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**THE CAPITALIST ELEPHANT IN KREMLIN:
SURGES OF *CHERNUKHA* IN POST-SOVIET
CINEMA & TELEVISION**

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by

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film Studies**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a resurgence of the *chernukha* aesthetic, literally translated as “darkness,” in post-Soviet cinema and television. Though the stylistic and narrative practices of *chernukha* were thought to be exclusive to the *perestroika* period from 1988 to 1991, I argue that they re-emerged in the late 90s out of social and cultural necessity in a time of national chaos and uncertainty. Also, I show how the origins of *chernukha* are rooted in a longstanding dichotomy of “friend and foe” that the Soviet state had masterfully imposed upon its citizens since the 1920s. My research proposes that although post-Soviet screenwriters and directors claim to have rejected the manipulative Soviet doctrines of filmmaking, the old principles have, in fact, been re-appropriated. In other words, Russia's national crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union yielded a new brand of xenophobic, anti-capitalist filmmaking infused with themes of corruption, despair, and a profound nostalgia for things past.

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INTRODUCTION:

WHAT IS *CHERNUKHA* AND HOW DID IT MANIFEST?

On January 17th, 1922 – nearly a month after the formation of the Soviet Union – head of state Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, in a much quoted address, declared cinema the most important of the arts. He predicted that cinema would venture into the uncharted territory of the sociocultural sphere, where it would function as a fresh medium onto which national ambitions and ideologies could be projected through an “abrasive misrepresentation of reality.”¹ Film's hold on the masses during Russia's Soviet period (1922-1991) confirmed it as an ideal, state-controlled tool for disseminating official doctrines through strategies of spectator identification.

This historical back-story provides both a framework and a context for this study, one that examines what observers characterized as a crisis in cinema's political role following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought about the emergence of not only new ideologies but also new identities. My research will begin with an overview of the post-Soviet crisis regarding the political function of cinema and then continue with an analysis of two blockbusters from Aleksei Balabanov, *Brat* (Brother, 1997) and *Brat 2* (Brother 2, 2000), followed by a discussion of select television crime series in mid to late 90s. I will detail how these films and TV shows explicitly address the fraught relationship between cultural traditions of the past and contemporary understanding of national identity in Russia through their various constructions of the cultural Other.

¹ Shlapentokh, Dmitry & Vladimir Shlapentokh. “Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991: Ideological Conflict and Social Reality.” New York: A. de Gruyter, 1993. 22.

While these works involve traditional cultural values and history, they deny them the power to influence or rescue post-Soviet cultural life.² As my starting point, I would like to offer a few remarks on the role of the *chernukha* aesthetic in Russia's post-Soviet cinematic movement, followed by an overview of how these films and television series signal a broader historical context of the social, political, and economic turbulence brought about by the fall of the USSR.

In *Brat*, hero Danila is a country bumpkin who comes to St. Petersburg to find his older brother Viktor and start a new life. As soon as he arrives, he meets a homeless German who warns him that the city is a frightening force that sucks people in and allows only the strong to climb out. Danila pays little attention, turning to the profitable activity of organized crime, which his brother is already a part of, in order to save some “good” people and get Viktor out of trouble with his gang. The film's final sequence reunites Danila with the homeless German, to whom he complains, “You said the city is a force, but everyone here is weak.” The German replies, “The city is a dark force, the strong come here and become weak; the city takes our strength, and now you've fallen, too.” The implications of his words are telling not only of the condition of post-Soviet society, but of the dismal themes dominating *chernukha* or the so-called “black” cinema that came about in the final years of the USSR's demise. *Chernukha* can be described as a cinema that thrived on either challenging official Soviet history to expose the fallacy and hypocrisy of communist leadership or on offering graphic, often overblown exposés “of

² Larsen, Susan. “National Identity, Cultural Authority, and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov.” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003) 504.

the social, economic, and moral collapse” in post-Soviet Russia.³ Post 1988, the term *chernukha* became a central characterization of cinema made in Russia. The phenomenon of *chernukha* was short-lived, however, for its end was generally associated with *perestroika*, a movement consisting of the economic reforms introduced in 1987 and then concluded in 1991. It was between these years, then, that a thematic and visual aesthetic for Russia's new national cinema was set in place as *chernukha* came to dominate Soviet cinematic output. *Chernukha's* influence continued to linger on beyond 1991, however, and its aesthetic was re-appropriated and embraced well into the late 90s, when it encompassed many of the films of the new millennium and coincided with the trends of *pornukha* and *bytovukha*, suggesting “porno” and “blue collar” films, respectively. The customary settings for all of the aforementioned film categories were crowded disintegrating apartment complexes and dirty courtyards ridden with strays and the homeless. The characters typically lived in complete urban isolation or with a truncated family that usually lacked a mother or father.⁴ Substance abuse and severe physical violence added to the genre's “general atmosphere of cruelty” where human bodies were constantly mangled and deformed by injury or illness and where sexual representation was limited to acts of rape, “though rarely acknowledged as such in the narrative.”⁵ In other words, regardless of the category, all of these films focused on the bleakest and most sinister aspects of human existence.

This study will confirm that both in its form and content, “black” cinema in

³ Johnson, Vida T. “The Search for a New Russia in an “Era of New Films”.” *Russian Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, (April 1997) 282.

⁴ Graham, Seth. “*Chernukha* and Russian Film.” *Studies in Slavic Cultures* 1 (2000). 9.

⁵ Ibid.

particular encompassed communal nightmares, cruel sexual behaviour, and brutality with its strong emphasis on eliciting raw “physicality.”⁶ Similarly, it was a movement that penetrated not only the aesthetic and narrative elements of filmmaking, but also mobilized its audience through strategies of cinematic identification. Nevertheless, the novelty and shock value that was attributed to *chernukha* filmmaking were quickly erased, since the collapse of the USSR and its subsequent moral, social, economic, and criminal repercussions were recorded for and broadcasted to the people as nation-defining imagery.

Put another way, the brewing social and political changes in the former Soviet bloc “relied on nationally and, not least, internationally televised events,” making media a part of post-Soviet reality to the point, as Lenin had predicted, of occasionally influencing the course of national events.⁷ In addition, the media of the post-Soviet decade has been marked by its struggle with economic and political powers; powers that are virtually inseparable in Russia.⁸ Moreover, post-Soviet media was branded “the most central agency in the conflicts within and between the groups of tycoons, oligarchs, and Kremlin establishment people [that were] often difficult to distinguish from one another.”⁹ In other words, while some of these “businessmen” controlled major papers and TV stations, they also used the media to incriminate and expose their enemies, thus broadcasting an unfavourable image of new Russian society to the millions of viewers who tuned in night after night.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ekecrantz, Jan and Kerstin Olofsson, eds. “Russian Reports: Studies in Post-communist Transformation of Media and Journalism.” Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell International, c2000. 10.

⁸ Ibid. 22.

⁹ Ibid.

It is crucial to note, however, that the idea of media freedom in new Russia cannot be compared with Western notions of freedom of the press. In particular, the *perestroika* years of 1989-91 “increased freedom of speech but with the caveat that higher authorities should decide the limits of this freedom.”¹⁰ In sum, the new Russian media are still dependent on structures inherited from the Soviet era; specifically, the compulsive readiness of any ruling party “to make black appear white for higher purposes;” a readiness motivated by the fear that, once the government or its corrupt “businessmen” cease the power to all media outlets, “then there are not, and cannot be, any reasonable limits to deception.”¹¹ Thus, although Russian media reveled in a newfound freedom (not unlike cinema's *chernukha* movement) in circulating nation-defining images of corruption and moral degradation, this freedom remained mediated by state powers and their various accomplices.

Furthermore, although *chernukha* is commonly cited as a dominant aesthetic from 1988 to 1991, one could argue that its most interesting manifestations are found in a number of post-Soviet films much later in the decade. In light of this, the focus on *chernukha* will be mobilized in the study of the output of a more recent post-Soviet film industry, taking as its model *chernukha's* “crime cinema,” to which the aforementioned Balabanov films pertain, (with related television series work) from 1995 to 2000. To be sure, Russia's new post-Soviet film industry yielded filmmakers who, unlike their Soviet predecessors, were no longer interested in being skillful “manipulators” of cultural identity and prophets of the state. Indeed, their indulgence in a cinema of poverty,

¹⁰ Ibid. 32.

¹¹ Ibid. 37,38.

bleakness, ideological collapse, and social decay could be said to have further established “identity” as a myth that collapsed along with the Soviet Union. For Daniil Dondurei, editor of a Russian film journal *Iskusstvo Kino* or *Film Art*, *chernukha* became not just a trend in cinema, but a social problem in itself. It encouraged audiences to identify with, accept, and dwell on “a worldview marked by catastrophe, rejection of the future, and negative interpretation of the present, a worldview that [was] essentially and functionally repressive towards all other value systems.”¹² Remarkably, it has not been uncommon to question *chernukha*’s validity as a critical societal menace that mirrors the collapse of the state, for it has also been argued to be, in itself, a facade that was merely born out of a sudden upheaval of “intoxicating artistic freedom.”¹³

I propose to focus my discussion around a series of critical questions: How did these new filmmakers construct their characters in terms of spectator identification in a state lacking a coherent national identity? What role did cinematic constructions of the other play in affirming the meaning of being Russian? Even more importantly, as Seth Graham suggests in a matter of “how much critical exposé is too much” and should some subjects, if any, remain untouched?¹⁴

In the following pages, I will ground my study of post-Soviet film and television in the context of the social, political, and economic changes that took place in post-Soviet Russia. On April 24th 2005, Russia's president Vladimir Putin declared the fall of the Soviet Union to be “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century,”¹⁵ and it is

¹² Seth Graham. 10.

