of the perestroika period that criticizes Soviet metanarratives. The difference is that most critical films of the period, such as Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *The Chekist* (1992) and Maria Goldovskaia's *Solovki Power* (1988) are about dealing with the past trauma of the bloody socialist revolution and the Gulag, whereas Bekmambetov's film was less historically removed and more shocking. Everyone knew about the horrors of the Gulag and the revolution, but how could something so abominable occur during the relatively stable period of the early 1980s?

This is perhaps the saddest aspect of capitalism in Russia: it precludes a deeper political discussion. If the political angle were always foregrounded in the Soviet Union, and perestroika films in the late 1980s and early 1990s were usually politicized in a critical way, then political dissent and a world view counter to what is politically sanctioned is no longer possible, or only possible for well-established directors with an international reputation, such as Andrei Zviagantsev, who criticizes the Orthodox church and the arbitrary power of local authority in *Leviathan.*

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[26] «Я как раз снял свой первый фильм, «Пешаварский вальс». И понял, что кино никому не нужно. Фильм ездил на фестивали, получал призы, но люди его не видели.» *Translation by author*.

Although Bekmambetov has a recognizable name, he is no longer an arthouse director. Furthermore, his path is not unique, since many directors turned to making advertisements and genre films in the 1990s, including Rogozhkin himself and Andrei Konchalovskii, who does work in Hollywood. Bekmambetov is simply the example par excellence. His career trajectory is a fairy tale with a happy ending and plenty of magical help along the way. He organizes workers and gives them a chance for advancement and work outside of his studio. So, despite the change of political valence in these films, it would be rash to condemn him whole-heartedly. Like Walt Disney, he has made a recognizable brand that is becoming global, but unlike Disney, he gives his workers credit and new opportunities in the process (Zipes). In this way, it is a network that is primarily aimed at profits, but that attempts to promote the long-term stability of the cinema industry in Russia.

5.4   TECHNOLOGY, THE DIGITAL AESTHETIC, AND PRODUCT PLACEMENT

As a body of work, *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* and the Elki films seem as if they were made by a director far removed from *Peshawar Waltz*. These films have their own signature stamp, which includes product placement, a clear political orientation aligned with the state, an interest in the borders between human and animal forms, fast cuts in the style of music videos and Hollywood production (Gray, "Timur Bekmambetov: *Six Degrees of Celebration*"), recognizable domestic actors, and especially the bright neon blue of the spectacle that matches the blue associated with Father Frost and the New Year's holiday, but that also matches the background to Russia-1 and its corresponding news outlet, Vesti. The most important characteristic of this aesthetic, however, is the presence of the latest communication technology. This section traces and pinpoints each successive technology as it changes throughout these films.

This recognition of a distinct style is not limited to this academic interpretation—it is recognizable enough to be parodied by a director and, it would seem, noticed by an audience as well. The key example comes from *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* The "businessman" Irakli puts work above the holiday and his love interest, Nadia. When he should be celebrating the New Year with her, he is instead working for Beeline Communications and trying to fix a malfunctioning antenna. It is actually a wild goose chase created by a prank call from Konstantin. Irakli's distance in his relationship with Nadia is the result, ironically, of an obsession with always being available—he constantly interrupts conversation with his fiancée to speak with clients on his Bluetooth. The message is that the omnipresence of communication technologies and over-attention to business are character qualities that may lead to material comforts, but not to the fulfillment of romantic desires and larger life decisions. This negative valence of cellular telephone culture gets transformed for *Elki*, in which it takes on a positive character, as a way of connecting people. In these films, it is no longer a distraction, but the reliable tool that accomplishes the job. It becomes almost magical in its ability to connect people over such large geographic distances in all of the major cities in Russia, the local capitals that construct the constellation of a new Russian empire.

Put bluntly, in *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* Irakli is coded negatively because he is on the telephone too much. The stylization is so clear that it was parodied in *The Very Best Film 2* (2009). At one point, a woman speaks on a cellular telephone even while copulating, and her partner takes no mind to it. In another instance a boyfriend with a Bluetooth cellular telephone attachment just like Irakli gets into a row with the protagonist of the film. Each time the "Irakli" character pushes the protagonist down this main character takes a moment to endorse a product, such as sunflower seeds.

Similar to the Nescafé advertisement of object perspective in *Night Watch*, this type of homage ultimately acts to increase the stock of both *The Very Best Film 2* and *Irony of Fate. The Continuation.* The former is rewarded for its wittiness and willingness to reveal the device of product placement by exaggerating it, thus putting itself on the "good side" of being skeptical of Western culture while still reveling in the Hollywood techniques in which it expresses that critique. *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* has almost a product placement for the film itself in *The Very Best Film 2* since the reference is so clear, and in fact the entire film is built around a conflict and plot similar to both the sequel and the original *Irony of Fate*.

But this revelation through extremity and parody is just one result of the original film. There is also Bekmambetov's own reversal of the cellular telephone trope. In *The Very Best Film 2* the cellular telephone from *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* goes from distracting gadget to *really* distracting gadget. In the transition from *Irony of Fate. The Continuation* to *Six Degrees of Celebration* the switch is profound. The cellular telephone is no longer the gadget that ruins a romantic relationship. Rather, it becomes the hero of the film, the method of connecting characters, and the technology that makes romantic relationships over long distances possible.

Bekmambetov's text is postmodern in the way he manipulates devices (this time the cellular telephone) to serve specific ideological needs *as they appear* in real time. So now the cellular telephone is not just a contraption to distract away from real love concerns, but something more. The former is a position of an older generation that borders on the didactic. The switch is that as a spectator you, a distracted teenager on your cellular telephone, can now feel empowered, not guilty but excited at your ability to participate in something larger than yourself. But this larger something will most likely involve the film and a full circle that

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revolves around the Elki franchise. Even the film itself is a product placement, an endorsement of cellular telephone technology and the state, as seen through the presence of Medvedev.

