

FOR MARX:
THE NEW LEFT RUSSIAN CINEMA

Marijeta Bozovic (Yale University)

CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN CINEMA SWINGS LEFT

What can politically engaged aesthetic productions from the former Soviet Union tell us about socialism? As recently as ten years ago, popular audiences and scholars alike might have answered this question by invoking the dissidents who fled the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. Throughout the twentieth century, dissidents provided popular and critical “Western” discourses with vivid tales of both the treachery of leftist utopianism and the courage of individual resistance. Today, the outdated imperialist ideologies that undergird this approach have become readily apparent, while a vital strand of post-socialist leftism has surfaced once more across the former Second World.

The former Second World never needed Marxist critique more. As political scientist Stephen Crowley suggests, the central irony underlying contemporary Russian socioeconomic structures and their systematic study is that Russian society requires class-based analysis more than ever in the wake of its official discrediting. The rapid transfer of property into private hands that took place in Russia in the wake of disintegration remains virtually unrivaled, even in Eastern Europe:

According to the World Bank, starting from a position of relative equality, Russia’s increase in its Gini inequality index of 11 percentage points over a decade “is close to a record.” [...] [T]his concentration of property and wealth took place not during a period of economic growth, but one of dramatic decline, significantly worse than the U.S. experience of the Great Depression. One study of Russian social mobility — comparing class origins with class destinations — found that from 1990 to 1998, “downward mobility exceeded upward mobility by 30 percent,” and that a downward shift, let alone of that magnitude, is highly unusual among mature economies [...]. By one estimate, the number of poor in Russia increased from 2.2 million in 1987–1988 to 66 million by 1993–1995, and a year after the 1998 crisis “four

out of every 10 people slipped into poverty, unable to meet nutritional and other basic needs.”¹

Yet the taboo topic of socioeconomic class remains underexamined by Russian social scientists and mainstream political rhetoric alike. With the “revealing exception” of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), there have been no successful political parties challenging United Russia from the left of the spectrum.² Excluding decidedly anti-Marxist studies of the stabilizing potential of a near-mythical Russian middle class, or research declaring Russian exceptionalism to observed global economic patterns, theory has lagged behind the horrors of lived experience.

The notable exception has been the rise of political and socially conscious themes in popular culture and other aesthetic productions, “most notably in film, the most accessible of art forms and one in which the artists are largely dependent on broad appeal in order to sell tickets.”³ The intellectual work of rebuilding class-based critique emerged more prominently in the arts than in political theory, with a peak in 2012, the long year of Russian and international protest. Film scholar Nancy Condee, looking for a common theme among the more striking entries to the 2012 Kinotavr film festival, writes:

I would risk suggesting that a good candidate might be their concern with class difference. Given Russia’s fraught ideological past, class difference is a topic most contemporary filmmakers would be quick (even well-advised) to disavow; it nevertheless remains a recurrent narrative code that informs both the commonalities and disjunctures of its contemporary cinema.⁴

The emerging Russian filmmakers I discuss in this article offer visions of radical politics and aesthetics that learn and diverge from the state socialism that shaped their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. Russia offers a stage for intellectual and artistic upheavals exceptional both for the political traditions they juxtapose, and for the foregrounded awareness of the ambivalent legacies of these traditions. Tackling a range of contentious subjects from sexuality to police brutality, these films met with controversy in Russia while securing the reputation of their directors on the international festival circuit. I examine three recent films — Svetlana Baskova’s *For Marx...* (2012), Angelina Nikonova’s *Twilight Portrait* (2011), and Lyubov Lvova and Sergei Taramayev’s *Winter Journey* (2013)

— all by female directors or co-directors, and all seeking to imagine and image social alterity after state socialism.

All three films were made between 2011 and 2013, barely missing the coming legislative and cultural changes in Russia, including the notorious legislation against homosexual propaganda passed in the summer of 2013. *For Marx...* offers an explicit engagement with Louis Althusser and lost legacies of Marxist thought, as well as with Sergei Eisenstein's cinema viewed from the other side of the twentieth century. The new Russian left announces its presence forcefully in this darkly comic parable of class struggle in post-Soviet Russia, rediscovering the thematic and formal markers of Soviet cinema as if from a position of (impossible) innocence. *Twilight Portrait* opens with an act of police brutality and sexual violence but defies genre at every turn, sampling the revenge fantasy, erotic thriller, and parable of political eros with equal conviction. In *Winter Journey*, a classical singer falls in love with a street thug in a tale that frames same-sex love as less complicated than class difference in post-Soviet Russia.

In unexpected ways, all three contemporary Russian films interrogate the perils and possibilities of "going to the people" in the twenty-first century. Baskova, who spent months conducting field research with independent labor union organizers across provincial Russia and who cast activists alongside professional actors recognized as People's Artists of the Soviet Union, responds to the challenge of Althusser's essay by merging theory with practice and calling into existence a new form of twenty-first-century Russian socialist intellectual work. The other two films use erotic/romantic fabulae to interrogate post-Soviet class struggle through lenses of gender and sexuality. In my reading, an unspoken motto emerges through the comparison — lines that have appeared in Cyrillic and Latin graffiti alike across the former Second World: *If the revolution is not feminist, it will not be.*

ONCE MORE, FOR MARX

Upon publication and through ongoing critical reception, Louis Althusser's 1965 treatise *Pour Marx* ushered in a new era of Marxist theory. Althusser opens with a critique of contemporary French Marxist thought, highlighting the absence of a native leftist philosophical tradition (the lack, as it were, of a French Rosa Luxemburg or Antonio

Gramsci) and looking to establish a more robust direction for future inquiry in what he termed the mature texts of Marx, over the earlier idealist-inflected works.