¹³ Ibid. 12.

¹⁴ Ibid. 11.

¹⁵ Rosefelde, Steven and Stefan Hedlund. “Russia Since 1980: Wrestling with Westernization.”

with this proclamation in mind that I will examine the events and circumstances surrounding the USSR's collapse. First, a brief summary of relevant chronology is in order. For the Soviet Union, the 1980s proved pivotal both as the final years of communism and as a start of the tumultuous state transformation that followed. After decades of authoritarian rule, reformist leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who served as the general secretary of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) from 1985 to 1991, became widely regarded as the first and last “president” of the USSR. He served his short term from March 15th, 1990 to December 25th, 1991. As head of the CPSU, Gorbachev was able to introduce a multitude of ambitious social, political, and economic reforms from 1986 to 1991 that included “*glasnost* (political candor), *demokratizatsia* (democratization), *uskorenie* (GDP growth acceleration), *perestroika* (radical economic reform), and *novoye myslennie* (new thinking to end the cold war).”¹⁶ Although the programs were initially applauded at home and publicized in the West, they “contributed variously to an acute economic depression, the destruction of communist power, and the dissolution of the USSR into fifteen independent republics, culminating in the Kremlin's loss of 30 percent of its territories and 48 percent of its population.”¹⁷

On August 19th, 1991 members of the CPSU who deemed Gorbachev no longer a fit leader of the communist party and its conservative ideology staged a coup to oust him from power. As the president vacationed at his summer cottage in Crimea, militia and KGB servicemen surrounded his property and imposed a form of house arrest.

Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Meanwhile, tanks rolled into the central streets of Moscow as word spread that Gorbachev had been successfully overthrown. The coup, however, was unsuccessful due to a former member of CPSU, Boris Yeltsin, who was newly elected on July 10th, 1991 as the president of the Russian Republic within the Soviet Union. Yeltsin rushed to Moscow and fought to resist the coup with other political and civilian demonstrators. While the coup was staged with the intention to prevent a possible dissolution of the Soviet Union, it only accelerated the process that had already been set in motion. Within days, the Ukrainian Republic drafted an Act of Independence that affirmed it as an independent democratic state; other Soviet Republics followed suit. On December 21st 1991, the leaders of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia officially dissolved the USSR and declared the Soviet Republics to be independent states. Gorbachev resigned his presidency of the now non-existent Soviet Union on December 25th and Yeltsin assumed power, becoming the first president of the post-Soviet Russian Federation. He served the Russian state until 1999. Yeltsin's presidency was just as turbulent as Gorbachev's. His own reform called

perekhod (radical market transition) [...] sought to expand the scope of late Soviet era business, entrepreneurship, and private property with *shock* therapeutic methods, to open the economy to globalization, and forge a multiparty democracy.¹⁸

Although these policies were accepted with the same vigor as Gorbachev's earlier reforms, they only served to assist and conceal “the asset-grabbing and revenue misappropriation” that crippled much of Russia's population.¹⁹

An account of cultural conditions of the time can be found in David Satter's

¹⁸ Ibid. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid.

compelling book “Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State,” in which the post-Soviet decade is described as one defined by a surge of “a criminal business elite and its takeover of the machinery of the Russian state, leading to the impoverishment and demoralization of the great majority of the population.”²⁰ An American journalist, Moscow correspondent, and long time observer of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, Satter approaches the material in his book from a peoples' perspective. He uses individual and small group accounts to trace “a spiritual crisis” experienced by the Russians during the reform period, for they were “confronted with a new way of life for which their previous experience had not prepared them.”²¹ In other words, in order to grasp a spiritual national crisis, Satter proposes, one must go beyond statistics and facts to uncover a post-Soviet psychology fraught with “mass moral indifference.”²²

The victory over communism was a moral victory. Millions took to the streets not because of shortages but in protest over communism's attempt to falsify history and change human nature. As a new state began to be built, however, all attention shifted to the creation of capitalism and, in particular, to the formation of a group of wealthy private owners whose control over the means of production, it was assumed, would lead automatically to a free-market economy and a law-based democracy. This approach, dubious under the best of conditions, proved disastrous in the case of Russia because, in a country with a need for moral values after more than seven decades of spiritual degradation under communism, the introduction of capitalism came to be seen as an end in itself.²³

In sum, Satter characterizes the developing post-Soviet system as wracked by bribery, pillage, and institutionalized violence because government officials were readily bought by the new “businessmen.” Illegally exporting their money to avoid confiscation, these businessmen, with gangsters serving as their bodyguards, were treated as “normal

²⁰ Satter, David. “Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State.” New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, c2003. Preface.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. 2.

²³ Ibid. 1.

economic actors.”²⁴ The criminal financial practices were, arguably, the first stepping stone in depriving an already crippled nation of finances needed for proper economic development. Furthermore, state authorities took bribes from members of organized crime; factory bosses “stole funds marked for the salaries of workers who had already gone months without pay;” and officials refused to accept any responsibility for the chaos, even though its consequences “victimized people who were already destitute.”²⁵ It is here, that the spiritual crisis becomes evident, for “if under communism universal morality was denied in favour of the supposed ‘interests of the working class,’ under the new government people lost the ability to distinguish between legal and criminal activity.”²⁶ In essence, a framework of law and order was indispensable to post-Soviet Russia, because for its citizens, socialism functioned as both an economic structure and a “secular religion.”²⁷

In Satter's collection of personal post-Soviet histories, the most publicized concerns the fate of Svetlana Kotova, a top model and former Miss Russia. On May 10th, 1997, her dismembered body was found in a shallow grave in Saronida, Greece, where three months earlier she reportedly had a romance with Russia's number one professional killer Alexander Solonik.²⁸ Solonik, for his part, was found strangled three months prior. They met in Moscow that January and Solonik invited Kotova to join him on a getaway in Greece. They were only there for four days, before hired killers ambushed the couple's rented villa and strangled Solonik. Kotova appeared to be collateral damage.

²⁴ Ibid. 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. 2-3.

²⁸ Ibid. 3.

Svetlana's story evoked intense interest in Russia because of her youth and beauty and because there was something about the romance between a twenty-one-year-old beauty queen and a professional killer that was symbolic of the condition of modern Russia [...] the fate of Svetlana Kotova had something in common with the fate of her nation, freely delivered into the hands of criminals during the period of reform. The rewards were quick and easy. There was a willful desire not to know.²⁹

It is not yet clear if Russia will share Svetlana's fate, but what is clear, is that the developing post-Soviet Russian state lacks leadership. According to Richard Rose and Neil Munro, “the order taken for granted in a democratic modern state [could not] be taken for granted in Russia, because it [was] not a modern state.”³⁰ More precisely, while Russia distanced itself from Soviet totalitarian traditions, it was not ready or willing to embrace a Western system of government; what was considered normal in the West was ill-suited for Russia.³¹ Disorder was rampant, ranging from people's savings that were suddenly worth nothing after inflation, to high mortality rates from “drunkenness, accidents and murder.”³² In this sense, order is characterized as a responsibility of the state to provide its citizens with a “secure framework for everyday life,” in which people and organizations can “rectify what is wrong and invest efforts in hopes of a better future.”³³ Thus, the disorder that is associated with the USSR's transformation into the Russian Federation not only “maintained many disorderly practices that were part of the Soviet legacy,” but added new ones as well.³⁴ In other words, Russia's new regime was drastically different, yet just as lawless as its predecessor, for it still used “whatever

²⁹ Ibid. 1.

³⁰ Rose, Richard and Neil Munro. “Elections Without Order: Russia's Challenge to Vladimir Putin.” Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 1.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 2.

³⁴ Ibid. 4.

means necessary to assert its domination.”³⁵ Significantly, Balabanov's films represent this general lack of order, but propose an extreme solution in the hero's vigilante-like actions; although Danila becomes one of the criminals, he is a “good” criminal who goes after his “bad” counterparts for the greater good of his nation's “brothers.”

Of even greater interest, is the fusion of new identity with masculine authority, with ideas of (national) brotherhood filling the vacuum of absent paternal figures. While *Brat* showcases the hero's loyalty to his blood brother, the sequel stages the hero's loyalty in relation to a fellow soldier in Chechnya, a former war “brother.” This study will look at how the forceful masculinity of the films' heroes, combined with a heavy dose of xenophobic national loyalty, stages individual and national insecurities in this turbulent period. In particular, Balabanov governs his heroes on the basis of their positive disposition to partake in violence and their subsequent ability to endure it from others. Out of this context emerges a young rural man-cum-urban vigilante who is selfless in a struggle against “the unscrupulous and powerful elements that dominate a lawless society.”³⁶

To draw thematic and aesthetic parallels between Balabanov's *Brat* films and Russian television from mid to late 1990s, this study will also propose that the most popular and successful crime series of the time illustrate how St. Petersburg's “cultural mythology” fed into the city's post-Soviet reputation as the “crime capital” of Russia, best exemplified by *Ulitsy Razbitykh Fonarei* (*Streets of Broken Lights*, 1997-99) and

³⁵ Ibid. 5.

