

Biopolitics in Contemporary Russian Cinema

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This dissertation looks at a corpus of recent Russian films that comments on the politicization of human life in contemporary Russia. The preoccupation of Russian culture with the relationship between political power and human life has been particularly acute since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, characterized by a shift in the administration's discursive practices, which now posited Russia as a stronghold of traditional values. The newly adopted rhetorical strategy was corroborated by a string of biopolitical initiatives, including tighter abortion restrictions, a ban on homosexual propaganda, the decriminalization of some cases of domestic violence, and the so-called Dima Yakovlev law, which prohibits the adoption of Russian orphans by U.S. citizens. The dissertation investigates the ways in which Russian arthouse cinema has conceptualized the recent changes in the Russian political landscape and focuses, in particular, on the modes of spectatorial address deployed by filmmakers to communicate their bio(political) concerns to the audiences. While the films explored in the dissertation are meant to serve as a critique of the increasingly fraught relationship between human life and political power in contemporary Russia, there might be, I argue, a certain degree of compatibility between the authoritarian practices of the state and the often monologically inclined cinematic statements produced by Russian filmmakers in recent years. The dissertation, however, does not make an overarching claim about the "complicity" of recent Russian cinema in the authoritarian project of the state. Organized as a series of case studies, it offers instead a number of potential approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between the two. Theoretically

indebted to Giorgio Agamben's work on biopolitics, the project brings into relief both the reach and the limits of his theoretical paradigm by staging an encounter between Agamben's conceptual universe and contemporary Russian "biopolitical" cinema. I take issue, among other things, with Agamben's reductive view of power as solely prohibitive and make room for an imperial narrative that is notoriously missing from Agamben's account but remains, as I contend, key to understanding the specificity of Russia's biopolitical project that is tangled with the country's imperial persistence.

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Preface

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Nancy Condee for her unwavering guidance, patience, and generosity. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Randall Halle, Neepta Majumdar, Vladimir Padunov and Sergei Prozorov, who—each in a unique way—helped shape the contours of this dissertation project. My warmest gratitude goes to my mentor Clint Walker for his early and enthusiastic encouragement, and, above all, his kindness.

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Introduction

This dissertation project investigates the increasing interest of contemporary Russian filmmakers in the relationship between human life and political power. The project looks at a corpus of films (including work by Andrei Zviagintsev, Kirill Serebrennikov, and Aleksei Fedorchenko) that comments on the ways in which the state politicizes human life and makes it subject to control and regulation. The preoccupation of Russian culture with the fraught relationship between the state and the human body became particularly acute during Vladimir Putin's third term, which marked a radical shift in the administration's self-legitimation strategy that now revolved around the defense of traditional values. The dissertation examines the ways in which contemporary Russian arthouse cinema has conceptualized the recent changes in the Russian political landscape and tests the hypothesis that there may be a certain degree of compatibility between the increasingly authoritarian practices of the state and the often monologically inclined cinematic statements produced by Russian filmmakers in recent years. Organized as a series of case studies, the dissertation does not make an overarching claim about the "complicity" of recent Russian cinema in the authoritarian project of the state, offering instead a number of potential approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between the two.

If in the two previous presidential elections, Vladimir Putin (in 2004) and Dmitrii Medvedev (in 2008) were able to secure their victories by flaunting Putin's (and by extension, the party's) ability to ward off a return to the chaos of the wild 1990s, the 2012 presidential bid, marred by a rapidly growing protest movement in the aftermath of compromised 2011 Duma elections, deployed a different legitimation strategy that emphasized Russia's "unique" position as a stronghold of traditional values. Particularly emblematic of this shift in discourse was the response

of the state to the Pussy Riot performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012 (“Mother of God, Drive Putin Away!”), less than two weeks before the presidential elections. In his account of the affair, Mischa Gabowitsch points out that the intensity of the reaction to the Pussy Riot protest and the coverage of the case in state-controlled media suggest that the state had a particular interest in giving the affair special weight (177). He argues that the Putin administration used Pussy Riot’s “punk prayer” performance as an excuse to reformulate its self-legitimation discourse around traditional values, and, more specifically, issues of gender norms and sexual morality (164). While the response of the state to the Pussy Riot performance crystallized the Putin regime’s new narrative strategy, the claim on human life as an object of state control and regulation was by no means purely rhetorical. The members of the protest group were evaluated by psychiatrists from the Kashchenko psychiatric hospital and were diagnosed with a range of “personality disorders”.¹ The court charged Pussy Riot under Article 213 of the Criminal Code, which punishes premeditated hooliganism “motivated by political, ideological, racial, nationalistic or religious hatred or animosity” by a deprivation of liberty for a term of up to seven years. Criminal Law 148.1 and Criminal Law 282 (that had been used in similar cases in the past), by comparison, carry a maximum sentence of one and four years respectively. In other words, the carefully orchestrated response of the state to the Pussy Riot performance was not simply an attempt to sell morality politics to the electorate; it was also designed to serve as a warning to the opponents of the state, a sinister reminder that the state had an arsenal of instruments at its disposal for producing docile bodies and had no scruples about making use of them.

¹ According to the psychiatrists’ report, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova’s disorder amounted to “an active life position ... and a tendency to express her opinions categorically”; Ekaterina Samutsevich suffered from “obstinacy, decisiveness and a tendency toward oppositional forms of behavior during conflicts, along with subjectivist and vigilant character traits”; Maria Alekhina showed signs of “demonstrative, overrated self-opinion” (qtd. in Bohm).

Some critics (see, for example, Makarychev and Medvedev) have argued that the year 2012 marked a “biopolitical turn” in Russian politics. Although the Putin regime made demographic politics its priority already in the mid-2000s, it was after Putin’s reelection in 2012 that the state made the human body a key lever in its political manipulations. The 2012 “Dima Yakovlev Law” (a ban on the adoption of Russian children by U.S. citizens), the 2013 ban on homosexual propaganda, the mass scale anti-immigration campaign of 2013, and a whole array of other biopolitically charged changes in legislation and policy² had tangible biopolitical consequences but also played an important role in consolidating the discourse of “us” vs. “them” promoted by the state, simultaneously exposing that the protection of “us” was merely a nominal purpose of these measures. As Sergei Medvedev shows, the protection of the constructed “us” made vulnerable not only those othered by the state (for example, members of the LGBTQ community and immigrants) but also those whom the state had pledged to protect (for example, Russian orphans who were prevented by the “Dima Yakovlev Law” from getting the expensive medical treatment that they needed and that was unavailable to them in Russia). More often than not, the “biopolitical turn” has, manifested itself primarily as a discursive strategy deployed by sovereign power for the purposes of self-legitimation. The state, for example, made recourse to biopolitical vocabulary in its attempt to legitimize its increasingly more aggressive foreign policy and, in particular, its military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As Medvedev argues, in 2014-15 the state-controlled media invoked the organicist concept of the state and portrayed the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the Russian support for the Donbass

² For a detailed account of these changes, see Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev’s article “Biopolitics and Power in Putin’s Russia”; Sergei Medvedev’s piece “The State and the Human Body in Putin’s Russia”; and Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk’s article “Biopower and Geopolitics as Russia’s Neighborhood Strategies: Reconnecting People or Reaggregating Lands?”

separatists as “an organic, biological act of nature, the reclaiming of a lost body part (‘Donbas is the *heart* of Russia’), and the reuniting of the torn body of the nation” (5; emphasis in original).

I conceive of my research project as theoretically indebted to Giorgio Agamben’s theory of biopolitics and his concept of the state of exception, the suspension of the juridical order in times of crisis that allows the state to violate broadly accepted conventions, laws, and practices and produce what Agamben terms *homines sacri*. The figure of *homo sacer* is reduced to “bare life,” a zone of indistinction between *bíos* (politically qualified life) and *zoē* (natural reproductive life). *Homo sacer*, Agamben contends, is outside both human and divine law—he can be killed but not sacrificed. In his most influential manuscript on the subject, Agamben refers to *homo sacer* as the protagonist of his book (*Homo Sacer* 8) and argues that the state of exception has become the rule of contemporary politics and rendered “virtually everyone *homines sacri*” (*Homo Sacer* 115). The films scrutinized in this dissertation similarly revolve around the figure of *homo sacer*. Often criticized for its universalizing impulse and political nihilism,³ Agamben’s work nonetheless provides a useful starting point for my analysis of the recent Russian cinematic conceptualizations of the relationship between human life and political power. Yet an encounter between Agamben’s conceptual universe and recent Russian cinema brings to relief both the reach and the limits of Agamben’s critical paradigm. A major goal of my project is to make room for an imperial narrative that is notoriously missing from Agamben’s account but remains, as I will argue, key to understanding the specificity of Russia’s biopolitical project that is tangled with the country’s imperial persistence. As Nancy Condee suggests in her essay “Imperial Ectoplasm,” in 1991 as in 1917 “*an* empire had fallen, but the structural and thematic components remain” (emphasis in

³ See, for example, Jacques Derrida’s *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Ernesto Laclau’s piece “Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?”, Antonio Negri’s essay “Giorgio Agamben: The Discrete Taste of the Dialectic,” and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek’s article “Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender.”

original). As evidenced by Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has yet again managed to reconstitute itself as an empire.

I also take issue with Agamben's reduction of biopolitics into thanatopolitics⁴ and attempt to restore the positive dimension of biopolitics by reinstating Michel Foucault's distinction between sovereign power ("the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live") and disciplinary and biopower, two aspects of what Foucault defines as "a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it" (*The History of Sexuality* 138). Foucault's work also provides a useful counterpoint to Agamben for my analysis of the cinematic medium itself as an apparatus. If we accept Agamben's definition of an apparatus (*dispositif*), a term he borrows from Foucault and extends to refer to "literally anything that has the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, the behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (*What Is an Apparatus?* 14), then cinema itself must be considered a dangerously powerful apparatus of biopolitical capture. As Randall Halle points out, Agamben's theorization of the apparatus, on one hand, opens up the restrictive equation of the cinematic apparatus to an ideological state apparatus that dominated Film Studies in the 1960s and is partially responsible for its current quiescent state, at least in Anglo-American Film Studies (46). On the other hand, as Halle shows, Agamben's notion of apparatus, which omits the positive productive capacities that it had in Foucault's account, reduces apparatus to "a structure of power, control, and regulation" that entraps living beings. In my discussion of the cinematic apparatus, I accept Halle's invitation to view apparatus, via Jean-Louis Comolli,⁵ as "an

⁴ For a discussion of the ways in which biopolitics collapses into thanatopolitics in Agamben's account, see Thomas Lemke's *Biopolitik zur Einführung*.

⁵ In his considerations of the cinematic apparatus in *Machines of the Visible*, Comolli writes:

[T]he cinema . . . functions with and in the set of apparatuses of representation at work in a society. There are not only the representations produced by the representative apparatuses as such (painting, theatre, cinema, etc.); there are also, participating in the movement of the whole, the systems of the delegation of power (political representation), the ceaseless working-up of social imaginaries

aspect of social reproduction” that as “a web of human activity” does not only control and regulate but “may just as well allow, or even more likely, liberate, ally, invent, open, envision, author, or strengthen the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (Halle 47).

Many of the films scrutinized in this dissertation communicate their biopolitical concerns to the viewers by addressing them from a position of authority, often opting for a didactic and/or manipulative mode(s) of spectatorial address. Drawing on Nikolaj Lübecker’s discussion of what he terms the feel-bad film, I argue that there may be political value to this approach. Feel-bad films, Lübecker contends, help us raise ethical and political questions and “de-frame”⁶ visual culture (81). Although Lübecker writes that feel-bad films target the body of the spectator in an attempt to reach her intellect (5), he largely circumvents considerations of affect. I too generally avoid (with some rare exceptions) discussing potential affective responses for my interest lies elsewhere. Without losing sight of the inherently collective nature of filmmaking, I probe the relationship between “authorship” and “authority,” a question to which Mikhail Bakhtin, among others, persistently returned and was ultimately unable to resolve in his writing. Even in his analysis of Fedor Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels, Bakhtin still acknowledged the “creative

(historical, ideological representations) and a large part, even, of the modes of relational behaviour (balances of power, confrontations, manoeuvres of seduction, strategies of defense, marking of differences or affiliations). On the other hand, but at the same time, the hypothesis would be that a society is only such in that it is driven by representation. If the social machine manufactures representations, it also manufactures itself from representations—the latter at once as means, matter and condition of sociality.

Thus the historical variation of cinematic techniques, their appearance-disappearance, their phases of convergence, their periods of dominance and decline seem to me to depend not on a rational-linear order of technological perfectibility nor an autonomous instance of scientific “progress,” but much rather on the offsettings, adjustments, arrangements carried out by a social configuration in order to represent itself, that is, at once to grasp itself, identify itself and itself produce itself in its representation. (qtd. in Halle 35-36)

⁶ Lübecker draws here on Judith Butler’s discussion of “norms” and “frames” in *Frames of War*. Norms determine the frames, but repetition of particular forms of framing helps produce the norms (Lübecker 81). The task of visual culture, according to Butler, is to “de-frame”: “To learn to see the frame that blinds us is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture [...] it is precisely to thematise the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be” (Butler 110-1).

activity of the really existing author, [...], “the author’s ‘plan’ or ‘design’ for the novel, and of his ‘ultimate semantic authority’” (Coates 89-90). While I do see film spectatorship as dynamic, and meaning as negotiated anew in each individual encounter between the spectator and the cinematic object, my analysis focuses primarily on the other dimension of this process—the interpretive possibilities (that exist as potentialities that may or may not be realized) created by the constellation of specific narrative, formal, and stylistic choices.

While Bakhtin’s thought, as Malcolm Jones points out, is at times characterized by a recourse to binary oppositions, his view that all utterances are in the final analysis double-voiced presupposes that monologic and dialogic are not absolute categories, not an either-or opposition, but rather represent “different degrees of double-voicedness” (23). The chapters that follow present individual case studies meant to illuminate the ways in which contemporary Russian filmmakers conceptualize the relationship between human life and political power as well as the different ways in which these filmmakers thematize and negotiate their own position of authority. What these studies ultimately bring to relief is the interplay of both vertical and horizontal gestures that characterize power relations at large—both inside and outside the movie theater.

Chapter One focuses on two of the most explicitly political Russian films in recent years, Andrei Zviagintsev’s 2014 film *Leviathan* (Leviafan) and Kirill Serebrennikov’s 2016 drama *The Student* (Uchenik). Both films explore the triangular relationship between the individual, the state, and the church and are explicitly critical of the rapport between the Putin administration and the Russian Orthodox Church. Drawing on Sergei Prozorov’s conceptualization of the post-communist condition as post-historical, I argue that both Serebrennikov and Zviagintsev view the state’s newly articulated rhetorical strategy as a “chimerical” attempt to reintroduce ideological content into the political sphere. As Prozorov shows, “given the nullity of the historical process,

any [...] hegemonic project is immediately revealed to be a chimera that invites us to Agamben's 'camp,' in which bare life itself is abducted by power as the instrument of its bio- or thanatopolitical rationalities" (*The Ethics* 169). I contend, however, that the model of power presented by Zviagintsev is better aligned with Agamben's negative view of power as the power "to taboo, exclude, and annihilate" (Chow 132), whereas the conception of power articulated by Serebrennikov resembles Foucauldian approach to power as dispersed across social networks. Finally, I discuss the push and pull between the vertical and horizontal gestures in the two films' modes of spectatorial address and conclude that the two films' attempts at monological unity are inherently driven by a dialogic impulse as they posit themselves as responses to the unidirectional discourse of the state-church duo that refuses to be part of an open-ended dialogue.

A cautionary word about the balance from one chapter to the next: This initial chapter is considerably more substantial than the chapters that follow for I use it as an opportunity to lay the theoretical groundwork for the entire dissertation. I discuss here the distinctions between Foucauldian and Agambenian conceptions of biopolitics, introduce the reader to Prozorov's theorization of the post-Soviet condition, and delineate the key characteristics of Lübecker's "feel-bad films." These concepts feature prominently in my argument on the *Leviathan-Student* dyad, and for this reason I have chosen to elaborate on them in detail in this chapter. They recur, however, throughout the dissertation and inform the readings that I offer in Chapters Two and Three.

Chapter Two explores the convergence of biopolitical and imperial narratives in Mamuliia's 2010 film *Another Sky* (*Drugoe nebo*) and Kott's 2014 drama *The Test* (*Ispytanie*), focusing, in particular, on their limited use of dialogue. While Mamuliia's and Kott's silencing strategies may be interpreted as a replication of an imperial logic that deprives its Other of *logos*, I argue that the silencing of characters is at least attempted as a liberating gesture, as a way of

freeing the characters from the constraints of language in general and the language of the oppressor, in particular. I conclude, however, that both Kott and Mamuliia—despite the striking differences in their approaches to the use of film language—fall in the final analysis into the same trap as Agamben himself, who refuses to address the “otherness” of bare life. As Malini Schueller points out in her critique of Agamben’s theory: “We might all be ‘virtually’ *homines sacri*, but only some of us are marked to be in the permanent state of exception” (243). The reticence of both Mamuliia’s and Kott’s films, including their refusal to ground events in a specific time and place, subsumes imperial and biopolitical narratives within the pursuit of larger metaphysical questions and discourages attempts to ponder who and why is more likely to find themselves deprived of a voice and reduced to bare life.

Chapter Three investigates the work of Ivan Tverdovskii and Aleksei Fedorchenko, whose cinematic efforts share an interest, among other things, in the discursive and institutional practices of othering and a preoccupation with the workings of visual apparatuses. In their attempts to de-frame visual culture, both filmmakers have experimented with the hybridization of documentary and fiction film forms and conceptualizing otherness in an “abstracted” form, thus bringing into relief the ways in which visual culture partakes in the construction of otherness and simultaneously distancing themselves from such practices. I take a somewhat different approach in this chapter than in the previous two and analyze a larger body of work by each filmmaker. I look at Tverdovskii’s early short *The Holy Groove* (*Sviataia kanavka*), and his two feature films, *Corrections Class* (*Klass korrektsii*) and *Zoology* (*Zoologiia*); as for Fedorchenko, I discuss his 2002 short *David* (*David*), his 2005 mockumentary *First on the Moon* (*Pervye na lune*), and his 2018 drama *Anna’s War* (*Voina Anny*). I argue that both filmmakers attempt renegotiations of the caesura between *zoē* and *bíos* (hyperbolized in Agamben’s account). I contend however, that in

Tverdovskii's cinematic worlds, power is dispersed across a multiplicity of networks (which form in Tverdovskii's pessimistic and somewhat anti-Foucauldian view an inescapable web). Fedorchenko's films, characterized by a postmodernist playfulness, in turn thematize power's attempts to establish total control, but continuously return to the sites where "bare life" escapes it, thus destabilizing the caesura posited by Agamben between power and the powerlessness of bare life. I conclude the chapter by looking in some detail at *Anna's War*, in which Fedorchenko departs from his signature playful directorial approach and opts instead for a more clearly articulated authorial stance.

In a brief final chapter, I offer a hypothesis derived from the conclusions of the individual chapters. I posit the recent predilection of Russian filmmakers for explicitly political and often monologically inclined cinematic statements as a logical response to the discursive practices (widely and mistakenly, as Mark Lipovetsky points out, interpreted as postmodernist ("Psevdomorfoza")) used by the state to introduce a new "chimerical" ideological content.

1.0 The Church, State, and the Body: Inflections of Religious Power in Andrei

Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* and Kirill Serebrennikov's *The Student*

The growing protest movement that threatened to mar Vladimir Putin's bid for re-election in 2012 required the President to articulate a new legitimization strategy and strengthen the ties between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church. In late 2011, the Patriarch was granted official residence in the Kremlin, which the church had lost back in 1917. Patriarch Kirill reciprocated by calling Putin's presidency a "miracle of God," corroborating his claim by saying that "as a patriarch" he "must only tell the truth, not paying attention to the political situation or propaganda" (qtd. in Bryanski). As irony would have it, earlier that year the truth-telling Kirill was reluctant to support Putin, made comments "vaguely supportive of the protesters' demands" and fell into line only after Kremlin-controlled media began to publish pieces criticizing Kirill for lavish material possessions (Coyer). The narrative that the ROC was recruited to ratify was that Putin was the champion of Christian values abandoned by a hostile West that is on a mission to weaken Russia and impose on it its degenerate values.

Recent Russian arthouse cinema has responded to the growing rapprochement between the Putin administration and the Russian Orthodox Church with a number of films that offer biting critiques of the coalition: among these are Kirill Serebrennikov's *The Student* (2016), Lera Surkova's *Pagans* (Iazychniki) (2017), Andrei Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) and *Loveless* (Neliubov') (2017), and Ivan Tverdokskii's *Zoology* (2016).⁷ While all of these films to a certain

⁷ For a discussion of the depictions of Orthodox Christianity in Russian cinema of the early post-Soviet period, see Jolyon Mitchell's essay "Portraying Religion and Peace in Russian Film" and Mark Le Fanu's chapters on Russia in his 2019 book *Believing in Film: Christianity and Classic European Cinema*: "Russia: Tarkovsky, Eisenstein and Christianity" and "Russia Again: Millennial Faith and Nihilism."

extent implicate institutionalized religion in the increasingly authoritarian practices of the Putin administration, this chapter focuses on Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* and Serebrennikov's *The Student*, two films in which the relationship between the state, the church, and human life takes center stage.

In both *Leviathan* and *The Student*, the church plays a key role in the state project of producing docile bodies. The two filmmakers, however, present in their cinematic worlds two very different models of power: crudely sketched, Zviagintsev's conception, I argue, is best aligned with the Agambenian model, while Serebrennikov's is better captured by the Foucauldian approach. What faces *Leviathan*'s protagonist is sovereign power, which Zviagintsev (as well as Agamben) understands predominantly in negative terms, as a power "to taboo, exclude, and annihilate" (Chow 132). While Zviagintsev suggests that his characters are not simply reduced to *homines sacri* by the state but are themselves implicated in their fate; the binary between the "dominators" and the "dominated" in this model ultimately remains intact. Serebrennikov's investigation of power, by contrast, is based on the assumption that power permeates the social body (a view aligned with Foucault's theorization of power relations) and thus leaves room for resistance and confrontation in places where Agamben and, so it would seem, Zviagintsev see none.

Sergei Prozorov's theorization of the postcommunist condition provides a useful point of departure for my analysis. Drawing on Agamben's conception of the "end of history,"⁸ Prozorov argues that the demise of the USSR did not simply expose the unsustainability of one historical project among others but brought to relief the contingency of the historical dimension as such

⁸ Prozorov juxtaposes Agamben's reconstruction of the Hegelo-Kojévian problematic of the end of history to Francis Fukuyama's "triumphalist liberalism, for which it is precisely the liberal (universal-homogenous) *state* that fulfills the historical dialectic" (*The Ethics* 29; emphasis in original). See Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* and his "Reflections on the *End of History* Five Years Later" published in *History and Theory*. Agamben's ruminations on the "end of history" are to be found in his "Notes on Politics" (pp. 109-19) in *Means Without End*.

(“The Management” 38). The early post-Soviet period of Russian history was, as Prozorov puts it, “a time of trials”: “[T]his period condenses a multiplicity of times, uniting in a single decade all that *might have happened*, all possibilities of Russia’s political development, and *suspending* them at the very moment when a single model of the future looked set to become irreversible” (*The Ethics* 46; emphasis in original).⁹ In an attempt to explain why Putinism triumphed over its adversaries across the ideological spectrum in the 2000s, Prozorov suggests that despite Putin’s efforts to position himself as a positive alternative to the “chaos” of the previous decade, the Putin regime did not offer “any positive ideological hegemony, but rather invoked a promise of stabilization devoid of substantive content” (“The Management” 41). The Putin regime can thus be discussed in terms of “absolute conservatism”:

While liberal conservatism attempts to conserve what is not yet created and left conservatism strives to conserve what no longer exists, the Putin presidency simply conserves *what there is*, that is, the ruins of the Soviet order. As this remnant of Soviet socialism is neither liberal nor socialist, and indeed escapes any positive predicate, we may speak of Putin’s reign of pure synchrony and structure in terms of *absolute conservatism*, which [...] has dispensed with the substantive object of conservation and instead articulates itself as pure form or style. (*The Ethics* 73, emphasis in original)

While Prozorov’s discussion accounts for the first two terms of Putin’s presidency, Zviagintsev’s 2014 drama *Leviathan* and Serebrennikov’s 2016 film *The Student* comment on its

⁹ According to Prozorov, the options that were tried out but failed to reach the hegemonic status to which they aspired include the following: “General Alexander Lebed’s military-style right-wing conservatism, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s carnivalesque street populism, Yevgeni Primakov’s bureaucratic ‘centrism,’ Gennady Zyuganov’s communist revanchism with a nationalist flair, Anatoly Chubais’s technocratic market liberalism” (*The Ethics* 46).

more recent installment, i.e. Putin's third term, during which, as some critics have argued, the regime became increasingly ideologized. Melik Kaylan, for example, wrote the following in his 2014 piece "Kremlin Values: Putin's Strategic Conservatism": "Putin has changed, or at least changed his game over time, and now espouses a discernible, exportable, full-fledged '-ism' [...]. That '-ism' is conservatism, or at least conservatism of a particular stripe" (10).¹⁰ Putin's conservatism that did not, according to Prozorov, have a substantive object of conservation during the first two terms of Putin's presidency, appears to have articulated during Putin's third term what it is that it strives to conserve: faith, family, and tradition. While Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* and Serebrennikov's *The Student* offer explicit critiques of the alliance between the Putin administration and the Russian Orthodox Church, I do not presume the two filmmakers' unqualified agreement with the thesis about the recent ideologization of the Putin administration. In fact, the question that drives my inquiry is whether, in the cinematic imaginations of these two filmmakers, the Russian state-church duo's defense of traditional values qualifies as a successful attempt to introduce new positive ideological content (however problematic) into the postcommunist experience. To put it bluntly, has the Putin presidency, in Zviagintsev's and Serebrennikov's individual arguments, recommenced the flow of history? An obvious but an incomplete answer—in both cases—is "no." The first part of my chapter is dedicated to a pursuit of more nuanced answers to this question.

While in the following two sections of this chapter I focus on the ways in which these two filmmakers articulate the relationship between the church, the state, and human life on the level of

¹⁰ Similar arguments have been made, among others, by Andrey Makarychev and Aleksandra Yatsyk ("A New Russian Conservatism: Domestic Roots and Repercussions for Europe"), Luke March ("Nationalism for Export? The Domestic and Foreign-Policy Implications of the New 'Russian Idea'"), and Owen Matthews ("Putin to Russia: We Will Bury Ourselves").

content, in the concluding part I discuss the narrative strategies chosen by Zviagintsev and Serebrennikov to address these issues. Both films call attention to the instrumental role that the church has played in shaping and perpetuating political narratives. One could argue, however, that both films, with their tightly controlled narratives, resort to similar narrative practices as the Putin administration itself as they make their own claims to moral authority and thus replicate the logic of the narrative practices that they seek to critique. I examine Zviagintsev's and Serebrennikov's narrative strategies through the concepts of Bakhtinian polyphony and Lübecker's feel-bad film and show that there is a push and pull between horizontal and vertical gestures in the two films.

1.1 *Leviathan*, *Bespredel*, and the End of History

Leviathan, Zviagintsev's fourth feature film and his most explicitly political film to date, is set in a small town by the Barents Sea.¹¹ The film's protagonist Kolia lives in a spacious ancestral home on the foreshore with his family—his second wife Lilia and his son Roma from the previous marriage. Kolia is being evicted from his house by the corrupt local mayor Vadim and he has recruited Dima, an old army friend and now a prominent Moscow lawyer, to help him win the legal fight. Dima, however, proves helpless in the face of corrupt authorities and is brutally beaten up by the mayor's henchmen. Before fleeing back to Moscow, Dima sleeps with Kolia's wife Lilia, who shortly thereafter goes missing and is eventually found dead. A defeated Kolia is thrown into jail for 15 years for the murder of his wife—a murder that he did not commit. Incited or perhaps

¹¹ Most of the film was shot in Kirovsk and the village of Teriberka in the Murmansk region, with some additional photography done in the nearby towns of Monchegorsk and Olenegorsk.

mandated by the “Vladyka,” the local bishop, the mayor Vadim has Kolia’s house demolished and builds in its stead a golden-domed church.

About half-way through, the film is punctuated with the following sequence. Lieutenant-colonel of the Russian Traffic Control, referred to as Stepanych by his friends, is at the wheel of a well-worn police truck. The radio is playing the anthem of the Russian criminal world, Mikhail Krug’s *shanson*¹² song “Vladimirskii tsentral.” The song’s first-person protagonist, an inmate of the notorious Vladimir Central prison, recounts the hardships of prison life and romanticizes in the process the criminal world. The camera lingers on three miniature icons attached to the dashboard of the car. A few inches away from the icons are three more stickers of a similar shape and size; these three are of naked women. [Figure 1]



Figure 1

The scene captures the myriad issues and contradictions that characterize contemporary Russia and that appear to be at the very heart of Zviagintsev’s inquiry into its plight: the alliance between the Putin regime and the Russian Orthodox Church, the commodification of religious

¹² For a discussion of *shanson* in the context of contemporary Russian culture and politics, see Anastasiia Gordiienko, “The Paradoxical Role of the *Shanson* in Putin’s Russia,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 45.3: 342-384.

values, the death-grip of patriarchy, the proximity of the state-church duo to the criminal world and what Prozorov aptly describes as a “brutal indistinction between law and crime, authority and violence, government and gang” (“The Management” 33).

In his analysis of the early postcommunist condition, Prozorov writes: “If there is a single term that can sum up the description of the experience of early postcommunism in everyday life, it must be *bespredel*” (*The Ethics* 150). The concept emerged in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s in the world of organized crime and the prison camp system. As Vadim Volkov points out, in criminal slang, the word was used to denote a violation of norms related to the use of force. Despite its aggressive facade, Volkov writes, the criminal code restricted violence as much as it authorized it. To commit *bespredel* meant to exceed the code-sanctioned level of violence (81). The concept “escaped” the criminal underworld during the perestroika era and has since been part of everyday vocabulary.¹³ The exact meaning of the word *bespredel*, as Prozorov points out, changes depending on its enunciative context: “[B]*espredel* may refer to the utter disrespect for traditional authorities, the acceptability of physical violence in the resolution of conflicts, the politicians’ disregard for public opinion, the radical reversal of moral values, the disappearance of ethical standards in professional practices, the domination of private entrepreneurship by criminal protection rackets, and so forth (“The Management” 38). What remains consistent across the different contexts of usage is the core meaning of a violation of norms. It should be noted, however, that even though the word *bespredel* is sometimes translated as “lawlessness,” the word is not equivalent to “*bezzakonie*” (literally, “without-law-ness”), as its origins in the criminal world

¹³ The term *bespredel* has been used in discussions of post-Soviet cultural production. See, for example, Eliot Borenstein, “Overkill: Bespredel and Gratuitous Violence” in *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Culture* (pp. 195-224) and Beumers and Lipovetsky, “Violence in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture” in *Performing Violence* (pp. 47-67).

intimate. As Prozorov emphasizes in his investigation of the postcommunist condition, *bespredel* does not designate illegality per se but rather “an inaccordance of acts with the tacit and informal norms that may well be themselves illegal” (“The Management” 37).