In the creation of this fantasy world connected by cellular phones, the film is not limited to shots of people talking on their mobile devices. A key aspect of the digital aesthetic concerns the map of Russia and the territory of the former Soviet Union that looks as if it were a punchboard with several small bulbs highlighting political borders. In this sense, it is not too dissimilar from the background of the *Larry King Live* show, but with a monochromatic yellow glow. It gives the impression of a world news aesthetic, but it also gives the feeling of a separate dimension, or in the "in between" electrical spaces of cellular telephone calls. The simulation in *Six Degrees of Celebration* is a primarily 2D map projection that evolves in subsequent Elki films to simulate a 3D space. In this sense, it has an affinity to object perspective. Although the perspective around the object is not the same, it has a similar narrative function: connecting vignettes by taking the spectator, and only the spectator, through otherwise impossible spaces. Unlike object perspective, it is not as experimental. It has less to do with the dynamics of desire, and more to do with being the glue that holds disparate narratives together.

The maps also give the film an overt political orientation that goes beyond private enterprise and endorsement. Lines on the map emerge from one city and connect to another city as each call is made, in a way reminiscent of ethnographic films that show the airplane flight of the protagonist-explorer. Instead of connecting all cities through the center as in Soviet cultural artifacts, cities are connected to each other in a way that crisscrosses the country in unexpected ways.

Figure 60. *Six Degrees of Celebration.* Vladivostok is the Eastern limit of the contemporary Russian Empire.

If the metaphor for such connectivity in Soviet cinema was the train ad nauseam, it becomes the mobile telephone in the first three Elki films. The decentered system of city connections is similar to the link of the Gulag archipelago but with a pro-state rather than a dissident orientation. The move is a subtle one that rewrites the history of how these cities are connected. Comical episodes even make light of Gulag trauma, as if it were a tolerable, but annoying, punishment, rather than a guaranteed horror. In an episode in *Six Degrees of Celebration* a thief is caught, and the song "Magadan" by Vasia Oblomov plays non-diegetically. [27] The thief is eventually "re-educated" so the trauma and the trip to Magadan are avoided and the joke is light. In *Elki 3* two male teenagers who try to dodge selective service end up on

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[27] Magadan is the quintessence of Gulag horror—in the far northeast it was notorious for being one of the worst camps, and memorialized in *Kolyma Tales* by Varlaam Shalamov.

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Ratmanov Island, also in the far northeast, next to Alaska. Although they complain, the girlfriend of one of the male characters and her grandmother show up for the New Year's holiday to bring them some cheer and ski with them. Potential trauma becomes light-hearted fun.
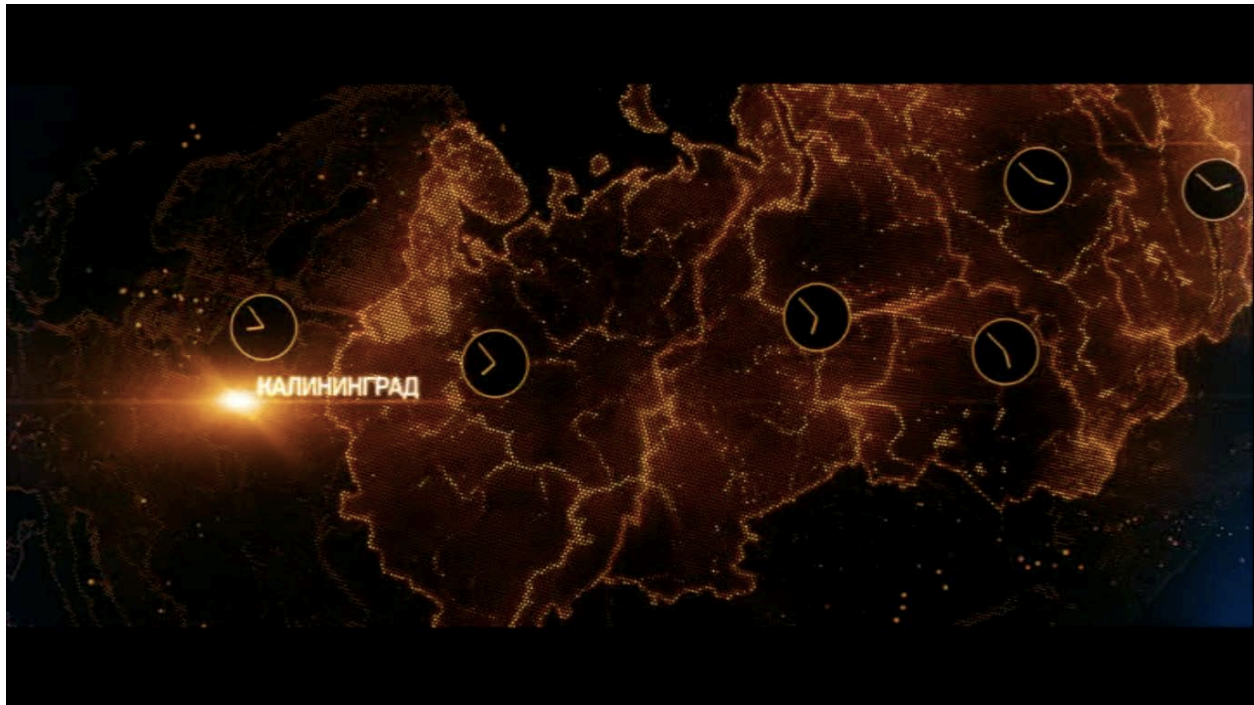
Figure 61. *Six Degrees of Celebration.* **Kaliningrad is the Western limit of the contemporary Russian Empire.**

Military obligation is not trauma, it is more of an inconvenient responsibility that is less dangerous and dreadful than the two had imagined. In this way, the periphery to periphery connection (the thief is from Ekaterinburg and the boys are from Perm') gets repoliticized to come under the auspices of the state and private enterprise. Everyone is always just a telephone call away so that the space that was formerly the Gulag is no longer an oblivion.