³⁶ Anemone, Anthony. “About Killers, Freaks, and Real Men: The Vigilante Hero of Aleksei Balabanov's Films.” in *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, eds. Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c2008. 127.

Banditskii Peterburg (*Gangland Petersburg*, 2000-07). Both series - along with Balabanov's films, for that matter - operate on the premise that the mafia is the only logical and available alternative to the unforgivingly inefficient, corrupt state. Here, St. Petersburg becomes more than a cinematic backdrop, but a real canvas that "demonstrate[s] both Russia's ideals and its disappointments when those ideals are not realized," further becoming a kind of "cipher for the exasperation and insecurity" the population experienced in the wake of economic and political turbulence of the time.³⁷ The mafia, therefore, becomes synonymous with yet another kind of brotherhood, supplying a sense of belonging, purpose, and group identity in the face of a social and paternal vacuum.³⁸ The series provide "surrogate communities" of the *detective* and the *criminal*; both function to compensate for the social incoherence of post-Soviet Russia in ways that also foreground masculine crisis. Furthermore, *Banditskii Peterburg* centralizes its two main characters on the dichotomy of detective and criminal where even the lawful protagonist is obliged to probe "beyond the law" to attain social clarification and justice.³⁹

In addition, I will also discuss the criminal drama series *Kamenskaya* (1999-2000), an unlikely hit because of its female protagonist. It will be interesting to see how a female police officer allows such great male and female spectator identification as well as to explore how her character's construction subverts Russia's patriarchal notions of

³⁷ Tishler, Jennifer Ryan. "Menty and the Petersburg Myth: TV Cops in Russia's Crime Capital." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*. 10 (2), 2003. 127.

³⁸ Prokhorova, Elena. "Can the Meeting Place be Changed? Crime and Identity Discourse in Russian Television Series of the 1990s." *Slavic Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003) 522.

³⁹ MacFadyen, David. "Russian Television Today: Primetime Drama and Comedy." London; New York: Routledge, 2008. 171.

women in the workplace by showing Nastya Kamenskaya as analytical and emotionless, qualities that are usually attributed to males.

To summarize, my study of Soviet spectatorship in relation to social/cinematic constructions of the enemy will function as a starting point for speculation about the role of filmmaking and television production within the developing cosmopolitan society of the new Russian Federation, whose methods of generating spectator identification suggests a striking regression to former Soviet practices.

CHAPTER ONE:
GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH
RUSSIAN FRIENDS & WESTERN FOES

In a nutshell, the fall of the Soviet Union left an ideological gap in place of official communist doctrine. In the early nineties, the struggle to claim that ideological gap had only two potential replacements; either an incoherent fusion of “imperialist thinking [and] Russian Orthodoxy” or the more articulate “liberal-democratic ideology based on market and bourgeois values and individual liberties.”⁴⁰ Both ideologies had their respective advocates in cinema and television of the Post-Soviet era. More importantly, in spite of Russia's astonishing (although accelerated) political, social and economic changes, and the impulse to single out the other by finding an enemy or a scapegoat was stronger than ever. This was particularly fostered “by the sentiments of the millions of Russians embittered by [*perestroika*] that left them impoverished, by the suspicious rise of the “oligarchs,” [and] by rampant crime in the cities.”⁴¹ This mistrust further cultivated the long standing Russian dichotomies of East and West that inevitably fell into the binary opposition of Us and Them. In that case, the only chance at societal unification was through the embrace of Pan-Slavism and xenophobic ideas of nationhood.

The basic principles of the Other and its function in a time of a national identity crisis have been analyzed by Julia Kristeva. In her text “Strangers to Ourselves,”

⁴⁰ Sulkin, Oleg. “Identifying the Enemy in Contemporary Russian Film.” in *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, eds. Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c2008. 113.

⁴¹ Ibid. 114.

Kristeva suggests that while the foreigner is presented in national discourses as “an image of hatred and of the other,” he (or she) is not necessarily seen as “the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis.”⁴² He is, however, something that remains within the nation, for he is “the hidden face of our identity” and comes at a time “when the consciousness of [our own] difference arises” and is, precisely, what turns the unifying national concept of “we” and “us” into a problem.⁴³ For Kristeva, the only way to escape the Other is to acknowledge our own otherness. Yet, “the absorption of otherness proposed by our societies turns out to be unacceptable by the contemporary individual, jealous of his difference – one that is not only national and ethical but essentially subjective.”⁴⁴ In other words, the foreigner becomes a product of nationalism. Kristeva argues, however, that it is only in the most savage groups that the foreigner is deemed an enemy to be destroyed, suggesting that society has evolved to accommodate and even assimilate otherness. She cites religion as the basis for this growing acceptance, but proposes that, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the world experienced a crisis of “religious and ethical constructs,” where contemporary society was no longer able or willing to accept the other.⁴⁵

Following Kristeva's argument, it is easy to understand why cinema became an exemplary vehicle in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia for tracing these “unnamed and undefined” foreigners, if not altogether manufacturing the names and faces of the

⁴² Kristeva, Julia. “Strangers to Ourselves.” in *The Portable Kristeva*, Kelly Oliver, ed., New York: Columbia University Press, c1997. 264.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 265.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

enemies readily held responsible for Russia's decaying social and political structures.⁴⁶ What surfaced, however, were three types of “enemy” discourses. The first discourse insisted that the enemy never slept; it lurked anywhere and everywhere and had to be physically annihilated. For the most part, this enemy could be classified as external. The second discourse proposed just the opposite; that the enemy was, indeed, “asleep” and internal or undercover; its exposure proving to be the only solution. A third and, arguably, most widespread discourse to date suggested that the other was not only a phantom, but a “vestige of the past” that operated within the nation; a nation that had to be “purged” of it by any means possible.⁴⁷

In this sense, the formation of the Soviet Union and its subsequent embrace of the cinematic medium spoke to the national urgency to determine the meaning of “Sovietness;” a process that, remarkably, has spanned much of the twentieth century. The definition of self in cinema and in nation, however, largely depended on identifying the Other. Film became an indispensable medium through which the public could be newly educated on key characteristics of the menacing outsider in order to determine who belonged to the state and who did not. In other words, this “process of defining” was fundamental to Soviet filmmaking in establishing the basis for spectator schooling and cinematic identification practices. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, from the onset, the employment of the foreigner was an elusive one, for outsiders could redeem their alien status by appropriating Soviet ideology and, thereby, negating their otherness.

Nevertheless, the introduction of cinema into a highly politicized and ideological

⁴⁶ Oleg Sulkin. 116.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 125.

Soviet culture demonstrated another means of access through which the state could propel its constructed binaries of what it meant to be Russian. This propping up of national identity through the construction of some 'other' has a longer history in both the Soviet era and pre-Soviet Russia. Remarkably, the first film produced in pre-Soviet Russia, *Sten'ka Razin* (Vladimir Romashkov, 1908) already articulated the concepts of belonging and otherness through recognition of difference between Russia and the Orient. With respect to post-Soviet film and television, however, the big development occurred later with the Revolutions of 1917 which further encouraged heads of state to "divide the world into binary categories."⁴⁸ It was a method that "involved sifting through ideas of foreigners, outsiders and insiders, a blend of orientalist and occidental ideas, and historical memories of past binary constructions" that persisted until the Union's collapse.⁴⁹

In this way, the first and, ostensibly, most straightforward discourse of the alert, awakened enemy surfaced in the 1920s along with Mikhail Bakhtin's developing theories of identity formation that were modeled on psychoanalytic and psychological frameworks. Bakhtin was a prominent Russian scholar, philosopher, and semiotician who maintained that "the subject's knowledge of itself or the world [was] impossible without the other" and heavily criticized all nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers who promoted a single autonomous consciousness that neglected the interdependence of self and other.⁵⁰ In particular, Bakhtin's scholarship thrived in a time of totalitarian rule

⁴⁸ Norris, Stephen M., "Introduction." in *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, eds. Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c2008. xiv.

⁴⁹ Ibid. xv.

⁵⁰ Hashamova, Yana. "Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in post-Soviet Film."

that denied any attempts at dialogue by voiding the space between self and other in order to transform society into a single isolated “mass man.” Because of this, Bakhtin pursued a reconfiguration of such political, cultural and societal thinking as to encourage the unbearable and often traumatic acknowledgement of the outsider within the self.⁵¹ More importantly, this acknowledgment of and subsequent dialogue between self and other that was “all too often a confrontation” must be assessed in terms of its psychological and social cost.