In his introductory remarks, Althusser introduces the essays to follow as “witnesses” to the experience shared by the Marxist thinkers of his generation: “the investigation of Marx’s philosophical thought, indispensable if we were to escape from the theoretical impasse in which history had put us.”⁵ History stole their youth via the struggles of the Popular Front, the Spanish Civil War, and the terrible imprint of World War II. “It surprised us just as we entered the world, and turned us students of bourgeois or petty bourgeois origin into men advised of the existence of classes, of their struggles and aims,” Althusser writes: “From the evidence it forced on us we drew the only possible conclusion, and rallied to the political organization of the working class, the Communist Party.”⁶

But the 1950s brought political and intellectual retreat alike. William S. Lewis summarizes the situation French communists found themselves in after 1956: French intellectual Marxism and the Parti communiste français (PCF) alike “lacked the theoretical resources to deal with the fact that the Soviet Union could no longer be identified with the truth of Marxism.”⁷ While the “worldview-shattering” events of 1956 — beginning with Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech on February 25 and culminating with Soviet tanks entering Budapest along the Danube on November 4 — were a tragedy for some fellow travelers, for others the breakdown of Soviet moral authority seemed an opportunity for theoretical liberation. Althusser saw the humanist Marxism popular in the 1960s as fundamentally regressive, one of several dead ends to be “contested both theoretically and politically if Marxism was to preserve and reconstruct itself in its integrity as a philosophy of political practice.”⁸

To defend Marxism [...] some leaders had relaunched this old “Left-wing” formula, once the slogan of Bogdanov and the Proletkult. Once proclaimed, it dominated everything. Under its imperative line, what then counted as philosophy could only choose between commentary and silence, between conviction, whether inspired or forced, and dumb embarrassment. Paradoxically, it was none other than Stalin, whose contagious and implacable system of government and thought had induced this delirium, who reduced the madness to a little more reason. Reading between the lines of the few simple pages in which he reproached the zeal of those who were making

strenuous efforts to prove language a superstructure, we could see that there were limits to the use of the class criterion, and that we had been made to treat science, a status claimed by every page of Marx, as merely the first-comer among ideologies. We had to retreat, and, in semi-disarray, return to first principles.⁹

To change the PCF, Althusser tried to correct his generation's understanding of Marxist theory. *Pour Marx* rejected the reductionism characteristic of both humanist and Stalinist positions, demonstrating how both were inconsistent not only with party principles but also with the classical texts of Marxist thought.¹⁰

According to Althusser, the distinguishing feature of the Marxist conception of the social whole is its refusal to reduce real complexity to some underlying principle of unity, whether this principle be envisaged as spiritual or material [...]. Althusser affirms that a social formation must be viewed as a “decentered totality” in which each instance — the economic, the political and the ideological being the initial three which Althusser distinguishes — possesses its own autonomy and effectivity. This conception implies that each instance or practice is determined not simply by the economic level as in reductionist Marxism, but is “overdetermined” by the totality of other practices, which it also in part reciprocally determines.¹¹

The Althusserian revolution that followed the publication of *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* (1965, by Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Jacques Rancière, and Pierre Macherey) was experienced as emancipatory — if also potentially revisionist and self-affirming. The concept of relative autonomy suggested that arts, sciences, politics, ideology need no longer be traced back to economic determinism: “each had its own particular imminent structure and temporal rhythm which merited an independent and untrammelled investigation.”¹²

In a sense, Svetlana Baskova's 2012 Russian-language *For Marx...* picks up there. Beginning with the title and equivocating ellipsis, Baskova (born 1965) suggests a continuation of the debate, translated and transposed into contemporary Russia. In an interview with Vladislav Moiseev, Baskova suggested that she chose her provocative title precisely because there is “no Marx to be found” anywhere in the film. Her naïve labor

union organizer heroes have no idea what force they are really up against; and neither does anyone else in today's Russia:

The return of capitalism in Russia automatically revives the perspective of class struggle. And Marxism again becomes relevant — in Russia in particular, because we are experiencing the savage capitalism described by Marx [...]. This moment is reflected in the film. People are very hesitant to speak on these topics. Some see it as bad acting on the part of the actors. But perhaps precisely such “bad acting” offers the most adequate reflection of our current condition.¹³

To audiences familiar with Baskova's earlier work, the first shock of *For Marx...* is the film's relative restraint. Wife and creative partner to Anatoly Osmolovsky (founder of Russian actionism during the lawless 1990s), Baskova was hitherto best known for her shock film *Green Elephant* (1999).¹⁴ A critique of the Russian army made during a period of escalating violence in Chechnya, *Green Elephant* remains a cult phenomenon online, though permanently limited in distribution possibilities due to graphic violence and considerable actionist gore.¹⁵ If for all these years, “épotage as a form of expression for pressing social themes has been Baskova's calling card,” in the words of Rolling Stone interviewer Viktor Nekhezin, *For Marx...*, her first feature in seven years, is also Baskova's first film with the potential to reach broader audiences.¹⁶

The actors Pakhomov and Vladimir Yepifantsev remain a constant across both films, and Osmolovsky is once again a producer, but there the similarities end. *For Marx...* offers instead unexpected realism and nearly mainstream aesthetic restraint. The shock value this time lies in the uncanny *deja-vu* of such a political parable in contemporary Russia: noble workers attempt to organize an independent union in a courageous, if doomed stand against the barbaric injustice and murderous tactics of their corrupt capitalist masters. What was old is new again: *For Marx...* quotes, among other sources, Eisenstein and Jean-Luc Godard's Dziga Vertov period.¹⁷ Polina Barskova summarizes,

One of the most obvious layers of creative digestion here is Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (*Stachka*, 1924), set almost a century later [...]. Baskova reintroduces all the elements invented by her predecessor; the plot is formulated as a series of conflicts between the

workers and their capitalist oppressors, between the two labor unions (the “real” one striving for the workers’ better future and the “fake” one created by the factory owners *pro formae*), and between the worker’s desire to fight and their fear to lose their jobs or even their lives [...]. All the elements of Eisenstein’s psychological mapping in *The Strike* (provocation, violence, and cowardice) serve Baskova to rehearse the same questions that for 70 years of Soviet rule seemed exclusively the domain of official Soviet culture.¹⁸

For Marx... responds to Althusser’s challenge by addressing the paradoxical lack of current Russian Marxist theory and by attempting to remedy the problem with political film art.¹⁹ Critics have been right to sense a connection between Baskova’s film and the emergence of a new Russian left “in the realms of art, drama, and especially literature, where works of prominent young authors such as Kirill Medvedev and Pavel Arsen’ev’s project *Translit* signal a newly perceived urgency of Marxism in Russian cultural circles.”²⁰ Describing the contemporary thrill of Kirill Medvedev’s unexpectedly political poetry, his English-language translator and *n+1* editor Keith Gessen astutely asks, what was it that previous generations failed to understand?