This literal connection of peoples across geographic space is not just about the simulation, though. It is bolstered by fan culture and the contest for *Elki 2* to contribute to the

script. A winner won a round trip ticket from their home city to any other city within Russia to meet relatives, friends, or loved ones for the New Year's holiday. The marketing campaign bolsters the ideology of the film—about connecting people for the holidays—with real life contests to garner greater attention and ultimately profits towards the film, and to make what was in the Soviet Union just a simulation a reality. The simulation, therefore, is in a sense more important than the reality when it comes to meeting the political leader, but the reality of meeting loved ones becomes a lottery, a reality, that transforms the simulation into something real for someone. It is a break from Soviet cinema with the suggestion that fandom matters. The film is more than the smoke and mirrors of *lakirovka*. It is a brand of *lakirovka* that fulfills its promises, if only for one person.

Figure 62. *Elki 3.* The enlisted soldier makes a snowman on Ratmanov Island for the New Year's holiday.

Fan participation is not limited to discrete contests, since the Elki franchise has an online presence that is always increasing and being updated. Currently, there is an official Elki website from which one can access Facebook, Instagram, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, and Vkontakte either to visit the respective webpages/feeds or to share material related to the film with others.[28] For the latest film, *Elki 1914*, there are free online video games associated with the franchise ("Elki 1914: Rozhdestvennaia komedia"). Since these pages are uploaded throughout the year, the Elki franchise can maintain fan interest in its product even at times other than the New Year release date.
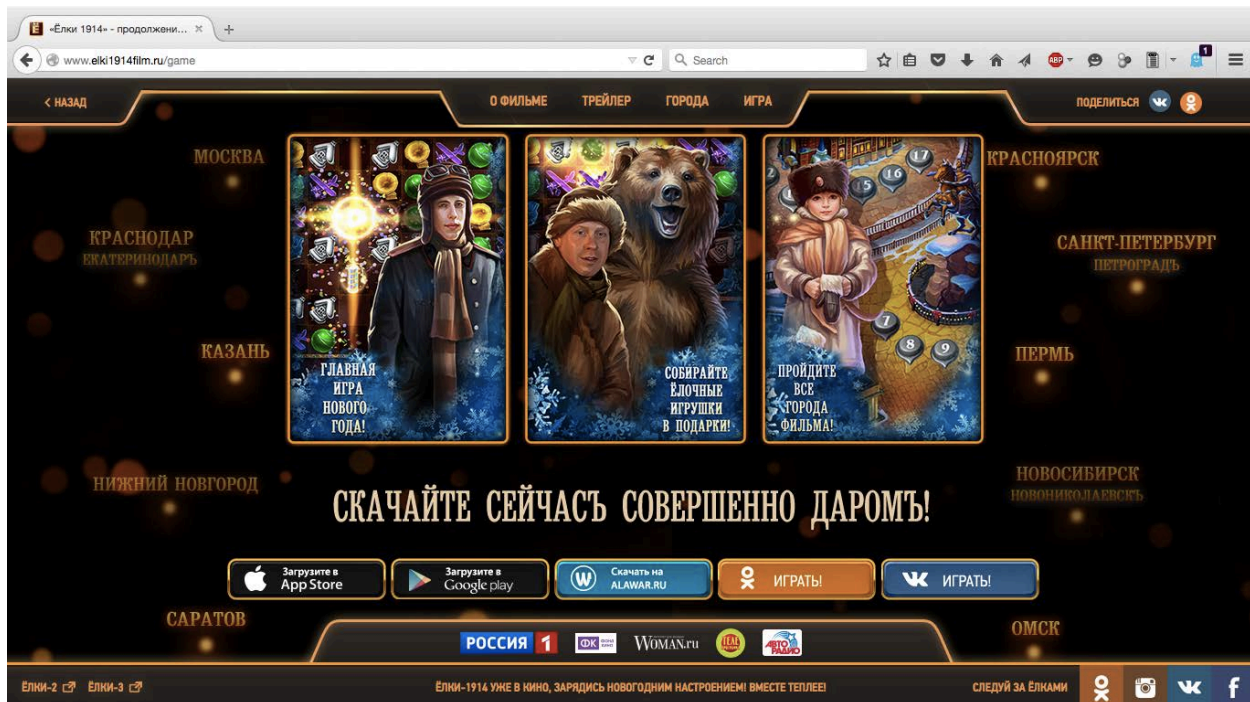

Figure 63. Elki website. There are three games, all of which may be downloaded for free.

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[28] Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki ("in contact" and "classmates," respectively) are Russian social media outlets, most similar to Facebook in their structure and organization. The official website of the Elki franchise is elki-film.ru.

In the months leading up to the release of *Elki 3*, for example, fans were encouraged to tag photos on Instagram showing their love of the New Year's spirit. Beginning in September and concluding before the release of the film, a winner was announced each week, with the corresponding photograph posted on the official website. The website promises that prizes were given to the winners of the "warmer together" (*vmeste teplee*) contest, although these prizes are not listed ("Avtory samykh teplykh photo"). These contests are a way of advertising the film and created hype for it with little financial investment. Online simulation is not just a way of participating in the narrative of the film outside of the film, but it is also a device within the film that takes the place occupied by Medvedev before, the *deus ex machina* and the meta-hero of the film that brings all of the characters together. The difference is that these web pages and contests are ephemeral. They disappear when they are no longer needed. The films, however, are more permanent, since they play on television and are available legally through DVD sales or illegally on the Internet.

The master vignette of *Elki 3* bears the argument out that the simulation becomes more important than the actual experience (for example, the online Instagram photograph, the result, is more important than the real physical context in which it was produced). Internet technology gets politicized or de-politicized to the point of absurdity. A young girl, Nast'ia was able to bring her two estranged parents back together in *Elki 2*. Now she pesters them over the fate of their two dogs, one of them a registered pedigree to be sent to London for breeding, and the other a mutt. The girl is convinced that the two dogs are in love and should be together. When she argues the point to her parents at the beginning of the film, the entire sequence foregrounds the screens of her iPod and her father's cellular phone. Even though the two are in adjoining rooms, they communicate through their electronic devices. The young girl is frustrated by her parents'

indifference, and takes action by making a Facebook page with pictures of the animals in the

hope that popular support will change the dogs' fate. The Facebook page becomes so popular

and receives so many "likes" that the story of the two dogs makes international news, especially

after the mutt runs to the airport and boards a plane for London. Technologies of Internet and

television combine to bring the two dogs together in London, when the mutt runs for the

purebred and is shot on the tarmac outside of the airport. The shot turns out to be a tranquilizer,

and the two animals are reunited after the mother decides not to breed the pedigreed dog. The

experience brings the human family closer together.