To emphasize, Bakhtin's approach is most straightforward in constructing the other, because it is the only formal discussion on early Soviet cinema that fleshes out the enemy's identity as Western and, explicitly, American. Although the argument of Americanization among “Slavophiles” has been continuous, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia has firmly established an ongoing, if not altogether obsessive, preoccupation with American models and ideas. To illustrate, following the Revolutions of 1917, Lenin introduced an ambivalent attitude towards America, praising its technological superiority and labour ethic (so much so that Soviet workers were encouraged to adopt an American way of working) while simultaneously contesting the capitalist cultural and political products of that very labour. In other words, as Russians were sent to America to specialize in modern technology that would later profit their own economy, Soviet ideology “more vehemently criticized the amoral nature of capitalism, its values and

Bristol; Chicago: Intellect, 2007. 19-20.

⁵¹ It is necessary to note, however, that Bakhtin's scholarship follows an entirely different trajectory in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Unlike the West, where Bakhtin's writings surfaced in the 1970s and were immediately appropriated by such scholars as the aforementioned Kristeva, contemporary Russia and its former republics are still largely unfamiliar with his work outside of Russia's highly intellectual circles. It was banned during the Soviet period and has not been properly explored any further since.

aesthetics.”⁵²

In Soviet cinema, the American foreigner became the manifestation of all that was considered despicable about capitalist culture. In this sense, the American enemy, although always “awake” and visible, was not exclusive to any particular period in Russian history. In fact, the American other has been the most consistent scapegoat in Russian cinema, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, hitting its peak during the Cold War decades (1940s to 1990s), and resurfacing once more as the capitalist monster after the USSR's dissolution. In addition, after World War II, “the more Soviet ideology demonized the West, the more fictional and imaginary this demonization became.”⁵³ In sum, America's image of wartime ally rapidly transformed into one of imaginary foe. Of even greater interest was the Soviet directors' engrossment in this negative portrayal, for not one of the filmmakers was ever able to visit America and “knew little of it;” yet, all were compelled to keep producing Soviet ideological fantasies at the expense of an already distorted American image.⁵⁴ Likewise, anti-American propaganda in film during the Stalinist period (1932-1953) was part of a Stalinist aesthetic that consisted of a “depressingly regular” set of three stock characters including “the Party leader, the simple [or innocent] person, and the enemy.”⁵⁵ In particular, the Party leader was always a male character and while the simple person was not bound by a specific sex, the enemy was also unquestionably male. Moreover, the enemy's only function was “to wreck and

⁵² Ibid. 22.

⁵³ Ibid. 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Kenez, Peter. “The Picture of the Enemy in Stalinist Films.” in *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, eds. Stephen M. Norris and Zara M. Torlone. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c2008. 96.

destroy what the Communists [were] building” and, occasionally, soliciting the simple person to betray the state by adopting Western ideologies.⁵⁶ Likewise, films that followed this Stalinist model unambiguously showcased American characters seeking “to discover Soviet secrets and shamelessly cooperate with the Nazis” as well as interrogating and torturing innocent communist youths by means of the Nazi rubric.⁵⁷ In light of this, despite the absurdly obvious demonizations of American society, the Soviet state realized its goal of keeping individuals' rebellions and protests at bay.

It is crucial to note, however, that the transparent excess of this glorified image ironically produced a counter desire for the very Western fantasy that was vilified. In a sense then, “the ideal subject of socialism” always kept a distance from the system itself, secretly fantasizing about an equally fictional Western paradise; a fantasy that, paradoxically, “kept the status quo of the system.”⁵⁸ This fantasy, which became even more vivid with the dissolution of the USSR, was questioned and further rejected in 1990s by Balabanov who, through his numerous projects, punctuated an end to the “utopian dream” of America for his vast audience. Balabanov's films offered a stark “retro Soviet patriotism” that thrived on xenophobia and, once again, anti-American sentiment.⁵⁹ Without further ado, Balabanov staged a collage of

anti-Semitism, anti-Ukrainianism, and anti-Americanism to create an image of an American “Evil Empire” whose corruption, criminality, greed, and limitless financial resources represent[ed] a serious threat to an economically weakened but morally and culturally superior Russia.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Yana Hashamova. 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 28.

⁵⁹ Anthony Anemone. 129.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 129-130.

In essence, Balabanov reignited the all too familiar image of America as a soulless materialist nation. In return, he is credited as the first post-Soviet filmmaker to stimulate and restore Soviet ideology in Russian cinema through his use of Soviet “sentimental clichés” and “kitschy visual images” of Lenin, Stalin, and the Revolution through posters, paintings, and sculptures.⁶¹

In that sense, *Brat 2* demonstrates the West (America, in particular) to be Russia's menacing other, for it is a place and a force of complacency, stagnation, hypocrisy, oblivion, and violence that is effortlessly condemned by the lawless Russian hero. While the film works as a “vicious satire” on America, its predecessor almost functions as “a manifesto for Russian fascism.”⁶² In other words, if new ideological possibilities remain ambiguous, then one thing remains clear – capitalism as a previously external enemy has now become internal and any progress towards it must be condemned. It is essential to note, however, that Balabanov's filmmaking should not be simplified and labeled as primitive based on its questionable ideology, for his subject matter is far from transparent as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Furthermore, American filmmakers offered their own “evil empire in the face of communism and showed similar symptoms of paranoia” by exploiting identical mechanisms in denouncing the Eastern Other.⁶³ Therefore, a cinematic construction of the national self and national identity along with stimulating spectator identification is, arguably, inconceivable without the negative fabrication of the other in any given nation.

⁶¹ Ibid. 129.

⁶² Oleg Sulkin. 117.

⁶³ Yana Hashamova. 27.

This idea is taken up by Yana Hashamova, who employs Freudian psychoanalysis to address constructions of self in opposition to the other using the ancient moral imperative of 'loving thy neighbour as thyself.' According to Hashamova, Freud argued that this was impossible due to a natural existence of aggressive instincts that served as “an outlet in the form of hostility to outsiders, foreigners, and intruders.”⁶⁴ In other words, Soviet leaders had the ability to bind large groups of people into strong and secure nationalist communities as long as select individuals remained on the outside and could be easily targeted by the insiders' instinctual aggression. Because of the available outlet, the social union of the nation could be reinforced and maintained. Freud's prediction for the communist state was direct; the Soviet Union would find its “psychological support” in persecuting outsiders and the bourgeoisie.⁶⁵ True to Freud, the Soviets and post-Soviet Russians continued crafting the Other, both inside and outside national borders.

Remarkably, although the historical images of the war enemy have changed, the question has always remained the same, that is, does one support the Whites or the Reds, the Russians or the Germans, Japanese and Jews, the Chechens or the federals? Under such circumstances, any positive representation of these enemies and ethnic minorities in the Soviet and post-Soviet film industry was entirely out of the question, for no production company or private sponsor would ever fund a project with such subject matter. Notably, even a theme of “equal responsibility for the war on both sides and a simply neutral depiction of the rebels” was immediately interpreted as “unqualified

⁶⁴ Ibid. 25.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

support” for the enemy and disregarded.⁶⁶

The case of Russia in the Post-Soviet decade proposed an enemy that now consisted of Russians who embraced capitalism in the wake of national uncertainty, and cinema now needed new markers to identify friends from foes. The BMW and the SUV automobiles became two such markers of “new Russians” and functioned as “a sure signal that the car owner [was] a member of the new criminalized business elite” and, as a new Russian, was either a “negative or ambiguous figure.”⁶⁷ Notably, although foreign cars were no longer uncommon in post-Soviet Russia and many cinematic protagonists would own one, the use of particular Western brands and models was exclusive to unfavourable characters. In this way, the old but persistent dichotomy of Us and Them was reassigned, where Us were now the older struggling nostalgic Soviet patriots and Them were the ruthless and morally corrupt new Russians who capitalized on the collapsing society. To detect Them, one only had to look as far as their capitalist possessions. The culprits, who could not be distinguished from other Russians by their looks, were easily identifiable by their profession. Specifically, the foe was now represented by “pro-Western” pimps, rapists, new Russians, and corrupt state officials. In other words, the invisible enemy shaped itself into “soulless bourgeois pragmatism.”⁶⁸ Significantly, the search for invisible enemies became central to plot progression, for all inhabitants of the post-Soviet landscape were “fraught with potential violence.”⁶⁹ Tellingly, Russian filmmakers have deviated from the straightforward divisions of friend

⁶⁶ Peter Kenez. 114.

⁶⁷ Oleg Sulkin. 121.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 123.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 124.

and foe, consciously blurring the differences and later exploited “this very confusion and fence-straddling as a plot-driving device.”⁷⁰ I would like to acknowledge, however, that Balabanov does not fall into this category.

In this sense, the discourse of the enemy as a phantom remains most constructive in its attempt to refrain from fabricating a scapegoat to reinforce identification with the Soviet and post-Soviet collective. The scapegoat was initially fabricated by Stalin during his Purges of the 1930s where he created a false enemy within the state in order to justify his attempt to cleanse the nation. This discourse suggests that if there is, after all, an enemy – it is one that is within every Russian who, in return, must rid himself of it as a means of reconciling the nation. In other words, the “real” enemy resides within the Russian mentality and “the sooner it is exorcised and defeated, the closer the Russian nation comes to renewal.”⁷¹

Furthermore, post-Soviet mentality, especially in males, is one heavily manipulated by the army service most experienced in the Chechen conflict. Those who came back alive, brought with them not only “physical bravery, loyalty, [and] patriotism” but also a “willingness to use violence in a worthy cause,”⁷² the worthiness of which is evidently self-measured. In particular, these cinematic patriots face an even more tragic fate; in order to be perceived as heroic and loyal they must abandon their values and adopt the very methods of their enemy. Moreover, this moral sacrifice in no way guarantees social acceptance and can, perhaps, be read as “a critique of a society that can

⁷⁰ Ibid. 125.