Zviagintsev intimates early in the film that the world presented to us is plagued by *bespredel*. About six and a half minutes into the film, its protagonist Kolia is pulled over by the traffic police. The viewer familiar with the workings of the traffic police in Russia is likely to brace herself at this point for the following scenario. The police officer will incriminate Kolia with a (possibly imaginary) violation and encourage him to deal with the situation on the spot, that is avoid paying the fine through official channels and having the violation registered on his record by paying the fine directly to the officer.¹⁴ The initial exchange between Kolia and the police officer supports our expectations. When asked to present his license and registration, Kolia defiantly asks the officer if he is trying to meet his “quota,” implying that the officer had no reason to pull him over and did so simply in order to pin on him an imaginary violation and extort a bribe. Zviagintsev, however, is only teasing the spectator. The police officer, we will find out, is Kolia’s friend Pasha, and the tense interaction between the two was just two friends joking around. What follows, however, confirms that our apprehensions were not entirely ungrounded. Pasha relays to Kolia a ‘request’ from his boss Stepanych—the latter wants Kolia, a car mechanic by profession, to repair his truck; the payment he offers is a bottle of vodka. Both the request and the suggested form of payment visibly upset Kolia—as he drives off, he reveals to his friend Dima that this is not the first time that Stepanych has asked him to fix his “rust bucket.” In an attempt to explain

¹⁴ Prozorov points out that the acts of offering and accepting a bribe in and of themselves do not amount to *bespredel*; it is only when the police officer demands an amount greater than the official fine and threatens the driver with additional charges that “we leave the domain of illicit regularity and enter the zone of *bespredel*, where no rules apply” (“The Management” 37-8).

why Stepanych would not buy a new car, Dima suggests that he might be an honest cop. “And a generous one, too,” Kolia retorts. The two have a good laugh.

It is not Stepanych’s abuse of power per se that constitutes *bespredel* here but the inapplicability of any particular set of norms. Stepanych and Kolia, we will find out, are friends but Stepanych asks both as a friend and as an authority figure.¹⁵ The fact that he offers to pay with a bottle of vodka muddles things even further: is he asking for a favor or a paid service? Because of the unclear nature of the request from a friend/authority figure, Kolia cannot demand a proper payment nor refuse him. The simultaneous applicability of two incompatible sets of norms means that no rules apply.

That the phrase “honest cop” is perceived by the characters as a joke, an oxymoron, that those who are supposed to protect the law are the most likely to violate it, speaks to the larger issue at stake here—the impossibility of distinguishing between seemingly incompatible categories, a cross-contamination of opposites. In the film’s opening shots Zviagintsev visually refers us to Genesis [Figures 2 and 3]: “And God said, ‘Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.’ / God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas.’ And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1: 9-10). In Zviagintsev’s creation, like in Genesis, the separation of the sea from the land is followed by the appearance of light. The light is man-made, however; it emanates from the flashing lamp of a lighthouse in the distance. Before man appears on screen, we see further effects of human activity: a disintegrating dock and rotting hulks of abandoned boats.

¹⁵ Notably, Kolia resorts to the same strategy in one of his early conversations with Dima. When the latter refuses to let Kolia read the documents incriminating the mayor, fearing that Kolia might “fly off the handle,” Kolia pulls rank on his friend reminding him that the latter was his junior when they served in the army together.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Creation in Zviagintsev's universe is thus contaminated with destruction and decay; friendship with betrayal; love with violence. Dima sleeps with his best friend's wife Lilia and flees town, abandoning both his friend *and* his lawyer's duties shortly after he is threatened by the mayor. Kolia and Lilia's family friends Anzhela and Pasha, Zviagintsev intimates, testify against Kolia in court when the latter is charged with the murder of his wife. When Kolia smacks his son on the head, he claims he does so "lovingly" ("Да ладно... Я так. Любя.") When Anzhela's son points his toy gun at Lilia, he explains his desire to "kill" her by the fact that she is pretty. Hurt by the betrayal of the woman he loves, Kolia "repays" Lilia first by beating her up and then raping her in the house basement.

Law and authority in *Leviathan* are similarly indistinguishable from violence and crime. The mayor Vadim uses the corrupt justice system to hound Kolia out of his house. The “prosecution” resorts to physical force to defeat Kolia’s lawyer. To put Kolia back in his place, Vadim frames Kolia for the murder of his wife. Whether or not Lilia’s death was the work of Vadim’s henchmen is not entirely clear, but Zviagintsev strategically leaves that option open. Notably, Dima’s defense strategy is far from legal as well. He arrives from Moscow with a thick folder full of dirt on the mayor; his plan is to blackmail the opponent into offering Kolia a more substantial settlement.

In his analysis of the postcommunist condition, Prozorov points out that it is the simultaneous contamination of opposites (akin to the one presented to us in *Leviathan*) that perpetuates the condition of *bespredel* and forestalls the articulation of a new teleological dimension in the post-historical time:

[T]he undecidability of the postcommunist condition is not exhausted by the trauma of the sudden demise of the order that laid its own claim to the teleological end of history, but is rather contained in the aporetic coexistence of radically heterogeneous elements that disables any meaningful vision of the postcommunist order and guarantees the perpetuation of the condition of *bespredel*. [...] Jacques Derrida famously described this experience of undecidability in a series of quasi-transcendental concepts (trace, *différance*, supplement, *pharmakon*, hymen, gift, autoimmunity, etc.) that all point to the same condition of a non-dialectical coexistence (or in Deleuze’s terminology, a disjunctive synthesis) of the most disparate: poison and cure, lack and excess, presence and absence, the sacred and

the profane, damnation and salvation, destruction and creation, violence and law.

(*The Ethics* 157-8)

In a televised speech delivered on February 3, 2000, then acting president of Russia Vladimir Putin declared: “Without the legal system and the dictatorship of law, freedom turns into *bespredel*” (qtd. in Volkov 82). Does *Leviathan*, set during Putin’s third term and insistent on exposing the ever-thriving *bespredel*, make the argument that the Putin administration never fulfilled its promise of establishing a “dictatorship of the law”? Does Zviagintsev expose as hollow Putin’s claim that he brought stability to Russia after the chaos of the 1990s? As Prozorov shows, the “dictatorship of the law” that Putin presented rhetorically as a solution to the condition of *bespredel* was not an alternative to it but precisely what guaranteed its perpetuation:

[T]he uncanny slogan of Putin’s first term, ‘dictatorship of the law,’ [...] supplements the ‘proper’ (legal) power of the law with its very opposite (‘dictatorship’) that reveals that the former has been rendered inoperative and requires the facilitating force of the latter to maintain the semblance of the existence of the law. [...] Putin’s slogan of the ‘dictatorship of the law’ unwittingly reveals what Agamben considers to be the *arcanum imperii* of modern politics [...]: the *law cannot rule*, that is, it has no access and no relation to life that it takes as its object, and, to establish this access, it must produce its own opposite (anomie, state of exception or ‘dictatorship’) in the guise of its application. (*The Ethics* 202-3; emphasis in original)

Leviathan’s verdict is unambiguous: the state of exception continues to be the norm and Russia’s citizens, deprived of a political existence, are essentially what Agamben terms *homines sacri*, beings abandoned by the law and hence at every instant exposed to death (*Homo Sacer* 183).

The film's protagonist Kolia is a textbook example of *homo sacer*. In a key early scene, the mayor shows up at Kolia's house drunk, essentially committing the crime of trespassing, and, among other insults, refers to Kolia and his lot as insects drowning in their own excrement who have never had and never will have any rights ["Вот вы все насекомые никак не хотите по-хорошему, поэтому тонете в говне"; "У тебя никогда никаких прав не было, нет и не будет!"]. Later in the film, in a clear nod to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the mayor will describe Kolia and his kin as "вши" ["lice"] and "твари" ["creatures"]. Deprived of access to the political, abandoned by the law, Kolia is reduced to bare life—what remains after *bíos* is separated from *zoē*: he can be killed with impunity by the state, terminated as an insect, as a louse.

While Kolia is not killed, Zviagintsev suggests at several points in the film that it would not be an entirely impossible outcome. The viewers do not get to find out what exactly is in Dima's folder full of dirt on the mayor, but when Kolia gets access to it, he cries out in outrage: "У него руки по локоть в крови" ["He is up to his elbows in blood."] Unsure at first, we learn how literally we should interpret this statement when the mayor stages a brutal beating of Dima and points a gun at him (eventually firing several shots into the ground). While Zviagintsev does not disclose the exact cause of Lilia's death, he plants a suspicion that it may have been the work of the mayor's henchmen. A final and more subtle hint that we should not put murder past the mayor and his "team" comes towards the end of *Leviathan*. When Kolia is wrongly convicted of the murder of his wife, the film brings to its culmination its ongoing dialogue with Aleksei Balabanov's 2007 crime thriller *Cargo 200*, in which the character played by the same actor as Kolia (Aleksei Serebriakov) who is also convicted of a crime he did not commit, is shot in prison by a guard in

an act of blatant *bespredel*.¹⁶ When the camera captures Zviagintsev's protagonist behind bars during the second courtroom sequence [Figure 4], a viewer familiar with Balabanov's work will remember a similar shot of Serebriakov's character from *Cargo 200* [Figure 5] and wonder whether Kolia, too, might end up "incidentally" killed in prison.¹⁷



Figure 4



Figure 5

¹⁶ Serebriakov's character in *Cargo 200* is sentenced to death, which has led some critics to interpret the killing as his execution (see, for example, Anthony Anemone's discussion of the film in *The Contemporary Russian Cinema Reader* and Jeremi Szaniawski's review of the film in *Senses of Cinema*). This "execution," however, is carried out too summarily to be considered an official fulfillment of the death sentence: Aleksei is summoned to see a visitor and is shot abruptly as he is walking down the hallway.

¹⁷ Zviagintsev's insinuations, paired with his refusal to make the mayor explicitly guilty of murder, may be construed as a subtle reference to the mysterious deaths, disappearances, and attacks of Putin's critics and political opponents. Among Putin's most prominent alleged victims are Anna Politkovskaya, Alexander Litvinenko, Boris Berezovsky, and Boris Nemtsov. For an account of what some consider to be the resurgence of political murder in Russia, see Amy Knight's *Orders to Kill: The Putin Regime and Political Murder*.

Kolia and his family's plight—to be abandoned by the law—is not unique. During the first courtroom sequence in which the judge reads “in supersonic-speed monotone” (Gessen, “Russia”) the court's decision to take away Kolia's property, the camera cuts to a shot of a distressed couple in the hallway who, we may surmise, have had an equally unpleasant encounter with the justice system as the film's protagonist. In Zviagintsev's universe, uncanny in its resemblance to contemporary Russia, no one is protected by the law. Even the lawyer Dima, who insists that he believes in facts only, seems to have known all along that law cannot rule: why else would he choose blackmail as his defense strategy? Critic Lidiia Maslova catches Dima's “bluff” early on; in her review of the film for the *Kommersant* she points out that the ardent materialist Dima refers to the mayor (jokingly, though there is a grain of truth to every joke in Zviagintsev's cinematic universe) as if the latter were a demon: “С такими—только постом и молитвой” [“Fasting and prayer are the only remedies against his kind.”]

Neither Dima, nor Zviagintsev, of course, believe that fasting and prayer would be a more efficient remedy against *bespredel*. The church in *Leviathan* emerges as an accomplice to the state and plays a key role in producing *homines sacri*. There is an almost explicit suggestion that it is the affluent bishop who incites the mayor to use violence in his dealings with Kolia and his lawyer. The bishop tells Vadim in a tête-à-tête that all power is from God, and that where there is power, there is strength, and encourages the mayor to use the “strength” given to him by God to resolve the issues he is facing. [“Всякая власть от Бога. Где власть, там сила. Если ты власть, на своем участке ответственности, решай местные вопросы сам, своей силой.”] The word “сила” that the bishop uses could mean a more abstract “might” but is more commonly used to denote physical force. The mayor heeds the advice and has Dima brutally beaten up. (For those who are inclined

to conclude that Lilia's death is the work of Vadim's henchmen as well, the implications of the bishop's sanction to use "сила" become even more harrowing).

The bishop uses the word "сила" for the second time in a sermon that he delivers in the newly-built church in one of the film's closing sequences. The bishop quotes Prince Aleksander Nevsky: "Не в силе Бог, а в правде." ["God is not in strength but in truth."] The Bishop's reversal of his earlier (behind-closed-doors) claim about God's relationship to power and "strength" exposes as hypocritical the entire sermon focused, ironically, on matters of truth. The duplicity of the bishop's preaching becomes even more pronounced in the subtle yet unmistakable reference to the Pussy Riot "punk prayer": "Когда люди уничтожают кресты, разрубают иконы, надругаются над распятием, *кощунственно называют беснование молебном*; когда люди пытаются уверить, что они делают это из благих мыслей и намерений, то это ложь, которая выдается за правду." ["When people destroy crosses, break icons, defile the Crucifix, and *blaspheme by calling demonic rites a prayer*; when people try to convince others that they do this out of good intentions, they are passing off lies as the truth."] The irony is hard to miss: the sight of an excavator tearing through Kolia's house is too fresh in the spectator's memory for the "good intentions" (construction of the church) to make up for the act of destruction.

The big "reveal" towards the end of the film—the construction of the church on what used to be Kolia's land—provides the key to Zviagintsev's argument about the workings of the Putin regime in its new, post-Pussy Riot, guise, and its alliance with the church. If in the film's opening sequences Zviagintsev shows us images of mutually contaminated creation and decay, the shots of the newly-built church posit destruction and construction as consecutive rather than overlapping categories. There is a clear boundary between the two: the destruction of Kolia's house (shown in

its process) must be completed before the church is constructed (notably, we see only the result, not the construction process itself).

Bakhtin's carnival may, perhaps surprisingly, serve as a useful interpretive framework here. The main limitation of the carnival paradigm is its dependence on boundaries. Consider, for example, Bakhtin's concept of "pregnant death": Bakhtin sees the generative potential of death precisely in the transitory moment; to put in crude terms, it is only after death that a body can be recycled as fertilizer. Even those categories and opposites that to a certain extent merge within carnival are reinstated once the temporarily authorized and spatially limited transgression is over. The boundary in Bakhtinian carnival guarantees a return to order. The question is, does the construction of the church at the end of the film suggest that the Putin regime has overcome the whirlwind of contamination characteristic of *bespredel* and recommenced the flow of history? Should Putin's defense of "traditional values" and the resultant coalition with the Russian Orthodox Church be considered an attempt to introduce new positive ideological content (however problematic) into the postcommunist experience?

Prozorov points out that if history ends abruptly (not because of the disappearance of time after the exhaustion of the Master-Slave dialectic) then it may, in principle, recommence. Any such recommencement, he argues, would have to take the form of terror, the violent attempt of the Master to reclaim his privileged position and reproduce the original "fight to the death" that would force the Slave to resume work (*The Ethics* 17-18). The same logic applies to the condition of *bespredel*:

The benefit of the post-historical condition of postcommunism is that it makes manifestly clear the absence of any way out of *bespredel* that would be a way *back* into the security of confinement within a hegemonic historical narrative. More

precisely, given the nullity of the historical process, any such hegemonic project is immediately revealed to be a chimera that invites us to Agamben's 'camp,' in which bare life itself is abducted by power as the instrument of its bio- or thanato-political rationalities. (*The Ethics* 168-169; emphasis in original)

The newly-built church in *Leviathan* is precisely such a chimera. It seems to be no coincidence that Zviagintsev entrusted his CGI team with the task of "constructing" the church. Zviagintsev, who has repeatedly said in interviews that he sees "things on film rather than on digital" (Rizov) and resisted shooting his films in digital until he began his work on *Loveless* (2017), is known for his reluctance to use computer-generated images. According to Dmitrii Tokoiakov, Zviagintsev's visual effects supervisor, the director goes to great lengths to minimize the use of computer graphics and when he does resort to CGI, he scrupulously researches the object in question and insists that the generated image be indistinguishable from the "real" one, that it becomes "invisible" (Orlov). The church in *Leviathan* [Figure 6], however, is anything but invisible. It is disproportionately large and, more importantly, lacks detail and contrast—compared to its surroundings, it does not have the same range of tones and levels of brightness. To put it in the crudest of terms, it looks fake.



Figure 6

Tokoiaikov has admitted in interviews that he has been asked multiple times to explain why the church looks like a pencil drawing. This is how he has responded to this question: “Она [церковь] действительно выглядит как инопланетный корабль на фоне этого пейзажа, потому что все остальные дома были построены очень давно, и давно не ремонтировались” (Luchko). [“It [the church] does indeed look like an alien ship in this landscape because all of the other houses there were built a long time ago and have not been renovated for a while.”] At the risk of being speculative, I would argue that a scrupulous filmmaker like Zviagintsev would not accept a fake-looking church from his CGI team unless it was *meant* to look less than real.

The vacuity of the ideological content propagated by the state-church duo manifests itself in a number of ways: in the spectral appearance of the church on the outside, in the blatantly hypocritical sermon delivered by the bishop, as well as in the emphatically bare white ceiling that the camera captures inside the church. During the bishop’s sermon, the mayor’s little son, bored by the oration, directs his gaze towards the dome. Instead of an icon of Christ Pantocrator that often occupies the space of the dome in Eastern Orthodox churches, we see a microphone hanging from an unadorned Christ-less ceiling that brings to relief, among other things, the theatrical nature of the bishop’s address.

The absence of Christ is a recurrent motif throughout *Leviathan*. At the end of the tête-à-tête between the mayor and the bishop in the latter’s office, for example, the camera slowly tracks in towards the three statuettes on the bureau: Christ in the center; and a figurine of Prince Vladimir on each side (in his religious attire and with a cross on the left and in his secular attire on the right). [Figure 7] In the preceding shot featuring the conversation between the mayor and the bishop, the interlocutors are sitting opposite each other (the mayor on the left and the bishop on the right), but

there is a vacant chair at the head of the table, a glaring absence in the center of the composition . [Figure 8] A superimposition of the three figurines onto this shot and an inversion of the image—in Zviagintsev’s *God-forsaken worlds* things are often inverted¹⁸—render the image legible. The following triad of pairings emerges as a result: an empty chair and Christ; the mayor and Prince Vladimir in his secular attire; the bishop and Prince Vladimir in his religious attire.¹⁹ The bishop and the mayor alike appear as stand-ins, albeit for a different Vladimir, not the ruler of Kievan Rus’ who converted it to Christianity in 988, but the Vladimir, whose hollowed-out Christianity is a chimera that invites us into the ordered *bespredel* of Agamben’s “camp.”

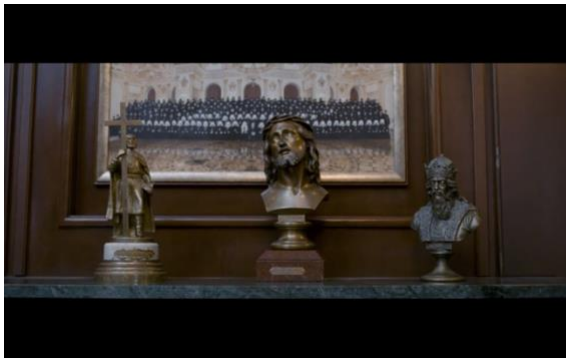


Figure 7

¹⁸ In her chapter on Zviagintsev in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, Nancy Condee argues that inversion is one of the three hallmark techniques of the director’s visual and narrative style (the other two are effacement and indeterminacy). See Condee, “Knowledge (Imperfective): Andrei Zviagintsev and Contemporary Cinema.”

¹⁹ I am indebted to Olga Kim for this insight.



Figure 8

That we are still in the domain of *bespredel* and mutually contaminated opposites is confirmed by Zviagintsev in the film's closing sequences that return us to the very beginning, the site of the separation of the land and water and the decaying boats on the shoreline.

The Putin administration's "biopolitical turn" emerges in Zviagintsev's conception as part of this chimerical constellation as well. In Agamben's engagement with Foucault's conceptualization of biopolitics, he challenges Foucault's claim that power acquires a biopolitical dimension at the threshold of modernity, when "the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 138). In his revision of Foucault's argument, Agamben claims that we cannot really distinguish between sovereign power and biopower because the Western political tradition has been biopolitical since its very inception. He writes: "[T]he inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*" (*Homo Sacer* 6; emphasis in original). As several critics have pointed out, however, in Agamben's articulation, biopolitics emerges in its reverse form—thanatopolitics—and is devoid of a positive productive component that it had in Foucault's conception. For Foucault, as Mark Kelly puts it, "In contrast

to the ‘biopolitics’ of biopower, sovereign power is ‘thanatopolitics’ [...]: the former controls people through the use of life, through caring for people’s organic wellbeing, while the latter uses death, or exposure to the risk of death, to keep people in line” (4).

While Zviagintsev’s negative conception of power is in alignment with Agamben’s theorization of sovereign power, it is Foucault’s distinction between sovereign and biopower that brings to relief its specific dimensions. If in its rhetorical practice, the Putin administration has emphasized its role in protecting and fostering (some forms of) life, in Zviagintsev’s rendition power is devoid of a positive productive dimension—it is exercised primarily as a “subtraction mechanism” (*The History of Sexuality* 136). In other words, what faces Zviagintsev’s protagonist is not biopower (the power “to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death) but sovereign power (the power “to *take* life or *let* live”) (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 138; emphasis in original).

Foucault’s definition of sovereign power as characterized by “a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself” (*The History of Sexuality* 136) is a most fitting description for the relationship between *Leviathan*’s protagonist Kolia and the state authorities. The nuances of the politics of seizure in Zviagintsev’s film are best captured by Nancy Condee in her unpublished essay “Balaclavas and Incense: Remarks on Russian Cultural Politics,” in which she explores the affinities between the seizure of Kolia’s house in *Leviathan*, the “seizure” of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior by Pussy Riot in 2012, and the state seizure of the Yalta Film Studio in 2014. “At its most speculative,” as she puts it, her argument is that “[t]o be a citizen of today’s Russia is increasingly to be called upon to embrace a higher patriotic and spiritual path whereby the body, the dwelling, and the homeland are rendered up to the dual custodianship of the state and the official church for better uses than are available to citizens of the Federation.” In *Leviathan*, Condee contends, Zviagintsev enacts a reversal of a powerful cliché: “If the Orthodox Church

today often rails against the ‘secular assault’ upon the sacred (such was the Church’s charge against Pussy Riot, for example), then here, in Zviagintsev’s reversal, the official church stages an assault upon the private aspirations of secular life” (“Balaclavas and Incense”).

That Zviagintsev is interested in the workings of sovereign power is clear from the film’s title, which is an allusion, among other things, to Thomas Hobbes’ political treatise on sovereignty. In his dialogue with Hobbes, Zviagintsev appears to side with Hobbesian critics who have shown that the civil order cannot be a protection against the state of nature for the simple reason that the latter is neither spatially nor temporally external to it. This is how Giorgio Agamben, for example, deconstructs Hobbes’ argument:

[I]n Hobbes the state of nature survives in the person of the sovereign, who is the only one to preserve its natural *ius contra omnes* [ES: law against all]. Sovereignty thus presents itself as an incorporation of the state of nature in society, or, if one prefers, as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence. [...] Hobbes, after all, was perfectly aware [...] that the state of nature did not necessarily have to be conceived as a real epoch, but rather could be understood as a principle internal to the State revealed in the moment in which the State is considered “as if it were dissolved.” (*Homo Sacer* 35-6).

Further in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes: “[I]n Hobbes the foundation of sovereign power is not to be sought in the subjects’ free renunciation of their natural right but in the sovereign’s preservation of his natural right to do anything to anyone, which now appears as the right to punish” (*Homo Sacer* 106). Zviagintsev, at least at first glance, would appear to be in agreement; it is, after all, the abuse of the right to punish by sovereign power that becomes the final straw in

Kolia's undoing. An extended encounter between Zviagintsev and Agamben, however, reveals discrepancies between their conceptualizations of the relationship between human life and political power and offers a more nuanced understanding of Zviagintsev's ruminations in *Leviathan* on the triangular relationship between the individual, the state, and the church in contemporary Russia and beyond.

The most immediate implication of Zviagintsev's allusion to Hobbesian treatise in the film title is that it extends the reach of the filmmaker's argument beyond contemporary Russia. What is at work here is Zviagintsev's tried-and-true strategy of balancing the culturally specific with the universally relevant. With its references to Pussy Riot, use of Putin's portraits in the mise-en-scene, and verbatim reproductions of real-life sermons from YouTube (Timofeev), *Leviathan* is Zviagintsev's most explicit commentary on the state of affairs in contemporary Russia. Yet Zviagintsev locates the roots of the contemporary Russian condition in the late Soviet Union. The filmmaker establishes a lineage between the late Soviet period, Putin's Russia of the early 2000s, and the contemporary moment through an extended dialogue with Balabanov's *Cargo 200*. While Balabanov's thriller, set in the summer of 1984, offers a dire portrait of the Soviet Union shortly before its demise, it simultaneously, as Anthony Anemone, among others, has pointed out, "suggests an essential continuity with the post-Soviet present" ("*Cargo*" 87). *Cargo 200* is set in a fictitious Leninsk; *Leviathan* in turn features a statue of Lenin in front of the compromised courthouse, suggesting that "the film's 'leviathan'—a mammoth whale skeleton stranded on the shore—implicates both the contemporary Russian state and the skeletal remains of the Soviet state" (Condee, "Balaclavas and Incense").

As Frederick White demonstrates, however, *Cargo 200* is a forceful relocation of William Faulkner's controversial novel *Sanctuary* (1931) to the Stagnation-era Soviet Union. Zviagintsev's

Leviathan is similarly based on an American source. The film was inspired by a news item featuring Marvin Heemeyer, auto-shop owner from Granby, Colorado, who was put out of business in 2001 by the decision of the local zoning commission to build a cement factory on his doorstep and retaliated by building a “killdozer” and demolishing the Granby town hall, the former mayor’s house, and several other buildings. As Zviagintsev has suggested in interviews, *Leviathan* has another inspiration source: Heinrich von Kleist’s 1810 novella “Michael Kohlhaas.” Kleist’s novella in turn is based on a 16th century story of Hans Kohlhase, a German merchant who, wronged by a Saxon nobleman and unable to find justice through recourse to legal procedures, decided to settle the matter through criminal means and launched a full-blown feud with the entire state of Saxony. The changes that Balabanov and Zviagintsev introduce to their source material in the process of cultural translation are illuminating,²⁰ but so are the continuities between the texts. What remains consistent in Faulkner’s novel set in 1931 in Mississippi, Balabanov’s crime thriller set in the Soviet Union in 1984, Kleist’s novella based on a 16th century story of a German merchant, the Colorado “killdozer” rampage story of the early 2000s, and Zviagintsev’s drama set in Russia in the 2010s alike, is the failure of the legal system, the non-equivalence of law and justice.

While it may appear that Zviagintsev targets specifically the corruption of the juridico-political system in contemporary Russia, the film’s inspiration sources suggest that Zviagintsev does not consider the Russian case to be unique; the filmmaker is suspect of law as such. That the

²⁰ If in Faulkner’s novel, for example, the villain is a Memphis racketeer, in Balabanov’s rendition of *The Sanctuary*, the psychopathic rapist, torturer, and murderer is a representative of the state, militiaman Captain Zhurov. As Condee points out, Balabanov’s films set out to remind us that we are all cunning and cruel animals (*The Imperial Trace* 236), yet *bespredel* appears to be a localized phenomenon, rooted in the Soviet Union of the 1980s. In his engagement with the source material, Zviagintsev insists on foreclosing the possibility of rebellion/vengeance that constitutes an important element of the stories that inspired the film. I will discuss the importance of this omission further in the chapter.

mayor in *Leviathan* bends the law however he pleases is only part of the problem; the fact that Kolia's lawyer proves to be a suspect figure as well sheds additional light on the issue. Dima's integrity is, of course, called into question when we find out that he slept with Kolia's wife during past visits and does not hesitate to resume the affair this time, despite the changed circumstances. There is, however, far more substantial incriminating evidence, as Condee suggests—evidence that goes beyond his personal flaws and illuminates Zviagintsev's mistrust of Dima as Lawyer:

[T]he Mayor, the film's most cartoonish figure [...] is a mere intermediary in the more significant [...] battle between Bishop and Lawyer (both, in the end, negative figures). Narrative details, such as the Bishop's and the Lawyer's unslaked craving for water, bring these two characters into alignment as false prophecy and secular knowledge, as a corrupt spiritual leader and an atheist, as co-opted 'truth' and worldly 'facts' – that is to say, non-truth and non-facts. ("Knowledge (Imperfective)" 566).

Zviagintsev's mistrust of law points to another affinity of his conception of power with that of Agamben, who established an opposition between law and justice already in one of his earlier texts, *The Idea of Prose*,²¹ and elaborated on the subject in his later work. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, for example, Agamben writes: "As jurists well know, law is not directed toward the establishment of justice. Nor is it directed toward the verification of truth. Law is solely directed toward judgment, independent of truth and justice" (18). As Connal Parsley points out, "Agamben eschews the determination of a discrete entity called 'law' – rejecting, also, the classical presumption that law (howsoever derived) could structure an ethical [...] 'good life'" (119).

²¹ See section titled "The Idea of Justice" (pp. 79-80) in Part II of *The Idea of Prose*.

Zviagintsev's visually inverted allusion to Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* [Figures 9 and 10] offers some additional insights into the filmmaker's skepticism about law. In a godless world, which in Zviagintsev's cinematic universe is, as Condee shows, often inverted ("Knowledge (Imperfective)"), Dima (Law) takes the place of God while adulterous Lilia (Lilith) emerges as a stand-in for Adam.



Figure 9



Figure 10

One may be tempted to conclude that Zviagintsev advocates here for a return to true Christianity. Some have cited as evidence for this conclusion the distinctions between the corrupt affluent Bishop and the humble local priest, Father Vasilii. Graffy, for example, writes that the

“explicit and sustained contrast” of the two characters showcases the insurmountable distance between official religion and true faith (“*Leviathan*” 317). The contrasts between the bishop and the priest are, no doubt, meaningful, but so are the affinities between the two. Just like the Bishop in his conversation with the mayor Vadim, the local priest asks Kolia if he takes communion and goes to confession. More importantly, both the priest’s and the bishop’s religions in the end carry the same ideological inflection: obedience and humility in the face of a greater power. In a particularly illuminating moment, Father Vasili, in an attempt to console a defeated Kolia, tells him the story of Job, the biblical prophet who, like Kolia, loses his property and family. Job insists that he does not deserve this punishment for he has not sinned and wants God to explain this predicament to him. The priest then skips straight to the conclusion of the story, in which God restores and increases Job’s prosperity after the latter stops questioning God. In his retelling of the story, Father Vasili makes an emphasis on Job’s pride and the fact that once he resigns to his fate, God rewards Job for his suffering. Notably, this is the passage that Father Vasili chooses to quote from the Book of Job:

Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook
or tie down its tongue with a rope?
Can you put a cord through its nose?
or pierce its jaw with a hook?
(Job 41: 1-2)

In her analysis of the film, Condee captures the irony of the priest’s choice of passage: “God’s message to Job (and the priest’s message to Kolia) might equally serve as the corrupt mayor’s threat: ‘If you lay a hand on it, you will remember the struggle and never do it again’ (Job 40: 8)” (“Knowledge (Imperfective)” 571). The mayor, the bishop, Father Vasili, and God alike

are all complicit in the same project—producing *homines sacri*, those who are deprived of *bíos* and forced into obedience.

The contrast between the dynamic hand of God and the passive hand of Adam in Michelangelo's iconic image is traditionally interpreted as evidence of the fact that God has not yet bestowed Adam with the spark of life (see, for example, Barolsky 21). An alternative interpretation, however, attributes Adam's lackadaisical pose to his reluctance to reach out to the divine. One way or another, the fact that Adam's arm is outstretched but his hand is not touching God's hand implies some degree of agency on Adam's part in his encounter with God. In Zviagintsev's rendition of the image, Dima (the stand-in for Law) clasps Lilia's hand in his but the frame above [Figure 9] is deceptive. Lilia quickly pulls her hand away.