Figure 64. *Elki 3*. Each local Vesti news outlet (Russia-1) reports the dog love story.

The episode is covert rhetoric in support of miscegenation. As long as the relationship is

heterosexual, it is interesting and appropriate, albeit between two animals. Even the decision to

feature cute animals is co-opted from the Internet, which has popularized and indulged the

growing fetishization of pets worldwide. There is even a spin off to the episode, a film

completely about the romantic relationship between the two dogs.[29]   In *Elki 3* the number of

Facebook likes magically brings the two dogs together, and the message becomes clear: the

Internet is a way to change the world, so long as the change is not political.[30] The film is a

blueprint for the appropriate use of Internet crowd sourcing, rather than a prohibition against

using the Internet to organize people, or a moralistic tale about how online contact with strangers

could be dangerous. And this is why the film is particularly powerful in its ideological valence.

It does not tell the viewer what not to do, it shows them on screen all that they can do with the

simulations possible through social media, but in a way that is completely depoliticized.

To bolster this last point, one more episode of a less ridiculous character in *Elki 3* should

be referenced to comment on the centrality of the Internet in the aesthetic as well as the thematic

dimension of the film. Internet connections serve to materialize romantic love interests, not

social revolutions. What happens online, the simulation, determines reality for the characters. In

one vignette, a medical doctor of modest means in his late 20s or early 30s, who works in a

provincial city, "friends" on Facebook his high-school crush, who works in Moscow. He boasts

of his monetary success, which is an online simulation that breaks down when he finds out that

she is in his provincial city and would like to meet in the "real" world of the film, the diegesis of

the physical, as opposed to virtual, world the characters inhabit. The need to maintain the lie of

the simulation is the catalyst for the action and the conflict of the vignette. How will the poor

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[29] The film is entitled *Elki lokhmaty* (2014). *Lokhmaty* means "shaggy" in Russian. The film did not do as well as other Elki installations. It barely paid for itself, with box office receipts slightly surpassing its $2 million budget ("Elki lokhmaty").

[30] Counterexamples include the Arab Spring or the work of activist Aleksei Navalny, who has published online such things as the budgets for regional projects, in which missing funds and corruption become immediately clear (Krechetnikov).

doctor convince his high-school crush that he is wealthy? The vignette turns into an

endorsement of Mercedes Benz. The doctor convinces his friend at the Mercedes Benz

dealership to test-drive a brand-new car for an extended period of time. He picks up his crush in

the car, but when he stops to help injured people at the scene of a traffic accident, the car is

stolen. The doctor is eventually found out, but the thieves who stole the Mercedes magically

return the car to the dealership after a change of heart on the New Year's holiday. The doctor

discovers that his priorities are misplaced, since his crush had mutual feelings for him all along,

despite his lack of monetary wealth. The conflict was all in the doctor's head. It was something

that he created when he tried to be someone he was not online. In addition to this didactic

message of how to use the Internet appropriately, the Internet connection here functions as the

cellular telephone did in previous Elki films. The only difference is that the Internet as a device

is more central to the aesthetic of the film. The mise-en-scène with its attention to white space,

digital sheen, and advertisements begins to look like a webpage, but an ideal, pleasant webpage

rather than a pop-up window.

5.5   THE POLITICS OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

This section analyzes the representation of romantic relationships on screen in the Elki franchise.

Since these films are comedies, their resolutions often end in marriage or, at least, the beginning

of a relationship. Two major points grow out of this fact. The first is that the episodes model

appropriate personal behavior. The second is that these vignettes function on a meta-level.

Many of the male heroes in the Elki vignettes directly represent state authority, while many of

the corresponding female love interests of these male characters are connected with capitalist

enterprise and technology. The result is often a symbolic marriage of state and private interest on the screen through likeable young characters.

An episode in *Elki 3* functions as a representative example to bolster the first point. The protagonist of the episode is an ethnically Russian male police officer who is involved in a mixed union with a Central Asian woman. The valence of the film comes out clearly when the police officer choses the name of their child. He dismisses the suggestions from his wife's relatives of the Central Asian Tajik in favor of a Russian one (Ivan). The wife has no speaking part. Although marriage between ethnicities is acceptable and even endorsed, there is still a hierarchy of ethnicity and national origin. The projection of the present is one that is quite positive in comparison to the usually xenophobic social atmosphere in contemporary Russia. The move is not isolated, either, since in *Elki 2*, a professor ends his scene in the last part of the film by kissing an African woman: as long as relationships are heterosexual and only between two people, they are sanctified by the state.

The idea of the state fostering multiculturalism and upward mobility for all, irrespective of ethnic identification, comes across most strongly outside the diegesis of the film. As a creative artist who is Central Asian and makes cinema in alignment with the moral compass of the state and the capitalist economic order, Bekmambetov himself is the proof in the pudding. His fairy tale journey from maker of television advertisements to global film director masks the fact that social mobility for Central Asians today is less accessible than it was during the Soviet Union. The majority of Central Asians working and living in Russia at this time are migrant workers doing manual labor, rather than Soviet citizens who were able to make it to the center, based on merit or personal connections. In social reality, the stratification has intensified, but in film simulation, it has faded away.

Other issues have less ambivalence, such as the franchise's attitude towards sexual

orientations that are not expressly heterosexual. The ideological valence comes across most

strongly at the end of *Elki 3* when the two protagonists that hold the series together—Ivan Urgant

and Sergei Svetliakov—reunite with their wives after a harrowing experience in a mental health

institute. They are featured at the stroke of the New Year's holiday at the conclusion of the film.