[...] the very thing they thought they knew best of all: Marxism. Not the Soviet “teachings of Karl Marx,” but the many intellectual heirs of Marx in the West in the postwar era. This was the Frankfurt School and Sartre and the Situationist International and Pierre Bourdieu and the Anglo-American thinkers around the *New Left Review*; but also such non-aligned thinkers as Barthes, Foucault, and Baudrillard. It’s not that these figures were entirely unknown in the Soviet Union, but that they were only partly known, or known in the wrong context.²¹

As an explicitly post-Soviet cultural formation, the new Russian left dares to move past the traumas of state socialism to reimagine engaged art and alternative social organization for the twenty-first century. It does so both by actively engaging with Western Marxism, and by reimagining local intellectual and artistic legacies.



Stills from *For Marx...* (© Svetlana Baskova).

It is telling that Baskova looks for answers and predecessors in nineteenth-century political writing (Vissarion Belinsky) and twentieth-century visual culture — as direct reference via the earnest debates of her working class heroes, or through visual puns. (In one striking *mise-en-scène*, she also arranges the three principal union organizers into a recognizable tableau recreating Andrei Rublev's *Trinity* icon.) While the “greedy and ambitious factory-owners collect Rodchenko, her ideology thirsty workers get together to discuss controversial staples of Russian Marxism such as Mikhail Pokrovskii, and...screen the Marxist works of Godard from his so-called political (or “Dziga Vertov”) period.”²² The press materials, meanwhile, claim *For Marx...* a faithful continuation of Soviet production films.²³ The last seems at least in part tongue-in-cheek, for the film blends documentary with highly stylized episodes: the violence of the concluding scenes departs from Soviet cinema to borrow recognizably from post-Soviet gangster action genres. But it is only through such new lenses that something of the old avant-garde spirit might be rescued: otherwise, it becomes the stuff of Sotheby's and office décor for corporate criminals.

Baskova prepared for *For Marx...* while conducting research for a series of documentary shorts entitled *The Only Solution is Resistance* (2011), exploring union activism across Russia and Ukraine. She speaks often of the sudden centrality of union activism to her work: “It seemed to me that the contradictions of contemporary life could be best expressed precisely through this theme”; “[this topic] contains in concentrated form the tragedy of our generation, for it was the working class above all who suffered as a result of the reforms.”²⁴

It thus seems more than a matter of style when Baskova's film blurs boundaries between fiction and documentary, as between professional and non-professional acting:

her camera work “simulates artless documentary, turning artfully arranged *mises-en-scène* into fragments of life ‘caught unawares.’”²⁵ The field research Baskova’s team conducted prior to filming; her aesthetic choices throughout; and even the organization of screenings after release all blend art and activism as forms of intellectual labor. Baskova traveled around Russia’s provincial cities before and after shooting *For Marx...*:

I didn’t know anything about labor unions before that — I had heard about them from friends, and since they introduced me to activists themselves I was treated very friendly. This way, I was able to attend meetings and rallies and finally learn how they worked [...]. [We] screened it in different cinema clubs around the country and reactions were very positive. The screenings were normally organized in halls with 50-70 seats, and followed by discussions which lasted no less than two hours.²⁶

These screenings were organized and attended by activists and local workers. Baskova suggests that it was during the discussions that followed that she came to understand the flexible genre of her own film: “I thought that it was ‘a production drama,’ but...it can be perceived as a comedy, a drama — for example, in Chelyabinsk, people were crying. The closer we were to the provinces, the more the film was perceived as a drama. And as a farce, of the Saltykov-Shchedrin, Gogolian kind.”²⁷ The film thus also provides an excuse for community organizing. As one reviewer noted, by telling “real people about real problems,” the film informs potentially interested viewers about organizing.²⁸ Far from a postmodern joke, *For Marx...* proves itself capable of engaging with the political tragedies of the twentieth century in a flexible, updated, and still relevant form.

Even through the idealized portraits of workers as activists and intellectuals, *For Marx...* pushes back against the prevalent and dangerously cynical “two Russias” cliché. (As Ilya Matveev argues, the “two Russias” theory of urban cosmopolitan Moscow and St. Petersburg versus a barely literate wild East “constructs a veritable ‘ontology’ of Russian politics, naturalizing differences in ways of life, behaviors and tastes that otherwise could be critically explained by social and economic conditions [...] into ‘primordial,’ eternal qualities, forcing their bearers into an ahistorical and unresolvable confrontation.”²⁹) If the workers are poeticized here, as reviewer Mikhail Shianov notes, it is to provide a break from “the portrayal that we’ve grown accustomed to in recent years: the brutal loyalist, ready to break up the opposition with a wrench, or the alcoholic who’s lost all human

form.”³⁰ Baskova repeatedly cites her own experiences researching for the film and participating in its reception as evidence against the “two Russias” cliché and its attendant portrayal of provincial Russian life. The very existence of independent labor unions in Russia, she argues, speaks to a small but real local victory.³¹

On the surface, Baskova’s film is nearly sexless. Heroes and villains alike are male, as is the family struggle revealed at the close: brother kills brother, inheriting the sins of the father, in a plot twist that reads as Biblical, Oedipal, or Dostoevskian depending on the viewer’s approach. There is a hint of originary erotic transgression in the psychoanalytically suggestive plotline: the brutal factory owner, (legitimate) son of a former KGB official turned private capitalist, kills his (illegitimate) activist half-brother. The films to which I turn next foreground gender and sexuality in the “longing for the people” that they portray — but Baskova’s entire project, from research, execution, to dissemination, models “going to the people” for the twenty-first century.