While Zviagintsev's film on one hand persists in presenting Kolia and his family as helpless in their uneven match-up with sovereign power, its corrupt juridico-political system and religious institutions, *Leviathan* simultaneously implicates the "victims" in their own plight. This brings us back to Agamben's contention that "the foundation of sovereign power is to be sought not in the subjects' free renunciation of their natural right but in the sovereign's preservation of his natural right to do anything to anyone" (*Homo Sacer* 106). For Zviagintsev, it appears, the subjects' voluntary renunciation of their rights is an equally problematic part of the equation.

While the filmmaker's argument about law's fundamental disjuncture from truth and justice is universal in its reach, Zviagintsev's decision to foreclose any possibility of Kolia rebelling against the system seems to pertain specifically to the Russian context. Unlike Michael Kolhaas (and his real-life prototype) or Marvin Heemeyer, Kolia, who sneers at Father Vasilii's retelling of the story of Job, ironically ends up doing exactly what the priest advises him to do—he resigns to his fate. Despite his threats earlier in the film to burn down the 'palace' that he

presumes the mayor will build on his land, Kolia puts up no fight at all at the end of the film—he drinks himself to oblivion and, when charged with his wife’s murder, simply bursts into tears. When the prosecutor asks him if he has anything to say in response to the charges, Kolia does not say a word; he covers his face with his hand and sobs uncontrollably. If in the news story that inspired Zviagintsev’s film, Marvin Heemeyer uses a “killdozer” to destroy the town hall and the mayor’s house in an act of revenge, in *Leviathan* it is Kolia’s, not the mayor’s house, that is torn down by an excavator. As Condee points out in “Balaclavas and Incense,” *Leviathan*’s final sequences bear an uncanny resemblance to the scenario conjured by a member of the Pussy Riot, Maria Alekhina, in her closing trial statement: “If an excavator drives up to their door and these people are told that they have to evacuate the premises because, sorry, we are razing your house and building a residence for a bureaucrat, these people will humbly collect their things, pack their bags, and go out into the street.”²²

The fact that Kolia does not say anything when the prosecutor “grants” him a voice may seem like a minor detail (it would be naïve to presume that Kolia’s words could have any real weight in this scenario), yet Zviagintsev is attuned to discursive politics throughout the film. Language emerges here as a site of power contestation. When the mayor uses the informal version of “you” (“ТЫ” instead of the formal “ВЫ”) to address Dima, the latter points out that the mayor is the second public official to address him informally (read: disrespect him) in one day. Dima’s attempt to gain an equal footing here fails as the mayor persists in using the familiar form. Notably, when Dima attempts to set up a meeting with the mayor, the latter advises Dima to come to his constituent office hours, reminding him of the limitations (clearly not only temporal) on the possibility of a dialogue with “power.”

²² Condee quotes from Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*, 212.

Zviagintsev eloquently expresses the same idea in two sequences that are almost identical in terms of composition and camerawork—the first courtroom sequence in which a judge speed-reads the court’s decision to evict Kolia from his property and the sequence featuring the sermon that the bishop delivers in the newly-built church. In both cases, the camera slowly tracks toward the front of the room, gradually leaving the “audience” members outside the frame and closing in on the person addressing the room—the judge and the bishop respectively—and the two figures on either side of the speaker. [Figures 11-14]

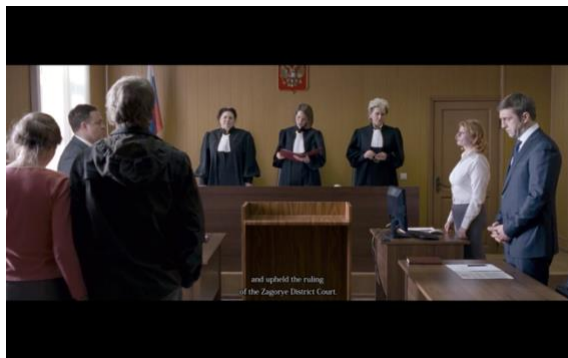


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

The cinematic parallelism between the two sequences illustrates what Masha Gessen has called a merging of “the state and the church into one mechanism of persecution” (“Vladimir Putin’s Absence”). Notably, authoritative discourse emerges as one of the weapons in the arsenal of the state-church duo. Both sequences feature speech acts—the legal verdict and the sermon—that are inherently monologic in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. They presuppose a passive recipient and hence no response.

The bishop’s hypocritical sermon, with its appeal to fight “enemies of faith and the Fatherland” and its claims to truth and moral authority, is the centerpiece of Zviagintsev’s critique of the Putin administration’s narrative games and the role of the ROC in shaping the official

narrative. As Denys Kondyuk suggests, almost all of the words of the sermon could be reversed and work as judgment on everyone involved in the construction of the church built on lies and violence. Zviagintsev himself said in an interview that he would sign his own name under the sermon: “[Э]та проповедь — средоточие мысли о правде и истине, под каждым ее словом я готов подписаться” (Timofeev). This is somewhat ironic. *Leviathan* is an indictment of sovereign power, i.e. power exercised vertically (as well as of those who patiently submit to it thus preserving the vertical of power). Zviagintsev, who begins his film with an allusion to Genesis, appears to be vying for a spot in the long line of distinguished Russian authors, including Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, who—as David Bethea has pointed out—“have long operated under the conviction that they are writing, not one more book, but versions, each in its way sacred, of the Book (Bible)” (164). With his own claim to moral authority and a tightly controlled narrative, Zviagintsev maintains a god-like control over his creation and appears to create a vertical power relationship with his viewers. Whether the irony is intentional and to what extent Zviagintsev’s cinematic “speech act” is indeed monological will be among the key questions addressed in the concluding section of this chapter. In the next section, however, I turn my attention to Kirill Serebrennikov’s *The Student*, a drama that is often cited along *Leviathan* as one of the few explicitly political films in contemporary Russian cinema and “another cinematic attack on the Russian Orthodox Church” (Hoad).

1.2 Cutting Off the King’s Head: Dispersed Power in *The Student*

Kirill Serebrennikov’s 2016 drama *The Student* tells the story of a troubled high school student Venia and his abrupt religious awakening. Nothing bodes disaster at first. The film opens

with a sequence in which Venia's overworked single mother finds out that her son has been skipping swimming lessons. The class, he claims, "offends his religious sensibilities." Venia's mother seems to be just as surprised as we are—the excuse has to be at least somewhat convincing, she implores. Yet Venia is not joking. Driven by his newly-developed religious ardor, Venia proceeds to disrupt one class after another and unnerve his mother, classmates, and teachers alike by pointing out their ungodly ways to them and corroborating his judgments with quotations of select passages from the Bible (which, as the film progresses, begin to sound more and more ominous). His preaching quickly takes effect. The schoolteachers indulge the boy and decide that the phrasing "appropriate swimwear" in the school statutes could only mean "one-piece bathing suits." After the ban on revealing swimming suits, the students who at first wore casual and colorful clothing to school gradually switch to wearing uniforms: white tops and dark bottoms. In an effort to pacify the troubled student, the school principal even goes as far as to propose that students are taught creationism alongside evolutionary theory in biology classes. The liberally-inclined biology teacher, Elena Krasnova, however, refuses to entertain the idea. The only person to challenge Venia and his quickly spreading religious ideas, Krasnova arms herself with a Bible to beat the teenager at his own game and counter his quotations of misogynist, homophobic, and antisemitic passages from the Bible with her own selections from the same text. Weary of Krasnova's attempts to question his 'teachings,' Venia recruits his 'disciple,' a disabled boy Grisha, to kill her. Both intimidated by and sexually attracted to Venia, Grisha initially pretends to go along with the plan but, when he ultimately refuses to carry it out, Venia murders him by hitting him on the head with a rock. Back at school, Venia gets Krasnova fired by falsely accusing her of having touched him inappropriately. In the film's closing sequences, Serebrennikov breaks the spectatorial contract he has established with the spectator by ending his seemingly anti-religious film with a miracle. On

her way out of the school, Krasnova has a vision of the deceased Grisha and, in a desperate act of protest, nails her shoes to the floor and cries out: “I am not leaving here because I belong here. And you don’t!”

Serebrennikov’s film is an adaptation of his own theatrical production staged at the Gogol Center in Moscow in 2014. Unlike his film called simply *Ученик* (*The Student*), the Gogol Center production was titled *М/ученик* (a play on words, a combination of the similar sounding “ученик,” i.e. “student”, and “мученик,” i.e. “martyr”). Both the film and the theatrical production are based on a 2012 play *Martyr* by a German playwright Marius von Mayenburg. Asked in an interview about his choice of a German play as the basis for his work, Serebrennikov said that it captures the reality of life in Russia today: “[В] Германии это такая притча о некой абстракции, мол: ‘что будет, если что-то такое случится?’. А у нас это уже происходит: вон все эти мальчишки уже громят выставки” (Liubakova). [“In Germany this is a parable about an abstract reality, as in, let’s imagine a world where this sort of thing happens. And here [in Russia] this is already happening: think of those boys raiding exhibits.”]²³

It is indeed remarkable how few changes Serebrennikov made to his source material,²⁴ particularly in light of the fact that the film quickly acquired the reputation of a political manifesto in Russia. Critic Mikhail Trofimenkov, for example, compares the experience of going to see *The Student* in the theater to participating in an unsanctioned protest rally, and Anton Dolin argues that Serebrennikov’s drama is the most political Russian film of the post-Soviet period (“*Uchenik*”).

²³ Serebrennikov is referring here to the “work” of the Orthodox group “God’s will,” led by Dmitrii Tsorionov, known by the nickname Dmitrii Enteo. On August 14, 2015, Enteo and his fellow Orthodox actionists smashed several sculptures by Soviet artist Vadim Sidur that were on display at the Manege Art Center at the time.

²⁴ Some critics have found these changes insufficient. Otto Boele, for example, writes: “The Russification of von Mayenburg’s play is not entirely convincing, though. One wonders, for example, if a Russian biology teacher would openly defend homosexuality in the classroom as a ‘natural phenomenon,’ or instruct students on safe-sex practices by having them put condoms on carrots. Krasnova seems implausibly liberal for a Russian school, even if she happens to be teaching in Kaliningrad, the most western part of the Russian Federation.”

The Student puts its cards on the table from the very beginning. The phrase Venia uses to explain why he has been skipping swimming class—“уроки плавания оскорбляют мои религиозные чувства” [“the swimming class offends my religious sensibilities”]—immediately rings an alarming bell. On June 11, 2013, following the scandalous trial of Pussy Riot, the Russian State Duma passed a new redaction of Article 148 of the Criminal Code, which declared a federal crime any “public act expressing manifest disrespect for society and carried out with the goal of insulting the feelings of religious believers.” In *The Student*, the protagonist with delicate religious sensibilities is presented in the most unsympathetic of lights—as a power-hungry, hypocritical, and violent sociopath. Whether or not the film is actually anti-religious, it could easily be construed as such—film scholar Mark Le Fanu, for example, calls it “fiercely anti-Christian” (212). *The Student*, however, treads on sensitive ground not only in terms of what can be interpreted as its anti-religious message, but its portrayal of homosexuality as well. Featuring a gay teenager as one of its few likeable characters and a biology teacher, who tells her students that homosexuality is a natural variation of human sexuality, could be made to look as a violation of the notorious 2013 “gay propaganda” law.

In August 2017 Serebrennikov was put under house arrest for the alleged embezzlement of 68 million rubles donated by the state to subsidize his theater productions. The filmmaker was released from house arrest in April 2019, after nearly 20 months in detention, but (at the time of writing) still faces trial. Some critics believe that the Russian Orthodox Church may have played a role in Serebrennikov’s arrest on what most consider to be trumped-up charges. It was allegedly Metropolitan Tikhon, rumored to be Putin’s personal confessor, who, outraged by the overt anti-clericalism of *The Student*, asked Putin to launch a complaint against its director (Fanu 218). If we are, however, to remember the lessons of the Pussy Riot trial, in which the prosecution refused to

discuss the group's performance in political terms and framed it as an anti-religious offense, we might surmise that the reasons for Serebrennikov's "fall from grace"²⁵ went beyond his anti-clericalist views.

Whether or not Serebrennikov's 2016 film had something to do with the filmmaker's arrest, *The Student* does not shy away from making bold political claims. Critic Anton Dolin has put together a comprehensive list of the film's targets, of which religious fundamentalism is only one: "'Ученик' — фильм прежде всего о фанатизме и 'оскорблении чувств верующих,' но еще — о современной системе образования, об антисемитизме, о гомосексуализме, о лицемерии, обо всех формах тоталитаризма" ("'*Uchenik*'"). [*The Student* is a film first and foremost about religious fanaticism and 'offending religious sensibilities,' but it is also about the contemporary education system, antisemitism, homosexuality, hypocrisy, and all forms of totalitarianism."'] In one of the film's most heavy-handed moments, the biology teacher spells out the film's political agenda:

Это что такое—уважение к религии? Это есть один пастырь, да? А мы все овцы? Он сидит наверху, а мы все внизу, да? Это кто его выбрал? Нет, его как раз-таки никто не выбирал. Слушайте, это прекрасная мысль! Прекрасная мысль, когда есть отец, который за всеми присматривает, но эта мысль прекрасна, когда мы дети, пока мы не выросли. Отец, который все видит, который бесконтрольно карает, который иррационален и жесток... Вы что, не понимаете, что это все тоталитарная диктатура?!

²⁵ As Joshua Yaffa points out, Serebrennikov was temporarily allied with the state during Putin's second presidential term and Medvedev's reign when the Kremlin dallied with contemporary art. Fostering the avant-garde at the time was part of a "stage-managed social modernization" project and was meant to send different messages to different audiences: for the West, it was an invitation to get involved, for Russia's intelligentsia and artists, it was a call for collaboration (*Between Two Fires*).

[What is that, respect for religion? One person is the shepherd, right? And everyone else sheep? He's sitting up there, and we're all down here, right? Who elected him? That's the thing, no one elected him. Listen, that's a nice thought! A nice thought that there's a father looking after all of us. A nice thought as long as we're children and don't grow up. A father who sees everything, who punishes uncontrollably, who is irrational and cruel... Don't you get it—it's a totalitarian dictatorship!]

Notably, Serebrennikov does not deviate here from von Mayenburg's play; every single word of Krasnova's monologue is taken directly from the original. Framed in the shot with Krasnova, however, is an out-of-focus portrait of Putin [Figure 15], which adds a legible second layer to the original meaning.²⁶

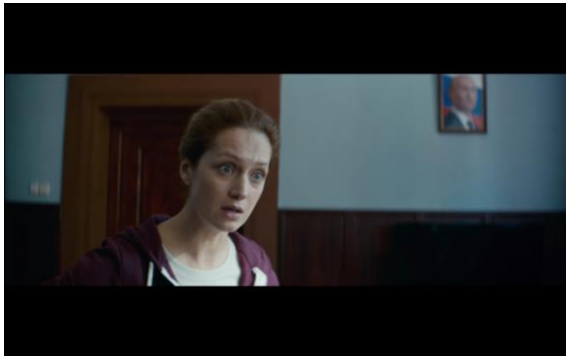


Figure 15

Judging by this sequence alone, one could conclude that Serebrennikov's views on power are in many ways compatible with those of Zviagintsev. In the scenario conjured by Krasnova (and

²⁶ The context renders particularly provocative Krasnova's claim that the shepherd up above was not really elected by anyone. In an op-ed piece written for *The New York Times*, Michael Khodarkovsky summarized the widespread opinion about election practices in contemporary Russia: "[T]here have been no fair elections in decades." Serebrennikov appears to share Khodarkovsky's view.

contextualized by the portrait on the wall), power has a strictly vertical orientation, with a sovereign who occupies a god-like position up above and his obedient subjects down below who unquestioningly submit to the sovereign and thus play an essential role in buttressing the vertical power structure. There is, however, what may at first glance appear to be an inner contradiction (which Serebrennikov inherits from von Mayenburg) in the model of power presented by Krasnova—the shepherd/father ‘up there’ is simultaneously punishing, caring, and all-seeing.

If we recall Foucault’s definition of sovereign power as a subtracting mechanism, as power characterized by “a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself” (*The History of Sexuality* 136), several passages from the monologue cited above will appear incompatible with it. Besides the fact that the stand-in for a sovereign in this case is “looking after all of us,” which adds a positive dimension incompatible with the subtractive operations of sovereign power, this figure is also all-seeing, a characteristic alien to the concept of predominantly absent and intermittent sovereign power. Zygmunt Bauman’s explication of the mechanisms of sovereign power in the Middle Ages (sustained by feudal social relations) brings into relief the episodic (vs. all-seeing) and negative, subtracting (vs. caring) nature of sovereign power:

In [a feudal] society, surplus product was typically extracted from the producers, so to speak, in leaps and bounds; say, once or several times during the annual cycle of the essentially agricultural production, in the form of rent, or tax, or a levy, or a tribute, or a tithe. The one function of power was to force the producer to part, of will or of fear, or of both, with a fraction of his product. Once he had done that, he could be (and should be, if the production was to continue) left to his own resources. It was largely irrelevant for the circulation of surplus how he went about his daily business, how he administered and deployed his bodily and spiritual powers. [...]

[T]he customs and habits which ruled the daily life of the food suppliers were no concern of power. (31-2)

The concept of sovereign power is thus inadequate or rather insufficient for capturing the nuances of the view of power presented by Krasnova in the film's most powerful monologue. Sovereign power (the punishing father)²⁷ is supplemented here with disciplinary power (the all-seeing father)²⁸ and biopower (the caring shepherd). Two additional points in Foucault's theorization of these three modes of power need to be addressed before I can proceed to show how power manifests itself in Serebrennikov's film: (1) the correlation of sovereign, disciplinary, and biopower in Foucault's theorization, and (2) the relation between religious power (specifically, pastoral power) and governmentality in his account.

In his first engagement with the concept of biopolitics, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posits disciplinary power and biopower as modes of power that supplant sovereign power. He writes, "the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (138). This new power over life manifested itself in two different forms: disciplinary power that emerged in the seventeenth century and biopower that formed in the eighteenth century (139, 141). Disciplinary power focuses on the body as a machine (139); it corrects deviant behavior through examination, observation and surveillance. "An anatomo-politics of the human body" (139), disciplinary power "increases the power of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (*Discipline and Punish* 138). Unlike sovereign power and disciplinary power which target

²⁷ Agamben's view of sovereign power as characterized by the right to punish (*Homo Sacer* 106) is particularly fitting here.

²⁸ According to Foucault, panopticism is the "general principle of a [...] 'political anatomy' whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty but the relations of discipline" (*Discipline and Punish* 208).

individuals, biopower operates on populations and consists in the “calculated management of life” (*The History of Sexuality* 140) through quantification and regulation of biological processes, such as birth and mortality rates, life expectancy and longevity, and propagation (139).

While in *The History of Sexuality* Foucault presents us with a chronological view of the transformations of power and suggests that sovereign power disappears with the advent of disciplinary and, somewhat later, biopower, he clarifies and modifies his conception in his later work. In a lecture delivered at the Collège de France on March 17, 1976, Foucault emphasizes that biopower does not replace disciplinary power but integrates itself into it: “This technology of power does not exclude the former, does not exclude disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent, and above all, use it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques” (*Society* 242). This combination of disciplinary and biopower in turn does not supplant but rather supplements sovereign power: “I wouldn’t say exactly that sovereignty’s old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it was complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (241).

In Foucault’s later work, his interest in biopolitics (and, to a great extent, sovereign and disciplinary power) was subsumed under his examination of governmentality. By linking within the term governmentality the terms governing (*gouverner*) and modes of thought (*mentalité*), Foucault emphasizes, as Thomas Lemke points out, that it is impossible to analyze technologies of power without examining their underlying political rationality (“Foucault” 50). Foucault’s definition of government as the “conduct of conduct” reveals another important aspect of the concept of governmentality: its inclusion of both techniques of management by the state and

administration and modes of “governing the self” (Lemke, “Foucault” 50). Governmentality, as Foucault himself puts it, “is the encounter between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (“Technologies of the Self” 225).

Foucault traces the origins of present-day practices of governmentality to the shepherd-and-flock type of organization of pastoral power in Christianity. The three specific characteristics of pastoral power (that then gave rise to modern-state governmentality) bring into relief the continuities between the concepts of biopower and governmentality: 1. “the shepherd’s power is not exercised over a territory” but over a flock, i.e. population; 2. “pastoral power is fundamentally a beneficent power”; 3. “pastoral power is an individualizing power.” In his clarification of the third feature, Foucault writes that the shepherd must look after all and each member of the flock, which will become “the great problem [...] of the techniques of power deployed in the technologies of population” (*Security* 125-28).

What emerges from Foucault’s discussion of the different techniques of power is that they are coexistent, correlated, and mutually implicated in one another. What is ultimately at stake in Foucault’s shift of focus from sovereign power onto disciplinary and biopower and the following reframing of the latter in terms of governmentality is an attempt to “cut off the King’s head” (*Power/Knowledge* 121), to decentralize power, to “abandon the model of Leviathan, that model of an artificial man who is at once an automaton, a fabricated man, but also a unitary man who contains all real individuals, whose body is made up of citizens but whose soul is sovereignty. We have to study power outside the model of Leviathan, outside the field delineated by juridical sovereignty and the institution of the State” (*Society* 34). Foucault’s approach to power, in other words, deconstructs the binary structure of power relations, with the “dominators” on one side and the “dominated” on the other (*Power/Knowledge* 142). In Foucault’s analysis “power is co-

extensive with the social body” (*Power/Knowledge* 142) and should be studied in the multiplicity of its forms: “rather than asking ourselves what the sovereign looks like from on high,” (*Society* 28) we should analyze power as something that circulates.

Foucault’s theorization of technologies of power provides a useful framework for an analysis of the workings of power in Serebrennikov’s *The Student*, which examines both the macro- and the microphysics of power and, as I will argue in the pages that follow, takes as its premise the assumption that power is not exercised from the top down but permeates the social body.

Serebrennikov’s investigation of power in *The Student* begins, to borrow Foucault’s expression, by cutting off the king’s head. Despite the looming presence of Putin’s portrait in the school principal’s office, there is no tangible evidence of the workings of centralized authority in the film. Putin’s portrait certainly “enhances” Krasnova’s monologue in one of the concluding sequences, but Vladislav Opel’iants’s cinematography suggests things are not as clear-cut as they may seem. Krasnova and Putin are compositionally presented as opponents: Krasnova in the foreground occupies the left half of the screen; the right half features a wall with the portrait of Putin on it but it is small, relegated to the background and out of focus. [see Figure 15 above] This portrait makes an appearance in all of the sequences in the principal’s office but it is even less prominent in these episodes and could be seen as simply another piece in the collection of pseudo-patriotic paraphernalia (crowned by an upside-down Russian flag) housed in the principal’s office. [Figure 16; the flag is on the desk; next to the computer screen]



Figure 16

The school functions here as a microcosm of Russian society at large, and the fact that the school principal is not a particularly influential figure serves as further evidence that there is no leviathan here. While the principal plays a role in some of the key developments in the film (for example, the ban on bikinis) and tries to present herself as firm in several moments, she does not make any consequential decisions on her own. Her *modus operandi* is to follow the path of least resistance. The rest of the teaching staff seems equally unauthoritative. Venia successfully disrupts one lesson after another but he is not an exception. The choice of a school as the setting of the microcosm appears crucial for Serebrennikov's argument precisely because, as a key disciplinary institution, the school cultivates a respect for and requires obedience to authority but often proves to be a site where authority is negotiated. The first school sequence, notably, begins with the teacher's interdiction that is violated in the same breath as it is spoken; the students jump into the pool seconds after the gym teacher commands: "No jumping into the pool!"

While the principal and the rest of the teaching staff have trouble maintaining authority, Venia proves to be successful in usurping it. The second swimming pool sequence [Figure 17], the one after Venia's intervention, is in dramatic contrast with the first one [Figure 18] and serves as a measure of Venia's success. The female students are no longer wearing bikinis. The colorful

bathing suits of the first pool sequence give way to solemn black and dark blue swimming attire. The lively soundscape of the first sequence featuring laughter, fragments of conversations, and the sound of splashing water is replaced with an ominous music track. Most importantly, in the first pool sequence the students jump into the water despite the teacher's instructions not to, while in the second the swimmers wait for the teacher's permission to jump in. After a single whistle, they dive in, each into their own lane. This sequence is shot from a high angle—we are positioned behind Venia who observes the race from one of the seating rows.

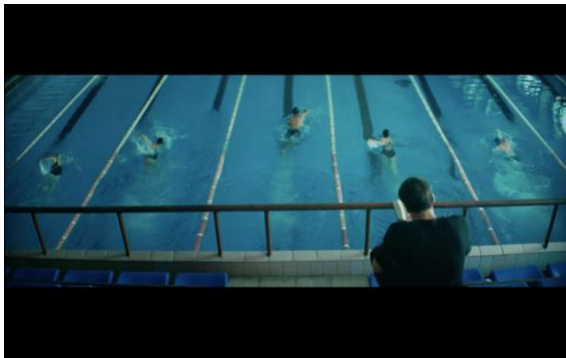


Figure 17

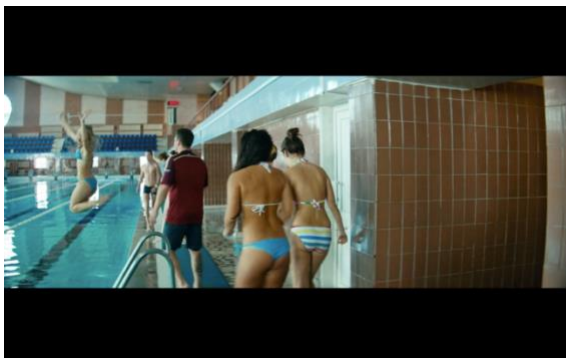


Figure 18

One of the few and hence all the more conspicuous differences between von Mayenburg's original and Serebrennikov's adaptation of it is how the other students respond to Benny's/Venia's stunts. Serebrennikov, who has changed no more than a dozen of von Mayenburg's original lines, altered Georg's/Grisha's remark from "The girls hate you for it" (where "it" stands for the new swimming suit policy) to "They hate you. Because you don't want to be friends with them and all that." ["Так вообще-то они тебя ненавидят. Потому что ты там с ними не дружишь, там всякое такое."] "They" in the latter case refers to all of Venia's peers. If in von Mayenburg's play, the protagonist's disruption of the history lesson with a sermon about the superfluity of industrialization ends with the teacher's comment: "The rest of you don't have to look so scared"; in Serebrennikov's film it wins the provocateur, who ends his sermon by making a sign of the cross to the class, a round of applause. In Serebrennikov's adaptation, Venia is admired, rather than despised, by his peers. The question is, what motivated these changes in Serebrennikov's cultural translation of von Mayenburg's play? An answer to this question requires a sundering of the film's narrative structure—a separation of the two superimposed levels of the narrative: the specific characters and storylines and the macro-dimension that they inform (the school as a microcosm of Russia).

In her preamble to an interview with Serebrennikov, Emily Buder aptly summarizes the conflict of the film: "Kirill Serebrennikov's [...] *The Student* finds its characters on either side of an ideological crevasse that might as well be the size of his motherland." On one side of this crevasse is Venia; on the other—Krasnova. The latter is a representative of secular liberalism, the former, upon a hasty examination, may be considered a stand-in for religious traditional values. A somewhat closer scrutiny, however, reveals that Venia represents not religious values per se but rhetorical recourse to religious discourse for the purposes of usurping and wielding power.

The film begins with Venia's declaration of his newly-found religiosity,²⁹ which prevents him from participating in swimming lessons. In an attempt to placate the teenager with delicate religious sensibilities, the school requires female students to wear one-piece bathing suits to swimming class. The new policy, however, has no effect on Venia; he still refuses to participate in the class. Venia's hypocrisy is brought into even sharper relief by the fact that, despite refusing to undress for swimming lessons, he has no scruples about getting naked to disrupt Krasnova's sex education class. Any remaining doubts about the "authenticity" of the protagonist's religious convictions are dissipated when Venia begins to violate one holy commandment after another: he is disrespectful towards his mother; he repeatedly takes God's name in vain; he bears false witness when he accuses Krasnova of touching him inappropriately; and, finally, he kills.

Venia's religious practice essentially comes down to quoting lengthy passages from the Bible in order to get people to do what he wants them to do. As the film progresses, it becomes more and more clear that recourse to religious discourse serves to satisfy the protagonist's megalomaniac tendencies. We get our first clue when, after the introduction of mandatory one-piece bathing suits for female students, he comes to observe the swimming class—he goes up the stairs and watches his newly-disciplined classmates swim, each in their own lane, from above; the smirk on his face an indicator of the perverse pleasure he experiences from manipulating others.

Venia's delusions of grandeur reach comedic proportions in the sequence in which Serebrennikov offers his own rendition of the incessantly reproduced fragment of the near-

²⁹ The fact that we will not find out what exactly brought Venia to God could be seen as Serebrennikov's commentary on the recent (re)turn to religious traditional values in Russian political discourse and an attempt to present this turn as unmotivated and as a rupture. Cf. Lera Surkova's 2017 drama *Pagans*, in which religion reemerges after a long absence. The plot of Surkova's film is driven by the return to the family of a long estranged devout grandmother, who takes it upon herself to convert her relatives to Christianity. The family members (with the exception of her rebellious granddaughter) prove amenable.

touching hands from Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*. In Serebrennikov's take on the image [Figure 19], Venia (who is standing up) extends his arm to Grisha (who is sitting on the floor); after a brief pause, Grisha extends his arm in return; Venia clasps Grisha's hand into his and pulls Grisha off the floor. What is important here is the set-up: after Venia, his mother, and Grisha eat dinner, Venia invites his guest into his room, and, out of nowhere, pounces on Grisha and beats him up. Venia accompanies the attack by an extended quotation from the gospel of Luke: "Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell." He concludes with the following remark: "Ты будешь вонять в могиле, если не одумаешься и не возьмёшь руку, которую протягивает тебе господь." ["You'll stink in your grave unless you get your act together and take the Lord's hand."] And it is, of course, at this point that the wannabe messiah extends his hand to Grisha [Figure 20]. This entire episode is, notably, absent from von Mayenburg's original.



Figure 19

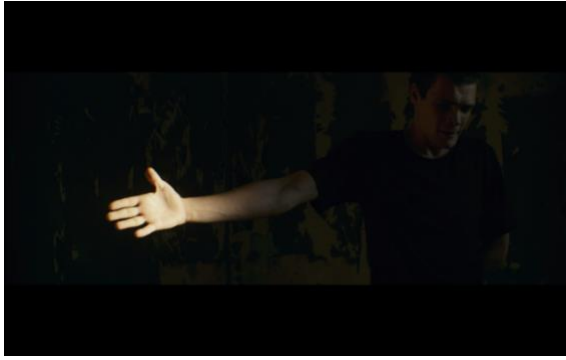


Figure 20

The *Creation of Adam* sequence is by far not the only one where Venia uses religious discourse as a justification for violence. His attempt to persuade Grisha to kill the biology teacher (who, he assumes, is Jewish) relies on manipulating his “disciple” with a selection of carefully chosen quotations from the Bible: “For there are many who are *insubordinate*, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach” (Titus 1:10-11; emphasis added). When Grisha fails to “deliver,” Venia first quotes a line from Matthew: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters (Matthew 12:30),” then asks Grisha to read a passage from Hebrews: “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). While Grisha is reading, Venia hits his ‘disciple’ on the head with a rock.