They separately kiss their respective wives. One motions as if to kiss the other and the response

is a backing away and a reminder that "hey, that's for next New Year!" (*eto uzh na sleduiushchii*

Novyi god!), a double entendre that shows the current valence of the film and the regime. On

the one hand, it is markedly homophobic since it makes light of homosexual male relations,

which are ridiculous, according to the moral compass of the film. On the other hand, the joke

that this is "for next New Year" and the fact that the film does not outright condemn a

homosexual lifestyle, subtly suggests that the film is in line with the agenda of the state, but that

this agenda, after all, is arbitrary and could change over time. There is a glimmer of hope,

therefore, even though an initial reaction might be to scorn this type of cinema. The flexibility of

capitalism and the need to react to the current generation may be the seeds of social change or

the method by which the status quo is maintained—there is no guarantee one way or the other.

The second point about the symbolic marriage of the state and capitalist enterprise comes

across clearly in the episode in *Six Degrees of Celebration* between a young thief and a police

officer, played by recognizable actors Artur Smol'ianinov and Sergei Garmash. The police

officer arrests the young thief, who breaks out of prison. The thief disguises himself in the

clothes of the police chief, who is bathing. The thief is on the run and he dodges into an Evroset'

cellular telephone store to hide. In the tradition of folktale chance encounters, he finds out that

his high-school crush works at the store. They recognize each other. When two bandits come in

to rob the place, the thief has to keep the simulation up that he is a police officer, and he bombards the two other thieves and takes their weapons. The robbery is foiled, but the real police officer (Garmash) comes into the store in plain clothes and attempts to arrest the original thief. The customers in the store protest in the belief that the real officer is an impersonator and that the impersonator is a real state authority. Rather than get into a conflict with the law-abiding citizens, the real police officer (Garmash) tells the false police officer (Smol'ianinov) to arrest him and take him to the station. In this way, the simulation is maintained and the female love interest—who is clearly connected with cellular telephones and the Euroset' corporation—believes that the thief actually is a police officer and a hero that saved her from bandits.
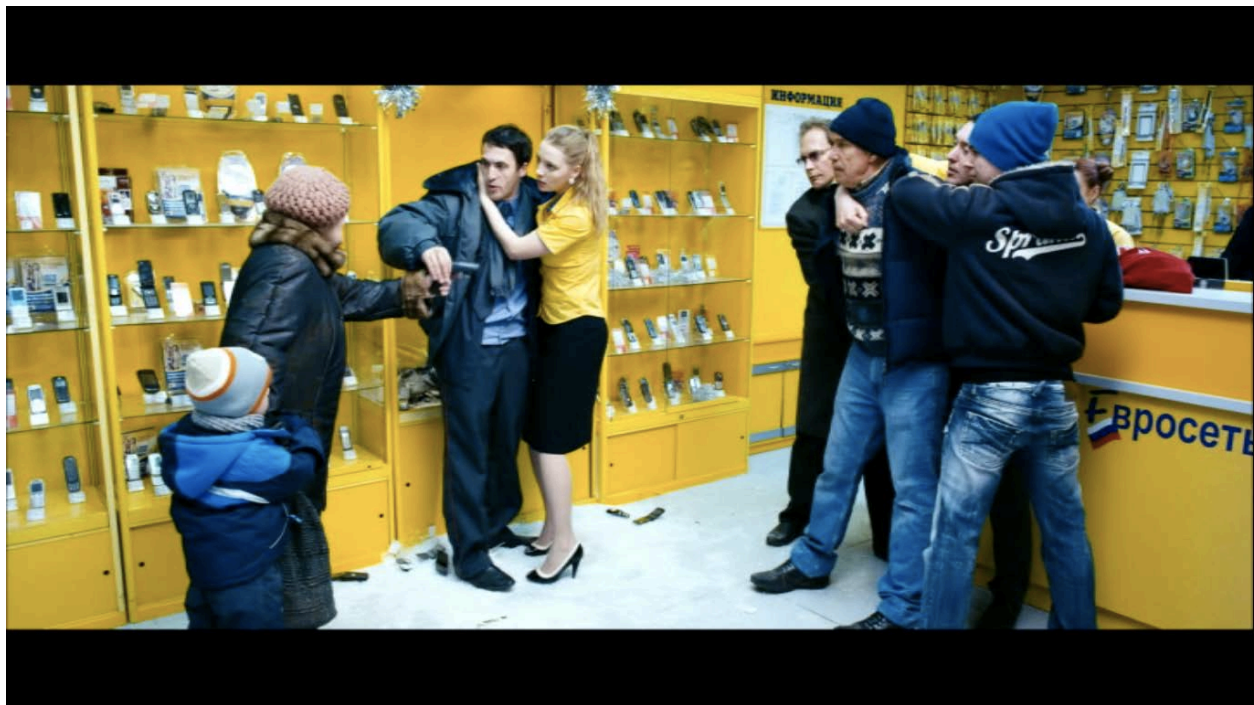
Figure 65. *Six Degrees of Celebration.* The Evroset' logo appears on the far right of the mise-en-scène.

By the end of the film, the police officer sidesteps procedure and lets the thief go. The vignette is both an advertisement for Evroset' and an endorsement of state authority, a link

between government and private enterprise that eventually leads to a functioning relationship. It is a marriage of state and capitalist enterprise, where the state is gendered as dominant and male, and new capitalism is gendered as the virgin female, passive but necessary for the edification and growth of the state and the country as a whole. This dynamic reflects capitalism in Russia in general and how it may be differentiated from capitalism in the West and especially the United States. If in the contemporary United States, corporations and private interest sway politicians through financing campaigns, that is, if, in a sense, government is subordinate to the interests of big business, then in Russia the opposite is true: big business is always ultimately subject to the agenda of the state.