⁷¹ Oleg Sulkin. 123.

⁷² Anthony Anemone. 129.

neither ensure justice nor recognize its true heroes.”⁷³ In that case, it is precisely this moral vacuum, the willingness to justify otherwise immoral acts, that the nation needs to release itself from. Likewise, it is undoubtedly this problematic justification of violence that is lost on both, the post-Soviet filmmakers and their domestic audiences.

Keeping these ideas in mind, my next chapter will illustrate how the concept of “friend and foe” has been re-appropriated by Balabanov in the *Brat* films.

⁷³ Ibid. 131.

CHAPTER TWO:
WE ARE NOT CRIMINALS, WE ARE RUSSIANS!
BALABANOV'S MISGUIDED FANTASIES OF THE NATIONAL HERO

Brat 1

Although Balabanov's *Brat* films will be the central focus of this chapter, I would like to precede my discussion of them with a few words about Russia's economic state during Boris Yeltsin's presidency from 1991 to 1999. This will guide the reader in further understanding the filmmaker's key aesthetic and thematic choices that will be explored later in the chapter.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the West encouraged the Yeltsin administration to carry out reforms in order to stimulate the new economy, most notably with expeditious privatization. Unfortunately, the haste with which these reforms were implemented did not allow for the thorough preparation of the affected fundamental infrastructures, thereby only worsening the economic and social conditions with each coming year. Russia's new economy disintegrated fast as "lawless and unregulated capitalism settled in."⁷⁴ Some of the immediate consequences included dwindling industrial production and a growing discrepancy between the rich and the poor; so much so, that "oligarchs using political influence managed to secure assets in the billions,"⁷⁵ while average Russians barely managed to stay above the poverty line. According to a World Bank survey for 1998, 23.8 percent of Russians lived on a mere two dollars per

⁷⁴ Yana Hashamova. 39.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 40.

day and 40 percent lived on less than four dollars.⁷⁶ In spite of this, Russia's biggest cosmopolitan areas were flooded with luxury goods and traffic jams that consisted of Mercedes and Lexus brands, prompting some to wonder if this was a sign of Russia's sickness instead of its health.⁷⁷ In this way, although Gorbachev's *perestroika* period allowed for fantasies of new beginnings and a bright future, Yeltsin's administration buried the dreams with disillusion and despair. Scholar Alexandr Etkind adequately summarizes the change in the following passage:

When wild capitalism replaced cradle-to-grave security, many people were frightened by the revolutionary forces they had helped unleash. Blue and white collar workers now faced unemployment; intellectuals found their spiritual bonds threatened by inequality; artists lamented their lost state subsidies; the once pampered military forces saw their prestige take a nose dive; collective farmers felt reluctant to strike out on their own as private producers; and nearly everybody felt the void inside.⁷⁸

What became clear is that post-Soviet Russia had little to offer its average citizens in their present situations as well as their immediate futures. Meanwhile, the West, which initially praised and rejoiced at the communist downfall, was now unable and unwilling to welcome these Russian masses abroad by allowing them to immigrate and settle elsewhere in Europe or North America; nor could the West effectively assist in improving people's living conditions back in Russia due to its fundamentally different political, social, and economic systems.⁷⁹

For the Russian arts and, more specifically, the film industry, these conditions also meant a drastic decline in both film-making practices and their commercial sales. Chief

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Etkind, Alexandr. "Psychological Culture" in *Russian Culture at the Crossroads*, ed. Dmitri Shalin, Boulder: Westview Press, 1996. 122.

⁷⁹ Yana Hashamova. 40.

critics like Daniil Dondurei proclaimed that the problem was Russia's lack of a national and, arguably, ideological cinema as well as the cinematic construction of an idealized national(ist) hero who could stand up not only for the common man, but for “everything Russian.”⁸⁰ He further concludes that,

[t]here is no such thing as a national hero and nobody cares to create him...
 What must be done is to create a national mythology instead of wasting
 time on creating films that are not even mentioned, let alone attended...
 The Soviet masters of culture depict their own society as one of criminals
 and in a masochistic way reopen its wounds.⁸¹

Perhaps what Dondurei hoped for, was that in this constructed fantasy the disillusioned spectators could find identification that would aid in resurrecting their national pride, which brings me directly to Balabanov and his first *Brat* film.

Although *chernukha* flourished during the *perestroika* period, it has lingered in Balabanov's thematic and aesthetic content from his first film in 1989 to his last in 2008. His is a peculiar case, because the *chernukha* movement was born out of social necessity and, thus, was specific to a time and place in Russian society. Yet, Balabanov continues this trend in the present, where Russia has overcome its turbulent transition and has stabilized as a nation. Balabanov's films, however, go against this idea, continuing to indulge in the blackness and bleakness of the *chernukha* aesthetic, but not entirely. What I am referring to here is Balabanov's take on the narrative construction of the hero. Although the director does expose the myth of the Soviet hero as one who participates in the historical process of nation building, he also rejects *chernukha's* model of the hero, one that “perceives man as a victim of circumstance and is therefore essentially non-

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. 41.

heroic.”⁸² Instead, Balabanov moulds a “killer-hero” not bound by law, morals, or reason; a loner who has nothing to live or die for because the values of national pride long preached by Russia's Soviet leadership are no longer present.⁸³ In short, as a hero, our protagonist Danila Bagrov is skilful and courageous in defending the poor and weak, exemplified by his generosity towards the old German, who he not only defends from market thugs, but also buys food for. Likewise, he defends his girlfriend Svetlana from her abusive husband by shooting him, although not fatally. In this sense, Danila's actions are justified in a vigilante kind of way, but we must remember that he is still a killer with a loose moral centre. Birgit Beumers further suggests that Danila may possess within himself the contradictions of the Russian soul: “self-assertion and self-effacement, the right to judge and the compassion to redeem, West and East.”⁸⁴ In sum, Balabanov did create a revised contemporary Russian hero, but as my research will continue to show, not the kind that Dondurei and fellow critics may have hoped for.

I would first like to point to Danila's isolation as one unusual quality in his construction as Russia's cinematic hero. This isolation is attributed to Danila's temporary displacement in Russia, specifically, his military service in Chechnya. While Chechnya is still considered part of Russian territory, it has been figuratively isolated from Russia by the media. Arguably, Danila's isolation can be tied to numerous studies that have been conducted on the issues of displacement and migration in former Soviet republics, as exemplified by Hilary Pilkington's study “Migration, Displacement and Identity in Post-

⁸² Beumers, Birgit. “To Moscow! To Moscow? The Russian Hero and the Loss of the Centre.” in *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers. London; New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999. 83.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Soviet Russia.” She suggests that there is “a striking absence in the media debate about Russian-speaking forced migrants returning to Russia is the culture shock they experience upon return.”⁸⁵ Pilkington further encourages us to examine “the culture shock experienced upon return to Russia and the importance of memory of the former place of residence in fuelling a common collective identity among the self-professed ‘other Russians’.”⁸⁶ Although Pilkington's research is exclusive to Russian migrants, I would like to propose that these feelings of displacement are equally applicable to the film's hero Danila who, while he may not have literally migrated elsewhere, has done so figuratively by his service in the military. Notably, post-Soviet Russian military service has had the same effect on the country's youth as the isolation and displacement had on the migrants. Because the subject has been deemed taboo by both the government and the population, there has been a profound lack of discourse about the mental and emotional ramifications of military service in contemporary Russia. This same lack of acknowledgement is evident in the film, for upon his return to his mother's house, Danila claims that his military duties merely involved working in an office and he never saw any real action on the battlefield. This is an apparent lie, because the spectator is quickly exposed to Danila's exceptional knowledge of firearms and his sniper-like skills as a gunman. A likelier scenario, then, is that Danila did serve in a war-torn region, presumably Chechnya, and is now so “hardened to the realities of life by his experience of war” that his whole personal history and even his personality become “like a blank

⁸⁵ Pilkington, Hilary. “Migration, Displacement, and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia.” London; New York: Routledge, 1998. 163.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

page, on to which any story could be written.”⁸⁷ This kind of ambiguity also serves to characterize Danila as someone who may be unformed as a person, but has vast experience. In other words, he may be a killer, but one with an innocent, almost nerdy, face. This brings me to a short discussion of Danila's physique and Balabanov's implications in choosing Sergei Bodrov Jr. to play Danila's character.