If we look exclusively at the macro-dimension (where the school is a microcosm of Russia), we may conclude that Serebrennikov posits that the sudden rhetorical shift to religious and traditional values is motivated by political reasons. Religious discourse, he suggests, can be used to define the “enemy” and recast political enemies as enemies of the faith (which in turn facilitates their exclusion from the political domain—cf. Krasnova’s getting fired as a result of Venia’s

narrative manipulations). Another intended effect of a narrative shaped around religious values is disciplinary; its purpose, to use Serebrennikov's own metaphor, is to make sure that everyone stays in their own "lane." While Serebrennikov, like Zviagintsev, showcases the vacuity of the ideological content propagated by the Putin administration, he also suggests that the post-Soviet condition (characterized by an ideological vacuum) may be one of the reasons why it has taken root or at least has not met substantial resistance from the populace. (While it is not definitively clear why Venia's classmates and most of the teaching staff go along with Venia's propositions, we may surmise it is because they do not have any clearly defined values of their own.) In both Serebrennikov's and Zviagintsev's arguments, the newly-found religiosity that has been molded into a new "-ism" is, to use Prozorov's metaphor, a chimera that threatens us with Agamben's camp. Yet what distinguishes Serebrennikov's argument, from that of Zviagintsev is his articulation of the specific ways in which recourse to religious discourse for political purposes produces *homines sacri*.

Zviagintsev's film focuses on a story in which the protagonist and his family's interests are in direct conflict with those of the authorities. The mayor captures the mechanism of producing *homines sacri*: "Вот вы все насекомые. Никак не хотите по-хорошему." ["You're all insects. You always have to make things difficult."] While every individual is virtually *homo sacer*, excluded from the political domain and deprived of *bíos*, it is only when one attempts to forcefully reclaim their *bíos* (when one is "being difficult") that one actually becomes exposed to death. The Agambenian term is, admittedly, both useful and misleading here. For Agamben, *homines sacri*, those who are "at every instant exposed to death" (*Homo Sacer* 183), are products of sovereign power. Yet Foucault's distinction between sovereign and biopower (between "the right to *take* life or *let* live" and "a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (*The History of Sexuality*

183) allows us to offer a more nuanced reading of both Zviagintsev's and Serebrennikov's arguments.

The model of power presented to us by Zviagintsev is sovereign, in the Foucauldian sense that it is exercised when someone dares to rise up against it (*The History of Sexuality* 135). Venia's failed attempt to "eliminate" Krasnova as well as his murder of Grisha (framed in terms of "whoever is not with me is against me") might be read in such terms, too, but only hesitantly: the narrative structure of Serebrennikov's film prevents any attempt to construct a monstrous "leviathan." The fact that Venia (whom we have tentatively designated as a stand-in for politically motivated recourse to traditional values) is a student in the school/microcosm of Russia makes it, in the ultimate analysis, impossible to equate him with the state, the Russian Orthodox Church,³⁰ or any other authoritative institution. No matter what exactly this character is a stand-in for, there will always remain the sheer fact that what takes place at the end of the film is the murder of one high school student by another; more specifically (and these are relevant specifics here), the murder of a gay student by a homophobic one. Grisha's death, in this framework, does not come about as a result of the sovereign's right to *take* life. What is at work here, on one hand, is a power that by making a claim—through recourse to religious discourse—to *foster* a particular kind of life, thereby *disallows* life that is not included within that category; in other words, it inevitably exposes those who are not covered by its protection (even if this protection essentially comes down to a rhetorical claim) to the risk of death. Serebrennikov is, no doubt, alluding to the fact that the

³⁰ Father Vsevolod, "a well-fed, gold-clad priest" (Boele), who teaches a class on the foundations of Orthodox culture at Venia's school, is a more suitable candidate for this role. The fact that he teaches his class in the gym could be seen as Serebrennikov's critique of the law signed by Putin in 2013 that made religious education mandatory for all schools in the country. It could also be read as a commentary on the increasing influence of the church in Russia's socio-political affairs. Irrespective of the scale, the message communicated by the decision to have the priest teach at the gym is more than legible: the church does not belong here.

2013 propaganda law essentially legalized discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ community in Russia.³¹

On the other hand, however, the doubling of *The Student*'s narrative structure (where Venia could be said to represent a specific political stance but also inevitably remains an ordinary high school student) has further political implications: it dismantles the binary opposition between the dominators and the dominated and presents power as something that is constantly negotiated between the participants of a given situation. In every single sequence in the film featuring an interaction between two or more characters, there is a push and pull, a continuous working out of the terms of the relationship. Venia may seem like a particularly successful manipulator, but if we look at specific moments, his presumed dominance easily crumbles. He beats up Grisha but is himself beaten up twice—by his mother and his classmate Tkacheva; it may appear that he has his mother and Grisha eat out of his hand but in both cases, this impression is at least in part an illusion that Venia's mother and Grisha create so as not to lose the person who is dear to them. There is no single moment in the film where Grisha is shown to have any genuine interest in Venia's preaching or seriously considers killing the biology teacher. He, too, manipulates Venia (in an attempt to get him to like him) by pretending that he is willing to "eliminate" Krasnova for him.

Opel'iants's cinematography serves as a crucial vehicle for communicating the fluctuations in power dynamics between the characters. Shot for the most part on a handheld camera, the film prioritizes long uninterrupted takes. In the press notes, Serebrennikov, a little disingenuously, as Leslie Felperin points out, attributes his preference for long takes to laziness. Felperin offers the following explanation: "The fact that Serebrennikov recently mounted a stage adaptation of Lars

³¹ According to a Human Rights Watch report "License to Harm" published in 2014, the anti-gay propaganda law passed by the Russian State Duma in 2013, led to increasing amounts of harassment and violent hate crimes against members of the LGBTQ community in Russia.

von Trier's Dogme 95 film *The Idiots* would suggest the long-take strategy has more to do with aesthetics and realism rather than expediency." I would also argue that Serebrennikov's use of the long take, assisted by blocking and the movement of the camera that follows whoever is the "agent" in each specific moment, captures how power is negotiated in a given situation in real time. The narrative structure and the cinematography of *The Student* posit that power permeates the social body. Serebrennikov's argument on the workings of power is thus aligned with Foucault's view that power:

is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them. (*Society* 29)

I would assert—if somewhat reductively—that Serebrennikov's stance is potentially more optimistic because a dispersed view of power presupposes a multiplicity of points of resistance. Zviagintsev, who presents his protagonist as helpless in the face of sovereign power, offers, it seems, a more pessimistic take on the matter. There is, however, a difference between the view of resistance presented in a given cultural object and the potential for resistance produced by that cultural object. I shall address this issue in the concluding section of this chapter, in which I explore the narrative strategies of these two, each in its own way, didactic and monologically inclined films.

1.3 Authoritarian Fictions?

In articulating their anti-clerical statements, both Zviagintsev and Serebrennikov offer disruptions to forms of discourse that Bakhtin would call authoritative. In *Leviathan*, for example, the tracking movement of the camera, used both in the first court sequence and the sequence featuring the bishop's sermon in the film's conclusion, slowly pushes the audience out from the shot, drawing parallels between the sermon and the legal verdict and exposing them both as discourse that is unidirectional and peremptory. Moreover, the events leading up to the bishop's sermon in the conclusion of the film destabilize and undermine the authority of the words uttered by the bishop. Examples, as I have discussed above, include the bishop's hypocritical claim about God's relationship to "сила" ("strength") and his critique of those who justify destruction with "good intentions," which applies to the bishop and his affiliates more than anyone else. Serebrennikov's study of religious fundamentalism similarly contextualizes authoritative discourse (thus double-voicing it, in Bakhtin's terms) to disrupt its coercive potential. A key strategy used by Serebrennikov for these purposes is accompanying each of Venia's quotations from the Bible with an on-screen reference to the chapter and verse from which the would-be messiah is quoting. The on-screen "footnotes" highlight Venia's selective recourse to the Holy Writ, visualize the fraught process of taking things out of context, and bring to relief the incongruence between the words and the situation to which Venia, usually as a result of a literal (mis-)reading, applies passages from the scripture. The fact that Venia violates several of the ten commandments further increases his distance from the authoritative discourse to which he lays claim. It is not, however, so much Venia's authority that the film challenges; the fact that the often bloodthirsty passages that the protagonist quotes are indeed from the Bible (as the on-screen annotations insist), as well as the fact that Krasnova and Venia draw opposite conclusions from it,

target the authority of the scripture itself and, by a logical extension, all forms of authoritative discourse.

The question that interests me, however, is whether the two films that stage elaborate attacks on authoritative discursive practices can themselves be considered authoritative in their forms of spectatorial address? Both *Leviathan* and *The Student*, often referred to as a “parable” and a “political manifesto” respectively, have lessons to teach us. Can we thereby conclude that they produce forms of what Susan Suleiman terms “authoritarian fiction” and thus engage in the same discursive practices that they seek to critique? Or would reading them in such a fashion be an “authoritarian” gesture in its own right? It is to these questions that I direct my attention in this section.

Serebrennikov’s *The Student*, a film that explicitly thematizes education, propounds the view that there are right and wrong lessons one could teach and learn. A class on the foundations of Orthodox culture, in Serebrennikov’s view, does not belong in the school curriculum (the filmmaker visually suggests its non-belonging by the fact that Father Vsevolod teaches it in the school gym). Equally unwelcome are creationist theories in biology classes and history lessons that present Stalin as a “a blessing for the state” [“государственное благо”].³² Serebrennikov, however, does not only take issue with the things that should not be taught in schools; what seems to be equally problematic in his view is the general lack of direction in school education. The all-pervasive apathy is part of the reason why Venia is so successful in disrupting the life of the school:

³² This is the view allegedly held by Olga Vasil'eva (see Surnacheva), who was appointed Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation in 2016 and currently occupies the position of the Minister of Education of the Russian Federation (the Ministry of Education and Science was split into two separate entities in 2018). In *The Student*, released prior to Vasil'eva's appointment, the history teacher assigns an essay on Stalin as “an effective manager.”

neither the teaching staff (with the exception of Krasnova), nor the students seem to have strong opinions about anything.

What drives the narrative forward is the conflict between the only two opinionated characters, Venia and the biology teacher Krasnova. In Susan Suleiman's discussion of what she calls "authoritarian fictions" (of which *roman à thèse* is an exemplary representative), she writes: "In the *roman à thèse*, the trait that determines all the rest is the manifest intention to communicate an unambiguous, virtually exhortative message" (243). One of the two classical narrative structures of the *roman à thèse* is confrontation,³³ that is a struggle between two opponents who are not on the same moral or ethical plane—in the *roman à thèse* the narrative clearly privileges one adversary and their set of values over the other (102). Serebrennikov's film is structured precisely as the kind of confrontation described by Suleiman and does privilege one of the characters (Krasnova) over the other, albeit begrudgingly. In his review of the film, Iurii Gladil'shchikov praises Serebrennikov's film for its polyphonic orchestration of voices but laments that this polyphony disappears in the last third of the film when we find out that the film's protagonist is "клинический идиот, скотина, а заодно бытовой антисемит, а вовсе не борец с окружающим маразмом" ["certifiably insane, an animal, as well as a common anti-Semite, and not at all a fighter against all-pervasive idiocy"]. While Venia is indeed completely discredited, his liberally inclined opponent Krasnova, who initially sounds like the voice of reason, is presented as the single but by no means unquestionable or unproblematic alternative.³⁴ In fact, Krasnova's

³³ The second one is apprenticeship (see Chapters 2 and 3 in Suleiman's *Authoritarian Fictions*).

³⁴ In von Mayenburg's original, the biology teacher, who immerses herself into the study of the Bible to beat her opponent, reaches levels of zealotry that equal those of her adversary. In Serebrennikov's adaptation, Krasnova is slowly becoming more and more unsettled, yet she is not dismissed altogether.

protest action at the end of the film, in which she nails her shoes to the floor,³⁵ is only made possible by a forceful adjustment of her worldview. A convinced atheist and rationalist, Krasnova, who has conceded defeat and is on her way out of the school, has a vision of the recently murdered Grisha, a vision that makes her turn around and stage her protest action.

Serebrennikov introduces some of the more radical changes to von Mayenburg's play in this scene. In the original, Georg [Grisha] is wounded but not dead; he comes back to the school, concussed and unable to explain what exactly has happened, leading one of his classmates to conclude: "He just says confused stuff, and that Ms. Roth [Krasnova] is involved." While there is some degree of hope in the original play that Georg might recover and that Benny [Venia] might be brought to justice, Serebrennikov kills Grisha off and makes him "return" only in Krasnova's vision. Grisha's "return" in the concluding sequences of *The Student* has important political implications as it rescues him from the fate of a *homo sacer* (who may be killed with impunity but not sacrificed) as it reframes his murder (for which Venia will most likely not be punished) as a sacrifice and Grisha himself as a martyr. In their theorization of sacrifice, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert write that sacrifice, which may be used for a variety of different purposes, always follows the same procedure: "This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed" (97). Grisha, who reappears in Krasnova's vision in the

³⁵ Krasnova's protest has reminded some critics of Petr Pavlensky's 2013 action titled "Fixation," in which he nailed his scrotum to Red Square (see, for example, Crane). Even though it was most likely von Mayenburg's original (in which the biology teacher nails her feet to the floor) rather than Pavlensky's performance that inspired Serebrennikov's narrative choice, the filmmaker embraced the comparisons between Krasnova's and Pavlensky's protest actions. See, for example, Serebrennikov's remarks at the Kinotavr press-conference ("Kirill Serebrennikov: 'Ekstremizm – ot pofigizma'").

liminal space of the staircase, emerges in the conclusion of Serebrennikov's film precisely as such a mediating victim but not as a *homo sacer*. The vision inspires Krasnova to continue fighting.

I would argue (at the risk of being speculative) that the changes introduced by Serebrennikov in these concluding scenes could be read as facilitating a statement about the political potential of art. It is, after all, the "magic" of the cinematic medium that brings Grisha back and reframes the murder as a sacrifice for a political cause. This moment in the film marks a sudden change in the terms of the spectatorial contract, which draws, by virtue of its precipitance, the spectator's attention to the workings of the medium. If there is an exhortative message that the film is trying to deliver, it is, as I have argued in the previous section, a message about the non-static circulating nature of power relations. In the film's concluding sequences, Serebrennikov suggests that art has the capacity to disrupt and challenge relations of power and may play a role in creating spaces for resistance.

Yet Serebrennikov, in one and the same gesture, expresses and tempers his optimism about the political efficacy of artistic interventions. Krasnova's act of protest motivated by Grisha's "return" looks less than formidable. The scene is shot in another long take: the handheld camera follows the biology teacher into one of the classrooms and "watches" her nail her shoes to the floor. All alone in the room, she keeps repeating "I am not going anywhere" but her voice grows quieter every time she says it until she bursts into tears. Il'ia Demutskii's ominous score in the meantime grows louder.

The ways in which the film's long takes engage the audience capture the key principle of Serebrennikov's spectatorial address in *The Student*. In John Rhodes's analysis of the long take in Haneke's films, he points out that long takes, which for Bazin epitomized the freedom of neorealist cinema, are to some degree coercive in nature: "[T]he freedom that Bazin relishes in neorealist

cinema (and in the cinema of Welles and Renoir) is actually a coercion to discern, to judge, to interpret. But spectators are free, so the argument goes, to make up their own minds. Nonetheless, the luxury of this freedom (a luxury produced by cinematic space and time) has value only insofar as it forces the activity of discernment” (19). In Haneke’s work, Rhodes suggests, the long take challenges the spectator because the plenitude of the real contained in the shot does not allow the viewer to make out what is important (20). In his use of the long take Serebrennikov uses a different strategy. His minimalist and formalist use of the *mise-en-scene*—this is where his experience as a theater director shows its most conspicuous traces—limits the plenitude of the real, encouraging the spectator to discern, but carefully guiding this process of discerning. As I have shown in the previous section, the film’s long takes want us to see the mobility and dispersed nature of power relations. It thus, paradoxically, coerces us into seeing that we can, in fact, negotiate our freedom.

The film’s inconclusive ending enters us into the feel-bad mode as it refuses to provide a catharsis to the worn-out spectator. The long take of Krasnova’s protest cuts to a shot of two police officers covering up Grisha’s body. Will Krasnova’s protest bring about any meaningful change? Will Venia be punished? Probably not. Yet what the feel-bad ending ultimately wants us to “discern” is consistent with the film’s agenda: it is up to us to decide what happens (both within and outside the realm of this cinematic universe). Serebrennikov, however, delivers this message with a degree of self-irony and an understanding that cinema’s ability to coerce (into freedom or otherwise) is limited. As the police are struggling to prevent the wind from blowing the tarp off of Grisha’s body, we see a young man jogging down the pier. He could not care less about the murder—he does not bother to look. We are, as Serebrennikov is well aware, free to choose what we do and do not want to see.

If Serebrennikov's film ends with a crime and a question—will there be a punishment? — Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* offers a closed-off narrative: it is not clear whether there was a crime but there were a trial and a punishment;³⁶ the (most likely) innocent protagonist was sent to jail for fifteen years after being convicted of the murder of his wife. The fact that the film ends just how it started (as is often the case in Zviagintsev's films) adds to the sense of finality. In the film's opening and concluding sequences alike, we see the site of the separation of the land from the sea, crashing waves, and the rotting hulks of abandoned boats. In his discussion of the feel-bad film, Lübecker quotes Aristotle's dictum "the end is everything" (2). Unlike many Hollywood films that either diffuse negative emotions at the end of the film or contain them within a fully closed-off narrative, feel-bad films do not let the spectator off the hook and force them to stay with the negative emotions (2-3). There is an implicit value judgment in Lübecker's position. His discussion of feel-bad films revolves around the ways in which an unpleasant viewing experience that feel-bad films create raises political and ethical questions. The much less unpleasant Hollywood films then presumably do not have the capacity to ask equally challenging questions.³⁷ Following Lübecker's logic, one might conclude that the closed-off narrative of Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* reifies the film's pessimistic ending, in which the protagonist submits to his fate without offering the least resistance. Asked about the ending, Zviagintsev said in an interview: "I want to see what my hero is made of, test his mettle" (Levchin). The test results are disheartening: the

³⁶ Both Zviagintsev and Serebrennikov are in dialogue with Dostoevsky. *The Student's* protagonist is a Raskolnikov-like figure who considers himself superior to all others (and hence above moral law). *Leviathan* includes explicit references to *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov* and challenges Dostoevsky's point of view (expressed in several of his works) that one needs to embrace suffering. As Randall Havas suggests, in Dostoevsky's view, suffering is "an expression of a specifically Christian goal of selflessness, what Kierkegaard calls a self-annihilation before God" (166).

³⁷ For example, in his discussion of Brian de Palma's 1989 film *Casualties of War*, "a film with Hollywood stars, a causal narrative, closure and a redemptive ending," Lübecker argues that the film lets the spectator off the hook by tempering its critique of the military system with the conclusion that, after all is said and done, this system does deliver justice (45).

protagonist proves helpless in the face of brutal sovereign power. The state of exception has become the norm, and that's that (hence the closed-off narrative—there is nothing we can do about it).

This caricature of an analysis brings to relief two fallacies: 1. The idea that the view of politics presented in a given cultural object equals the politics of that cultural object; 2. The belief that there is a guaranteed correspondence between specific formal choices and a particular political stance. Filmmaker Yvonne Rainer names a couple of such problematic correlations: “disjunction equals alert viewer equals critique of patriarchy and narrative coherence equals passive viewer equals status quo” (qtd. in Phelan, 178). Paradoxically, what makes Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* a feel-bad film is that it does not have any of the formal characteristics of a feel-bad film.

The defining characteristic of the feel-bad experience, according to Lübecker, is this: “the film produces a spectatorial desire, but then blocks its satisfaction; *it creates, and then deadlocks, our desire for catharsis*” (2; emphasis in original). In her analysis of Zviagintsev's film, Olga Kim briefly invokes Lübecker's category and suggests that *Leviathan* does precisely that—it blocks the satisfaction of the spectatorial desire that it has created: “The viewers are doomed to leave the theater with no sense of relief, but rather with a renewed sense of angst and urgency” (46). While I am in agreement with Kim's conclusion, formally, the film does not qualify for the feel-bad category. While Lübecker admits that there is no ready-made recipe for a feel-bad film, feel-bad films use the capacities of the cinematic medium to “get on the nerves of the spectator” (2). Among the strategies used by feel-bad filmmakers are the following: assaulting the sensorial apparatus of the spectator (by making sounds too loud, images too blurry, close-ups too close, editing too jagged, etc.); producing a form of affective disturbance through moral or narrative indeterminacy; refusing to provide narrative closure; leaving unexplained or breaking the terms of the spectatorial

contract (for example, by abruptly switching to a different genre or confusing reality and fiction without relinquishing the claim to reality). Lübecker also notes that feel-bad films “sit somewhere between establishing a fictional universe and deliberately wanting to get on the nerves of the spectator” (2). Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan*, with its beautiful cinematography and a coherent and closed-off narrative, does not use any of the above strategies to irritate the spectator. Neither the sound, nor the images are designed to stage an assault on our senses. There are no narrative gaps (with the exception of the cause of Lilia’s death, to which I will return) or any unexplained changes in the mode of spectatorial address. If some feel-bad films challenge the spectator by refusing to take a definitive moral stance on a problematic action, *Leviathan* has its values straight and does not hesitate to qualify things as right or wrong, true or false, fair or unfair. Zviagintsev wants us to get fully immersed in the fictional universe he has created, wants us to empathize with the film’s protagonist and appreciate the monstrosity of the injustice that he has suffered. In other words, *Leviathan* confronts the spectator by refusing to confront us directly; it creates an overwhelming spectatorial desire for the protagonist to take vengeance (which it then frustratingly refuses to satisfy) precisely because it uses conventional cinematic language and narrative strategies. Even the sense of finality produced by the film’s closed-off narrative only exacerbates the feelings of angst and urgency with which we are “doomed to leave the theater.” Any sense of indefiniteness would leave the spectator hopeful (maybe Lilia isn’t really dead? maybe they won’t demolish the house? maybe Kolia won’t have to go to jail?) and less likely to leave the theater motivated to take on the world. The extreme pessimism of the outlook on power presented by Zviagintsev in the film is a crucial element of the film’s feel-bad strategy: Zviagintsev lays it on thick to elicit a stronger emotional response. *Leviathan* and *The Student* are thus (at least in some ways) engaged in the same project: coercing the spectator into freedom.

Yet there is a fallacy underlying this conclusion as well: the assumption (that has informed much of my discussion) that *Leviathan* is a political film or, rather, that it is primarily or exclusively a political film. As Condee points out: “We – Western scholars, Russian critics – may want it to be a political film rather than a religious film; Zviagintsev has a different view” (“Knowledge (Imperfective)” 566). While my interest in the film lies mainly with its political aspects, reading it as a predominantly political film is in itself an authoritarian procedure that imagines *Leviathan* as inherently monologic and obscures some of the more dialogic aspects of the film’s spectatorial address. While Zviagintsev may indeed privilege the religious message over the political one, one of the key aspects of the film’s relationship with its audience is that it allows us to read it either as a religious or a political film.

The film’s title refers us to two key texts: Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and the biblical story of Job.³⁸ In my discussion of the film’s political agenda I focused on the former and briefly invoked the latter as evidence for Zviagintsev’s anti-clerical view that religion (in its institutionalized forms) demands obedience in the face of a greater power. If we switch the interpretive lens, however, we may conclude that Zviagintsev’s interest in the story of Job lies elsewhere. In her analysis of the story of Job, Victoria Silver writes: “Job asks for his predicament to be made intelligible to him, to have the coherence of his world and his faith restored by some explanation, to have the deity interpret itself to him. [...] God gives no answer as such to Job’s question but aggravates Job’s sense of disorderly creation with a litany of its curiosities [...] and monstrosities”

³⁸ While in many ways monologically inclined, Zviagintsev’s film can be read as polyphonic if we interpret Bakhtin’s polyphony, via Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov, as intertextuality. See Kristeva’s “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (pp. 64-91) and Todorov’s *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*.

(164). *Leviathan*, Silver concludes, is thus a figure for the “world’s fundamental intransigence—its resistance to explanation” (164).

If we privilege the religious reading of the film, Zviagintsev’s “leviathan” appears to be precisely such a figure. The film’s ending in this case then does not (and does not have the capacity to) provide a closure. As Condee writes in her discussion of the film: “[A]s an artifact of human creation, the film itself does not perform for us a knowledge of whether the very suffering it depicts finds redemption in a world to which it has only tenuous access” (“Knowledge (Imperfective)” 572).

The fact that Zviagintsev refuses to provide an explanation for Lilia’s death leaving us wondering what exactly happened (was it a suicide? accident? murder? and if she was indeed murdered, then who did it?) can on one hand serve as further evidence that the film’s “leviathan” is to be understood as a figure of the world’s fundamental intransigence. To fill in this narrative gap would equal an attempt to answer the question that torments the biblical Job, Kolia, and the viewer alike, and that both God and Zviagintsev leave unanswered: what is the cause and value of human suffering? On the other hand, the filmmaker leaves the spectator an opportunity to choose the explanation that best suits their understanding of the film as a whole. The following evidence is purely anecdotal but nonetheless informative: in random conversations with people about the film, I have noticed that many viewers believe they know for certain what happened to Lilia—some say she committed suicide, some believe she was murdered by Vadim’s henchmen, others, that it was Kolia who killed her (in cases when there was a longer temporal gap between the viewing of the film and the conversation, many were convinced that they saw it happen on screen). This unreliable survey brings to relief the inherently dialogic nature of the relationship between

film and the spectator as well as the chameleonic nature of Zviagintsev's film. He may want it to be a religious film, but we are given the option to decide otherwise.

For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's work was the exemplar of polyphonic writing—it incorporated a multiplicity of heterogeneous voices and positions, which were not subsumed under the voice of the author. As critics have pointed out, however, “Bakhtin's passion for the horizontally cast dialogic word comes at the expense of Dostoevsky's more vertical gestures” (Emerson 132). In Zviagintsev's and Serebrennikov's films, as I have tried to show, there is a similar push and pull between vertical and horizontal gestures. If there is a tendency towards the monological in both *Leviathan* and *The Student*, it is akin to the one that Yurii Kariakin detects in Dostoevsky's oeuvre: in his crucial scenes, there is always a silent “finger pointing at the truth” (qtd. in Emerson 130). As Jones reasons, however, Bakhtin's recourse to binary oppositions and his privileging of the dialogic over the monologic do not survive careful scrutiny because in accordance with Bakhtin's own principle that all utterances are ultimately double-voiced, “it should be possible to establish a scale of different degrees of double-voicedness” (23). While Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* and Serebrennikov's *The Student* are indeed inclined to “affirm absolute truths, absolute values,” as authoritarian fictions do (Suleiman 10), their attempts at monologic unity are driven by inherently dialogic ambitions. If these attempts resemble the language of the state-church duo that has taken upon itself the role of moral authority, it is precisely because they are meant to serve as a response to discourse that refuses to be part of an open-ended dialogue.

2.0 Russia's Quiet Other: Dmitrii Mamuliia's *Another Sky* and Aleksandr Kott's *The Test*

Dmitrii Mamuliia's 2010 film *Another Sky* and Aleksandr Kott's 2014 drama *The Test* at first glance have little in common. The former is set in contemporary Moscow; the latter in northeastern Kazakhstan of the Stalinist period.³⁹ While Kott's film with its stunning geometrically accurate shots and interplay of bright colors is empathically formalist, Mamuliia's "restrained" visual style tends towards that of the documentary film. What these two very different films share, however, is their focus on Russia's Others. Kott's film tells the story of a Kazakh girl Dina and her father Tolgat, who fall victims to the first Soviet bomb test, conducted at the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site on August 29, 1949. In *Another Sky*, Mamuliia's protagonists, Ali and his nine-year-old son, are immigrants who come to Moscow from one of the Central Asian republics in hopes of finding Ali's estranged wife. Both Mamuliia's and Kott's characters are *homines sacri*, bearers of bare life who dwell in the zone of indistinction between *bíos* and *zoē*. Included only by virtue of being excluded, they are outside both divine and secular law—they can be killed but not sacrificed (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 73). But unlike in Agamben's conceptual universe, which is notoriously resistant to engagement with imperial and colonial histories in a theorization of the state of exception,⁴⁰ Mamuliia's and Kott's films, with their focus on Russia's Others, seem to

³⁹ Neither film explicitly states its location. Mamuliia avoids all geographically grounded shots. That we are in Moscow is revealed only to the attentive eye and ear: one may recognize Moscow's Kiev Train Station or catch a muffled station announcement about a train arriving in Moscow. In Kott's film, it is the plot that leads the spectator to believe that the characters are near Semipalatinsk.

⁴⁰ For a critique of Agamben's refusal to engage imperial and colonial histories, see Malini Johar Schueller's article "Decolonizing Global Theories Today," Sheila Nair's essay "Sovereignty, Security, and the Exception," and Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat's intervention in *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*.

point to the indispensability of the imperial context for understanding both the Soviet and the post-Soviet biopolitical projects.

In this chapter, I investigate the convergence of imperial and biopolitical narratives in Mamuliia's and Kott's films, focusing, in particular, on their limited use of dialogue: here, Russia's Others either do not speak at all (*The Test*) or speak very little (*Another Sky*). While Mamuliia's and Kott's silencing strategies may, on one hand, be interpreted as a replication of an imperial logic that deprives its Other of *logos*, I argue that the silencing of characters in the two films is at least attempted as a liberating gesture. Language, after all, as Agamben argues, is "the most ancient of apparatuses – one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face" (*What Is an Apparatus?* 14). Neither film is without its problems, however. At first glance, Mamuliia's strategy seems less ideologically problematic than Kott's; if the former questions language as such, including the language of cinema, the latter is reluctant to do so and inadvertently aligns itself with the empire. The reticence of both films (including although not limited to their refusal to ground events in a specific time and place) subsumes imperial and biopolitical narratives within the pursuit of larger metaphysical questions and discourages attempts to ponder who it is that is more likely to be reduced to bare life and be abandoned by the law.

2.1 Mamuliia's and Kott's *Homines Sacri*

Mamuliia's *Another Sky* begins in the steppe: Ali, the film's protagonist, is struggling with the disease and death of his sheep herd. Together with his son, Ali leaves the steppe for Moscow, where they become migrant wage workers. While the film will never return to the steppe, the

images of sick and dying sheep remain with the spectator throughout the film, connecting the numerous instances of illness and death into one single thread. Almost immediately after their arrival in Moscow, Ali is dragged (like an animal, by the scruff of his jacket) by a police officer to a sanitation shower. No questions are asked. As Edward Said points out, the Oriental is always already guilty: “The crime was that the Oriental was an Oriental” (39). Stripped and disinfected, Ali is reduced to bare life—not natural life per se, but what remains after *bios* is separated from *zoē*. Without clothes, the thin yet strong shield that holds in place the distinction between the private and the public, Ali becomes one body among the numerous others at the sanitation shower, those belonging to other immigrants and homeless people. Mamuliia “rhymes” the sanitation shower scenes (there will be another one towards the end of the film) with the sequence in which the television, playing in the background in Ali’s room, broadcasts the spreading swine flu and stresses the importance of disinfection procedures. Disinfection is required to protect the “healthy” from the “sick.” Mamuliia reminds us, however, that health and disease function in today’s world as biopolitical categories. Subtly yet noticeably, Mamuliia suggests that to be an immigrant and to be homeless is equated by the contemporary “anthropological machine” with being “sick” and in need of sanitation measures.