EROS AND THE POLICE

If in general Russian films of the 1990s focused on deconstructing Soviet narratives, the following decades brought the opposite concern: reconstructing Russian national identity. While commercial cinema and television produced hordes of blockbusters celebrating historical and folk heroes, Dusty Wilmes notes that independent and arthouse cinema followed suit:

This is certainly the case with two of the most celebrated films of the so-called “New Wave,” Kirill Serebrennikov’s *Yuri’s Day* (*Iur’ev den’*, 2008) and Sergei Loznitsa’s *My Joy* (*Schast’e moe*, 2010) [...]. The journeys of their respective protagonists constitute a modern-day “return to the people,” but the Russian *narod* (people) that they encounter has little in common with the one envisioned by nineteenth-century populists like Alexander Herzen. Both films depict the Russian folk in an unflattering light, using devices of the horror genre and the grotesque to create what one critic calls “social horror films” [...]. these films represent the two predominant tendencies in recent independent cinema’s nationhood discourse: neo-populism, a fraught but ultimately reaffirming exploration of Russian cultural

history; and neo-chernukha, a continuation of chernukha's utter rejection of all traditions, past, present and future.³²

Angelina Nikonova and Olga Dihovichnaya's *Twilight Portrait* tiptoes along the divide, but ultimately joins more recent films that "eschew the negative identity, 'heroless-ness' and utter despondency of neo-chernukha films like Balabanov's *Cargo 200*, Aleksei Mizgirev's *Tambourine, Drum* and Loznitsa's *My Joy* [...] to salvage meaning from Russian cultural myths and traditions, such as Christian collectivism and kenoticism."³³

Nikonova and Dihovichnaya (born 1976 and 1980) already represent a different generation than does Baskova. Nikonova studied filmmaking in New York in the 1990s and struggled to find work upon her return to Russia. "Russia is a very chauvinistic society, and directing is considered a man's job," she explains in interview: "I tried it all; I even dyed my hair dark brown, but it didn't help. My scripts were popular but they never let me on set because they're not sure a woman can handle men in production."³⁴ In the end, she and Dihovichnaya, her co-writer, star, and muse, decided to go it alone.

Dihovichnaya, an established actress (and the widow of director and screenwriter Ivan Dykhovichny), wrote the original screenplay based on her own experiences as a child psychologist. The first version was reputedly even bleaker than the final cut, but the central conceit all along was to highlight the difference between two worlds: the protected private realm that some upper-middle class Russians are able to create at home and the external social reality. In Nikonova's words: "But what you step on out in the street is basically piles of shit."³⁵

To film on the micro-budget of their pooled private resources and in several weeks, Nikonova returned to her former hometown of Rostov-on-Don. The myth of return shapes the narrative across the majority of reviews and interviews: Nikonova incorporated real encounters in the film, including the theft of her purse shortly before shooting, an incident she then used to kick off the heroine's downfall.³⁶ While Nikonova was careful to mask specific locations, creating an abstract portrait of a city center and outskirts, the locals soon ran away with the film.

Nikonova's team held open casting calls in Rostov-on-Don, looking for non-professional actors to fill in the cast. Dihovichnaya remarks that the local accent and speech patterns added a great deal to the film: "On top of musical intonation, [the local actors] added fantastic neologisms [...]. Rostovites have extraordinarily rich imaginations

and speech patterns. They improvise new words and sentences on the spot.”³⁷ Several key moments were in fact improvised by Sergey Borisov, the male protagonist/antagonist, and by the young local performer playing his younger brother. (The latter, a Rostov-on-Don rapper with the stage name “Bla,” charmed Nikonova into shaping a new character around his talents.)

The most dramatic change occurred when they met Borisov, a real police officer, who helped them procure the police car they used for filming.³⁸ The film was originally imagined as an erotic fable across generations, depicting an affair between an older woman and much younger man (*à la* Catherine Breillat), but the casting changed the story line. (Borisov’s life also changed dramatically after the release of *Twilight Portrait*, but despite a blossoming film career, reputedly he still responds to reporters like a former police officer: “Why do you want to know?”³⁹)

Reimagined, the plotline illustrates the interlocking power dynamics of gender and money. The film blends scenes reminiscent of Michael Haneke, such as a dinner party exposé where a drunk Marina tells her husband and friends exactly what she thinks of them, with scenes more akin to Lars von Trier — from the portrait of depression in *Melancholia* (2011) to the holy harlotry of *Breaking the Waves* (1996) — or of Andrea Arnold’s *Red Road* (2006). Sex and money refuse to parse separately: adultery is exposed in very Marxist terms as the entertainment of the bourgeoisie, while police brutality and the rape of sex workers is part and parcel of life in the precariat. Marina, a social worker who specializes in treating young victims of abuse, confesses that she no longer harbors any hope of making a difference: the surplus classes drunkenly beat and rape their children, who grow up alcoholics and monsters in turn. The fragile hypocrisy of her designer-clad existence is driven home brutally when, after a perfect storm of accidents, she is mistaken for a high-class prostitute by the local patrol and treated accordingly.

At some point it is no longer sufficient, or possible, to escape into the private home — the available female rebellion under Soviet times. Marina stalks down the police officer responsible for her sexual assault; although, as we see nothing but only hear the incident, we never learn whether he participated in or ordered the act. And then the film confounds audience and genre expectations alike: in place of the expected revenge, Marina seduces her assailant in an attempt at emotional intimacy. Lying to her husband, she temporarily moves in with Andrei, learning the details of his traumatized and abandoned boyhood

from observing his permanently stoned young brother and mute grandfather, both of whom Andrei supports and cares for in an apartment tellingly devoid of women or grace.

As explicit sexual scenes alternate with shots of comical domesticity, Marina cooks, scrubs, and screws away the squalor of Andrei's life. (Despite the brutal buildup, audiences inevitably laugh at Andrei's genuine shock — not when a strange woman offers him oral sex in an elevator, but when she garnishes his soup with fresh parsley.)