Firstly, Bodrov was only twenty six years old when he shot *Brat*, but his character is seemingly even younger in the film. Hashamova notes that Danila's appearance is “youthful without well-defined manly characteristics,” but does not “show any evident muscularity [or] masculine performativity.”⁸⁸ I find this to be crucial, because Balabanov has clearly modelled *Brat* following the structure of American action films, especially hits from the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Yet, Danila, and even his mobster brother Viktor, exhibit none of the bodybuilding muscular physical qualities that we so often associate with Hollywood action-hero stars. This comes as a surprise, since Russia has long felt Hollywood's presence at the box office that has, without doubt, shaped the tastes of Russian moviegoers; yet, as Bodrov's popularity with the audience suggests, Russians may value masculine spiritual and moral qualities over Hollywood's flaunted physical strength.⁸⁹ In essence, the phallic power so often evoked by Hollywood's aesthetic of male bodies and poses “that mimic hard lines and angular shapes” does not apply to the Russian taste due to Russia's differing hierarchy of values from their Western counterparts.⁹⁰ Although this statement does not ring true for Russia's

⁸⁷ Birgit Beumers. 84.

⁸⁸ Yana Hashamova. 46.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

controversial standards of female beauty (which also happens to be heavily influenced by the West) it is, in fact, true for males as illustrated by the actors working in the Russian film industry. The 'values' thought to distinguish Russian male actors from the rest are simply grounded in a long standing cultural tradition that has put very little emphasis on physical appearance in favour of natural charisma and skilful performance. This kind of talent is best exemplified by national treasures such as Vladimir Vysotsky, Yuri Nikulin, Andrei Mironov, and their more contemporary counterparts Gosha Kutsenko, Konstantin Khabensky, and, of course, Sergei Bodrov Jr. (Figures 1.1-1.6)

In spite of these physical shortcomings, however, one thing remains clear: *Brat* is a film that prioritizes Russia's national politics, especially because they are based on the idea of heterosexual male superiority not only over women, but also the ethnic Other. Both, *Brat* and *Brat 2* “establish a cinematic structure based on consistent hostility and aggression toward the other and on the marginalization of women.”⁹¹ Danila openly discusses his disdain for Jews with the German he befriended at the market, proclaiming that he is “not wild” about them, but deeming Germans to be “okay.” Likewise, he confronts two men from the Caucasus on the trolley when they refuse to pay their fare. When the men try to reason with him, calling him their brother, he refuses such comparison, dubs them “black-assed scum,” and pulls a gun on them. Hashamova argues that this sequence further “constructs Danila as a superior specimen,”⁹² for while he stands confidently with a gun pointed at their faces, they cower below him, practically on their knees. Finally, Danila has yet another confrontation with a young man at a party

⁹¹ Ibid. 47.

⁹² Ibid.

telling him, “your American music is shit... yeah, and you yourselves... soon your entire America is going to bite it, we're going to wipe the smiles off all your fucking faces, got it?” Yet, when a woman informs him that the person he is arguing with is actually French and not American he exclaims, “What’s the difference?” In short, anyone who is not ethnically Russian is automatically deemed inferior, regardless of their Russian citizenship.

Danila's (and the nation's) masculinity is further defined by his romantic conquests. Although his lovers in *Brat* are fairly marginal women, (Kat is a jobless drug addict and Sveta is a battered wife) they fall for him effortlessly. In *Brat 2*, Balabanov raises the stakes, making Danila a love interest of a famous Russian pop star Irina Saltykova (playing herself) and even a black Chicago reporter Lisa Jeffry (also playing herself). The latter encounter is even more significant, for this sexual conquest is interracial, objectifying and feminizing African Americans as a whole. Hashamova speculates that because of this encounter, “Danila's masculinity assumes national proportions and consolidates national identity desires.”⁹³ Moreover, Balabanov's *Brat* films operate with a strategy that allows him to construct masculinity “that detracts attention from undesirable characteristics;” specifically, because the characters'

Russianness, commitment to the cause of justice, membership in larger fraternal communities, and protective attitudes toward women are all perceived as positive traits of the masculine and national ideal, [leaving their] dominance over women, their xenophobia [and] their violent behaviour unquestioned.⁹⁴

I think it is precisely this strategy that allowed Balabanov's *Brat* films to have such

⁹³ Ibid. 48.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

monumental success. The films redefined physical and emotional violence (toward men and women alike) as something acceptable and often necessary, thereby conditioning the spectators to not only be pleased by it, but consciously or unconsciously long for it as well.

This taste for masculine authority is also key to the many ideas of brotherhood presented in the *Brat* films. As I briefly stated in the first chapter, for Balabanov, brotherhood ventures outside of the family circle, assuming national and patriotic connotations. Aside from their literal titles, the films incorporate blood brothers, war brothers, blue collar brothers, and even certain innocents are allowed to join the circle. So much so, that both films fuse together “family and national bonds as the basis for Danila's impromptu vigilante justice throughout the film[s], yet [his brother] Viktor's many betrayals of Danila's trust suggest that brotherly love – like its national equivalent, patriotism – is only a convenient fiction, not a moral absolute.”⁹⁵ This is certainly a worthy observation, because Viktor becomes an unlikely antagonist in both films. In *Brat*, Danila's mother praises Viktor, acknowledging his accomplishments as a “big man in Leningrad” (currently St. Petersburg), failing or refusing to understand that being a big man at that time could only mean directly associating with crime. She is the one who encourages Danila to visit Viktor, who is his blood and “the closest person to [him] in this world,” also noting that she will die soon and Viktor has long ago assumed the role of Danila's father in their broken family. While Danila takes his mother's statements to heart, it quickly becomes apparent that Viktor has not put much emphasis on the idea of

⁹⁵ Susan Larsen. 504.

family bonds and brotherhood, unless, of course, they serve as aids to get him out of trouble. He works as a hit man and gets a new target just as Danila arrives, but decides to persuade his younger brother to take care of it; specifically, to assassinate a rival gangster known by everyone as “the Chechen.” Susan Larsen notes that Viktor persuades Danila “by appealing to his fraternal loyalty and his patriotism, describing the Chechen as a ‘former terrorist’ who is persecuting both Viktor in particular and the ‘Russian people’ in general.”⁹⁶ Yet, the audience is well aware from the start that Viktor works for the rival bandits who are simply competing for power to terrorize and blackmail those same Russian people. In the end, Danila comes through, but is wounded in the process and becomes a target himself. Not only does Viktor set him up, but he is also responsible for Sveta's rape by the bandits as they search her apartment for Danila. The end of the film yields a powerful scene constructed similarly to the one on the trolley, except this time it is Viktor who kneels before Danila and begs for mercy with the similar plea of “don't shoot me brother... please, don't kill me.” Yet, instead of anger and intolerance that dominated the trolley scene, this one becomes tender as Danila pulls his brother off the floor and with a childish naiveté exclaims that it is over, “you're my brother, you took dad's place, I used to call you Papa, what's with you?” Larsen observes that Danila's proclamation “brings the film full circle, as it marks once again Danila's fatherlessness and the inadequacy of the surrogate fathering offered by his cowardly, murderous brother.”⁹⁷ She concludes that “the parallel phrasing and structure of these two scenes signal both the powerful appeal of calls to fraternity and the dangers inherent in

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 505.

surrendering to that appeal without examining its bases in fact.”⁹⁸ This dilemma is also at the centre of *Brat 2*, which I will discuss in a later part of this chapter.

To conclude my analysis of *Brat*, I would like to further relate the film to the social and cultural conditions of its time in Russia. While the film clearly states its unapologetic position towards the Other and its unwanted influence, it also chronicles, in an almost documentary fashion, the lives of average and below average Russians. The film showcases that corruption, which for some may seem to be the way of the rich, is something that has penetrated Russia's society to the core, from the oligarchs to the homeless. Janine R. Wedel refers to this system as one of “dirty togetherness” where “the use of informal contacts and networks perfected by Russians and other former Soviet citizens to obtain scarce goods and services and to circumvent formal procedures, is a legacy from the Communist past that helps explain present day practices, relationships, and institutional development.”⁹⁹ This legacy flourished full force in the 1990s, where new found freedom was embraced at the expense of people's morals. The majority openly engaged in this “dirty togetherness” and “developed ethical systems in which legality was seen to diverge from morality, [because] people's experiences of law and morality did not stem from fixed or state articulated notions of justice and its universal application.”¹⁰⁰ *Brat* illustrates these issues quite well, as we witness these practices with Viktor and his gang who, in reality, are nothing more than petty crooks who want control of the produce market in order to gather protection money. The German and his

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Wedel, Janine R. “Flex Organizing and the Clan-State: Perspectives n Crime and Corruption in the New Russia.” in *Ruling Russia: Law, Crime, and Justice in a Changing Society*, ed. William Alex Pridemore. Lanham, [Md.] : Rowman & Littlefield, c2005. 102.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 103.

homeless friends are not immune to these shenanigans either, but we are more forgiving of them because it is their only way of survival in an already hostile city. It is precisely this “dirty togetherness” that the German hints at when he warns Danila about the dangers of St. Petersburg. As was mentioned in my introduction, the German describes the city as a dark force that swallows unsuspecting individuals and, unknown to him, Danila has been swallowed as well. He views himself as a survivor, however, because he engaged in these amoral practices for a greater good. Yet, by being unable or unwilling to resist the temptation, he has become like everyone else, where

skirting the system became a way of life with its own language, impulses of discretion, and habits of secrecy [with] people conduct[ing] unsanctioned and even illegal transactions while acknowledging them only obliquely.¹⁰¹

In sum, what becomes clear from these findings is that the aforementioned practices also aided, if were not entirely responsible for, the rising crime in post-Soviet Russia.