The bodies of the dying sheep in the steppe and the bodies in the sanitation shower re-float in the spectator’s memory when Ali goes to a hospital to check if his wife’s name has been listed in the hospital intake list. He walks down the long hallways, peeking into the rooms and looking at the patients’ grotesque ailing bodies, sprawled across the beds. The doors to the rooms are open, allowing Ali (and us) to catch a glimpse of what is supposed to remain private. The camera follows Ali from room to room, catching only fragments of the bodies, reminding us of Ali’s (and by extension, our) violation of the privacy with respect to those to whom the bodies belong.

Fragmented and violated by our gaze, the bodies do not amount to a whole; deprived of identity, they are reduced to bare life.

The trip to the hospital yields no results, and Ali continues his search in a brothel where the body (notably, the immigrant body) becomes a commodity *par excellence*. The prostitutes are shot from the neck down, as “headless” anonymous bodies that are “chosen like items off of a menu” (Draskoczy). If the fragmented naked bodies in the brothel episode “rhyme” with those in the sanitation shower and the hospital, the next body that Ali encounters brings back the images of the dying sheep from the film’s opening. Driving home late at night, Ali slows down to avoid hitting a drunk man and instead runs over a dog. One life saved, another one ended. Ali gets out of the car for a few seconds to look at the dead dog, then drives away.

The relief, however, is only temporary. Ali soon finds out that his son was killed in a sawmill accident where the boy had been working. Although meaningful for Ali, his son’s body is only one corpse among many zipped into black plastic bags at the hospital’s morgue. [Figure 21]



Figure 21

Like the dead dog that Ali had left lying on the street, his son’s body has been left lying in the morgue by those indifferent to it. Mamuliia persistently equates the boy’s life with animal life.

At the train station in Moscow Ali carries his sleeping son over the shoulder just like he carried the dead sheep in the film's opening shots. The contemporary "anthropological machine," in Mamulii's argument, equates immigrants, animals, the homeless, and the sick. Killed with impunity as *homo sacer*, Ali's son is abandoned by the law. In one of the film's grimmest moments, the sawmill foreman puts a "price tag" on the boy's body when he pays Ali for the death of his son: "Here's some money. No one is to blame. It just happened." Ali does not say a word in response.

Kott's *Test* at first presents itself to be a coming-of-age drama with a Kazakh girl Dina as its protagonist. Living with her father Tolgat, the girl cannot choose between two suitors, a local Kazakh "cowboy" Kaisyn and a visiting Russian photographer Maksim. Once her father dies and Dina, as a psychoanalytical reading would suggest, becomes ready to "replace" him with a more appropriate object for her love, the girl opts for the Russian suitor Maksim.

The love story, however, comes with a twist. The film's characters, it appears, live near Semipalatinsk, the site of the first Soviet nuclear test bomb; the year, we may surmise, is 1949. Separated from the rest of the empire by a fence, the characters are not simply cut off from the rest of the empire; they are included only by virtue of being excluded. Kott establishes early in the film that Tolgat and his daughter's lives are confined to the sphere of the *oikos*, "home" (distinct from the *polis*, the locus of *bíos politikos*), characterized by "familial relations with the father as head of the household, a subsistence economy, and mere living" (Arnold 13). In the sequence following the title card Tolgat is shot in close-up enjoying an afternoon nap; instead of a pillow, he uses a sleeping sheep. Although Tolgat and his daughter's proximity to the natural world will be emphasized throughout the film, their lives are by no means pure *zoē*. After a series of cuts, the serene napping duo is shown lying in a Soviet truck in the middle of the steppe. [Figure 22]



Figure 22

Kott's characters are bearers of bare life, caught in the zone of indistinction between *zoē* and *bios*. Once awake, Tolgat drives the truck to his home, takes the sheep off of the truck bed and picks up a knife. Despite our fears, he uses the knife to untie the sheep's legs, not to kill it. The brief moment of uncertainty, however, introduces one of the film's central themes: the precariousness of all life. The sheep is spared by Tolgat but neither of them will be spared by the empire.

Throughout the film the Soviet empire manifests itself almost exclusively through technological means: the truck, the plane, the radio, the Geiger counter. Even Maksim, equipped with a camera and a projector, appears as a "civilizer." He astounds Dina by projecting a black-and-white image of hers on the house wall. One of the rare exceptions in the film only proves the rule: the Moscow Kremlin in Dina's herbarium book is made of dry leaves. The empire's connection with nature is thus established only through the mediation of its internal Other. It is also notable that it is only in this form that the empire proves vulnerable and perishable.

The film arguably reproduces what Madina Tlostanova describes as "the Soviet modernity's grand narrative of the backward people civilized by the Socialist Russians" (8). Kott

insists, however, that the Soviet mission to assimilate and accept Russia's Others "into the only correct form of modernity" (Tlostanova 8) ultimately failed. His characters are included in the *polis* by virtue of being excluded. In one of the film's most eloquent shots, Dina appears as a shadow on a geopolitical map⁴¹ hanging on the wall in her room. Dina as well as her father and the two suitors are figures *par excellence* of this (inclusive) exclusion of bare life. Textbook examples of *homines sacri*, the characters are killed with impunity at the end of the film. Tolgat dies from exposure to radiation even before the explosion. The others perish when the bomb is detonated, turning the bodies on the screen as well as their belongings into dust. Dina and Maksim face the calamity holding hands, silent.

2.2 Escaping the Apparatus of Language?

What is at stake in Kott's and Mamuliia's decisions to leave their characters "speechless," even when faced with death?

In his volume *Language and Death*, Agamben takes issue with the inclination of the Western metaphysical thought, from Aristotle onwards, to define man as a mortal speaking being.⁴² What troubles Agamben most about the Aristotelean definition of man as *zōon lōgon échon*, man endowed with language, is that it relies on a separation between animal *phonē* and human *logos*. Aristotle's passage reads:

⁴¹ This is a recurrent image in Kott's filmography. Characters are shot against geopolitical maps in three of his shorts: *The Scarecrow* (Pugalo) (2000), *The Giant* (Velikan) (2003), and *The Fish* (Ryba) (2008).

⁴² For Heidegger, the human has the "faculty" for death precisely because he has the "faculty" for language because death is a condition that needs to be uttered (or thought) in advance of its arrival: "Die Sterblichen sind jene, die den Tod als Tod erfahren können. Das Tier vermag dies nicht. Das Tier kann aber auch nicht sprechen. Das Wesensverhältnis zwischen Tod und Sprache blitzt auf" (qtd. in Agamben, *Language and Death* xi).

Man alone of the animals possesses language (*logos*). The mere voice (*phonē*), it is true, can indicate pain or pleasure, and therefore it is possessed by the other animals as well [...] but language (*logos*) is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state. (qtd. in Agamben, *Language and Death* 87)

The transition from animal voice to human language implies, according to Agamben, a caesura in the human being that becomes, as Daniel McLoughlin points out, the model in Western culture for thinking the difference between nature and culture, the living being and language. Human Voice (Agamben capitalizes it to differentiate it from *phonē*), stripped from signification, is qualitatively different from *phonē*, animal voice: when confronted with a foreign language, we are aware that what we hear has meaning even though we do not understand the words. The human Voice thus always already implies the potentiality for language: “For the metaphysical tradition, then, to have *logos* is to have the immediacy of the voice negated and replaced by the potentiality for language; as such, while the animal voice is placed at the origin of language, ‘it is also true that this voice is, from the beginning, conceived of as removed’ ([*Language and Death*], 39)” (McLoughlin, 197-8).

The metaphysical tendency to posit Voice as the negative foundation of language thus has political implications as well. The exclusion of what Aristotle calls nutritive (or vegetative) life (characterized by an absolute separation from *logos*) is the foundation on which the definition of man as *zōon lōgon échon* rests. Life according to *logos* is actualized, for Aristotle, in the *polis*

from which natural life is banished: “The political, as the work of man as man, is drawn out of the living being through the exclusion—as unpolitical—of a part of its vital activity” (Agamben, “The Work of Man” 6). In *Homo Sacer* Agamben articulates the structural parallels between the metaphysical tradition and contemporary biopolitics implicit in his early work and demonstrates that the metaphysical view of language as an added capacity, as characterized by a split between *phonē* and *logos*, replicates the structural logic of the sovereign practice of isolating bare life: “The question ‘In what way does the living being have language?’ corresponds exactly to the question ‘In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?’ The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it” (*Homo Sacer* 8).

Modern sovereign power, according to Agamben, does not only produce *homines sacri* but can also deprive them of what Western thought considers to be human “essence,” their capacity to speak. For Agamben, an extreme manifestation of the plight of *homo sacer* today is the figure of a ‘*Muselmann*.’⁴³ The term was used in Nazi concentration camps to describe those inhabitants who, starved and exhausted, could no longer respond to their environment: “*Muselmänner* [...] though surviving as a biological organism, could no longer be recognised as human – not only by the Nazis, but by fellow camp inmates themselves. What the death camps [...] revealed is that ‘man’ (the mortal speaking being) can *really* be separated from his ‘essence’ (speech) [...]. [I]t would be impossible for a *Muselmann* to say ‘I am a *Muselmann*’” (Clemens 118-9; emphasis in original).

Do Mamuliia and Kott, by leaving their protagonists speechless in the face of imperial violence, replicate the sovereign gesture? In other words, are the two films’ quiet *homines sacri*

⁴³ For a critique of Agamben’s use of the term, see Schueller, 243-246.

separated from their “essence” like *Muselmänner*? The short answer is no. Neither Mamuliia’s nor Kott’s characters qualify as *Muselmänner*. Mamuliia’s reticent protagonist Ali can and does occasionally speak but often chooses to remain silent. The silence in Kott’s film, as Elena Stishova suggests, may be interpreted as a metaphor for the informational vacuum [*“informatsionnyi vakuum”*] imposed on the Semipalatinsk residents by the Soviet empire (72).⁴⁴ As a metaphor, the silence has meaning and function; in other words, it is an alternative form of communication, rather than a lack of capacity to speak. In pursuit of the longer answer, the remainder of this chapter explores the nuances of the two directors’ silencing approaches and their ideological implications.

In Mamuliia’s *Another Sky* the “silence” is, to some degree, motivated diegetically: Ali does not speak Russian. In those rare moments when he does speak, he relies on the help of an interpreter. If *logos* is indeed what distinguishes the human from the animal, then Ali’s forced silence may be seen as further evidence that, as an immigrant, he has been reduced to bare life. Yet unlike Agamben’s *Muselman*, he says his name loud and clear at the police department. While all the other questions and answers require the mediation of an interpreter, Ali’s name is self-sufficient.

That Ali is otherwise reliant on interpretation is telling: Mamuliia is suspicious of language as such and its mediating function, in particular. As Agamben puts it, “To adopt an image from Wittgenstein, man exists in language like a fly trapped in a bottle: that which it cannot see is precisely that through which it sees the world” (“Un’idea” 33). Unlike animals, who communicate without the mediation of a sign system, human beings must first learn the language as infants

⁴⁴ The 1949 anatomic test was the most devastating for human exposure of all the tests conducted in Semipalatinsk, in part, because the military had neither much experience nor much concern about protecting local populations. The public could not be informed of any details associated with the testing, and unlike the test personnel who were sheltered in special rooms, the ordinary citizens were asked to stay outside with no explanation provided as to why they were supposed to leave their households (Werner and Purvis-Roberts 281-7).

which allows us to “achieve an inestimable gain in sophistication of communication, but at the price of immediacy” (Durantaye 93).

In *Another Sky* language functions as an apparatus of capture, finalizing,⁴⁵ in the Bakhtinian sense of the word, that which it captures—claiming to know its essence without, in fact, being able even to approximate it. The insufficiency and the inadequacy of language are emphasized by Mamuliia early in the film, even before father and son move to Moscow. In a first brief dialogue, Ali’s son asks his father in Tajik whether his mother is beautiful. Ali is driving his truck on a highway. Mamuliia emphatically refuses to use conventional shot-reverse shot technique; the camera is fixed on the road and on the cars in front of the windshield. Ali responds to his son with a single word: “Beautiful.” The boy asks about the color of her eyes. Ali’s answer is “black.” What color is her hair, the off-screen voice wonders. Ali sticks to one-word responses: “Black.” The boy finally asks: “Why did she leave?” After a long pause, Ali says: “I don’t know.” The screen cuts to black. The conversation is over.

Mamuliia’s refusal to rely on traditional continuity editing underscores the insufficiency of language. Words prove ineffective, at least in part because they are not paired with the images of those speaking and listening. By refusing to pair language with affect, Mamuliia destabilizes the link between language and knowledge. Language does not get to the essence of things, but emerges here as an apparatus of biopolitical capture, categorizing its referent only by hair and eye color. Mamuliia stresses this point later when Ali goes to the police department in hopes that the

⁴⁵ As Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan points out, Bakhtin uses the Russian verb *zavershit* “both in the sense of ‘consummate,’ i.e. an operation of loving containment (as translated in “Author and Hero”), and in the sense of “finalize,” a violent act of closure (as translated in *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*)” (13). If in the 1920s essay “Author and Hero” *zavershenie* was the desired outcome of aesthetic activity, in his 1930s piece “Discourse in the Novel” *zavershenie* is interpreted as a violent and destructive act. See Ken Hirschkop’s chapter “Dialogue with History” in *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* for a discussion of the transformations that link the two essays.

police would help him find his wife. Among the questions are those his son had asked: What is the color of her eyes? And what is the color of her hair?

If language is an apparatus of biopolitical capture, then Ali's silence bears the potential to be liberating. His refusal to use language even when there is no language barrier suggests that he is not so much deprived of the ability to speak as wary of language and its limitations. For Agamben, it is "in man's moments of silence [...] that he at once draws close to animality at the same time as he offers the opportunity to think human potentiality, precisely when that potentiality is not actualized" (Colebrook 23). In other words, to overcome metaphysics and, by extension, the logic of the sovereign ban, it is necessary to rethink the human "capacity" for language as "potentiality" in its double appearance as "potentiality to and potentiality not to"⁴⁶ (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 46). Even though human beings, according to Agamben, cannot call into question their entry into language, "the simple acquisition of speech in no way obliges one to speak. The pure pre-existence of language as the instrument of communication—the fact that, for speaking beings, language already exists—in itself contains no obligation to communicate" (*Remnants of Auschwitz* 65).

Mamuliia's protagonist Ali exercises potentiality in its double appearance as "the potentiality to and the potentiality not to" speak. The connection between silence and potentiality manifests itself with particular clarity at the end of *Another Sky*, when Ali finally finds his wife but, much to the spectator's frustration, does not say a word to her. She asks him to stop the car at one point but otherwise remains silent as well. Mamuliia draws out the closing sequence and refuses to break the silence. When nothing is said, all the things that could have been said remain

⁴⁶ See Mills for an in-depth analysis of the role of potentiality in Agamben's theory of language and the conclusions that Agamben draws from his retheorization of potentiality in the fields of aesthetics, politics, and ethics.

present as potentialities. Silence serves here as an antidote to the finalizing ambition of language, as it includes simultaneously what could have been said and what could have been left unsaid.

Unlike Mamuliia, who limits the use of dialogue in his film and explains this choice by intradiegetic reasons, Aleksandr Kott eliminates dialogue altogether, providing no immediate explanation for the characters' silence. The silence in Kott's drama is a formal device that has led many critics to go as far as describe the film as silent. The film, however, is not silent per se: the characters do not speak but their silence, in many ways, foregrounds the sounds of nature permeating the soundtrack. Occasionally, solemn music fades in and grows louder, only to dissolve into the whisper of wind, the buzz of flies, and the chirping of birds. The film concludes by breaking its own rule—by matching a human body with its voice. Seconds before his death, Dina's suitor Kaisyn unleashes a powerful scream. The exception, however, only proves the rule as it maintains the Aristotelean caesura between animal *phonē* that expresses pleasure and pain and human *logos* that is uniquely positioned to articulate the distinction between the just and the unjust. An expression of pain, Kaisyn's scream maintains the characters' separation from *logos* as well as *bíos*.

Logos, however, is not entirely banished from the film but rather restricted to a specific user, the empire. The only few instances in which language is used point to the empire's inseparability from *logos*. In the first, the state radio in the background informs its listeners about the beginning of yet another successful harvesting season in the north of the Rostov region. In the second, the newspaper *Izvestiia* is happy to report a surge of inflation levels in capitalist countries. Since language is not entirely absent then the characters' silence could indeed, as Stishova suggests, be understood as a metaphor for the violence inflicted by the empire on its *homines sacri*, the residents of Semipalatinsk who lived in an informational vacuum and had no say in the matter.

If this is indeed Kott's intention, however, then the silence does not allow us to speak about potentiality. As a metaphor, the silence insists on making a point. The point would be Kott's, who incorporates the silence as a device into the *logos* of the film and thus reinforces the distinction between *phonē* and *logos*, *zoē* and *bios*. Notably, in the third and perhaps the most revealing use of language in the film the empire emerges as the mediator but not the subject of speech. Early in the film Dina is listening to Colombina's aria from *Pagliacci* on the radio. It is unlikely that Dina understands the Italian words but that is precisely the point for Kott who contends that the meaning-making capacity of art (be it music or cinema) has little to do with words per se. Thus *logos*, in Kott's argument, problematically appears as the prerogative of both the empire and art. Even if the characters' voicelessness may have been indeed intended by Kott as a critique of the imperial biopolitical project, in its attempt to render inoperative the apparatus of language, the film inadvertently risks becoming complicit in the same project that it seeks to critique.

If in Mamulii's *Another Sky*, silence leaves the spectator with myriad options—none of which is realized—then in Kott's film the options are often limited. In a telling scene, for example, Dina summons Kaisyn to fetch a doctor for her ill father. Once Kaisyn arrives, the camera cuts to a shot of Dina. She turns to look and, we assume, sees Kaisyn. The horse makes a noise that ensures continuity between the two shots. Another cut; Kaisyn looks into the hut, at Dina, and immediately rides away: he understood. The camera then cuts to a shot of Dina by the window: she is waiting for the doctor to arrive. The doctor makes an appearance in the following shot. The spectator is left with a clear idea of what it was that was left unsaid ("My father is ill. Go get a doctor").

Does Kott, in an Orientalizing gesture, suggest that the characters, simple creatures as they are, do not need language to communicate? The film's Kazakh characters, however, are not the only ones limited to simple wordless communication. It would be disingenuous to ignore the fact

that Dina's Russian suitor Maksim does not speak either. In the face of imperial violence, he proves to be just as voiceless and helpless as Dina. The two of them die together, holding hands, silent. Maksim's silence at first glance attenuates the film's Orientalizing impulse; it suggests that he is just as dispensable for the state as Dina, Tolgat, and Kaisyn. They are all *homines sacri*. This narrative choice, however, shifts the focus of what appears to be Kott's argument away from issues of ethnicity and race to issues of class, suggesting that any ordinary citizen (as opposed to a member of the privileged *nomenklatura*), who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, could have become a nuclear test victim, a *homo sacer* in the Soviet empire. The film thus inadvertently mimics the hypocritical attitude of the Soviet state, which, as Tlostanova demonstrates, substituted race for class in its official discourse (while practicing racism all along) (15).

Equally problematic is the fact that the film takes it upon itself to "speak" for the characters. That the characters can communicate with each other without language is conveyed by the film's editing choices. Thus, if Mamuliia avoids traditional shot-reverse-shot sequences, then Kott relies on such conventional sequences to make legible that which would otherwise remain unclear. Kott's silencing of the characters may free them from the language of the empire—one particular language—but it does not dismantle the apparatus of language altogether, nor does it question its own language.

In his review of *The Test*, Robert Bird captures the articulacy of Levan Kapanadze's cinematography and the film's belief in its own capacity for *logos*: "The compositions, like the film's construction, are perfectly centered and relentlessly symmetrical; for all their poignancy, they are almost painfully legible." Further in the review, Bird aptly describes the film as a "drama of scale." Kott alternates throughout the film between shots of different lengths: "bird's-eye shots

[...] render the human world as toy-like or map-like, before zooming in for texture-rich close-ups of sheep's wool, tree bark, or the characters' faces" (Bird). Kott's cinematic language, in other words, is all-powerful; the camera may replicate the imperial gaze when it surveys the vastness and the greatness of the imperial domain; or it may come close and position us near the characters. The switching itself carries meaning. When Dina first discovers the fence separating her home from the rest of the empire, we are at first positioned behind her, discovering it with her as she stops in front of what is revealed to be barbed wire. The back of her head is shot in close-up, and we see only a tiny segment of the wire. [Figure 23] The camera cuts and we find ourselves on the opposite side of the wire; Dina's perplexed face is shot in close-up *en face*. [Figure 24] Another cut, and we are behind Dina's back again, now several meters away from the fence, able to "appreciate" for the first time its height—about twice Dina's height. [Figure 25] Another cut, and we are now even further back, yet still unable to see where the fence begins or ends. [Figure 26] Finally, the camera captures Dina and the infinite fence from above: she is just a tiny dot on the screen. [Figure 27] She is powerless in her "encounter" with the fence. The camera, on the contrary, can decide which side of the fence to position itself, finally choosing to stay above the fence, gauging it and visually commenting on it.



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

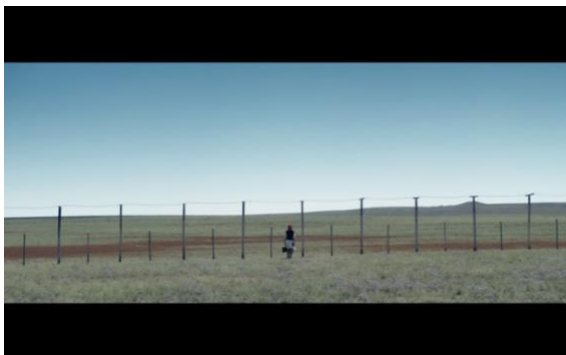


Figure 26



Figure 27

Mamuliia's cinematographic choices are strikingly different. The film relies predominantly on medium shots, occasionally zooming in slightly and showing the characters in medium close-ups. It does not assume omniscience, for the most part showing things from one single position and angle. Moreover, it constantly questions its own ability to stabilize meaning. In those rare moments when characters are engaged in dialogue, the camera either shoots the interlocutors from their backs, or focuses on something else entirely. Even immediate proximity does not guarantee access to knowledge. When Ali, for example, leans against the truck after loading the bodies of dead sheep onto it, we are positioned behind his back and can only guess but not read his affect. On numerous occasions, the camera gets claustrophobically close to Ali, yet we are still left with little information. Dark lighting, an inconvenient angle, as well as Ali's tendency to look down and the general inexpressivity of his face, do not allow the spectator to "read" him, to make him legible (Kott, on the contrary, almost always captures his characters' faces *en face*). The ending of Mamuliia's film is particularly telling in this sense. The spectator's hopes to finally get some answers are frustrated in part because Ali remains silent and in part because Mamuliia does not give us access to Ali's emotional world. Shown in profile, Ali stares at the road ahead of him, his expression impenetrable to his wife's and (by extension, our) gaze. [Figure 28] In stark contrast to

the authorities who strip Ali of his privacy, the film refuses to violate the border between the public and the private or, rather, acknowledges its simultaneous desire and inability to do so.



Figure 28

In Lübecker's terms, Mamulii's drama is a feel-bad film while Kott's *Test* is decidedly not. As discussed in Chapter One, Lübecker identifies "feel-bad" films as those that make the spectator uncomfortable through their narrative and cinematographic choices. These "micro" feel-bad moments feed into "larger structures of spectatorial manipulation" (2), while refusing to provide the spectator with a cathartic ending or any kind of closure (3).

Kott's wordless drama may at first glance seem to be a perfect candidate for Lübecker's category; after all, contemporary audiences have been taught to rely on dialogue as a key source of narrative development and meaning. Moreover, as Mary Ann Doane points out, it is the separation of the voice from the body that makes silent cinema intimidating to the modern spectator. She writes: "The silent film is certainly understood, at least retrospectively and even (it is arguable) in its time, as incomplete, as lacking speech. [...] The uncanny effect of the silent film in the era of sound is in part linked to the separation, by means of intertitles, of an actor's speech from the image of his/her body" (33). While Kott's "wordless" rather than silent film does not

make up for its speechlessness with exaggerated acting or intertitles, it does separate the body from the voice. The whispers and noises of the natural world make the characters' voicelessness all the more conspicuous. In his review of Kott's drama, critic Anton Dolin suggests that the wordlessness of the film may be a "test" in and of itself for the audiences (a "test" that is well worth taking, according to Dolin) ("*Ispytanie*"). While there is no way to establish what exactly scared away the distributors and the viewers, it would not be unreasonable to posit a correlation between the film's "silence" and its dismal box office numbers. The film that cost two million dollars to make played on a total of 18 commercial screens domestically and earned a little more than \$10 000.⁴⁷

The experience of watching Kott's drama, however, is hardly taxing as the film's cinematographic and narrative choices are designed to (over)compensate for any discomfort that the lack of dialogue may cause. As Lübecker points out, the frustration generated by feel-bad films "originates in their disrespect for the conventions of storytelling. This is why many of the films have been accused of being incoherent, boring, mystifying or otherwise lacking in narrative" (14). Neither of these characteristics apply to Kott's film that offers the viewers a love triangle story that may be all too predictable but is easy and entertaining to follow. Kapanadze's "crisply poetic cinematography" (Young) is not only "legible" (although it does play an important role in filling the gaps that may have been left by the missing dialogue) but also spectacularly beautiful. Praised by numerous critics and recognized at the Kinotavr Film Festival, the cinematography alone provides for a most pleasant viewing experience.

⁴⁷ That is not to say that the film's wordlessness is the only culprit. Michel Hazanavicius's *The Artist*, a 2011 throwback to the early days of Hollywood (with a production budget of 15 million dollars), made more than 134 million dollars in international box office. The film was admittedly boosted by its Oscar sweep (five wins including awards for Best Picture and for Best Director) but could be considered an economic success regardless.

The film's tragic ending may come as a surprise to the unsuspecting spectator but even here Kott takes an array of measures to alleviate the blow. First, the images of the nuclear mushroom and the destruction caused by it are shot in slow motion and aestheticized to a subliminal degree. In his interview with Larisa Maliukova, Kott admits that the aestheticization is intentional: "Мне хотелось воссоздать бодлеровское настроение. Помните? 'Пейзаж чудовищно-картинный. Мой дух сегодня взволновал' [...] Есть и у жути завораживающая магнетичная красота." [I wanted to recreate the Baudelairean mood. Do you remember how it goes? "De ce terrible paysage, / Tel que jamais mortel n'en vit, / Ce matin encore l'image, / Vague et lointaine, me ravit." [...] Even the dreadful has a captivating magnetic beauty to it.]

Second, the negative in Kott's film is contained within a tightly controlled narrative. In his discussion of the role of the ending in deciding whether a film qualifies for the feel-bad category, Lübecker notes:

In the *Poetics* Aristotle writes that the end is 'everything' (Aristotle 1965: 40). [...]

Many Hollywood dramas go far into negative emotions, but most will make sure that such emotions are diffused at the end of the film; occasionally they will stay with the unpleasant emotions, but the films will then at least contain them within a fully closed-off narrative. It is precisely this form of satisfaction and negative containment that the feel-bad film does not deliver. (2-3)

In his study of narration and closure in cinema, Richard Neupert echoes Barbara Herrnstein Smith and David Richter who, in their analyses of endings in poems and fables, respectively, come to the conclusion that a strong closure requires the achievement of a sense of completeness both at the level of story and at the level of narrative discourse (13-15). Kott does not only bring the story to a definitive conclusion—what else is there to tell if all of the characters and their belongings

have been crumbled into dust—but also brackets the narrative by showing at the very beginning of the film what is supposed to come at the very end. The film opens with a sequence of the destruction caused by the nuclear explosion. There is no indication in these introductory scenes of what caused the (highly aestheticized and neatly organized) destruction. The slow and steady gliding movement of the camera, the splendor and the peacefulness of these shots, as well as the sound of the blowing wind produce a soothing effect and ensure that the spectator is neither disturbed nor haunted by these images and recalls them only at the very end of the journey when their meaning is finally revealed. By returning to the starting point, the film signals an end to the narration and releases the spectator. Unlike a feel-bad film, however, it captivated rather than captured.

Mamuliia's film, by contrast, establishes an antagonistic relationship with the spectator. The inconvenient angles and dark lighting do not only hamper our vision but constantly implicate us in questionable actions. We invade the patients' privacy as we follow Ali on his visit to the hospital and share the camera's indifferent gaze when confronted with the naked bodies at the brothel and the corpses at the hospital morgue. The use of the hand-held camera produces a claustrophobic effect—it aligns the spectator's perspective with that of the protagonist and leaves her no room for escape. Numerous narrative ellipses, subdued acting styles, and the brevity of dialogues leave us with questions that the film refuses to answer. If Kott goes out of his way to make up for the lack of words, Mamuliia keeps pulling the rug from under the spectator's feet. If the feel-bad characteristics of "being incoherent, boring, mystifying or otherwise lacking in narrative" do not fit *The Test* at all, all of them can be used to describe Mamuliia's film with at least a certain degree of accuracy.

Another Sky poses at times as a road movie but insists on subverting every convention of the genre that it invokes. In their introduction to *The Road Movie Book*, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark list, via Timothy Corrigan, the four defining features of a road movie. First, a road movie responds to the breakdown of a family unit. Second, the characters of a road narrative are acted upon by the world around them that often proves to be menacing. Third, the protagonist is associated with the mechanical means of transportation that he uses to cover distance. And fourth, the road movie “promotes a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment” (2-3).

The protagonist of *Another Sky* is always in motion; we see Ali driving a truck and a car, taking the train and the bus, walking. While the motion is motivated by the breakdown of a family unit (as in a classical road movie narrative), its ultimate goal is its reconstitution. Mamuliia teases the spectator with the promise that Ali will achieve his goal only to question the goal itself at the very end. Ali does find what he is looking for—his wife, but loses another family member along the way—his son. The journey continues. Where it is that Ali and his wife are headed is not clear.

The world around Ali is indeed menacing but Mamuliia carefully balances between Ali as the subject and the object of the on-screen world. Ali constantly switches between different modes of transportation oscillating between the roles of the driver and the passenger. Notably, in all of the driving sequences of the Moscow segment of the film, Ali drives someone else’s vehicle. If in a classical road movie narrative the identity of the protagonist is displaced onto the mechanized vehicle (Corrigan 145) and the vehicle serves as “the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction” (146), then in Mamuliia’s narrative the rapidly changing modes of transportation testify to the protagonist’s displacement but do not capture or lay claim to his

identity suggesting rather that it is in flux. If in road movies the camera assumes the perspective of the vehicle itself (that in its turn merges with the protagonist), in Mamuliia's film the camera watches Ali from a distance insisting on its inability to align itself with his perspective. Finally, if the road movie posits the road and the journey as a temporary authorized escape from domesticity, Mamuliia uses these familiar tropes to challenge the meaning of domesticity in a globalized world characterized by displacement. *Another Sky*, often criticized for its undisguised festival ambitions, is indeed an art house film at its core but its flirtation with the conventions of the road movie place it alongside feel-bad films that offer generic subversions and thus position themselves between the art film and mainstream cinema (Lübecker 3).

The defining characteristic of the feel-bad experience, however, is that it “produces a spectatorial desire, but then blocks its satisfaction; *it creates, and then deadlocks, our desire for catharsis*” (Lübecker 2; emphasis in original). *Another Sky* does precisely that. Even though Ali finds his wife, the film refuses to provide a cathartic ending. The death of a child is too expensive a price to pay for Ali's reunion with his wife and leaves a lasting bitter aftertaste. The wordlessness of the encounter between Ali and his wife exacerbates the spectator's frustration even further as it teases her with the promise of closure but refuses to provide her with it. The question is what is it exactly that Mamuliia is trying to achieve by vexing the spectator? And what are the ethical implications of Kott's refusal to do the same in his wordless drama?