5.6   CONCLUSION TO THE CHAPTER

The Elki series of films is not merely a franchise, but it is also a meta-brand since it includes advertisements for several corporations and brands within it. The most prominent of these brands is the Putin administration itself, and many of the plots within these films reveal the interconnected nature of economic enterprise and state investment through metaphors of marriage, in which capitalism is gendered as female and the stable state as male. In this sense, it is similar to what Boris Groys terms the total art of Stalinism, in which Stalinist art fulfilled the goals of the avant garde. Here it is the total art of Russian Capitalism. The Elki films are, therefore, similar to the recent Winter Olympic Games in Sochi (2014) or the upcoming FIFA World Cup (2018), in that they are state-supported events for the masses. It is repeatable, it relies on corporate sponsorship, and although many of the actors remain the same and have widespread recognizability, they are ultimately replaceable: the show can go on without them. Similar to these sporting events, the Elki films provide jobs for a large group of people who do

the work to make the event or film happen. And just as these sporting events rely on the

president to "open" the games or the competition, these films rely on the presence of politicians

who appear as if they themselves are just another corporate product placement.

Unlike sports, however, these films rely not on impromptu outcomes, but narratives (not

to suggest that sports do not rely on their own narratives) that are carefully crafted and infused

with ideology. Representations of communication technologies are the glue that keeps several

distinct plotlines together. These plotlines have more push and pull than traditional scripts, since

they both react to and engender fan participation on a variety of platforms, from the home video

to social media and online video games. The result is that these technologies are re-politicized to

create a fairy-tale world slightly different from that of the Western capitalist mythology. Rather

than self-sufficient individuals who pull themselves up by their bootstraps under adverse

situations with no help from others, in this rendition strangers help each other reach personal

fulfillment. This fairy tale, however, is one conspicuously devoid of the underlying sexual

dynamics present in the folk tales recorded from the oral tradition. Instead, the tradition is better

traced back to Soviet cinema, in which a young state representative, a spontaneous male positive

hero of the Socialist Realist type, goes through a transformation involving an older male mentor

to become a solid representative of the state (Clark). The difference is that technology is the

savior that allows the transformation to happen. Virtual simulation affects real life more than

real life actions.[31] The virtual landscape is the amusement park, the playground where one can

participate in the world of the Elki franchise and repeat the actions of the people onscreen in

one's own life.

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[31] A counterexample would be Valeriia Gai Germanika's *Yes&Yes* (2014) in which a young woman and a young
male artist meet for the first time after an online romance. What begins as excitement ends with disillusion. The
film is a deeper investigation of how relationships started online can devolve into something less than desirable.

This chapter has taken a critical view of the ideological valence of these films, which suggest that consumption is best realized under the auspices and the vision of state authority. People do best under the existing class order, in which Central Asians are migrant workers and ethnic Russians belong to the rising middle class. Economic advancement, these films suggest, is open to all, so long as the status quo is maintained. Xenophobia and homophobia are swept under the rug. While it is tempting to end this chapter with a condemnation of the sometimes frightening valence of these films—especially in the way they elide past and present trauma in the style of Stalinist *lakirovka*—there are positive aspects to these economically self-sufficient films. As Anton Dolin has pointed out, Bekmabmetov's blockbusters have opened up the possibility for other domestic blockbusters such as *Stalingrad* and for a more active and participatory movie-going culture. Even if this type of cinema may de-politicize youth in the service of Disney-like capitalism, it is still better than the heavily politicized and nationalistic group *Nashi*, in which youth go to camps to become loyal citizens of the country.[32] Furthermore, even if it redraws the map of Russia in a way that elides the past and ignores the village, it does give attention to peripheral capitals,[33] and in this way changes the cinematic and politically imagined community into something different than the dominant dynamic of Moscow/St. Petersburg or province. It is a refreshing switch from what has been such a monotone note in Russian cinema for so long: the lugubrious Russian film that wallows in its own melancholy and the beauty of sadness and suffering. It is, at least, an alternative.

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[32] The experience is ironized in the documentary film *Putin's Kiss.*

[33] During the summer before *Elki 3*, film crews went to several cities throughout Russia—Ufa, Magnitogorsk, Krasnodar, Ekaterinburg, Perm', Boronezh, Irkutsk, and St. Petersburg—and to Almaty (Kazakhstan) to film crowds of fans organized in the shape of one of the letters for the phrase "Happy New Year" ("S"emki novogodnei komedii *Elki*"). Each letter consisted of at least five hundred individuals. The letters were later digitally composited to form the phrase that was shown at the end of the film. In this way, fans could literally see themselves in the film and hype was created around the film in each of the respective provincial cities.

6.0   CONCLUSION: SCRIPT TO IMAGE

This dissertation analyzes the films directed or produced by Timur Bekmambetov, whose works provide a fertile ground for the production of new ideas about cinema in the digital age. The most important break for Bekmambetov's cinema—as opposed to Soviet cinema as a whole—is the switch from a script-based form of production and planning to one based on images. Before a film is even approved, storyboards of ten or more defining digital images are strung together ("3D Previz"). It is only later that the plot content is added, which becomes secondary to Bekmambetov's visual aesthetic. Investigating the visual style of these films has been the principle project of this dissertation. Questions about cultural context, global and domestic marketing, and the transition from socialism to the blend of new Russian capitalism and state support—all of these concerns have guided the analysis of the innovations that Bekmambetov's visual-effects teams have made.

The kernel of insight and the organizing principle for the chapters has been the concept of the virtual index, which, I claim, is a useful idea for capturing the way digital images may be contextualized in terms of the historical period and the aura that surrounds them. To briefly reprise the core themes of this dissertation, the virtual index in Bekmambetov's films appears in four distinct manifestations. Chapter 1 describes a virtual index that cites the world video games create and markets the film to a gaming audience. Chapter 2 focuses on a virtual index, object perspective, that is an innovation in representing perspective and the space around an inanimate object. Chapter 3 examines virtual indices as a way of communicating linguistic meaning

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through kinetic subtitles or digital dubbing. Chapter 4 contextualizes a virtual index that is the

digital composite of thousands of fans, who were filmed in different cities across Russia. Each

virtual index is a form of participation for the spectator. It relies on innovations in digital

technology that make engaging cinematic experiences more financially feasible than they were in

the past.