The attempts of these educated, upper-class heroines to clean up the squalor of their new surroundings evoke the intelligentsia's enlightenment mission. However, significantly it is [they] who ultimately learn from the *narod*, achieving a new sense of humility, purpose and, impliedly, a more authentic life [...]. It is no coincidence [...] that the neo-populist narratives of recent Russian cinema frequently depict a protagonist paradoxically drawn to the abject, thus leading to a break with their former identity and a reunion with their "true" cultural roots.⁴⁰

While the films of Balabanov and Loznitsa send a clear message of "don't meddle" in their portrayal of the people, emphasizing total cultural degradation and unbreakable cycles of violence, post-*chernukha* films place "a measured, qualified hope in the fallen Russian *narod*."⁴¹

Once again, the "making of" story behind *Twilight Portrait* highlights the intelligentsia filmmakers learning from the people. Cheap production values only add to the sense of authenticity: shot on a Canon Mark II by the able hands of cinematographer Eben Bull, the picture maintains a "loose, handheld feel" in tension with the "careful framing and sensitive use of natural light."⁴² The meta-narrative is even obliquely echoed by the story line: Marina is called a fool when she buys a used camera from a local drunk in a moment of pity. She uses the "twilight portrait" function to film despite the lack of light; there is even a scene of suggestive exchange of the policeman's gun for the camera at the denouement. As reviewer Svetlana Khokhriakova notes, it is tempting "to compare Olga Dykhovichnaya's heroine with Vera Zasluch, going to the people."⁴³ It is as tempting to see the filmmakers as repeating her journey.

Dihovichnaya's inscrutable face and her heroine's inexplicable behavior render *Twilight Portrait* a veritable Rorschach test for audiences.⁴⁴ Critics read the film as a portrayal of Stockholm syndrome or of elaborate psychological torture alike; as an anti-

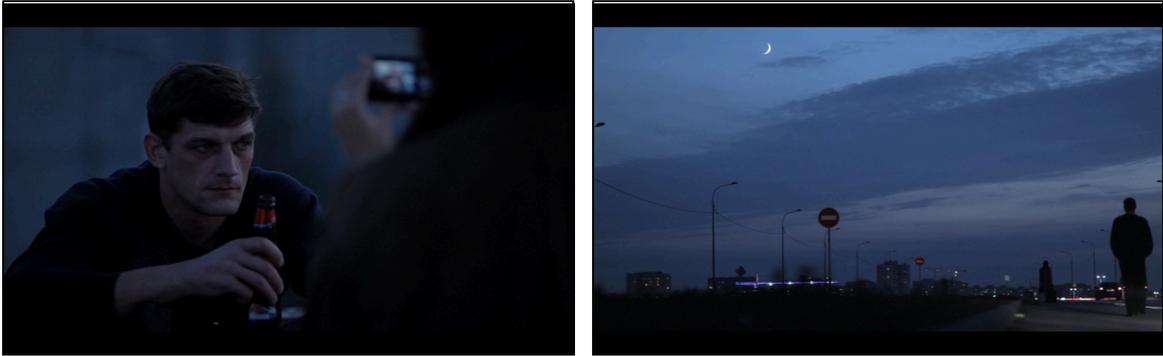
feminist or feminist parable; or as “a portrait of a woman’s descent into a high functioning form of insanity.”⁴⁵ Recontextualized alongside films like *For Marx...* and *Winter Journey*, the most persuasive reading of *Twilight Portrait* appears far closer to the surface; however, generic expectations are so strong that we refuse to believe our eyes.

Nikonova’s film radically disrupts expectations provoked by the rape revenge genre. Feminist scholar Claire Henry notes,

After being raped, Marina showers and picks debris out from under her nails (ruining evidence that is usually collected in a rape kit), using another common motif of the genre to further indicate that there is no possibility of justice via the law. These readily identifiable characteristics of the genre establish viewer expectations that Marina will take revenge [...]. Marina’s response to rape is a radical and clever twist on the genre, where seduction and the redemptive power of love are used to seduce (Andrei) — and the viewer) — out of the cycle of violence [...]. In the Q&A after the London Film Festival screening, Nikonova picked up on the wording of an audience question and affirmed that “reaching for people” is a key phrase [...]. Unpleasantness or implausibility aside, *Twilight Portrait* offers a radical alternative to the typical responses to sexual violence in both cinema and society. At times baffled by her behavior, at the end the spectator is positioned, like Andrei, to follow Marina’s ethical lead as she gives up revenge and pursues her idealistic, restorative route.⁴⁶

Andrei quite literally relinquishes his badge and gun to follow Marina into the liminal twilight. Credits roll, and while a Russia where these two might find light (or even, as in the ending of Bulgakov’s 1930s novel *Master and Margarita*, merely peace) remains unimaginable, *Twilight Portrait* challenges us to at least admit the possibility of a radically alternative future.⁴⁷

Marina’s relationship with Andrei is ultimately portrayed as “radical, fearless social work [...] a kind of pseudo-Christian exercise in healing.”⁴⁸ Audiences struggle to read signs as relatively straightforward as the cross that Marina wears around her neck: in the twenty-first century, Christian Eros doesn’t fully parse. (We might compare here the work of Georgian-Russian poet and theorist Keti Chukhrov; or in the American poetic context, that of Ann Carson: “decreation” as a feminine form of kenosis.) As with von Trier’s holy harlots, the journey to rebirth includes a passage through hell.



Stills from *Twilight Portrait* (© Angelina Nikonova).

The evolution of Andrei is no less critical to the political themes and emancipatory hopes of the film. While the rape-revenge genre often casts the rapists as policemen in order to justify vigilantism, in *Twilight Portrait* the choice seems “part of the fabric of the film’s realism, reflecting a sociopolitical issue of police corruption in Russia (which, as the director pointed out during a Q&A after the London Film Festival screening, is an issue common to many places around the world).”⁴⁹ The monstrous *ment*, or cop, has become a staple in contemporary Russian cinema: but nowhere else does he reform. When Andrei hands over the symbols of local power and masculinity, he too has no idea what comes next. “I’ll figure out the rest myself,” he tells his former partner, but he knows he cannot follow Marina as one of the police. Nikonova’s *Twilight Portrait* ends as if illustrating terms familiar from Rancière and Foucault: there can be no politics where there is police.