For Lübecker, the provocation of feel-bad films can be of value.⁴⁸ “[T]he destabilization of the spectatorial contract,” he writes, “is precisely the point, for this is how the films raise political and ethical questions” (Lübecker 3). The sparing use of dialogue and the general distrust

⁴⁸ Lübecker adds, however, that some feel-bad films go too far in their assaults on the spectator. Among the films that he considers excessively manipulative are Lucile Hadžihalilović's *Innocence* (2005), Brian de Palma's *Redacted* (2007), and Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (2009).

of language including the language of cinema itself in Mamuliia's *Another Sky* appear to be part of a larger strategy that is best described in Bakhtinian terms: Mamuliia challenges his own and the spectator's desire to finalize the Other. The finalization of the Other is predicated on what Bakhtin terms 'transgredience,' the author's ability to "collect the hero and his life and to complete him to the point where he forms a whole by supplying all those moments which are inaccessible to the hero himself from within himself" ("Author and Hero" 14). By refusing to tighten the episodes into a coherent narrative with a clear resolution (a form of finalization in and of itself) and by challenging the camera's omniscience, Mamuliia draws attention to the act of "authoring," to its finalizing ambition, and ultimately implicates the spectator in this attempt at finalization, an essentially violent and destructive act.

Kott's film that offers a very different viewing experience from the feel-bad mode of Mamuliia's drama may at first glance appear to be even more explicitly political than *Another Sky*—that is, if we interpret the film's wordlessness, via Stishova, as a metaphor for the informational vacuum imposed on the Semipalatinsk residents by the Soviet empire. But is the "silence" indeed meant as a metaphor? Stishova, notably, is wary to commit to this interpretation, suggesting that it might be reading "too much" into it [*"perebor"*] (72). Kott's passion for silent, or more accurately, wordless cinema justifies the critic's caution. Nancy Condee writes: "Since his first arrival in the mid-1990s at VGIK, [...] Kott had been interested in wordless cinema. [...] [H]is wordless script [...] *Zav'ialov and Iula* (2012) was awarded a prize at the 2012 Tekstura Festival [...]. Kott has described the genre of wordless cinema as 'my format [...] where I scramble at the first opportunity; my parallel world'" ("History").⁴⁹ The majority of Kott's short films have

⁴⁹ Kott has discussed his lifelong fascination with silent, or rather wordless cinema, in numerous interviews. See, for example, his interviews with Mariia Tokmasheva and Dariko Tsulaia.

been wordless: *The Photographer* (Fotograf, 1998), a black-and-white ode to silent cinema and the camera's capacity to play with time; *The Scarecrow* [(Pugalo, 2000), a black-and-white short about a boy's unlikely attachment to a scarecrow; *The Giant* (Velikan, 2003), the story of an equally unlikely friendship between a girl and a giant mime; *The Fish* (Ryba, 2008), a stepping-stone to *The Test* that tells the story of a boy and his sick mother. What these shorts have in common (besides the characters' silence) is a fascination with the aesthetic of silent cinema. The silence of Kott's characters, in other words, appears to be an homage to the early days of cinema rather than a decision dictated by the content of the films. About a third of the way through *The Test*, Maksim projects the photo he took of Dina earlier as a film strip onto a house wall. The next morning Dina is daydreaming, a faint smile on her lips hinting that the interplay of light and shadow has worked its magic.

Even though Kott's script *Zav'ialov and Iula* has never been made into a film, the director's remarks about it are telling: "Это история вне времени и вне пространства, она могла произойти сейчас, могла произойти сегодня, может произойти завтра. И неважно где. Как это ни банально, она о вечных ценностях, о первых чувствах" ["It is a story outside of time and space; it could happen now, it could happen today, it could happen tomorrow. And it does not matter where. However banal it may be, it is a story about eternal values, about first feelings"] (Tsulaia). This sense of timelessness is characteristic of Kott's shorts but is tangible in *The Test* as well. What can be more universal than a coming-of-age love story? It eliminates, at least in Kott's telling of it, the need for names, words, or any other specifics. For Agamben, notably, the human becomes a historical being when he leaves behind the wordless experience of infancy. Unlike animals, human beings do not enter language immediately upon birth but need to learn it first. Agamben writes: "Only because of this is there history, only because of this is man as a historical

being—only because there is a human infancy, only because language is not the same as the human” (*Infancy and History* 52). The silence of Kott’s characters is instrumental in obfuscating the historical details. That the characters are near Semipalatinsk and the year is 1949 is an educated guess but nonetheless a guess. The nuclear explosion is relegated here almost to an afterthought. The sublime images of the mushroom cloud in the closing sequences bring to mind an earlier scene, in which the lighting strikes and burns down a lonely tree in the steppe. The scene foreshadows the explosion but simultaneously dissociates it from its immediate historical context by positing destruction as natural. The choice of Semipalatinsk as the Soviet nuclear testing site was a political decision that had to do with race, geography, and colonial power.⁵⁰ The film, however, chooses to subsume imperial thanatopolitics under the tired message about the transience and beauty of life and love and thus replicates the imperial logic by enacting a double erasure of more than a million Semipalatinsk nuclear victims.

Mamuliia, who on one hand refuses to “speak” for the Other and challenges cinema’s capacity to “finalize,” in the ultimate analysis pursues a project similar to Kott’s—a metaphysical rather than a political one. We do not know where exactly Ali comes from and can only guess that he relocates to Moscow. We do not know the names of his son and wife. And while the sudden death of Ali’s son comes as a result of his unlawful employment as an immigrant child laborer, the pervasiveness of death in the film makes us wonder whether the sawmill foreman is right and indeed “[n]o one is to blame.” Sheep, dogs, people die (today as likely from unnatural as natural causes), and even an all-inclusive law would not be able to change that. Is Agamben right to

⁵⁰ As Gabrielle Hecht argues in her volume *Being Nuclear*, despite the widespread view that “splitting the atom promulgated a new world order that replaced imperialism with ‘the bomb,’ [i]t was clear that colonialism remained central to the nuclear order’s technological and geopolitical success. Even a short list of atomic test sites makes the point: Bikini Atoll, Semipalatinsk, Australian Aboriginal lands, the Sahara, French Polynesia” (ix).

suggest that “[w]hat confronts us today is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways” (*Homo Sacer* 114)? Are we “all virtually *homines sacri*” (115)?

Both Kott and Mamuliiia—despite the striking differences in their approaches—ultimately fall into the same trap as Agamben himself, who, despite being perfectly aware of Said’s argument, participates in the discourse of Orientalism, as Malini Johar Schueller suggests, by refusing to address the “otherness” of bare life: “We might all be ‘virtually’ *homines sacri*, but only some of us are marked to be in the permanent state of exception” (243).

3.0 (De-)Framing the Other: Vulnerable and Resilient Bodies in the Cinema of Ivan Tverdovskii and Aleksei Fedorchenko

In this chapter, I analyze the work of Ivan Tverdovskii and Aleksei Fedorchenko, who, in their engagement with biopolitical issues, foreground the role of the cinematic medium and visual culture, more broadly, in decisions on political exclusion. Tverdovskii and Fedorchenko may, admittedly, strike one as unlikely companions. While the former focuses in his cinematic worlds on those who are marginalized in the contemporary moment, the latter comments on the present by revisiting the past. If Fedorchenko perceives “both himself and the viewer as *homo ludens*” (Prokhorov, “Aleksei Fedorchenko”) and gives the audience an opportunity to figure out the rules of the game and decide whether they want to play it, Tverdovskii, a self-proclaimed Lars von Trier aficionado, is frequently antagonistic towards the spectator and exploitative in his choice of subject matter. Despite the stark differences in their directorial choices, however, Fedorchenko and Tverdovskii have more in common than it may seem. Both began their careers by experimenting with the documentary form and directed pseudo- and mockumentaries before crossing over into fiction film. Both continued their explorations of the cinematic medium and its relation to mimesis and representation in their (now formally) fictional films. Thematically, both Tverdovskii and Fedorchenko have repeatedly engaged in their work with the relationship between human life and political power, focusing, in particular, on the workings of discursive and institutional strategies of othering and probing in the process the role of visual culture (including their own cinematic efforts) in both shaping/perpetuating as well as challenging/destabilizing narratives and practices of what Agamben terms “inclusive exclusion.”

While in the two previous chapters I zeroed in on two specific films most relevant for the given case study, in this chapter I take a slightly different approach and explore a larger body of work by each of the two filmmakers in an attempt to bring into relief the political implications of both thematic and stylistic shifts in Tverdovskii's and Fedorchenko's respective oeuvres. This approach illuminates, among other things, a gradual departure in the work of both filmmakers from epistemological uncertainty created by a muddling of the distinction between reality and fiction; movement towards and away from abstracted categories of otherness; and an increased interest in renegotiating the caesura between humanity and animality, i.e. what Agamben refers to as *bíos* and *zoē*.

I will begin the first part of this chapter with a brief discussion of Tverdovskii's 2007 documentary short *The Holy Groove*. I then proceed to analyze the internal conflict between humanist and anti-humanist impulses in his first feature film *Corrections Class* (2014). I conclude my investigation of Tverdovskii's work by looking at his 2016 surreal drama *Zoology* that exposes the workings of what Agamben calls the "anthropological machine" and challenges the spectator to rethink our relationship to animality. I will argue, among other things, that Tverdovskii, seemingly unflinching in his attempt to "deframe" visual culture and challenge preconceptions about normativity, eventually "flinches" and lets the spectator off the hook at the end of both *Corrections Class* and *Zoology*, which end in gestures reminiscent of the one that Tverdovskii set out to criticize—the banishment of what is presumed to be non-normative.

In the second part of this chapter I provide an overview of Fedorchenko's earlier work, focusing, in particular, on his 2002 documentary short *David* and 2005 mockumentary *First on the Moon*. I discuss how Fedorchenko's postmodernist authorial stance mirrors his predilection for narratives in which, despite power's attempts to establish total control, "bare life" finds a way to

escape it. I contend that, unlike in Tverdovskii's cinematic worlds, in which power is dispersed across a multiplicity of networks (which form in his pessimistic and somewhat anti-Foucauldian view an inescapable web), Fedorchenko's films renegotiate or rather deconstruct the caesura (hyperbolized in Agamben's theoretical universe) "between meaningful life and mere animality, between power and the absolute powerlessness of 'bare life'" (Elmer 30). In the concluding section of the chapter I analyze Fedorchenko's 2018 war film *Anna's War*, in which the filmmaker departs from his playful deployment of the cinematic medium.

I analyze Fedorchenko's oeuvre through the prism of what Marcia Landy terms "counter-history" and defines as "an escape from formal history to a world of affect, invention, memory, art, reflection, and action" (xi). I argue that Fedorchenko's work has been consistently counter-historical. My contention, however, is that the specific choice of his directorial strategies depends on what specifically his counter-cinema has been "counter" to—hence the dramatic departure in *Anna's War* from his signature postmodernist playfulness, produced at a time when the state's discursive attempts to introduce new chimerical ideological content into Russian politics have been widely and mistakenly (as Mark Lipovetsky shows)⁵¹ understood as postmodernist.

3.1 Tverdovskii's De-Othering Cinema

Ivan I. Tverdovskii, son and namesake of documentary filmmaker Ivan Tverdovskii and a graduate of the Russian Institute of Cinematography, began his directorial career by making a

⁵¹ See Mark Lipovetsky's essay "Psevdomorfoza: Reaktsionnyi postmodernizm kak problema" ("Pseudomorphosis: Reactionary Postmodernism as a Problem") in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. Lipovetsky contends that the discursive practices of the Putin administration are cynical (in Peter Sloterdijk's definition of the word) rather than postmodernist. I will discuss Lipovetsky's argument in more detail in the concluding chapter.

series of documentary shorts, several of which garnered international awards. The first of these shorts, his student film *Holy Groove*, offers a distilled version of Tverdovskii's principles and preoccupations as a filmmaker. The short features a six-minute long sequence of a girl and a middle-aged man talking while strolling down a paved path. The handheld camera moves along with the two but focuses almost entirely on the girl. The camera briefly moves up only once, about halfway through the short, to capture the man's face (which otherwise remains outside the frame). The seven-year old Kristina enthusiastically tells her companion about a cat she saw in the bathroom earlier that day and a performance that she recently attended, which featured Baba Yaga and a handful of other fairy tale characters. As good a storyteller as most children her age, the girl is charming but ordinary. The equally unremarkable landscape, the other people walking down the path, as well as the cinematic language make the spectator wonder why exactly we are watching this most quotidian of scenes.

A judgmental (and slightly bored) viewer watching the film might be inclined to reproach Tverdovskii for his all-too-obvious (and hence amateurish) attempt to challenge the very idea of documentary by pushing the observational mode of documentary filmmaking to the point where it cracks at the seams and mutates into the reflexive mode.⁵² This judgmental spectator knows all too well what Tverdovskii is up to: the fact that nothing is happening is supposed to make us aware of our narrative desire; the lack of a voice-over and other formal directorial guidance is intended to encourage us to discern some cinematic truth from the images; the fact that there is nothing of

⁵² I am referring here to Bill Nichols's classification of documentary modes delineated in his 2001 volume *Introduction to Documentary*. Nichols differentiates between six different modes that "function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative" (99). For a critique of Nichols' schema, see Carl Plantinga's piece "Blurry Boundaries, Troubling Typologies, and the Unruly Fiction Film" and Stella Bruzzi's book *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*.

particular interest to discern from the images, however, is designed to make us question the documentary mode of filmmaking and its ability to capture “truth.”

Our judgmental viewer, however, would have to reconsider these easy conclusions at the end of the film when Tverdovskii, with the help of two text cards, reveals crucial information that he has strategically withheld up to this point. The first card informs us that the film title refers to the holy path on the territory of the Holy Trinity Seraphim-Diveevo Monastery; the second—that Kristina was born blind and is a resident of the boarding school for the blind and deaf in Sergiev Posad. The revelations at the end of the film do not change the fact that *Holy Groove* is an example of a reflexive documentary, but they do substantively alter the relationship between the film and the viewer and articulate a set of additional questions about cinematic representation. Tverdovskii’s maneuvers are explicitly manipulative: by “hiding” the fact that Kristina is visually impaired, Tverdovskii sets us up to feel duped so that we ask ourselves why it is that we feel duped and what preconceptions lie behind our perception of Tverdovskii’s refusal to foreground the girl’s disability as if it were the director’s act of concealment. Our judgmental spectator would be misguided to accuse Tverdovskii of exploitativeness—at this point it is not Kristina, but the spectator who is the object of the director’s “gaze.”

The revelation about the holy nature of the path walked by Kristina and her companion comes as less of a surprise: the brief opening sequence features the Russian Orthodox ritual of thrice-repeated dipping into icy water to celebrate epiphany; in the film’s equally succinct closing sequence Kristina says a prayer before going to bed. Both sequences have an element of coercion to them: both feature children whose behavior is directed by women who instruct them to perform religious rituals, the meaning of which is arguably not clear to the children. The path itself—straight and contained on each side by a short metal fence—could be viewed as a spatial apparatus,

controlling the movement of the human body. The revelation that the strollers are walking down a holy path encourages a problematic metaphorical reading of the film—is Tverdovskii “playfully” conflating here the literal and the figurative meanings of the word “blind” by invoking, however subtly, the expression “слепая вера” (“blind faith”)? The filmmaker’s later work and his remarks in interviews suggest that Tverdovskii might be a religious man himself and is, akin to Serebrennikov and Zviagintsev, making an anti-clericalist rather than an anti-Christian argument. Yet the sincerity of his own religious views are not a guarantee that Tverdovskii, a “baby von Trier” (“крошка-Триер”) as Olga Kas’ianova has dubbed him, is not playing *enfant terrible* and provoking the spectator to “read” the film as a metaphor for religious “blind faith” and make her terrified of her own interpretation? The film’s self-reflexive mode prompts an equally problematic and equally plausible reading of the film as a challenge to the spectator’s “blind faith” in the mimetic potential of cinematic images. Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, the only certain conclusion we can draw is that the images did not in fact “dupe” us—the images showed nothing but the truth; it just was not what we expected the “truth” to look like.

The imagery, directorial strategies, and thematic concerns of Tverdovskii’s first short are easily discernible in his later work. Tverdovskii returns time again to discursive and institutional “normalizing” practices, turning his attention to different categories of those who are disenfranchised through exclusionary processes of “othering” (teenage prostitutes, people suffering from substance abuse disorders, persons with disabilities, etc.). Tverdovskii consistently employs religious imagery and narratives in his work, simultaneously encouraging religious readings of his films and inviting the spectator to ponder the role of institutionalized religion in producing “normative” docile bodies. Both his short (pseudo-) documentaries and his feature films persistently attempt to “de-frame” visual culture and its representations of “otherness” and

challenge preconceptions about (in)authenticity of cinematic images. While the intensity of his “assaultive” mode of spectatorial address varies from film to film, Tverdovskii is relentless in his efforts to provoke the spectator. His first feature film, a coming-of-age drama *Corrections Class*, is his most emotionally manipulative and challenging film to date.

Tverdovskii’s debut feature *Corrections Class* won the best debut prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival and received the East of the West Award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. The film tells the story of a teenage girl Lena Chekhova (Mariia Poezhaeva), who, after years of being home-schooled, is admitted to high school. Lena, who suffers from myopathy and is bound to a wheelchair, is assigned to a special “corrections class” for students with a range of physical and cognitive disabilities. The class students will be assessed at the end of the school year by a special commission, and Lena hopes that she will be allowed to join a regular class and thus get access to better job opportunities in the future. Lena shows a strong academic performance and seems to be getting along with her new classmates. Yet things go awry when she starts a romance with one of her peers, Anton (Filipp Avdeev).⁵³ The couple’s tender relationship upsets some of their classmates (in particular, Misha and Vit’ka who nurture crushes on Lena and Anton, respectively), Anton’s mother, as well as the school staff (most appallingly, the janitor who claims that the two are perverse and should not be allowed to procreate because their disabilities are contagious and will harm the national gene pool). While Anton manages to escape the wrath of his classmates, the newcomer Lena quickly becomes *persona non grata*. At this point, the film takes a brutal turn. Misha vandalizes Lena’s wheelchair; Lena is gang-raped by her classmates; the much-anticipated commission rules that Lena does not belong in a “normal” classroom; Anton,

⁵³ Both Poezhaeva and Avdeev (as well as Nikita Kukushkin who, in *Corrections Class*, plays the antagonist Misha) trained at Kirill Serebrennikov’s Gogol Center.

however, makes the cut and, without any explanation, stops talking to Lena. Heartbroken but not defeated, Lena—in the film’s “magical-realist ending” (Alaniz)—miraculously gets up and walks towards the school exit.

Nominally a feature film, *Corrections Class*, like many of Tverdovskii’s earlier shorts, masquerades at times as a documentary. Director of photography Fedor Struchev shot most of the film’s footage on a handheld camera to imitate the aesthetics of a documentary film. Moreover, some of the young actors cast in the film are non-professionals with real disabilities. In their discussion of what they term “cultural locations of disability,”⁵⁴ Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell include documentary film representations of disability among those sites that are created exclusively on behalf of people with disabilities and “in which disabled people find themselves deposited, often against their will” (3). These locales, which also include nineteenth-century charity networks, institutions for the feeble-minded during the eugenics period, workshops for the “multi-handicapped,” and academic research on disability, represent, according to Snyder and Mitchell, “saturation point[s] of content about disability,” which, even in their most benign manifestations, have resulted in treatment, both in the medical and cultural senses, that proved detrimental for the disabled (3). Snyder and Mitchell differentiate these cultural locations of disability from more acceptable, experiential forms of comprehending disabled bodies, which include personal narratives, performance art, as well as narrative film (4).

Tverdovskii, who made a few documentary shorts at the beginning of his career, seems to have developed an awareness of the objectifying potential of the documentary form and began experimenting with hybrid forms that imitated the documentary genre in content and style, but

⁵⁴ The term alludes to Homi Bhabha’s collection of essays *The Location of Culture*, in which Bhabha posits as such locations of culture spaces and narratives of resistance of the colonized peoples.

were not, by any definition, documentaries. Moreover, most of the shorts explicitly signaled their non-documentary status to the spectator, for example, by featuring a moderately well-known actor in one of the roles. In his 2011 short *Snow* (Sneg), for example, Tverdovskii cast Natal'ia Pavlenkova⁵⁵ in the lead role of a schoolteacher who buys cocaine for her daughter suffering from a substance use disorder.

That Tverdovskii did not fully abandon experimentation with the documentary format is notable for our discussion here. Tverdovskii's hybrids (fiction films with elements of the documentary form) have a twofold agenda. On one hand, Tverdovskii's explicitly fictionalized worlds allows the filmmaker to dissociate his work from the kind of documentary cinema that claims to produce "objective" discourse about a particular category of people and thus participates in their othering. On the other hand, Tverdovskii's use of documentary strategies minimizes the gap between the fictionalized and the real worlds, which disallows the spectator to distance herself from the social commentary attempted by the film. To put it bluntly, Tverdovskii's hybrid cinema does lay a claim to "truth" and takes it upon itself to inform the spectator but the "knowledge" it seeks to communicate is not "knowledge" about a certain category of people traditionally "othered" by a society but about the institutional and discursive practices of "othering."

The infusion of documentary elements into the fictional universe of *Corrections Class* is motivated precisely by this twofold agenda. The film relinquishes any claims to truth about a particular set of disabled bodies early in the film when he introduces us to the students from the "corrections class." We meet Lena first and follow her and her mother as they find their way, for the first time, to the "corrections class." We are encouraged to share Lena's perspective—the one

⁵⁵ Pavlenkova will become a regular in Tverdovskii's films. In *Corrections Class*, she plays the mother of the protagonist Lena. In *Zoology*, she is cast in the leading role.

of a newcomer, stranger—and “meet” her classmates as if we, too, have been accepted into the “corrections class.” This is, of course, a set up: we are encouraged to look for “otherness” so that we become aware of the inadequacy of the criteria we use in this operation. We will find out at various points later in the film why some of the students found themselves in this “corrections class”: Anton suffers from epilepsy, Mitia has a stutter, Masha has dwarfism, Vitia in turn suffers from “extreme fatiguability.” It will remain unclear on what basis the other students were assigned to this class. Tverdovskii uses dramatic license granted to him by the narrative form to put together a “corrections class” with a seemingly implausible range of cognitive and physical [dis]abilities. The factual distortion both serves as a disclaimer, a reminder that this is a work of fiction, and simultaneously allows Tverdovskii to articulate the question that is at the very heart of his social critique: who and on what (arbitrary) grounds decides what needs to be “corrected”?

While there is a certain degree of universality to Tverdovskii’s inquiry, *Corrections Class* makes it clear from the very beginning that its social commentary pertains, first and foremost, to contemporary Russia. When Lena and her mother report to school on September 1 (the official start of the academic year in Russia, also known as “The Day of Knowledge”), we witness a brief episode of the festivities dedicated to the beginning of the new school year—the raising of the Russian flag to the sounds of the national anthem. Lena and her mother, however, are not welcome at this celebration of knowledge—they are promptly rushed into the school by a member of the teaching staff. Unlike the “normal” students, the students of the “corrections class” are scheduled to be in class during the festivities. The symbolism of the gesture is all too legible: people with disabilities in contemporary Russia are not only refused equal access to education but are included in the imagined political community only by virtue of being excluded.

Tverdovskii's critique of the ways in which state institutions treat people with disabilities reiterates the deep entanglement of disciplinary power and biopower. The teacher, who rushes Lena and her mother into the school, harangues them about the importance of complying with the rules of the special education system designed specifically to help and take care of people like Lena. Lena in the meantime is trying to keep up with the teacher who is walking too fast in an attempt to get the new student and her mother as quickly as possible away from the "normal" part of the school and into the special corner on the second floor where the "corrections class" is located. There is no elevator or wheelchair ramp so Lena has to pull herself up the stairs by holding onto the railing, all while listening to the "caring" teacher impatiently nudge her to hurry up. The special education system designed "to help people like Lena" does not only refuse to help Lena get to the classroom; it turns out that it is not really designed to educate either. The teachers do not have the training (nor do they really care enough) to provide the special education that they claim the students in the "corrections class" require. Special education instead becomes a synonym to low-level education as the students are constantly asked to do assignments that are too easy for the ability levels of the students in the class.

In Tverdovskii's view, the special education system serves a different purpose altogether: it is designed not to educate but to police the public space. It partakes in a sort of "positive eugenics" project where "disability is supplanted from public visibility" (Snyder and Mitchell 30). Tverdovskii puts a lot of emphasis on the extreme lengths taken by the school to keep the students of the "corrections class" away from the "normal" part of the school. They are not welcome at the public celebrations of the "Day of Knowledge"; the other students do not seem to know that there is a special "corrections class" in their school; they are taught in their own corner that is separated from the rest of the school by a metal gate, which establishes a visual connection between the

“corrections class” and a carceral institution. As Foucault makes it clear in his discussion of biopower, the identification of subjects to be cared for entails the identification of those who are to be excluded from care, and it is disciplinary power that ensures the exclusion and stigmatization of those who “threaten” the ones deemed worthy of protection. The special education class, in short, emerges in Tverdovskii’s argument as part of Foucault’s “carceral continuum that covers the whole social body, linked by the pervasive concern to identify deviance, anomalies, and departures from the relevant norm” and as an element of the “framework of surveillance and correction [that] stretches from the least irregularity to the greatest crime and brings the same principles to bear on each” (Garland 864).

In *Corrections Class*, visual culture itself is implicitly posited as an element of this “carceral continuum,” as complicit in the identification of “normal” and “abnormal” components of populations.⁵⁶ In her discussion of the politics of visual representation, Butler distinguishes between social norms and what she calls “frames”; the latter are part of the so-called “staging apparatus” and determine what can be shown and how. Lübecker summarizes Butler’s position: “We can say that the norms determine the frames, but we must straight away add that the repetition of particular forms of framing helps to consolidate and/or produce the norms that govern the criteria that determine which lives are deemed worthy of recognition” (81). As Butler suggests, a critical task facing visual culture today is “to learn to see the frame that blinds us, [...] to thematise the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be” (Butler 100). In *Corrections Class*, Tverdovskii stages precisely such a “meta-framing,” an attempt to “frame the frame” (Butler 8).

⁵⁶ On the use of visual media as a method of political governance, see Allen Meek’s *Biopolitical Media: Catastrophe, Immunity and Bare Life*.

Tverdovskii alerts the spectator to his preoccupation with the ethical and cultural dimensions of vision already in the film's opening sequence. On their way to school, Lena and her mother are held up at the railway tracks because a teenage boy has been hit by a train. Lena's mother tells her daughter not to look but Lena does, as we will find out later, when she will describe in gruesome detail what she saw to Anton. José Alaniz interprets the scene at the railway tracks as Tverdovskii's challenge to the spectator: "I will show you things you will not want to see." While Tverdovskii indeed establishes a confrontational relationship with the spectator (which I will discuss further in the chapter), he does not really show us what we supposedly (do not) want to see in this episode. I would argue that Tverdovskii has a somewhat different agenda here: to draw the spectator's attention to the ways in which culture mediates our vision. In his seminal essay "Death in Cinema," Mikhail Yampolsky writes: "On the one hand, contemporary man attempts to banish death from his consciousness; the entire evolution of contemporary ritualization of dying and burial is connected to this. [...] On the other hand, the tendency to exhibit death as a necessary feature of contemporary spectacle is also very strong" (272). While these two tendencies—to conceal and to exhibit—may seem contradictory, the latter, in fact, serves the same purpose as the former: the spectacularization of death turns it into a fiction (272).

The meta-framing attempted by Tverdovskii in *Corrections Class* consists in subverting the ways in which disability—on one hand, concealed by the "carceral continuum"—has been fictionalized in visual culture. The film tackles, in particular, the stereotypical portrayal of people with disabilities as "pitiable and pathetic victims" or "evil monsters."⁵⁷ The key mechanism of meta-framing employed by Tverdovskii is the use of genre conventions—this is, first and foremost,

⁵⁷ See Jack Nelson's *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age* for a discussion of common stereotypes about disability shaped/perpetuated by visual culture.

a school film⁵⁸ and it prioritizes the common topics of the school film: first love, friendship, sex, bullying, difficulty fitting in and finding connection. There are certainly “victims” and “monsters” here but not victims of disability or people considered “monsters” because of their disability. Lena, a victim of betrayal, bullying, and rape, joins the long list of teenagers bullied and violated in Russo-Soviet school films, from Rolan Bykov’s *Scarecrow* (Chuchelo, 1984), the classic Stagnation-era school film, to Valeriia Gai Germanika’s 2008 drama *Everybody Dies but Me* (Vse umrut, a ia ostanus’). The perpetrators⁵⁹ similarly find numerous “like-minded” teenagers in the school film tradition. The school in *Corrections Class* in turn serves as a microcosm for society at large, and Tverdovskii diagnoses it with the same condition as Zviagintsev in his 2017 feature film—the condition of “lovelessness.” For Tverdovskii, *Corrections Class* is, to a lesser degree, a film about how we as a society treat people with disabilities, but rather a film about how we all as human beings treat one another.

Tverdovskii’s humanist agenda, however, appears to be in conflict with the antagonistic relationship he establishes with the spectator. Among the films discussed in this project, *Corrections Class* is the best and easiest fit for Lübecker’s category of the feel-bad film. Tverdovskii, who has frequently cited Lars von Trier’s cinema as an influence on his work, spares no efforts to antagonize the spectator. The rapid and often chaotic movement of the handheld camera, emotionally manipulative narrative developments, moments of “acrid, cringing comedy” (Alaniz) immediately following the most uncomfortable of sequences make *Corrections Class* a

⁵⁸ For a discussion of Soviet school films of the Stagnation period, see Olga Klimova’s *Soviet Youth Films under Brezhnev: Watching between the Lines*.

⁵⁹ As far as the “monster” stereotype is concerned, Tverdovskii treads with extra caution so as not to perpetuate it: Misha and Vitia, the two main instigators of the gang rape, are not “marked” by any specific disability. Early in the film Vitia says she is not sick at all and cites “extreme fatiguability” as the reason why she was assigned to the “corrections class.” It is not revealed how Misha ended up in the class.

very difficult film to watch, and it becomes increasingly more so as the film progresses.⁶⁰ The form here is in alignment with the content. The film's tonal shifts are a match for the emotional turbulence of adolescence; the film's formal choices predictably become particularly challenging during the film's most uncomfortable sequences—as, for example, is the case with the gang rape sequence in which Lena's agony is communicated through an exhausting combination of swift jerky camera motions (as if the camera, too, is in pain), disturbing close-ups of Lena's bleeding gagged face, and a cacophony of Lena's muffled screams and her classmates' callous remarks about who is going to go next. The camera's incessant shifting of perspective forces us to assume, alternately, the position of the victim and that of the perpetrator, a classmate waiting for their turn.