In terms of Balabanov's films, state and non-state crime is nothing new and is shown in its entirety. What the director also shows, however, is domestic violence towards both men and women as a result of all the dirty practices. Therefore, I feel it merits further investigation. Janet Elise Johnson reports that the extent of domestic violence in post-Soviet Russia is alarming and, even more so, the law enforcement's understanding of this violence. She contemplates that “the legal milieu, at worst, reinforces scepticism that violence against women is a “real” problem and, at best, reflects the ambivalence toward violence against women in the country.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 102.

¹⁰² Johnson, Janet Elise. “Violence against Women in Russia.” in *Ruling Russia: Law, Crime, and Justice in a Changing Society*, ed. William Alex Pridemore. Lanham, [Md.]: Rowman &

Unfortunately, this kind of scepticism often results in women being turned away when they seek legal aid after being assaulted or raped. More importantly, for battered women, this type of dismissal and negligence perpetuates an idea that they are in the wrong and will be shamed or further harassed for coming forward. It is through these series of actions that domestic battery may have been so easily integrated into post-Soviet Russian culture and became something of a norm. In *Brat*, this normalcy is presented in an eerily nonchalant fashion. Sveta is Danila's main love interest. He meets her during a shoot out with some gangsters after he jumps onto a tram that she is operating. She invites him to her apartment, explaining that her husband is not at home. They meet at her place frequently, but it is a communal apartment, so the neighbours quickly catch on to their affair and Sveta's husband is eventually informed. During one of their first meetings, Danila notices a bruise and asks if the husband is responsible, but Sveta is in no mood to discuss it. Therefore, Danila takes matters into his own hands and, on a day when Sveta is out, ambushes the husband in their apartment. Instead of complying with Danila's demands, however, the husband informs Viktor and the gangsters of Danila's affair with Sveta and they later come looking for him in her apartment. When they show up demanding information, the leader initially taunts her by joking that "when the husband is away, the wife goes to play." Likewise, he lectures her, saying that she should not have deceived her husband, because it is not "the Christian way." Yet, immediately after, he exclaims that if she likes the honey, she must tolerate the bees as well, quickly calling on his goons to beat and rape her. When Danila sees her bloody and bruised, he exacts

revenge on the goons, but not on his brother, who is indirectly responsible for the visit. Interestingly, when he goes back to get Sveta, the husband is there and they engage in a scuffle. Danila shoots him in the leg, but instead of relief and praise, Sveta hits and curses him, telling him to get out and never come back. She then drops on the floor near her husband, caressing him and whispering sweet words to him as he tries to withstand the pain. Although returning to one's abuser is not uncommon, the camera almost favours Sveta and somehow supports her decision to stay, perhaps as a good Christian would. There is nothing special about the composition of the shot or its framing, Sveta is shown in a medium close-up at eye level, but it is almost as if the camera lingers on her a few seconds too long as she orders Danila to leave. This becomes even more problematic during a montage of Danila leaving the city, as the camera briefly cuts to a close up of Sveta in the foreground crying in her apartment next to a boom box, with her husband recovering in the background out of focus. In the previous scene, Danila leaves her a CD before she throws him out and the audience is left to wonder if the song playing in the background to supplement this montage is non-diegetic or if Sveta is listening to a song from Danila's CD. The ambiguity here is almost infuriating, for the spectator is left to decide whether her cries are ones of remorse for her infidelity or regret for not running away with Danila.

Brat 2

Before exploring the American setting for *Brat 2*, I would like to discuss a scene in the film that once again parallels a segment from *Brat* and turns the tables on the character hierarchy in the film. As I mentioned earlier, in the opening scenes of *Brat*,

Danila and his mother have an exchange about “big man” Viktor in St. Petersburg and it is she who persuades him to go visit and, perhaps, make a name for himself as well. The opening scenes of *Brat 2* echo that exchange with exactly the same setting, except it is now Viktor who is at home with his mother, while Danila is on a talk-show in Moscow where he currently lives. It is he who is the “big man” now and their mother praises Danila, telling Viktor, “and you sit here drinking vodka, you pig.” The tables have turned and she calls Viktor a fool who should go visit his brother in hopes of getting a job close to Danila. Once more, she reminds Viktor that she will die soon and that he should embrace the only blood relative he has left, his brother. In a stark contrast to Danila's original baby-faced response, Viktor quietly and angrily replies “screw him,” immediately setting him up as someone who has learned nothing from his brother's kindness and is a lost cause for audience identification. In short, Danila is set up to prevail once again, while Viktor is constructed as a warning to the audience; if we refuse Danila's path for ourselves, we run the risk of being seduced by American capitalism which, in the film, is equivalent to degeneration and death.

It is here that I must deconstruct the plot of *Brat 2* in order to piece together the film's radical message, for the corruption of the Russian state and its population persists. Yet, Balabanov goes even further to vilify the West by sending hero Danila to America in order to avenge the death of his friend with whom he fought in Chechnya (notably making him a war brother) by helping the friend's brother. The brother, a talented hockey player, was recruited to the States, but has been quickly exploited by Americans and the Russian mob that has embraced the consumerist paradise of the West and re-appropriated it to suit

the workings and mechanisms of organized crime. In a bathhouse scene before his untimely death, Danila's war brother tells him that Mitya, the hockey star, played for two years in Kiev, Ukraine and was drafted from there by the NFL straight for the Chicago Black Hawks. Yet, the Kiev mob got to him there, under the idea that they raised him and fed him back home and now it was time to pay them back for their hospitality. Mitya found a local American to protect him and although he did his job for a while, the American ended up conning Mitya even better than the Ukrainian mob. Mitya was forced to give all of his money away while being paid "peanuts" himself. When Danila's war brother is asked if there is a legal way to help Mitya and expose the exploitation, he answers that Mitya signed a contract even though he did not speak English at the time, but "thought the Americans [were] honest unlike our [Russian] lot." In short, Mitya's American troubles and his brother's subsequent death in Moscow because of them set up the premise for *Brat 2*.

Before fully delving into the film, however, I would like to give some historical background to the Russian mob phenomenon in the United States. In 1993, a Russian immigration official revealed to U.S. investigators

that there were five million dangerous criminals in the former USSR who would be allowed to immigrate to the West [making it] nearly impossible for the State Department to weed out these undesirables because the former states of the Eastern bloc seldom make available the would-be émigré's criminal record.¹⁰³

Robert I. Friedman, the author of my main source for this discussion, "Red Mafiya: How the Russian Mob Has Invaded America," knows all too well about the dangers of

¹⁰³ Friedman, Robert I. "Red Mafiya: How the Russian Mob Invaded America." Boston: Little, Brown, c2000. xx.

investigating the Russian Mafia circle in the United States. After writing extensively for various newspapers and magazines about the evolving threat of Russia's mob in the West, a contract was taken out on his life by the most prominent and savage Russian crime boss, Semion Mogilevich. Reportedly, Mogilevich was angered by Friedman's article about his considerable criminal career, one that exposed Russia's "nearly impenetrable ethnic underworld" that has "ensnared everyone from titans of finance and the heads of government to entire state security services."¹⁰⁴ Yet, unlike in Russia, where the practice of silencing journalists through contract killings is now the norm, Friedman wanted to show the mob that these scare tactics will never intimidate Western media. It is with this stance, that Friedman's book chronicles the rise of the "Red Mafiya" in the States, specifically in Brighton Beach, Miami, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Moreover, his findings show the mob's direct intervention in sports, especially the National Hockey League (NHL), where a lot of stars were young players recruited from former Soviet republics. In other words, this overview will help us understand the plot's Chicago setting for *Brat 2* and why the character of the recruited and swindled Russian hockey player, the bad Russian/Ukrainian mobsters, and the apathetic American officials transcend the narrative with a sinister and uncomfortable revelation; that perhaps the events depicted in the film are closer to the truth than we may want to think.

Friedman's research confirms that although the lift of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s encouraged rapid emigration to the West, this phenomenon started much earlier in the 1970s, when the leaders of the Soviet Union allowed limited emigration of Soviet

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. xiv.

Jews to America.¹⁰⁵ Instead, “thousands of hard-core criminals, many of them released from Soviet Gulags by the KGB, took advantage of their nominal Jewish status to swarm into the United States” where they quickly re-established their criminal networks, the most prominent settling in Brighton Beach.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the Soviet officials were trying to save face by showing leniency after all the religious persecution the Jews have endured in Czarist and Stalinist Russia, but the result was catastrophic. One Russian investigator cleverly pointed out that the Iron Curtain may have served as “a shield for the West” more so than for the East, because now it is the West that faces Russia's criminals and has limited resources to combat the problem.¹⁰⁷ This idea is worth noting, because despite Soviet Russia's constant anti-American propaganda, thoroughly chronicled in my first chapter, it is precisely the Soviet Union that was “plagued by an almost institutionalized culture of thievery [...] given the gross inequities of communism, where corruption [was not] just widespread, but the business of the state [...]”¹⁰⁸ It may be useful to ask, then, what exactly crime means for Russia as a nation, given its swift cultural, political, and economic integration into society.