These virtual indices are forms of digital conceptual art that draw from the insights of the

avant-garde of the early twentieth century, specifically in the modernist technique of revealing

the device. Whether it is the presence of subtitles moving across the screen in unfamiliar and

interesting ways, object perspective and moving through spaces one does not see in "real"

experienced everyday life (such as in between walls), or the intercutting of live-action footage

with images from a video game, the moments in which these virtual indices occur are not so

much aberrations as insertions, times when spectators are reminded that this is a film doing

something only a film can do. It is far removed from the "real" world in these moments. The

consequence of this experience is quite different from, for example, the Brechtian concept of

Verfremdungseffekt, in which moments of fissure should result in the spectators' alienation from

the text and the characters. Brecht fosters a realization that, perhaps, the "Powers that Be" are

tricking spectators and that the capitalist system, which makes otherwise good people do bad

things, is the problem. In Bekmambetov's work, quite the opposite is true; the result of the

virtual index is further immersion in the system. It is a way of engaging spectators and

enthralling them with an attraction that breaks away from the diegesis, but is inevitably wrapped

up in it as well. Rather than alienation, the virtual index becomes a game for the spectator, a way

of hailing them (in the Althusserian sense) by making the game tricky enough to be interesting,

yet neither too challenging nor too transparent.

Object perspective is a key example. The perspective around an otherwise inanimate object simulates the dynamics of desire by parodying camera angles and shots with a digital effect. It creates the impression of a physical camera that has never existed, but is, nevertheless, gendered as masculine, while the object of inquiry is gendered as feminine. Object perspective dissects advertising's technique of creating sex appeal for a thing, a potential consumer product, by focusing on a banal object such as a rivet, a bullet, or wires. These things are not really sold through the film and they do not usually appear as product placements in film. Such an idea becomes absurd and yet—at the height of that absurdity—the same object perspective is used to advertise, for example, Nescafé. Even if spectators understand the game and feel the ironic wink at the end, the fact remains that the Nescafé brand sticks with them. The critique inherent in the digital sequence is about ways of viewing, but it has no investment in criticizing the characters, their actions, or capitalism and advertising in a broader sense. Rather, virtual indices brand Bekmambetov's style and make it recognizable. In these works, virtual indices never defamiliarize the spectator from the protagonists and the potential consequences of their violent or consumerist behavior. If anything, the main characters are model consumers, not so much of specific products, but of the violent ideology that the film promotes. Because moments of the virtual index become a virtual game, they are denuded of their subversive potential (as in Brecht's work) to "wake up" spectators.

The virtual index is about a strong form of engagement that does not necessarily challenge the spectator intellectually or morally. It is an unmasking of the principles of capitalism and ways of viewing that ultimately is in service to capitalism, a cynical innovation that, ironically, is the thing that creates appeal and is worked back into the service of product

endorsement. How, then, may spectator participation in Bekmambetov's films be conceptualized? And what does that participation mean for cinema history?

Virtual indices may be thought of—alternatively or simultaneously—as a form of advertisement for a specific corporate brand of consumer products, the films and the Bazelevs studio themselves, and/or the statist ideology behind them. They, like the product placements that run through Bekmambetov's feature-length films, are integrated into the text of the film. In this sense, a way to think about Bekmambetov and his cinema finds a key in television and what television can do in "free-market capitalism," based on its history in the United States (in the United Kingdom, for example, advertisements have always been more restrained).

The fact that Bekmambetov made his name in advertisements and music videos in the 1990s is key. Bekmambetov co-opts techniques from television to enrich his films, in the same fashion that he made short films to put on television in the 1990s. Advertising has always been his bread and butter. It is important to foreground that the Bazelevs studio never stopped making advertisements. Bekmambetov continues to film and produce them. Furthermore, the advertising division of Bazelevs develops young production talent by allowing new directors to film commercials and work their way up to feature-length films or, at least, vignettes in feature-length films. The Bazelevs website has an entire section devoted not to promoting their films but to advertising to potential corporate sponsors, encouraging and noting the benefits of either television commercials or product placement, which, in industry terms, is often referred to as integrated advertising. Advertising pays, while box offices receipts for films are always risky. Films have the potential to make more money, but they are just as likely to lose money as well.

After his debut film *Peshawar Waltz*, Bekmambetov, by his own admission, began work in television and specifically advertising in 1990s Russia because he wanted to reach a larger

audience and because, with the collapse of state support, it was the most viable filmmaking industry at the time (Denisova). If the *World History: Imperial Bank* commercials were a way to exert great social influence and shoot short, innovative films without necessarily making a strong argument for the benefits of Imperial Bank, then later, in Bekmambetov's blockbusters, techniques from television and advertising are used to make films more cost efficient and lucrative.

Bekmambetov's practice of making short advertisements as if they were films worked in the post-Soviet social anarchy of Russia in the 1990s because many movie theaters had gone out of business, and people did not have enough money to go to the cinema regularly. The commercials were native, but not Soviet, and something that was at first unexpected. Because the *World History: Imperial Bank* became a series of 18 commercials over several years (1992-97), these short works came to be anticipated and looked forward to. Seriality became part of Bekmambetov's aesthetic. This period was also the time before one could record television on DVR, and before any film could be found on the Russian Internet to be downloaded or streamed illegally. Television was the most prominent medium at the time because it at least had funding and viewership. In the evolution of the post-Soviet economy, technology, and culture, and as funding from the state became more available, cinema became not just possible again, but also something that could accomplish everything a television commercial could do and more. It is important to note that, since *Night Watch*, Bekmambetov's films have been funded by the Ministry of Culture, specifically through Channel One Russia and then Russia-1. There are three consequences that grow out of this fact.