ROMANTICISM IN WINTER

My last example is on the surface the least subversive (it has been described as “aggressively chaste”) of the three films, were it not for the timing of its release. Lyubov Lvova and Sergei Taramayev’s *Winter Journey* (2013) is inevitably shadowed by the story of Russian legislative change: “For a film centered on a gay relationship even to get made in Russia is remarkable; more extraordinary still is that the culture ministry in Moscow approved the film in a year when Vladimir Putin signed a law criminalizing ‘gay propaganda.’”⁵⁰ Taramayev called the ministry’s decision to approve the film nothing short of miraculous.

Winter Journey / Zimnii put' borrows its title from *Winterreise* (op. 89), a song cycle for voice and piano by Franz Schubert set to Wilhelm Müller's poetry. Written by the fatally ill composer in 1828, this musical piece describes a romantic hero's journey through a somber, snow-covered world [...]. Taramaev and L'vova integrate the German composer's music into the film's diegesis when the protagonist Erik (Alexei Frandetti) rehearses and performs one of the songs from the *Winterreise* cycle for a vocal competition. Inspired by Schubert's dramatic parable of love and betrayal, *Winter Journey* also deconstructs the traditional archetype of the romantic hero through an unusual (for Russia) cinematic portrayal of unrequited love between a homosexual and a heterosexual man.⁵¹

Many Russian festivals were afraid to take on the film. St. Petersburg's Kinotavr pulled *Winter Journey* from the lineup in June 2013. Lvova and Taramaev (born 1984 and 1958, respectively) didn't even submit the film to the Moscow International Film Festival, given organizer Nikita Mikhalkov's well-known views.⁵² In August 2013, the Russian Ministry of Culture annulled the film's distribution license; *Winter Journey* made its way only to a few smaller film festivals in Russia. Taramaev affirms that when writing the film, "We assumed, naturally, that we were stepping on the state's corns, but we had no idea to what extent."⁵³

Amidst the whirl of controversy, both directors and stars made a point of stating that *Winter Journey* was "not a gay film."⁵⁴ Review after sympathetic review concurred, in the Russian-language press. "There are darker things than homosexuality and drugs — for example, Schubert's 'Winterreise' song cycle," reviewer Anastasiia Mordvinova puts it: "The censorship Committee should pay attention to this propoganda for German Romanticism, for classical music that tugs at the soul, driving it in a fatal and vicious circle: 'sleep — long walks — Schubert — sleep — long walks — Schubert.' The only way out of this Samsara is to freeze to death."⁵⁵

Like their fellow Russian "New Wave" auteur Kirill Serebrennikov, Lvova and Taramaev are both escapees from the theater; both also had serious and lengthy educations in music.

Graduates of the Peter Naumovich Fomenko school, the remarkable theater artists Sergei Taramaev and Lyubov Lvova abandoned the theater a few years ago, drawn by

a desire to devote all their time filming their own auteur arthouse film. To everyone else, the idea seemed desperate — they had no money, and neither Taramaev nor Lvova had any experience or education in writing or directing.⁵⁶

The desire to escape from success and a closed artistic community is part of what they portray in *Winter Journey*. The tremendously talented and equally lost protagonist Erik (Aleksi Frandetti) is a student of the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, preparing Schubert's song cycle for competition. (The filmmakers claim the *fabula* is entirely fictional, taking no inspiration from the life of the late-Soviet opera singer Erik Kurmangaliev, but the coincidence — and the casting of the "exotic" Frandetti as Erik — seems too striking to ignore.⁵⁷) Michael Haneke used the same song cycle for the *Piano Teacher* (2000), but the melancholy legacy of Schubert lends itself readily to Russia: "Schubert's 'Winter Journey' is really very Russian... genuine and enduring sorrow and restrained quiet desperation are constant leitmotifs precisely of the Moscow winter, not the Viennese."⁵⁸

Erik's winter journey home through the streets of an unrecognizable Moscow inevitably takes him into the corner store for (strictly forbidden) vodka. We glimpse a banal and humiliating family life with his mother and stepfather, and the more enticing queer community of elite artists where nothing he does is questioned — and we understand both to amount to an artistic dead end. "Nothing is sacred to you queers," remarks the young thug who steals Erik's music player and heart: he might as well mean the professionalization of music among elite intelligentsia communities, and the making of Schubert into the stuff of singing competitions.

As in the two previous films, the directors of *Winter Journey* went to great pains to camouflage the setting, an especially daunting task in Moscow.⁵⁹ To do so, Lvova and Taramayev procured the visual and sound design of Mikhail Krichman and Andrei Dergachev, frequent collaborators of the far better known director Andrey Zvyagintsev (of *Elena*, 2011, and *Leviathan*, 2014, fame).⁶⁰ But Krichman's roving handheld work here could not differ more from the precisely composed images demanded by Zvyagintsev; nor could it render more Romantic the Russian streetscapes in winter.⁶¹ Again, the effect creates a sense of the universal and untimely, for the "when" of *Winter Journey* is equally slippery as its "where."