In his analysis of von Trier's 2003 drama *Dogville*, Lübecker redeems the filmmaker's "assault" on the spectator by insisting on the importance of distinguishing between ethics inside and outside the movie theater. Drawing on the work of Claire Bishop, Lübecker suggests that we consider art "an experimental activity" that has different ethical norms than the ones we expect to see outside the experiential venue that is the movie theatre. Thus, even though *Dogville* puts the spectator through an experience that would be considered unethical outside the movie theatre, it is not anti-humanistic but rather an example of "feel-bad humanism"—the film reveals our "inner

⁶⁰ Olga Kas'ianova captures her experience of watching Tverdovskii's drama in her review of the film for *Seans*:

Как и подавляющее большинство зрителей, по ходу истории о детях из «нестандартного» класса, я послушно совершала запланированные эмоциональные скачки. Меня кидало из крайности в крайность: от сладкого физиологического ужаса на люмьеровской сцене с поездом [...] до гомерического смеха на сцене с бананом — она еще хитро оставлена на финал, когда смеяться совсем не хочется. Это чистое насилие — твой смех волею заэкранного человека выплескивается вопреки твоему собственному настроению.

As I followed the story of the children from the "corrections class," I obediently, like the vast majority of the spectators, performed the built-in emotional leaps. I was catapulted from one extreme to the other: from the sweet physiological horror during the Lumière train scene [...] to the Homeric laughter during the banana scene, which was treacherously put off until the finale, when you don't feel like laughing at all. It's pure violence —your laughter pours out of you against your own will by the volition of the person behind the screen.

bastard” to us in an attempt to initiate a “discussion of what we might call the ethics of a human subject who only partly understands herself” (169).

While I am in agreement with Lübecker’s point about the distinction between the ethical standards inside and outside the movie theatre, I contend that in *Corrections Class* Tverdovskii’s efforts to antagonize the spectator ultimately undermine the film’s attempt at a “meta-framing.” Most narrative choices of the film in the last thirty minutes of its duration appear to be a dare to the spectator: How much more can you take? How much longer are you going to watch Lena’s suffering and humiliation? For those who stick around even after the disturbing sequences of Misha’s vandalization of Lena’s chair and the vicious gang rape, Tverdovskii has more “surprises” up his sleeve. The first comes in the form of Anton’s unmotivated betrayal of Lena.⁶¹ Up to this point the film has gone to great lengths to convince us of the sincerity of Anton and Lena’s feelings for each other, only to have Anton inexplicably turn his back on her—the same Anton who (only a few minutes earlier, i.e. a day or two within the diegetic world) got into a fight with Misha when the latter insulted Lena. There are, of course, dozens of plausible explanations for Anton’s behavior that we as spectators could divine, but it is less the narrative gap itself that is of interest here than the fact that, by refusing to explain the inconsistency in Anton’s behavior and asking us to do it ourselves, Tverdovskii abruptly changes the terms of the spectatorial contract: “You thought you knew the rules of the game but I just changed them!”

The filmmaker changes the terms of agreement yet again at the very end of the film when Lena, whom the special commission has deemed unfit for “normal” classrooms, miraculously finds herself able to walk again. The film’s conclusion has been interpreted by critics either as “as a final

⁶¹ *Leviathan* also gets progressively darker as it unfolds, yet the narrative developments in Zviagintsev’s feel-bad film do not seem inconsistent. In an interview with Viktor Matizen, Zviagintsev has said that he, too, found Anton’s sudden change of disposition at the end of Tverdovskii’s *Corrections Class* inconsistent with the rest of the film.

stab in the eye to the viewer, a Larsian foiling of preconceptions” (Alaniz) or as an “apologetic compensation” (Kas'ianova) for the emotional manipulation that the film has asked the spectator to endure. I lean towards Kas'ianova's reading of the conclusion, yet, regardless of whether the “miracle” was meant as a quasi-catharsis⁶² or a real attempt at compensatory catharsis, the common denominator in both readings is the correlation of the miracle cure ending to the film's antagonistic relation to its spectator. Whether designed to appease or to anger the viewer even further, the miracle ending is problematic because it “participates in an age-old quasi-eugenicist ‘wishing away’ of disability” (Alaniz). Beyond offering the pessimistic view that we cannot fight or change the disciplinary institutions masquerading as institutions of care, the film's ending places it on the long list of “stories about disability [that] conclude with solutions that result in the erasure of impairments either through death or cure” (Mitchell and Snyder 1383). In the case of *Corrections Class*, Aristotle's dictum that “the end is everything” (qtd. in Lübecker, 2) holds true as the film's settling of scores with the spectator undermines its attempt to de-frame visual culture and perpetuates, rather than displaces, what Butler calls “the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm” (100).

Zoology, Tverdovskii's second feature film and the recipient of the Kinotavr festival's cinema critics award, is, like the filmmaker's debut feature, a coming-of-age story—despite the age of its protagonist, a middle-aged zoo-worker Natasha (portrayed by Natal'ia Pavlenkova). Natasha acts like a teenager, still lives with her mother and hides cigarettes from her and is

⁶² In his discussion of *Dogville*, Lübecker suggests that von Trier provides a catharsis but then puts a ‘deadlock’ on it: “The manipulative director seems to tease the spectator in accordance with a formula that could be summed up like this: ‘So you want catharsis? So you want catharsis? Here you have it! . . . Was that really what you wanted?’” (27). If Alaniz is right and the “magical-realist ending” of Tverdovskii's film is supposed to serve as “a final stab in the eye to the viewer,” then Lübecker's formula for von Trier's quasi-catharsis could apply to *Corrections Class* as well (with a slight modification): “You want catharsis? Here you have it! I'll give you a miracle! Remember those don't happen in real life!”

mercilessly bullied by her co-workers. Her life is suddenly transformed, however, when she grows a tail—"thick, fleshy, the kind that would make David Cronenberg proud" (Prokhorova). The healthcare system at large proves unable and unwilling to help her. Natasha, however, strikes up a friendship (which quickly develops into a romantic relationship) with the young X-ray technician Petia (Dmitrii Groshev). As Natasha begins to come to terms with her phallic appendage, she gets a makeover, starts flaunting short skirts and sequined dresses, and generally becomes more confident and assertive. In the meantime, rumors start spreading across town of a devil-possessed woman with three tails, an encounter with whom will inevitably give you cancer. Natasha's own mother paints the entire living room with dozens of red crosses in an effort to protect herself and her daughter from the caudate monstrosity that threatens their town. [Figures 29-30] Natasha is not too bothered at first, but everything changes when her budding romance with Petia comes to an abrupt halt. When the two consummate their relationship in a zoo cage, she is disappointed to discover that Petia has a particular appreciation for her tail and breaks things off. Natasha hopes to find another compassionate human being who would not consider her a "freak," but people in the streets bolt off at the sight of her appendage. In a final blow, Natasha's mother rejects her own daughter as she responds to Natasha's confession with a cruel "You're drunk. Go sleep it off." Defeated, Natasha cuts off her tail—as the film cuts to the closing credits.



Figure 29



Figure 30

Zoology pursues many of the same issues addressed by Tverdovskii in *Corrections Class* and, arguably, remedies, in its exploration of these issues, some of the shortcomings of the filmmaker's first stab at the subject matter. The stumbling block of Tverdovskii's conceptualization of the relationship between the self and the other in *Corrections Class* is a conflation of two different notions of otherness: singular and collective otherness. In an attempt to kill two birds with one stone—to address how we as a society treat people with disabilities and how we treat one another as human beings—Tverdovskii mixes politics with ethics in a such way that they threaten to cancel each other out. What appears to be the problem is, perhaps, meant as a solution: the film's focus on a universally applicable message (how we treat one another) is

supposed to be part of a “meta-framing” project, a deconstruction of the othering practices that assign a set of stereotypical features to a particular group of people. The issue with this quest toward universality, however, is its implicit disavowal of a condition which the film simultaneously attempts to foreground—the condition of precarity, which Butler defines as “the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death” and which should be distinguished from precariousness, a generalized “shared condition of human life,” “a condition that links human and non-human animals” (Butler, 25; 13).

In *Zoology*, Tverdovskii also employs the notion of the other that could simultaneously be read as singular and collective but absolves himself from the responsibility to account for the “differential allocation of precarity” (Butler, 3) through the use of Natasha’s tail as an abstracted notion of otherness. Perhaps even more importantly, in *Zoology*, Tverdovskii challenges his protagonist and the spectator to encounter the other within the self—our own animality—and thus attempts a dismantling of the boundary between the self and other altogether. The figure of the animal, after all, as Cary Wolfe points out, “has always been especially, frightfully nearby, always lying in wait at the very heart of the constitutive disavowals and self-constructing narratives enacted by that fantasy figure called ‘the human’” (6). As long as we think the human not as part of us but “as the primitive and pure other that we rush to embrace as a way to cure our own existential malaise,” the humanist speciesist discourse “will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of *whatever* species— or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference” (Wolfe 17; 8; emphasis in original).

While Tverdovskii’s project does not perhaps match the ambition of Wolfe’s radical post-humanism, *Zoology* persistently encourages us to rethink our ideas about (our own) animality. The

film's interest in the workings of what Agamben terms the "anthropological machine"⁶³ manifests itself early on when it is revealed that Natasha works at the zoo—the site par excellence of human desire to establish a boundary between man and animal. The zoo "position[s] 'them' (animals) relative to 'us' (humans) in a fashion that links a conceptual 'othering' (setting them apart from us in terms of character traits) to a geographical 'othering' (fixing them in worldly places and spaces different from those that we humans tend to occupy)" (Philo and Wilbert 10). In a telling moment, Tverdovskii satirizes the illusion of man's radical alterity from animal when he uses a match cut to establish a likeness between the chewing animals in the zoo and Natasha's coworkers enjoying lunch. At the press-conference at the Kinotavr film festival, Tverdovskii pointed out that each of Natasha's co-workers was supposed to resemble a particular animal: a toad, a giraffe... ("Press-konferentsiia"). Compared to their slurping human counterparts, nonhuman animals appear significantly more dignified (*Zoology* is consistently unkind to its numerous middle-aged female characters; Natasha seems to be the exception that proves the rule).⁶⁴ The comparison illuminates an important dimension of Tverdovskii's agenda—while the film points to what we share with nonhuman animals, it simultaneously attempts to negotiate an appropriate degree of animality that we should embrace. What is in view in the case of Natasha's co-workers is insufficient humanity; the issue with Natasha, at least initially, is repressed animality.

While several critics have noted that it is not clear when exactly Natasha begins to grow a tail, I would argue that this moment coincides with the film's opening sequence. Beyond the

⁶³ The anthropological machine, according to Agamben is what separates man from his animality. He writes: "In so far as the production of man through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman, is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion)" (*The Open* 37).

⁶⁴ As Natal'ia Sirivlia writes in her review of the film for *Iskusstvo kino*, most of the residents of Natasha's town are "почему-то раскормленные бабцы неопределенного возраста, прекрасные настолько, что заставляют заподозрить режиссера в мизогинии" ["for some reason rotund hags of an uncertain age, who are so 'fine' that you might suspect the director of misogyny."]

unreliable hypothesis of narrative symmetry—that a film that ends by cutting off the tail could begin when the said tail starts to grow—I would cite as evidence the fact that Natasha briefly loses consciousness and then vomits at the beginning of the film. The abject expulsion could be read, via Kristeva, as a reaction to the breakdown of the distinction between self and other; as a response to what threatens the boundaries of identity. As Kristeva writes: “The abject confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening worlds of animals and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (*Powers of Horror* 12-13). The abject expulsion, in other words, is a manifestation of and response to the return of repressed animality (the appearance of the tail).

The most significant challenge offered by Tverdovskii’s film to our conceptions about our animality comes in the form of the transformation that Natasha undergoes after she sprouts a tail. Previously timid and forbearing, Natasha becomes more assertive and playful, speaks up at work and starts breaking social norms and expectations (as, for example, in the scene where she and Petia get drunk and disrupt a self-help meeting). In his critique of Agamben’s rigid distinction between *zoē* and *bíos*, Laurent Dubreuil insists that we cannot really separate the two: “We live politics, which is not only the far horizon of shared existence, an inventory of techniques, a subject of discussion between scholars. We live it in our gestures, words, experiences, feelings, and attitudes. Life, politics, are bound to each other” (83). Tverdovskii’s conceptualization of the relationship between life and politics is in some ways similar to Dubreuil’s position but has a somewhat different inflection. The abstracted notion of otherness embodied in Natasha’s tail has been read by critics as a stand-in for all kinds of difference, including political, yet even without reading the tail as a metaphor for political difference specifically, the tail challenges the view that

politics is coextensive with the human domain. One could derive from *Zoology* a vision of politics that is in some ways similar to the one developed by Brian Massumi in *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*. Massumi, who grounds his animal politics in the playfulness and self-expressivity of animality, suggests that animality can help us rethink the “all-too-human ways of working the political” (3). “Massumi’s most powerful claim,” as David Craig contends, is that “animality already lies at the core of our political lives and relationships” (Craig 27).

Natasha’s newly-gained self-belief, however, could also be seen not as an effect of her new appendage but as a result of Petia’s interest in her. While it is impossible to say definitively what exactly brings about the protagonist’s transformation, the fact that Natasha loses her newly-found passion for life when things with Petia go awry, suggests that it may have been the attention of a handsome man that motivated her to change. While this could be read, as critic Wendy Ide suggests, as a “depressingly prosaic conclusion to a pleasingly unconventional story,” a closer look at Petia’s character offers an alternative and less regressive (albeit equally pessimistic) interpretation.

Petia, the X-ray technician, proves to be the only professional and compassionate healthcare worker of the several featured in the film (like Tverdovskii’s debut film *Corrections Class*, *Zoology* offers a biting critique of the state institutions of “care”). The fact that the film’s only character not appalled by Natasha’s tail is an imaging technician seems far from incidental. I would even argue that the film draws a parallel between Petia’s use of imaging apparatus and the cinematic apparatus employed by Tverdovskii. My contention is in part based on a small but striking detail about Petia’s office—hard copies of x-ray images on the window ledges. [Figures 31-32]



Figure 31



Figure 32

The detail is unusual in and of itself—most radiographic imaging is processed digitally these days (notably, the transition from film to digital was accompanied by the same deliberations on the part of radiologists and cinema practitioners alike: the cost of film and the inherent malleability of the digital image). What is particularly remarkable, however, about the images on display in Petia’s office is how they are positioned on the window ledges and vis-a-vis each other. In their arrangement, they resemble photos of family and loved ones one might display on a mantelpiece at home or on the desk in an office.

On one hand, the x-ray images could be interpreted as a product of the objectifying medical gaze, in Foucault’s understanding of it, as enacting a separation between the patient’s body from

the patient's identity (*The Birth of the Clinic* 89). In that sense, the arrangement of the x-ray images in Petia's office could be seen as a warning that Petia might have more of an appreciation of Natasha's phallic appendage than Natasha herself—in that sense, Petia's concentration in his sexual encounter with Natasha on her phallic appendage should not come as a surprise.⁶⁵ This conclusion, however, is undermined by the fact that, in *Zoology*, the medical gaze is not dehumanizing—it is the refusal to see (and not only on the part of medical professionals)—that is presented as problematic. Two encounters are particularly illuminating in this respect: Natasha's appointment with the surgeon and her “coming out” to her mother. The surgeon, after staring at the x-ray clearly showing the vertebrae of a tail, declares that he cannot see anything and tells Natasha to get another x-ray; after the same thing happens the second time, Natasha realizes the healthcare system will be of no help to her. Natasha's mother similarly refuses to see. Even though she has been diligently relating to Natasha the rumors of a three-tailed devil-possessed woman roaming the streets of their town, she tells Natasha to go “sleep it off” when her daughter shows her the tail.

The connection between the x-ray images, photographs of loved ones, and cinematic images leads to a conception of the gaze of other as finalizing, but not in the negative sense proposed by Bakhtin in his later work as “deadening,” “a second-hand definition” and “reifying” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 59-62) but in the positive sense of his earlier work. In his early theorization of the author-hero relationship, Bakhtin views the aesthetic act (gaze of the other) as infused with “the organizing power of love” (“Author and Hero” 171): “Words of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the dark chaos of my inner sensation of myself: they name, direct,

⁶⁵ This reading, however, is based on a view that the tail is separate from Natasha's identity, in other words, on the assumption of a rigidly separated *zoē* and *bíos*, animality and humanity. I will return to this point shortly.

satisfy, and connect it with the outside world...” (“Author and Hero” 50). Aesthetic seeing, to which Bakhtin also refers as “empathizing” is inevitably fragmentary but has the ability to see the hidden inner truth (like an x-ray), to give a unity to the other who cannot see self as a whole: “In this sense, one can speak of a human being’s absolute need for the other, for the other’s seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying self-activity...” (“Author and Hero” 35-36). In this sense, the two readings I have offered are complementary rather than contradictory: whether through a rethinking of the relationship with our animality or our need for the empathizing other, the film de-frames the opposition inherent in the self-other dichotomy.

Yet if Petia is the empathizing other who, unlike the numerous indifferent others, offers Natasha a compassionate finalizing view, then what makes her reject Petia after they consummate their relationship in the cage? An answer to this question requires a consideration of the mode of spectatorial address employed by Tverdovskii throughout the film and in this scene, in particular. Unlike *Corrections Class*, *Zoology* does not antagonize the spectator. Aleksandr Mikeladze’s handheld camera strives to imitate the authentic feel of an observational documentary but its movements are not too abrupt or chaotic. There are no jarring tonal shifts or unanticipated changes in the terms of the spectatorial contract. Yet Daria Ezerova, in her overview of the films shown at the 27th edition of the Kinotavr film festival, lists *Zoology* as an example of “cinematic discomfort.” If the film is to a certain extent discomforting, its discomfort stems from its insistence on our encounter with Natasha’s fleshy tail that, through a combination of CGI and prosthetics, is made to look rather repugnant. The sequence featuring Natasha’s and Petia’s sexual encounter in a zoo cage brings the level of discomfort to the maximum when the camera lingers on Petia in close-up fellating Natasha’s tail. A viewer’s interpretation of the film’s conclusion is likely going

to depend on what we do with this discomfort and whether we perceive it as discomfort at all—hence the multiplicity of competing interpretations.⁶⁶

The numerous readings of the film offered by critics vary based on how the author interprets Petia's "way-too-into-it sexual enthusiasm" (Kiang) for Natasha's tail and Natasha's reaction to this discovery. The question that Tverdovskii poses to us here is whether we can offer the same empathizing gaze to Petia with which the film has encouraged us to view Natasha? In her review of the film Alena Solntseva suggests that for Petia the tail is ultimately an attraction (like sliding in a tin tray down a concrete slope, which we witnessed earlier); this leads her to the conclusion that Petia is, like everyone else, unable to understand Natasha ("Khvost"). Petia's gaze, in this reading, emerges as the objectifying dehumanizing gaze that separates Natasha's body from her identity. This reading, however, is based on the presupposition of a caesura between the two, which is not necessarily a given, if we read the film, as I have attempted above, as an effort to destabilize the divide between our humanity and animality. In his review of the film, Dolin argues that Petia's encounter with Natasha gives him an opportunity to let his own tail grow: "почувствовать себя диковинным животным среди других зверей — и обрадоваться этому" ["to feel like a curious beast among other animals—and rejoice"] ("Zoologiya"). Petia indeed seems to have embraced his animality (or perhaps has been in touch with it all along?)—he feels quite at home in the zoo cage and playfully describes to Natasha how he would arrange things in the cage when he "moves in." Natasha, on the contrary—and this is where the film is at its most pessimistic—is unable to accept neither her own nor Petia's animality and is, by extension, unable to return his empathizing finalizing gaze. For her, there remains an unbridgeable caesura between her humanity and animality—the latter is included, in Agamben's terms, only by virtue of being

⁶⁶ See, for example, Solntseva ("Khvost"), Dolin ("Zoologiya"), Kiang.

excluded. The question is, whether the film itself sets Natasha up for failure by imagining animality as an appendage—as separated by a caesura? A further question that remains open is why the film chooses to become an accomplice in the cutting off of the tail? The film cuts to black at the very moment when Natasha's appendage is about to hit the blade. Should this conclusion be read as a commentary on the ways in which the cinematic medium itself has been instrumental in perpetuating and shaping notions of normativity and banishing what does not fit those constructs? *Zoology* does indeed, as I have tried to show, set out to challenge preconceptions about normativity. It appears, however, to have little faith in its own success from the very beginning: it would be logical for a film that begins with the sudden appearance of a tail to end with its removal.

Tverdovskii thus offers pessimistic conclusions to both *Corrections Class* and *Zoology* as he suggests that what entraps us within the norm is that we are responsible for producing it through engaging in self-discipline and self-surveillance. Aleksei Fedorchenko, who returns to the workings of disciplinary power time and again in his oeuvre, arguably offers a more hopeful outlook—in his playful cinema, despite the seeming omnipresence of power, there is always a possibility to escape. It is to his work that I will now turn my attention: I will first provide an overview of the key strategies and themes across Fedorchenko's oeuvre and then discuss his 2018 film *Anna's War*, which marks an important stylistic and narrative rupture in the filmmaker's work.

3.2 Fedorchenko's Counter-Histories: Beyond the Bareness of Bare Life

In his review of Aleksei Fedorchenko's 2005 "documentary fantasy" *First on the Moon*,⁶⁷ Oleg Kovalov writes:

The characters of the film are under the control of the CheKa, who secretly film every one of their steps with a hand-held camera. [...] Supposedly this footage was shot using a portable camera, but on the screen we see very effective images shot in wide-angle, so beloved by avant-garde filmmakers. Shot in shallow-focus, the "Stalinist Empire-style" buildings appear like cyclopean armaments and the squares in Russian cities appear boundless and deserted. Human forms likewise seem lost in these expanses—lonely figures that cast lengthy shadows as in Giorgio de Chirico's "metaphysical" paintings. It even seems that the "fish-eye lens" in this film has an "organic," rather than technological ancestry. This is the eye of an unimaginable monster that breathes off-screen, the incarnation of a sinister, invisible, and anonymous power. The images themselves declare that the mechanism of surveillance and control of individuals in Russia has never died and has no intention of dying, and that its very indestructibility contains something metaphysical, as in de Chirico's paintings.

First on the Moon, a mockumentary about the Soviet space program and its first successful mission to the moon in 1938, does indeed have a preoccupation with the ubiquity of state surveillance mechanisms and the complicity of the cinematic apparatus in the exercise of power.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the interplay of the post-Soviet and the postmodern in *First on the Moon*, see Daria Kabanova's "Mourning the Mimesis: Aleksei Fedorchenko's *First on the Moon* and the Post-Soviet Practice of Writing History."

As Birgit Menzel points out, the film's narrative strategies are meant to resemble those of secret services: "Geheimhaltung, Manipulation, Betrug und Verschwörung gehören zu den zentralen politischen Strategien aller Geheimdienste, besonders zur Zeit des Kalten Krieges, sind aber zugleich auch die wirksamsten Faszinationsthemen in der Populärkultur" (236). ["Secrecy, manipulation, fraud and conspiracy are among the central political strategies of all secret services, especially during the Cold War, but are simultaneously the most effective appeal strategies in popular culture."]

Yet what Kovalov's eloquent description of the "unimaginable monster" of power and its methods of surveillance does not capture is how frequently Fedorchenko's characters succeed in escaping the "monster." In a particularly telling sequence in *First on the Moon*, the handheld surveillance camera follows engineer Fedor Suprun, the "general constructor" of the spacecraft that the Soviets sent to the moon. The footage produced by the surveillance camera betrays the presence of its all-too-human operator. The camera movement is shaky, and we hear the quickened breathing and the footsteps of the cameraman trying to keep up with its object of surveillance, while maintaining a certain distance so that Suprun does not notice that he is being followed. Suprun's quick stride, however, disrupts the illusion of the "total one way-ness" of the gaze of the surveillance camera (Koskela 175)—he is not walking, he is running away. Suprun leads his follower onto a viewing platform (the irony!), lulls him into a false sense of security by putting his satchel onto the railing, and disappears down a flight of stairs. We hear the man behind the camera curse; the quickly changing images in the frame suggest that he is now running too. When the camera reaches the most advantageous viewing spot on the platform, it is only to capture through its lens an empty viewing platform (identical to the first one—a postmodernist trick typical of Fedorchenko's cinematic worlds) and Suprun's satchel sitting on the railing. The surveillance

camera has lost the “subject” of surveillance and can only surveil the object left behind. [Figure 33]



Figure 33

Suprun, we will soon find out, will reappear only thirty years later. Despite power’s attempt to assert total control and the alleged “anonymity” of disciplinary power,⁶⁸ power is, as the film posits, neither total, nor anonymous—it is negotiated in specific interactions. By putting the spectator in the position of the person behind the surveillance camera and making us complicit in its operation, Fedorchenko suggests that we too are participants in the negotiations of power.

In his critique of Agamben’s theorization of bare life (i.e. what remains when *bíos* is forcefully removed from *zoē*), Jonathan Elmer writes: “Agamben remains so fascinated by the hyperbolic opposition between meaningful life and mere animality, between power and the absolute powerlessness of ‘bare life,’ that a trace of contempt edges into his description of those who have been reduced to the latter condition” (30). Fedorchenko’s films continuously return to the sites of production of bare life, but they do not find “the absolute powerlessness of ‘bare life’”

⁶⁸ For Foucault’s discussion of the “anonymity” of disciplinary power, see *Discipline and Punish*, p. 176 and p. 193.

there. In *First on the Moon*, the astronauts of the Soviet space program, whose bodies are, on one hand, molded by the state for its purposes, are, on the other hand, voluntary participants in the project. They are victims and heroes at the same time.⁶⁹ Once the state decides to cover up the whole project (after the spacecraft crashes on its way back to earth), the project participants, including the surviving astronaut Ivan Kharlamov, time and again miraculously escape the NKVD that is out to get them.

The “absolute powerlessness of ‘bare life’”⁷⁰ is not to be found even in those films on Fedorchenko’s filmography where you would most expect to see it. Fedorchenko’s directorial debut, a 2002 documentary short *David*, about a Jewish man from Minsk who survived both Nazi and Gulag camps, features only one voice—the voice of the survivor. In his account of his experience in the Nazi camps, David Levin talks about the days when he was subjected to painful medical experiments and forced to copulate with Jewish girls, as well as the days when he played soccer with the other boys and knocked apples and pears off of a tree when no one was looking. He talks about the children who were “put to sleep, like animals” for disobedience; about a German soldier who would kick the children, as well as about the time when he kicked her back. He talks about the day when he was supposed to be “liquidated” and the German nurse (who, he notes, looked a little bit like Zykina)⁷¹ who saved his life by saying that he was contagious (a testimony to the power of the abjected body).

⁶⁹ As Fedorchenko himself has said in an interview: “The element of irony is very small, perhaps around five percent. The rest is something of an homage to the generation of our fathers and grandfathers, including their honesty, their genuine belief in an ideal” (qtd. in Prokhorov, “Alekssei Fedorchenko”).

⁷⁰ For a critique of Agamben’s concepts of *homo sacer* and bare life, see Antonio Negri’s piece “Giorgio Agamben: The Discreet Taste of the Dialectic” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*; Ernesto Laclau’s contribution to the same volume titled “Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?”; Thomas Lemke’s article “‘A Zone of Indistinction’: A Critique of Giorgio Agamben’s Concept of Biopolitics” in *Critical Practice Studies*; and Paul Patton’s piece “Agamben and Foucault on Biopower and Biopolitics.”

⁷¹ Liudmila Zykina (1929-2009) was a Russian folk singer. She was decorated as a People’s Artist of the Soviet Union, as well as a Hero of Socialist Labor. She was also awarded the Lenin prize in 1970.

The footage that Fedorchenko uses in his short was shot by volunteers from the Shoah Visual History Foundation, founded by Steven Spielberg—the Foundation recorded more than 50000 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses between 1994 and 1999. The pieces of footage that Fedorchenko chooses to include suggest that, unlike Agamben, who, as Thomas Lemke puts it, is “less interested in life than in its ‘bareness’” (“‘A Zone of Indistinction’” 4), Fedorchenko offers a corrective to Agamben’s conception that “does not comprehend ‘camp’ as an internally differentiated continuum, but only as a ‘line’ that separates more or less clearly between bare life and political existence” (Lemke, “‘A Zone of Indistinction’” 8). As Lemke points out, “[Agamben’s] attention is fixed on the establishment of a border – a border that he does not comprehend as a staggered zone but as a line without extension that reduces the question to an either-or” (Lemke, “‘A Zone of Indistinction’” 8). That is not to say that Fedorchenko downplays the brutal facts of the Holocaust or obscures the vulnerability of precarious life; what is at stake here is rather a refusal to make helplessness the defining characteristic of David’s humanity.⁷² As Thomas Elsaesser notes, “victims” and “survivors” appearing on television are frequently reduced to specific roles: they are supposed to produce affect and emotion and have a certain negative agency: “that of righteousness and subjective truth, *but only on condition of consenting to being a victim*, testifying to powerlessness and pure need” (114; emphasis in original).

Fedorchenko’s numerous survivors—the filmmaker has a predilection for survival narratives⁷³—are not reducible to absolute powerlessness; neither do they produce easily

⁷² It should be noted that, although Fedorchenko certainly plays an editorial role in shaping the narrative, David’s testimony itself resists the equation of bare life and powerlessness, no matter how you “cut” it. The subject is inseparable here from hope and resilience.

⁷³ His trilogy on the fraught relationship between the state and the individual features three stories of survival: *David*, *First on the Moon*, and a 2003 documentary *Children of the White Grave*, about the survival of ethnic groups exiled by Stalin to Kazakhstan. *Angels of Revolution*, a 2014 drama loosely based on the 1934 Kazym rebellion against forceful Sovietization, leaves behind numerous casualties but is also framed as a survival story. In the finale, the film switches to the documentary form and shows an old Khanty woman, a survivor of the events, in present-day Kazym.

“readable” affect. David Levin delivers his testimony without showing any outward sign of emotion. The short alternates between medium shots and close-ups but even the close-ups, “the magnifying glass of the cinematograph” (38), as Béla Balázs described the close-up, do not give us access to “the mysterious inner workings of the soul” (Renov 3). In his analysis of the use of the close-up in audio-visual testimony, Michael Renov argues that “the close-up can offer something more than the mere spectacle of suffering. It can afford ‘proximity’ to the other, a visceral and enduring (if archived) vehicle for understanding and ethical encounter” (5). Fedorchenko’s short, however, is resistant to making a spectacle of suffering and questions its ability to serve as a “vehicle for understanding” or offer “‘proximity’ to the other.”

While the reticence of the close-up cannot be attributed directly to Fedorchenko since he was working with found footage (although he may have contributed to the overall effect during the process of footage selection), the ways in which he pairs David’s words with archival footage betray an intentional blocking of affect and reveal a larger skepticism about the capacity of the audio-visual to render sensible the traumatic experience of the other. At the beginning, the film anticipates David’s words. We see, for example, footage of Minsk in the 1930s before David begins his story and tells us about his family. A title card added to the shot of people walking down Minsk streets reads: “1934. USSR. / Minsk. / David is born.” As the film progresses, we see numerous pairings like this: David’s voice off-screen, a short inscription with the indication of

She is wearing a national dress and singing a song by a Soviet songwriter Aleksandra Pakhmutova. In his review of the film for *KinoKultura*, Frederick Corney writes that the film concludes that “only one of the cultures still survives, at least in fragments.” The closing sequence, however, testifies to the persistence of both. For an in-depth analysis of Fedorchenko’s *Angels*, see a cluster of articles on the film in *The Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Volume 13, Issue 3): Alexander Prokhorov’s “Images of ‘posthumous subjectivity’ in Fedorchenko’s *Angels of Revolution*”; “The violence of antiquated forms: Aleksei Fedorchenko’s *Angels of Revolution*” by Tom Roberts; and Tatiana Mikhailova’s “The Myth of Two Goddesses.” Notably, Fedorchenko’s most recent survival narrative, his 2018 film *Anna’s War*, does not definitively end in survival. I will discuss this point in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter.

year and place, and archival footage from that particular location where David found himself at the time (most often, although not always, against his will). This footage often features numerous people, as if encouraging us to try and fail to find David among them—his conspicuous absence serves as the film’s acknowledgement that it has only tenuous access to David’s experience. The heterogeneous quality of the images and sound and the mixed “genres” of the featured archival footage (everyday scenes, footage from Nazi camps, recordings of spectacles designed for entertainment) alternately increase and shorten the distance between David’s testimony and the visual accompaniment that the short offers, bringing into relief the fact that the distance between the two cannot be bridged.