The first has to do with product placement or integrated advertisements. It is a more effective form of advertising from the corporate sponsor's point of view because it is less overt

and direct than a television advertisement. It has an unconscious value, a power of suggestion to

drink Nescafé coffee, for example, because the characters do so. One cannot fast forward

through product placement or put the television on mute since it is so often a seamless part of the

cinematic text itself. Furthermore, if the film becomes popular, the product placement will

continue to pay dividends in the form of advertising for free, whereas corporate sponsors must

pay for each television commercial. Even when the integrated advertisement is ironic or uses the

technique of revealing the device, the process is one of hailing an intelligent and savvy spectator,

but it is hailing nevertheless, and the advertisement achieves its desired effect. This technique is

by no means new[34]. This type of inserted plug is in fact one of the best forms of advertisement,

since it is self-effacing and admits that advertising as such is a bit of a scam.

In addition to the innovation of advertising within film as an alternative to advertising

just on television, there is the consideration of remakes and sequels that has contributed to

Bekmambetov's career and status in Russia. Sequels to Soviet classics such as *Irony of Fate.*

The Continuation (2007) and *Good Luck, Gentlemen!* (2012) are marketing moves that

spectators will watch out of nostalgia for the classic, the long anticipation of waiting for a

remake/sequel, and even, perhaps, to confirm the inferiority of the new film in comparison to the

original. Bekmambetov's latest project, the *Ben-Hur* (2016) remake, falls into this category.

The new film re-popularizes and resurrects the 1959 William Wyler film, and it also provides a

counterpoint for comparison.

The Elki series of feature-length films is the apotheosis of the model that draws

substantially from television. Its stars, the two actors who hold the series together, are Ivan

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[34] It is one that has thrived in the American context, whether it was Alfred Hitchcock endorsing Bristol-Meyers with negative remarks on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (sponsored by Bristol-Meyers and worked into the script) or Steven Colbert ironically endorsing Sabra hummus and Oreo cookies in his premiere as the new host of CBS's *Late Show* (Nussbaum).

Urgant and Sergei Svetliakov, both of whom had made their name on the variety show *Comedy Club*. They are recognizable actors not from film, but television and, as such, they have a broad audience, especially from the late night show "Evening Urgant" [Vechernii Urgant] on Channel One Russia. Many television techniques are evident: individual teams, for example, film individual episodes with different actors and a director originally from the advertising sphere. Since any episode may be included or dropped without affecting the others, it is more akin to filming a series of pilots than individual television episodes. The choice to film in locations all over Russia, in several provincial cities, is presented as a marketing campaign to garner widespread popular support, but it can also be seen as a way to film in less expensive locations outside of Moscow. The fact that actors come and go in the Elki series (with the exception of Urgant and Svetliakov) ensures that the project—unlike the sequel to *Wanted* (Douglas)—cannot be halted if an actor does not commit to the next installation. The advantage, of course, is that if spectators go to cinema theaters to see the latest film, they do not need the background of the other films to participate in the spectacle. And, of course, the original *Six Degrees of Celebration* [Elki] plays on television during the New Year's holiday, and the whole project is sponsored by the state-controlled television channel Russia-1. Elki has even become its own franchise within the Bazelevs studio.

In addition to these techniques are the advertising, contests, and other ways of promoting films on social media: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and VKontakte. They too are games in the way that virtual indices are. But once again, social media is not an end to itself; instead, it fuels the series and becomes a productive forum for promoting merchandising, such as the Elki t-shirts. Social media play supporting roles, rather than the main role of television as the platform in which these films are legally replayed.

When television is invoked as the unifying principle, and when the American model of production that has been co-opted for the Russian context is referenced, one thing sticks out: so much of the funding in the Russian context comes from the government through state-controlled media outlets, and specifically, national television channels that have been carried over since the Soviet period. As the final chapter points out, Bekmambetov's films are suffused with ideology, especially one that favors or is neutral toward the Putin regime. As the chapter argues, these films often gender capitalism and capitalist enterprise as feminine (through a female representative character) and the state as masculine (through a male representative character). President, for example, Dmitrii Medvedev had a cameo in the first Elki film.

This relationship has allowed Bazelevs to grow domestically. It has contributed to a healthy film industry that continues to thrive and whose influence may be seen in such films as *Stalingrad* (2013) and *Legend № 17* (2013), in which computer graphics of missiles and aircraft in the former, and a flying hockey puck in the latter, are arresting digital images that combine with nationalistic ideology. And in this way, virtual indices are analogous to the advertisements, say, during the Super Bowl, that may themselves steal the show and make what is just a high-stakes football game more interesting. Unlike the Super Bowl, however, these Russian films compete more with American blockbusters than they do with each other. The industry has become mutually supportive, reusing the same actors and directors, such as Petr Fedorov, who has a significant role in the second and third Elki films and is the central protagonist of *Stalingrad.* The combination of state support and capitalism has led to a robust industry that is capable of continued innovation.

The transition from a script-based to an image-based mode of cinematic production is the defining feature of the Bazelevs studio. The switch has contributed to the growth of an industry

that no longer relies exclusively on state funding. Bekmambetov's primarily commercial cinema has benefited from a focus on a visual aesthetic in two distinct ways: it has facilitated capitalist funding through the inclusion of corporate brands in the form of product placements, and it has resulted in a unique and recognizable style that can be marketed to a global or domestic audience, depending on the film. In other words, the visual style of Bekmambetov's films is itself a form of branding for the Bazelevs studio. The emergence of a popular, visual aesthetic (rather than, for example, verbal rhetoric or a unique narrative structure) that exploits the possibilities of digital technology and engages spectators rather than challenges them has been a method for keeping the films depoliticized in the global context, and neutral or vaguely supportive of the Putin regime in the domestic context. Because the visual style of Bekmambetov's films for domestic Russian audiences sharply contrasts with Soviet cinema as a whole, these films provide distance from the Soviet context and its associated trauma, while allowing enough room to cash in on Soviet nostalgia in the form of remakes and sequels. This visual aesthetic, however, is by no means fixed. It is flexible and it continues to evolve over time. It transforms in each successive film in an effort to market films to spectators who value the visual tropes of social media, and to extend a marketing campaign that includes this social media and extends the cinematic created worlds outside the text of each film.

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