Into such a world explodes Lekha the *gopnik* or provincial thug, the seducer, the demon — also the first actor cast in the film, in an undoubtedly fetishized portrayal of imagined street vitality.⁶² We see Lekha entirely through the desiring eyes of depleted elites (although some audiences, on the contrary, report experiencing Lekha as the outsider leading viewers into an elite queer world).⁶³ The two meet when Lekha robs Erik on a bus, and the film begins to explore their divergent worlds:

The space of homosexual men has a certain hallucinogenic quality to it: artificially bright and stylized, filled with drug-induced adrenalin rushes and the synthesizer-laden music of Klaus Nomi. The dream-like, “otherworldly” space of the gay community is juxtaposed to the drab and lifeless contours of the “straight” world, such as Erik’s family apartment (where the conversations are mundane and focus on a leaking toilet) or a snow-covered Moscow back yard (where Liokha receives a thrashing for stealing a wealthy Russian’s dog).⁶⁴

Like Humbert Humbert’s *Lolita*, Lekha is oddly unsurprised by his new surroundings: presumably, he has already “seen everything” on the streets. What he has never *heard* before, however, is Erik singing. The two begin to fall in love in ways that neither thought possible; and indeed, it isn’t possible. A new musical motif takes over: the Demon aria from Anton Rubinshtein’s eponymous opera, indicating doomed love and the presence of the satanic (we see Lekha with horns; his totem animal is the lizard; etc.). Erik and Lekha briefly dream of escaping to India, which might as well be utopia. (Like love, India is enticing precisely for its exotic and spiritual unattainability; “What did you see, when you were singing?” an instructor asks Erik. He answers: “it was like I was reborn in a lotus blossom.”⁶⁵) The rest is predictable: betrayal, violent robbery, Erik collapsed in the snow. The final vision of the two young men sliding down a snowy hill in pure joy may be Erik’s last illusion.

Such an ending is foreshadowed as early as the pre-credit shot that opens the film: the extravagantly dressed figure of a man in drag (played by travesty artist Andrei Tsymbalov) runs across a bridge and the screen, drunk or heartbroken or in serious trouble.⁶⁶ The scene resembles the opening of the recent Iranian arthouse vampire allegory *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirour, 2014). If that opening helps to foreshadow an allegory of the veil, in *Winter Journey* we glimpse a performance of gender

and class equally misplaced in modern-day Russia. All love for Lekha is “queer”: decadent; the stuff of artifice and performance; the lies of rich elites. This is no country for poor young men.



Stills from *Winter Journey* (© Lyubov Lvova and Sergei Taramayev).

IF THE REVOLUTION IS NOT FEMINIST, IT WILL NOT BE

My readings of these contemporary Russian films suggest that in both *Twilight Portrait* and *Winter Journey*, sensational and distracting central plot devices — police rape, homosexuality — only partially screen the even larger issue of class conflict in post-Soviet Russia, thereby paradoxically highlighting its looming, invisible magnitude. *For Marx...*, as the title alone makes abundantly clear, addresses the conflict head on. What the juxtaposition makes equally apparent is the emerging centrality of gender to the critique of contemporary Russian capitalism. While I am not able to develop this point fully in the present brief essay, it not only invites further research but seems the most pointed departure setting apart contemporary politically engaged aesthetic productions from mere nostalgia for socialism's past.

The filmmakers behind *For Marx...*, *Twilight Portrait*, and *Winter Journey* alike might be surprised to hear their films read in the context of feminist socialism: a few might ask sharply whose feminism I had in mind.⁶⁷

Should *Twilight Portrait* be considered a feminist film? ...Some felt the film offered a daring, psychologically complex but still-credible portrait of a woman's unexpected reaction to sexual violence; others, especially Russian and older viewers, felt the pic

violated core feminist tenets, or simply considered it too unpleasant or implausible. Offshore, it's likely to provoke similarly polarized reactions.⁶⁸

All three films were perceived as “not local,” and all the filmmakers accused of catering to international festival audiences. Reviewers complained, for example, that *For Marx...* makes little sense “in the context of Russian cinema, which lacks the category of ‘political film.’”⁶⁹ Critics of *Twilight Portrait* noted, “Fest bookings are a certainty for this item, which stylistically feels more European than Russian, but its controversial storyline may force it to dwell in the twilight of niche distribution, even (perhaps especially) domestically.”⁷⁰ Still others summed *Winter Journey* as an “imperfect, but important attempt on the part of Russian cinema to claim the language of European Romanticism.”⁷¹ But the female filmmaker is often something of a Lady Merle; as Henry James’s best villainess put it, women belong to place differently.⁷²

Equally striking are the creative partnerships at the heart of all three films — surprising, given the auteur feel of each; less so, given their shared preoccupation with the Other. Taramayev confessed, “Roughly speaking, Erik is Lyuba, and I am Lekha.”⁷³ Dihovichnaya downplayed her role as Nikonova’s creative partner, calling *Twilight Portrait* an “auteur film and the debut film of the talented director Angelina Nikonova” — but only over Nikonova’s protests to the contrary.⁷⁴

A structural Marxist might accuse the last two films of humanism, but the dead end in each suggests rather that the personal is political; that there is no private escape without a greater social transformation; and that gender and sexuality must be at the forefront of contemporary discussions of cultural and economic injustice. Such discussions require a robust leftist intellectual tradition, unafraid of its political and aesthetic nineteenth and twentieth-century roots or twenty-first century realities. In Russia today,

Women make up 70 percent of the unemployed. And of these unemployed women, 85 percent have higher or specialized educations. Now the placement officers say they should be cleaners or nurses, the lowest-paid, least prestigious jobs. They say women under 18 or over 45 should not be trained or retrained, because there are no jobs for them. The paradigms of women's lives are changing. Why should they get a higher education? [...] Through the media of the new Russian market, sexual freedom

is being purveyed as a heterosexist male prerogative, with women enjoined to consume their own commodification as a means of earning value in men's eyes.⁷⁵

This time, the gendering of revolution and of the new Russian left alike must be seriously rethought.