In some cases, the film that has conceded its inability to “illustrate,” attempts to comment instead. About ten minutes into the short, David talks about his time in a clinic in Spain where he was put on display for medical students “in his birthday suit” (“в чем мать родила”) and used as a teaching aid. As a preamble, the film shows footage of a corrida that alternates between shots of the bullfight itself and shots of the spectators cheering at the violent spectacle. The footage is accompanied by a soundtrack featuring the inappropriately high-spirited Georges Bizet’s *Overture to Carmen*, a melody so familiar and cheerful that it inevitably disrupts the affective response shaped by David’s narration preceding it and blocks an “appropriate” affective response to what David is about to disclose. The subtitle reads: “1944. Spain. *La Coruña*. / Medical Institute. / David is 10.” The point of the arrangement is, on one hand, painfully legible. Yet there is something about this combination of the aural, the visual, and the verbal that resists signification. Designed as a meaningfully inappropriate counterpoint to David’s story, it simultaneously testifies to the absolute inadequacy of any audio-visual “accompaniment” to it.

The establishment of a distance between the viewer and the diegetic world, as well as a persistent foregrounding of the mediating role of the cinematic apparatus are characteristic of Fedorchenko's oeuvre at large (his 2018 *Anna's War* is in some ways an exception, a point to which I will return shortly). His films that persistently investigate the relationship between power and the individual thematize and challenge their own authorship. With rare exceptions, Fedorchenko's cinematic efforts feature "willfully abstruse" non-linear narratives (Marshall), do not have an investment in a central protagonist or set of characters and hence disallow psychological identification, and are generally more interested in representation itself rather than the object of representation.⁷⁴ Unlike feel-bad films that, as Lübecker puts it, "sit somewhere between establishing a fictional universe and deliberately wanting to get on the nerves of the spectator" (2), Fedorchenko's films create lavishly aestheticized fictional universes that bring to relief their constructed nature. Moreover, they have no desire to antagonize the spectator—heavily aestheticized, Fedorchenko's cinematic images offer a most pleasant visual experience. Unlike Tverdovskii, who has said in an interview that the spectator has to play by his rules (Smirnov), Fedorchenko has asserted that his "[v]iewers should have to figure out for themselves the rules of the game and decide whether they want to play according to them or not" (qtd. in Prokhorov, "Aleksii Fedorchenko"). As Prokhorov writes, Fedorchenko views both himself and the spectator as *homo ludens*: as an author, "he is not a modernist heroic figure, but rather a playful craftsman, aware of the postmodern moment and engaging the viewer in an intellectual game" ("Images" 263).

⁷⁴ For a discussion of the discursive ruptures in Fedorchenko's work, see Vlad Strukov's chapter on *Silent Souls* in his volume *Contemporary Russian Cinema*. See also Prokhorov's essay on ruptured narration in *Angels of Revolution*, "Images of 'posthumous subjectivity' in Fedorchenko's *Angels of Revolution*."

Fedorchenko's mode of spectatorial address, however, undergoes a radical transformation in his 2018 film, *Anna's War*, in which Fedorchenko, on one hand, explores the issues that featured prominently in his earlier work (the power of the powerless; survival narratives) but on the other, departs from his playful authorial strategies—the film offers an easily accessible narrative with a central character, encourages an emotional investment on the part of the spectator and has a clearly articulated authorial stance.

Anna's War, recipient of the 2018 White Elephant, Golden Eagles, and Nika awards for best film, tells the story of a six-year old Jewish girl who miraculously survives a Nazi mass execution and continues her struggle for survival while hiding in a disused chimney in a Nazi headquarters. The film begins with a dark screen and a cacophonous soundscape of gunshots, screaming, barking, footsteps and car noises, as well as snippets of dialogue in Ukrainian and Russian. When the voices die down, the first images appear on the screen—the camera captures from above fragments of what we soon realize is a mass grave. An on-screen text informs us that it is November 1941, and we are in the Nazi occupied zone. Moving haphazardly from one body part to another, the camera eventually finds what it was looking for—the surviving child Anna. What we witness next is, as Sonia Lupher puts it, “a birth of sorts: Anna must fight her way out of her mother's body, now as an orphan, in order to survive.” Anna quickly finds out that she is entirely on her own—a peasant couple give her some food and wash her clothes only to drop her off at the Nazi headquarters. The rest of the film takes place within the school building requisitioned by the Nazis. Anna hides on a ledge in the chimney flue of a disused fireplace during the day and ventures out of her hiding spot at night in hopes to find something to eat and drink. Anna does not have much to get by on at first: she eats crumbs from the mousetraps and drinks water from flowerpots and paintbrush jars. As the film progresses, however, she becomes more

and more ingenious in her survival strategies—like a primordial human, she evolves from scavenger to hunter and eventually learns to harness fire (finds matches). At one point, she roasts a pigeon that she has trapped in the rafters and shares her feast with the stray cat, who has become her companion and whom she eventually has to sacrifice. She lets go of the cat when a Nazi guard dog starts barking at the fireplace. Anna avenges the loss of her friend at the end of the film by poisoning the dog, an action that signals the replacement of survival as the single telos of the film. In the film's final sequence, Anna moves back the pin flags scattered across Europe and the Soviet Union on a military map back to the German territory. It remains unclear whether Anna will survive or not, but she has won her war.

Unlike Fedorchenko's earlier films that frequently shifted between different perspectives, *Anna's War* has a single focal point, its protagonist Anna. The film features very little dialogue—Anna's survival depends on her silence—but in those few cases when we do hear scraps of conversations in different languages, there are no subtitles to help us. Our understanding of what is going on is limited to that of Anna. Almost the entirety of the film is shot in tight, claustrophobic frames, and when Anna is stuck in her hiding place during the day, we observe what is happening on the outside from her point of view—our vision is limited just like Anna's, who is watching the world through a cracked mirror. [Figures 34-35]



Figure 34

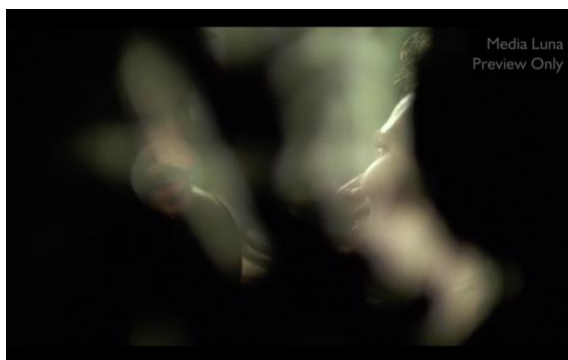


Figure 35

In contrast with Fedorchenko's earlier work, the film appears to have a linear albeit fragmented narrative, yet the film gives us no clues as to how much time has passed from the moment Anna found her hiding spot and the day she poisoned the dog. The narrative is shaped as a series of episodes, each of which fades to black. Our perception of time is aligned with Anna's as well: we too have no way to keep track of hours, days, weeks that pass between the episodes.

Despite its minimalist style, the film encourages psychological identification with its protagonist. While Fedorchenko's focus is still on resilience of bare life rather than suffering and absolute powerlessness, the choice of a child—one of the most vulnerable figures of precariousness—as its central character demands empathy from the spectator. Moreover, the film

creates and nurtures a strong narrative desire for a particular outcome, Anna's survival. Fedorchenko's earlier survival narratives never posited survival (or anything else for that matter) as their telos. They either "accidentally" stumbled upon survivors (as, for example, *First on the Moon*, stylized as an investigative documentary) or assumed survival as their starting point (as was the case in *David* where the fact that we are witnessing his testimony posits survival as already accomplished, rather than as telos).

If in his earlier work Fedorchenko kept "us purposely suspended between various interpretations of what he shows on screen" (Prokhorov, "Images" 266), there are no traces of this ambiguity in *Anna's War*; nor are there any remnants of Fedorchenko's signature playfulness. In the remainder of this chapter I situate the film in its context and attempt to articulate why Fedorchenko chose a more straightforward approach for the task he has set for himself.

When Oleg Kovalov reviewed Fedorchenko's *First on the Moon* back in 2006, he wrote: "The worse a government's state of affairs, the more fantastical the legends of its former victories become." He also noted that blockbusters were often tasked with propagating these legends. Blockbusters have since acquired an even more prominent role as a vehicle for myth.⁷⁵ As Alena Solntseva points out, however, if in the 2000s the proliferation of patriotic narratives was a product of audience demand (viewers wanted Hollywood-like heroic and uplifting legends), from 2012 on, the year when Vladimir Medinskii was appointed Minister of Culture, the state has taken it upon itself to ensure that filmmakers, especially those who are funded by the state, deliver the "correct" version of history. Solntseva writes: "Уверенность в том, что увиденное на экране как бы само собой становится реальностью, заменяя собой любые архивные и личные документы, —

⁷⁵ See Stephen Norris' monograph *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* for a discussion of the revival of patriotic and nationalist sentiments in Russian cinema of the 2000s.

наивна, но небезосновательна: увиденное действительно может быть убедительней сказанного.” [“The belief that what you see on the screen becomes reality and replaces all archival and personal documents is naive but not unfounded: seeing can indeed be more convincing than hearing.”] (“Mif”).

Three periods of Russo-Soviet history have been revisited particularly often in recent Russian cinema: Ancient Rus', the pre-revolutionary period, and the Great Patriotic War. Fedorchenko's *Anna's War* is in many ways a response to a series of films about the latter, beginning with Fedor Bondarchuk's *Stalingrad* (Stalingrad, 2007), Sergei Mokritskii's *Battle for Sevastopol* (Bitva za Sevastopol', 2015), Kirill Belevich's *Woman Alone* (Edinichka, 2015), Renat Davlet'iarov's *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (A zori zdes' tikhie, 2015), Sergei Popov's *Road to Berlin* (Doroga na Berlin, 2015),⁷⁶ and Kim Druzhinin and Andrei Shal'opa *Panfilov's 28* (28 panfilovtsev, 2016).

While there have certainly been exceptions to the rule, many of the recent state-subsidized war films⁷⁷ have reinstated elements of the victory myth that dominated the screens in the late Stalinist period. Stephen Norris summarizes the simple storyline of the original myth as follows: “when the beastly Nazis invaded, the Soviet people suffered at their hands, but guided by Stalin they responded patriotically and ultimately triumphed” (119). In his study of the Stalinist war myth,⁷⁸ Amir Weiner contends that, in its classical form, the victory narrative had two key

⁷⁶ 2015, the year of the 70th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War, saw, predictably, a particularly high number of war film releases. The 60th anniversary had been similarly greeted with a series of war films, including Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *The Cuckoo* (Kukushka, 2002), Nikolai Lebedev's *The Star* (Zvezda, 2002), Dmitrii Meskhiev's *Our Own* (Svoi, 2004), Aleksei A. German's *The Last Train* (Poslednii poezd, 2003).

⁷⁷ *Anna's War*, by contrast, did not use any state funding and was sponsored by a group of independent producers, as well as the Genesis Philanthropy Group. Before the film premiered at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam, the producers raised money for the post-production work on CGI, color correction, and sound through a crowdfunding campaign.

⁷⁸ See Amir Weiner, “When Memory Counts: War, Genocide, and Postwar Soviet Jewry,” in Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann, and Mary Nolan, eds., *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*. For more on this myth,

components: “hierarchical heroism” and “universal suffering” (“When Memory Counts” 192). According to the principle of “hierarchical heroism,” the Russians made the most meaningful contribution to the victory and were the most heroic of the Soviet nations. The “universal suffering” component in turn manifested itself in the representations of collective suffering of all Soviet citizens.

Anna’s War challenges the components of the victory myth that made a comeback in the 2000s and gained particular traction in the 2010s: universal suffering, the trope of the enemy, and heroic narratives (and the trope of heroic death, in particular). On one hand, Fedorchenko’s decision to show war through the perspective of a child, makes a universal anti-war statement as it attests to the automatized and instantaneous transformation of precariousness into precarity during war (in the face of which we are all children). On the other, however, it is a film about the Holocaust; in other words, the film acknowledges what has been consistently omitted from Russo-Soviet war narratives with their focus on “universal suffering”—the uneven distribution of precarity. As Anton Dolin points out, Anna’s diegetically motivated silence both refers to the silence of the millions of children and adults who were not allowed to have a voice, as well as the silence of Russo-Soviet cinema on the Holocaust, which has been treated as an “unspoken taboo” in Russo-Soviet cinema (“*Voina Anny*”). Fedorchenko had broken the taboo already in his little-known debut documentary short *David*, which I discussed above; *Anna’s War*, however—perhaps together with Konstantin Khabenskii’s *Sobibor*, released the same year—became one of the first Russian feature-length Holocaust films.⁷⁹

see Weiner’s volume, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*) and Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

⁷⁹ Whether or not *Sobibor* qualifies as a Holocaust film is a matter of interpretation. Dolin, for example, notes that the film touched upon the Holocaust but intentionally deemphasized it (“Shkola” 136). Dolin also notes that Andrei

By positing survival as the single telos of the film, Fedorchenko disrupts both the enemy and the hero tropes of the war myth. While some commentators have accused Fedorchenko of a stereotypical portrayal of Nazi soldiers (“cruel even to their dogs,” as Weissberg writes), Anna’s war is not against the Nazis—her sole purpose is to survive, her sole enemy is Death. Everyone who is on the other side of the cracked mirror through which Anna observes the world is a potential agent of death—be they Russian, Ukrainian, German, French, Hungarian or Romanian (these are the languages we hear in the film). In his discussion of the power of the abject, Elsaesser notes that “the abject is beyond victimhood, because he or she has no claims to make, which means that the abject commands a particular kind of freedom that probes the limits of *both* freedom *and* the law” (140; emphasis in original). This freedom consists in the indifference of the abject to the “community constituted as a nation or a state” (140). In Anna’s war against death, there is no community and hence there can be no Heroes. One of the key targets of Fedorchenko’s critique is the return of the trope of heroic death in recent Russian war films. In the war films of the late Stalinist period and socialist realist narratives at large death was imagined as “sublated,” to borrow Jean-Luc Nancy’s term, as “reabsorbed [...] in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence” (13). In the words of Sergei Dobrotvorskii: “for decades our cinematic heroes embraced their deaths with a proud smile on their faces and a ready-made meaningful speech. They died for a cause and never bored the spectators with any unnecessary details” (51).

Fedorchenko, who has avoided definitive conclusions in his earlier work, articulates a simple unambiguous position in *Anna’s War*: he posits human life as an absolute value and takes a clear stance against narratives based on imaginary allegiances to imagined communities that

Konchalovskii’s film *Paradise* (Rai, 2016] similarly relegates the Holocaust to a secondary role (136). Konchalovskii himself has explicitly said in an interview that for him, *Paradise* is not a Holocaust film (see Nechayev).

make human life dispensable. In this light, the fact that the film is set on the occupied Ukrainian territory acquires additional weight. Some commentators have interpreted Fedorchenko's decision to set the film in Ukraine and depict Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators as an expression of an anti-Ukrainian sentiment.⁸⁰ At the risk of being speculative, I would argue that Fedorchenko, like Anna, does not have an allegiance to any particular community. I read Anna's gesture of putting the German pin flags back onto the German territory as an anti-war and an anti-imperialist one and hence, among other things, as a commentary on the persistence of Russia's imperialist ambitions that have been recast into narratives about the preservation of an imagined community.

Fedorchenko's oeuvre—from *David* to *Anna's War*—has been consistently counter-historical, to borrow Marcia Landy's term. Landy defines counter-history as "an escape from formal history to a world of affect, invention, memory, art, reflection, and action" (xi). One of the key elements of counter-history, for Landy, is "its decentering of narrativity through discontinuity or fragmentation in the interests of a different relation to bodies and movement" (xiv). Fedorchenko's counter-historical cinema renegotiates, as I have attempted to show, the caesura (hyperbolized in Agamben's theoretical universe) "between meaningful life and mere animality, between power and the absolute powerlessness of 'bare life'" (Elmer 30). The different directorial approaches adopted by Fedorchenko in *Anna's War* and some of his more playful earlier films are perhaps motivated by what specifically his counter-cinema has been "counter" to. My contention is that Fedorchenko's earlier encounters with history have targeted primarily trauma, memory, and modes of representation. One of the central questions posited by Fedorchenko in *First on the Moon*

⁸⁰ Fedorchenko has countered this critique in an interview by saying that the original story (the film is loosely based on real events) took place in Ukraine, that he attempted to create on-screen a village in the Poltava Oblast where his father grew up and where Fedorchenko himself used to spend his summers as a child. Finally, he has pointed out that these events could have just as easily taken place in Russia, Belarus, or Poland ("#Kinotavr2018").

and *Angels of Revolution*, for example, was, “how do we relate to the image and, through the image, to the history that it presumably indexes?” (Prokhorov, “Images” 262). The counter-historical impulse of *Anna’s War* is, in my view, directed at the present. It attempts a de-framing of visual culture and acknowledges the limits of its own vision too (by foregrounding the act of subjective viewing through Anna’s obstructed view) but it is less interested in representation per se than its complicity in a much larger set of discursive practices that, through the construction of the other (“the enemy”), legitimize thanatopolitics.

In his discussion of Fedorchenko’s “postmodernist mystification” *First on the Moon*, Alexander Prokhorov has argued that the film reinstated “the utopian dimension in Russian cinema, thereby distancing it from the Soviet-era monopoly on discourse” (“Alekssei Fedorchenko”). Fedorchenko’s departure in *Anna’s War* from his signature postmodernist playfulness can then perhaps be read as a logical response to the state’s attempts to introduce a new ideological dimension (chimerical as it may be) into Russian politics; attempts that have been widely and mistakenly (as Lipovetsky has argued) understood as postmodernist.

Conclusion

In this study I have examined a selection of recent Russian films that thematize the fraught relationship between human life and political power. The limited corpus was not intended to be exhaustive—if power, as Foucault suggests, permeates the entire social body, then the list of films that could be considered as offering a commentary on the distribution of power relations in contemporary Russia would be endless. Each of the individual case studies was instead meant to showcase the different ways in which filmmakers, who are interested in the workings of power, negotiate their own position of authority. In *Leviathan* and *The Student*, Zviagintsev and Serebrennikov, respectively, embrace the role of “masters.” Kott in *The Test* and Mamuliia in *Another Sky*, on the contrary, refrain from articulating distinct authorial positions, albeit their approaches to establishing distance, as well as their motivations for doing so, vary greatly. Fedorchenko and Tverdovskii, in turn, experiment with different degrees of authorial presence but, more often than not, foreground in their self-reflexive cinema the constructed nature of their cinematic universes.

A relevant conclusion derived from this study—or rather a useful reminder—is that there is no guaranteed correlation between a particular form and a particular political stance. While the relationship between a film’s formal choices and its politics is worth pondering, the categorization of films into “genuinely and only apparently progressive films” (O’Shaughnessy 26) based on their formal properties is now a thing of the past. As Martin O’Shaughnessy points out, classifications of films akin to the one devised by critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma* may have had their relevance back in the late 1960s, but the questions that these critics posed about the relation between a progressive film politics and film form, production, and reception belonged to a specific historical moment

and should receive different answers today (27). In her analysis of what she calls “authoritarian fictions,” Susan Suleiman approaches the issue from a different angle but reaches a consonant conclusion. Even the most authoritarian of fictions, she writes, “if questioned a certain way, ends up contesting its own authority” (243).

A proximity of the discursive practices and political gestures used by the state and its critics in contemporary Russia is nonetheless worth exploring. Numerous oppositional artist figures have in recent years imitated the gestures of the current administration in their protest art. Petr Pavlenskii, for example, known for his performances of the vulnerable body (such as a cut off earlobe or a scrotum nailed to Red Square), reduces himself in his protest actions to bare life thus reclaiming from the state the object of politics par excellence, the privilege to draw the boundary between bare and political life. A similar assimilation of an antagonistic gesture is at work in the Pussy Riot “punk prayer,” as Daniil Leiderman suggests: “Instead of critiquing the collusion between state and church from a secular vantage point, Pussy Riot critiques from a religious vantage point – seemingly trying to harness religion to effect political change, the exact type of manipulation that they are denouncing in the first place” (174). Such oscillation between two incompatible positions, or “shimmering,” as Leiderman terms it, is an inherently postmodernist gesture.

Notably, however, the practices of the Putin administration itself have been frequently described as postmodernist. Among the cultural and political figures who have noted parallels between the discursive practices of the state and the postmodernist movement are Evgenii Bunimovich, Dmitrii Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, Aleksandr Dugin, Petr Pomerantsev... Yet in his essay “Pseudomorphosis: Reactionary Postmodernism as a Problem,” Mark Lipovetsky shows that the attribute “postmodernist” has been mistakenly applied to the discursive practices of the state.

What lies behind the fallacy is an erroneous association of postmodernism with eclecticism, amorality, absurdism, and the proliferation of simulacra. The first three features, Lipovetsky argues, are more characteristic of modernism and avant-garde than postmodernism.⁸¹ As for the Baudrillardian “hyperreality of the simulacrum,” it is characteristic of postmodernism as a historical period rather than postmodernism as a discursive system—the latter simply unveiled the key operating principles of this hyperreality. What is usually omitted from accounts of the allegedly postmodernist rhetorical strategies of the Putin administration, Lipovetsky suggests, are the most important qualities of postmodernism as a discursive system: “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard), deconstruction of binary oppositions (Derrida), and postmodern constructivism (i.e. anti-essentialism). Lipovetsky concludes that “то, что современные комментаторы называют постмодернизмом неоконсервативной политики, по существу, не имеет ничего общего с важнейшими характеристиками постмодернизма.” [“what contemporary commentators call the postmodernism of neoconservative politics has nothing in common with the key characteristics of postmodernism.”] (“Psevdomorfoza”). What we are dealing with is rather “messianic cynicism,” as Ilya Kukulin has argued.

I shall return to Kukulin’s point shortly but would like to first point out that the films that I have discussed in this study, while not necessarily postmodernist per se,⁸² do rely at least to some degree on postmodernist gestures. Tverdovskii, Kott, Mamuliia, and Fedorchenko attempt, albeit with varying degrees of success, a dismantling of the binary opposition between self and other.

⁸¹ Lipovetsky adds that these features were present in early Russian postmodernism as well and cites two reasons for this: 1. the fact that Russian postmodernism attempted to compensate for the interrupted evolution of avant-garde; 2. the fact that postmodernism developed in Russia in the underground scene, which was generally countercultural (“Psevdomorfoza”).

⁸² Fedorchenko is a single “definitively” postmodernist auteur on the list, even though he departs from his signature style in *Anna’s War*, as I discussed in Chapter Three.

Zviagintsev, Serebrennikov, Fedorchenko, and—implicitly—Tverdovskii challenge the boundary between the “dominators” and the “dominated.” Zviagintsev, Serebrennikov, Tverdovskii and Fedorchenko bring to relief the constructed nature of certain “truths,” discourses, and practices: be it religious discourse, the Russian version of the “great again” narrative, or what has become its essential component, the myth of the Great Patriotic War—“hystorical mythomania,” as Kukulin describes it (231). It is another matter (and an important one) that many of these filmmakers (with the exception, perhaps, of Kott) simultaneously return to a form of realism and offer their own version of truths (as, for example Zviagintsev and Tverdovskii, with their apophatic theologies). This oxymoronic combination of postmodernism and realism, I would argue, may be a logical response to the “messianic cynicism” practiced by the state.

So what exactly is understood by “messianic cynicism”? Drawing on Peter Sloterdijk’s conceptualization of “cynical reason,” Lipovetsky argues that the key distinction between postmodernism and cynicism is that the former juxtaposes conflicting discourses in order to lay bare and exacerbate what makes them incompatible, while the latter ignores and smooths over these incompatibilities for pragmatic (or selfish) purposes (“Psevdomorfoza”). “Cynicism,” Lipovetsky writes, “only pretends to be ideological; it offers the modern subject a strategy of pseudo-socialization that reconciles the individual’s interests with the requirements of society and its ideology by dissolving subjectivity into unstable, alternatively authentic and false masks (personas) through which the cynical subject can realize itself” (“Intelligentsia” 3). In his discussion of cynicism in contemporary Russia, Kukulin offers two reasons for the prevalence of “cynical reasoning”: 1. the ideological vacuum created by the emptying out of Soviet ideology and the resulting perception of morality as a discursive phenomenon; and 2. the need to defend oneself against and legitimize the undeclared state of exception. He writes: “One of the main goals of

Russia's current propaganda is to make extraordinary situations seem routine and, moreover, centuries-old" (231). What makes the cynicism of Russian propaganda "messianic" is that it simultaneously and paradoxically discredits idealistic motivation for political actions and presents this discrediting as a way to defend Russia's unique historical mission to preserve the moral values abandoned by the West (Kukulin 231).

A key characteristic of this "messianic cynicism" is its aggressive anti-communicative position: "it blocks differentiated, complicated communication. It is an anti-communicative attitude, which does not acknowledge the Other as an interlocutor (Other in this context can only mean Alien) and denies the presence of otherness in individual or social consciousness" (Kukulin 231). In this light, the fact that the films that I have examined in this dissertation all in one way or another thematize communication and its failures acquires additional weight. The filmmakers whose work I have discussed both register the crisis of communication and challenge, at least to some extent, the anti-communicative stance of the state, asking (and in some cases demanding) to be recognized as interlocutors. These efforts are certainly perceived by the adopters of the anti-communicative stance as a threat that needs to be neutralized—as evidenced by a whole array of neutralization measures that have been taken over the last few years: the 2013 anti-gay propaganda law, the 2014 ban on swearing in the arts, numerous manipulations with screening licenses,⁸³ and a refusal to fund "inconvenient" films. *Leviathan*, tellingly, proved to be the last film by Zviagintsev funded by the Ministry of Culture; his 2017 drama on the failure of communication,

⁸³ The Russian Ministry of Culture notoriously withdrew the screening license issued to Armando Iannucci's black comedy *The Death of Stalin*, which, in the words of Pavel Pozhigailo, a member of the advisory council of the Ministry of Culture, "insults our historic symbols – the Soviet anthem, orders and medals" (qtd. in Bennetts). Earlier in 2018 The Russian Ministry of Culture postponed the release of Paul King's live-action animated comedy film *Paddington 2* in order to prioritize two domestic productions, Anton Megerdichev's patriotic basketball drama *Three Seconds* [*Dvizhenie vverkh*] and Rustam Mosafir's *The Scythian* [*Ski*]. Denis Saltykov argues that the latter, despite appearances, is not "another patriotic history flick" but delivers an unconventional political message. See his review of the film in *KinoKultura*.

Loveless, was funded by a group of independent Russian and international producers. Some critics might also add to the list of aggressive anti-communicative measures the arrest of and charges against Kirill Serebrennikov.

I have discussed at length in this dissertation the ways in which filmmakers deconstruct in their cinematic universes the binary view of power that creates an artificial divide between those who have it and those who do not. The cinematic medium itself, however, as an apparatus counters the binary view of power as each film—no matter the degree of its “authority”—is in a dynamic relationship with the viewer, who participates in the production of meaning (and, in the worst-case scenario, can simply walk out of the movie theater). Inherently dialogic, cinema presupposes an interlocutor—the spectator—and is thus by its very nature, opposed to the anti-communicative position of “messianic cynicism.”

I would like to conclude by providing just a few examples of the ways in which the cinematic medium, through its attempts to find its spectator, has attempted to counter the anti-communicative position of “messianic cynicism” in contemporary Russia.

In 2015, shortly after the introduction of the ban on swearing, director Vasilli Sigarev was requested to bleep out the swear words before submitting a copy of his black comedy *Land of Oz* (Strana Oz) to the Kinotavr committee. Sigarev waited until the very last minute to submit the film and “accidentally” failed to bleep out all of the curse words (which make up a substantial portion of the film’s dialogue). Sigarev hosted a party at the same Kinotavr festival to bid farewell to swearing in cinema; in the finale of the celebrations, the film’s lead actors Iana Troianova and Gosha Kutsenko cut a cake featuring two of the juiciest Russian swear words (Korsakov). To prepare the film for a wider release, Sigarev and his team got to work on the remaining swear words in the film. In an interview, Sigarev said: “Ну, когда у тебя пиццит почти все в каждой

реплике, это тоже о стране много говорит. Значит, в этой стране есть цензура... Мы сейчас весь фильм запикиваем. Даже когда люди молчат, мы туда пики вставляем” [“The fact that there is a bleep in every single remark says a lot about the country. It means that there is censorship in this country... We are now bleeping everything out. Even those parts where no one is saying anything.”] (Shakina). Zviagintsev in turn responded to the ban on swearing by having a non-censored version of *Leviathan* leaked on the Internet so that as many people as possible could download the film and watch it as intended.

Faced with a fierce backlash from federal lawmakers, director Aleksei Krasovskii released his film *Holiday* (Prazdnik, 2019), a black comedy about the Siege of Leningrad, exclusively on YouTube and for free. Willing audience members were given the option to thank the filmmakers by making a donation. During the first four days since the film’s release, audiences donated more than 2.5 million rubles (an impressive number, taking into account that the film was produced on a modest budget of 4 million rubles) (Grigor'eva).

Unable to or unwilling⁸⁴ to get funding from the Ministry of Culture, numerous filmmakers have found independent producers to sponsor their films. Aleksei Fedorchenko even launched a successful crowdfunding campaign to collect the missing funds for the post-production of *Anna's War*.

There have been, however, less optimistic developments. In January 2020, newspaper *Kommersant* published an article by Andrei Plakhov, in which the critic wrote that Zviagintsev had been unable to secure funding for his new projects. In 2018 Zviagintsev announced that he is working on a film about the Siege of Leningrad; the project for some reason fell through. His

⁸⁴ Serebrennikov, for example, did not ask the Ministry of Culture to support *The Student*. Neither did Fedorchenko when working on *Anna's War*.

alliance with producer Aleksandr Rodnianskii (who produced Zviagintsev's *Elena* (Elena, 2011), *Leviathan*, and *Loveless*) broke up too, shortly after the two finished work on *Loveless*. Zviagintsev then recruited Il'ia Stiuart as the producer for his new film and secured the support of Roman Abramovich's private cinema fund Kinoprime, but yet again both the producer and the fund abruptly pulled out of the project. What is at work here, according to Plakhov, is self-censorship—a testament to the fact that the “messianic cynicism” and its anti-communicative attitude are not “prerogatives” of the state. As Kukulin contends, the state has exploited and exacerbated the crisis of communication for its own purposes but its roots are much deeper and the crisis itself permeates the entire social fabric (as Tverdovskii, Serebrennikov, and Zviagintsev, among others, have intimated in their work). Plakhov ends his piece on a pessimistic note—by quoting Rainer Werner Fassbinder: “Fear eats the soul.” I would like to conclude with an (unjustifiably?) optimistic rejoinder. While under house arrest, Serebrennikov edited his film *Summer*, a tribute to the Soviet underground music scene and an ode to freedom. Zviagintsev's inability to secure funding for his next project is a most worrying sign, but is it unreasonable to hope that a response will soon follow?

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