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 2. *Ibid.*, 703.
 3. *Ibid.*, 707.
 4. Nancy Condee, "Fifteen Realities of Russian Cinema (Kinotvr 2012)," *KinoKultura* 38 (2012), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2012/38-condee.shtml>.
 5. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (New York: Verso, 2005), 21-22.
 6. *Ibid.*, 21-22.
 7. William S. Lewis, *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 161-162.
 8. *Ibid.*, 163.
 9. Althusser, *For Marx*, 21-22.
 10. Lewis, *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism*, 163.
 11. Peter Dews, "Althusser, Structuralism, and the French Epistemological Tradition," in *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gregory Elliott (1994), 113-114.
 12. *Ibid.*, 113-114.
 13. Vladislav Moiseev, "Za Marksom Marks," *Russkiy Reporter* (January 31, 2013), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://rusrep.ru/article/2013/01/24/marx/>. Translations mine unless otherwise noted.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. In keeping with the film's "trash aesthetics" and actionist ethos, Baskova; Osmolovsky; actor, muse, and performance artist Sergei "Pakhom" Pakhomov; and the rest of the creative team eschewed copyright and reputedly earned not a single kopeck from the film's underground success.
 16. Viktor Nekhezin, "Svetlana Baskova i Sergey Pakhomov: Para snov dlya protokola," *Rolling Stone* (March 15, 2013), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.ru/cinema/interview/15841.html>.
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 18. Polina Barskova, "Svetlana Baskova: *For Marx* (*Za Marksa*, 2012)," *Kino Kultura* 39 (2013), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2013/39r-zamarksa.shtml>.
 19. Baskova confirms that her title referenced Althusser's, "except mine ends not with an exclamation mark but ellipses, suggesting deliberation," Andriy Manchuk, "Za Marksa...Pochemu Troetochie?," *Liva* (March 13, 2013), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://liva.com.ua/za-marxa.html>.
 20. Barskova, "Svetlana Baskova: *For Marx*." Strikingly, the most recent project of Kirill Medvedev's protest rock band Arkady Kots is an album entitled *Music for the Working Class*, commissioned by Russian labor union activists.
 21. Keith Gessen, "Kirill Medvedev: An Introduction," in Kirill Medvedev, *It's No Good: Poems/Essays/Actions*, trans. Keith Gessen, with Mark Krotov, Cory Merrill, and Bela Shayevech (New York: n+1/Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), 18. I read Medvedev's work as a post-Soviet avant-garde praxis in "Poetry on the Front Line: Kirill Medvedev and a New Russian Poetic Avant-garde" in *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 70.1 (2014).
 22. Barskova, "Svetlana Baskova: *For Marx*."
 23. Condee, "Fifteen Realities of Russian Cinema (Kinotvr 2012)."
 24. Manchuk, "Za Marksa...Pochemu Troetochie?"
 25. Barskova, "Svetlana Baskova: *For Marx*."

26. Konstanty Kuzma, "Svetlana Baskova on *For Marx...*," trans. D. Loginov, *EEFB* (March 1, 2013), accessed October 30, 2016, <https://eefb.org/archive/march-2013/svetlana-baskova-on-for-marx/>.
27. Nekhezin, "Svetlana Baskova i Sergey Pakhomov."
28. Vladimir Lyashtenko, "Kino tol'ko dlya chlenov profsoyuza," *Gazeta.ru* (March 16, 2013), accessed October 30, 2016, https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2013/03/16/a_5059513.shtml.
29. Ilya Matveev, "The Two Russias Culture War: Constructions of the 'People' during the 2011-2013 Protests," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113:1 (2014): 188.
30. Mikhail Shiyarov, "'Za Marksa...kipit nash razum,'" *RIA Novosti* (July 13, 2012), accessed October 30, 2016, <https://ria.ru/authors/20120713/698681990.html>.
31. Nekhezin, "Svetlana Baskova i Sergey Pakhomov."
32. Dusty Wilmes, "National Identity (De)construction in Recent Independent Cinema: Kirill Serebrennikov's *Yuri's Day* and Sergei Loznitsa's *My Joy*," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 8:3 (2014), 218.
33. Wilmes, "National Identity (De)construction in Recent Independent Cinema," 218.
34. Carmen Gray, "Feminism Russian Style? Angelina Nikonova's *Twilight Portrait*," *BFI* (March 4, 2014), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/feminism-russian-style-angelina-nikonova-s-twilight-portrait>.
35. Natalia Antonova, "The Horror of 'Twilight Portrait.' Also, the Beauty," *Feministe* (July 19, 2012), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2012/07/19/the-horror-of-twilight-portrait-also-the-beauty/>. Cf. "In direct contrast to the many Western women who struggled to escape a devalued home into a powerful professional and political world, many Soviet women (and men) sought sanctuary and fulfillment in the less monitored world of family and friends, a domestic space that was far more capacious and stimulating than obligatory work or meaningless politics," Beth Holmgren, "Bug Inspectors and Beauty Queens: The Problems of Translating Feminism into Russian," *Postcommunism and the Body Politic*, ed. Ellen E. Berry (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 21.
36. Elena Glazkova, "Angelina Nikonova: 'My ne na poverkhnosti,'" *Snimi Film* (November 22, 2011), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://snimifilm.com/post/angelina-nikonova-my-ne-na-poverkhnosti>. The ensuing incident when Marina attempts to report her passport stolen to a bored female police officer was handled "with such deft absurdism she was asked to submit [the scene] to Cannes as a standalone short," see Carmen Gray, "Feminism Russian Style?"
37. Lyashtenko, "Kino tol'ko dlya chlenov profsoyuza."
38. Gray, "Feminism Russian Style?"
39. Glazkova, "Angelina Nikonova: 'My ne na poverkhnosti'"; cf. Michael Gibbons, "ND/NF Discovery: Angelina Nikonova's 'Twilight Portrait' (Russia)," *Film Linc* (March 30, 2012), accessed October 30, 2016, <https://www.filmlinc.org/daily/nd-nf-discovery-angelina-nikonovas-twilight-portrait-russia/>.
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41. *Ibid.*, 229.
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67. Cf. Serguei Oushakine's *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).
68. Henry, "Challenging the Boundaries of Cinema's Rape-Revenge Genre," 142.
69. Lyashtenko, "Kino tol'ko dlya chlenov profsoyuza."
70. Felperin, "Review: 'Twilight Portrait'."
71. Oleg Zintsov, "Salamandra Zimoi," *Vedomosti* (February 24, 2014), accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2014/02/24/salamandra-zimoi>.
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