Although crime in Russia is a topic much too broad for my research, it is possible to peer into specific areas of crime that are directly related to *Brat 2*. As I pointed out, sports were an area not immune to the Mafia's grip and its hold on the world of athletics came years before the fall of the Soviet Union. In fact, the Soviet era yielded performers, singers, artists, and sports stars that were all too familiar with the black marketers,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. xx.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 7.

because all were considered to be members of the Soviet elite.¹⁰⁹ Even more so, according to Friedman's research, "top athletes and mobsters sought out one another's company to mutually enhance their image and prestige" by eating at the same restaurants, vacationing at the same luxury resorts, and often dating the same people.¹¹⁰ Although this was widespread in all kinds of sports, the main damage was done in Russia's most popular past-time – Hockey. Yet, regardless of whether it was a small-town league or a national team, both were equally penetrated and tainted by the mob and, unfortunately for the players, the corruption did not end at home, but followed the sport everywhere.

Friedman expertly explains this mob presence in the following passage:

When communism fell, the former Soviet Union's rich reservoir of hockey talent – the same players who had so often demonstrated their astonishing skills against the world in the Olympics – suddenly became available to the West. The NHL's U.S. and Canadian teams went on a buying binge, snapping up the country's current and future superstars, signing players like Tverdovsky to extraordinarily lucrative contracts. But the NHL teams discovered soon enough that they [were not] importing only expert skaters and stickhandlers; they were also importing the brutal extortionists and gun-toters of the Russian *Mafiya* who followed in their wake.¹¹¹

It is through these corrupt sports machinations that Balabanov's inspiration for the premise of *Brat 2* becomes clear, for Mitya's fate is none too different from those of the players shadowed by Friedman. As a matter of fact, based on data from a congressional investigation in May of 1996, "as many as half of the league's ex-Eastern bloc players have been forced to buy a *krysha*, or "roof" - the euphemism for protection."¹¹²

Tverdovsky, for example, was threatened multiple times after refusing to pay off his Russian coach once he arrived in the States. As a result, the mob kidnapped his parents

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 174.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 175.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid. 177.

in their native Ukrainian city of Donetsk and demanded a ransom, but even then Tverdovsky did not confide in his team mates or league officials, anxious that if the mob got word they would kill his mother to teach him a lesson.¹¹³ Although Tverdovsky got lucky with the Russian law enforcement, who were able to rescue his mother, Mitya's character in *Brat 2* does not share Tverdovsky's fortune. His brother back in Moscow is captured and murdered for Mitya's debts, making Danila the only one willing and capable not just of avenging his death, but also helping Mitya get out of the bind in America. In short, almost all NHL hockey players who came from ex-Soviet republics were bullied by the Russian mob, but none dared to report it to authorities because of their "inherent distrust of the police" as a result of growing up in a totalitarian state, leaving their relatives back home vulnerable and susceptible to danger.¹¹⁴ Moreover, it is precisely this kind of fear and silence, showcased by Mitya's own unwillingness to share his misfortune with anyone but his brother, which allowed the Russian mob to thrive, making it nearly impossible for American authorities to convict any of them.

With this background in mind, I want to shift focus back to Danila, Viktor, and the idea of brotherhood that keeps dominating Balabanov's sequel, especially because the meaning of brotherhood finds new depths and dimensions in *Brat 2*. Of particular interest are the new notions of brotherhood that now incorporate war brothers, crime brothers, and even an androgynous Russian prostitute who, I will argue, is welcomed into Danila's brotherhood because of her tomboy looks. First and foremost, war brotherhood sets up the premise of *Brat 2*. My description of the film's opening sequence

¹¹³ Ibid. 176.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 178.

already sets up Viktor as someone who has not absorbed the deep meaning of brotherhood even after his brush with death in the first film, allowing another character (in this case, Mitya's brother in Moscow) to provide Danila with the plot's central conflict that will result in a series of cause and effect relationships, leading to a powerful climax and resolution. Here, war brotherhood takes central stage while Danila and Viktor's blood brotherhood fades into the background. Surely, Danila holds on to his naive fantasy of Viktor as “brother” and “papa” as long as he can, but when Viktor succumbs to America's capitalist lifestyle and desires even Danila is forced to turn his back on him and walk away. In this sense, Balabanov portrays capitalism as an infectious disease that even a hero like Danila cannot cure or forgive. In sum, Viktor has always been presented to us as weak Russian patriot and his embrace of capitalism solidifies his fate for the Russian audiences as the only possible outcome for tempted defectors.

Following the brotherhood trajectory, the second kind to dominate *Brat 2* is one of crime, known in Russian as the *vor* (or thief) brotherhood. Friedman briefly explains its social construction, suggesting that the *vors* “grew in strength to the point that they began to play an unusual role in the nation's history [as early as 1910s and 20s when they] taught Lenin's gangs to rob banks to fund the communist revolution.”¹¹⁵ Fast forward to post-Soviet contemporary Russia in the 1990s, and the *vors* excelled by gaining a ruling council that was aptly called *Bratski Krug* or the Circle of Brothers who, among other duties, were also in charge of sending prolific Russian gangsters to “invade America.”¹¹⁶ Although *Bratski Krug* is not directly referenced in Balabanov's film, it becomes obvious

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 10.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 117.

that Danila's enemies in America are not petty street thugs, but belong to a much more powerful, almost omnipresent group that can reach its targets anytime and anywhere. Regardless, the film allows Danila to triumph over both, the Russian and American criminals, if only to further reinforce its idealistic stance on Russian honour and patriotism. This idea is solidified in a sequence at the end of the film, when Danila finally pays his American nemesis a visit in order to get Mitya's money. They sit in the high-rise apartment at a dining room table drinking Russian vodka (the American is so terrified that he spills most of it on his shirt) when Danila asks, "American, what's your power? Is it really money? My brother says it's money. You've got lots of money, so what? Truth is a real power. Whoever is right is strong." He proceeds to say that if you steal money from someone, you are not stronger, because you are not in the right. Yet, the person you stole from is in the right, making him the strongest. He demands the money and the next shot shows a medium close up of a duffle bag with cash that Danila graciously passes on to Mitya. The message of the film is made clear, the Russian will always be morally superior and in the right, choosing truth over money, while the American will continue to succumb to the monetary evils of capitalism, weakening his moral core.

Interestingly, there is one American in the film that is embraced by Danila when his car breaks down at he has to hitchhike to Chicago. He is picked up by Ben Johnson, a truck driver who is simple and genuinely naive. He is the answer to everyone's "common man," dressed in cheap jeans and flannel shirt. His simplicity, both external and internal, is what attracts Danila and they find common ground in Ben's blue collar lifestyle. The

next scene shows Ben and Danila at a truck stop with other drivers as they watch him eat an oversized hamburger. Interestingly, these are the moments that Danila is most happy and Balabanov takes extra time to show the audience a montage of Danila and Ben's adventures on the way to Chicago. In this sense, the film makes clear that the only possible non-hostile interaction Danila, and the Russians in general, can have with Americas is if those individuals resemble the ideal proletariat. Therefore, Ben and his buddies are perfect contenders.

To wrap up the brotherhood themes of *Brat 2*, I would like to give honourable mention to a Russian prostitute Dasha, who Danila encounters in Chicago. As Ben drops him off he asks him if Danila is interested in a girl, but when a bald, punk dressed prostitute offers her services, Danila vehemently declines. Yet, when he hears her swear in Russian, he goes after her and gives her some money without asking for anything in return. Aside from helping Mitya, Danila decides to rescue Dasha as well and take her back to Moscow. I would argue, however, that even though she is Russian, this is not what allows her to get close to Danila. In *Brat*, Danila tried to save Sveta, but did not involve her in his business. Dasha, however, is a fairly androgynous figure, with her military boots, baggy army pants, jacket, and her shaved head. Because she is presented more as a masculine figure, she is allowed to join Danila's brotherhood. She is enlisted as his helper and partner in crime, making her even more important to Danila than his own lost brother Viktor.

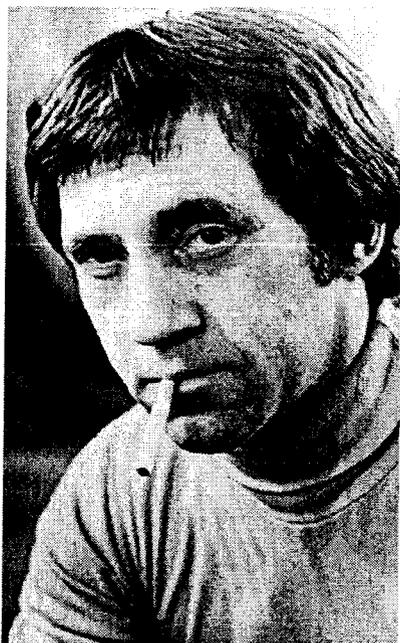
Of even greater curiosity, however, is Dasha's journey to America. She briefly mentions to Danila that she was not even twenty years old when she came there, which

was right after the fall of communism, summarizing that period of her life as “university, perestroika, America, Coca-Cola.” She got divorced as quickly as she got married and went on to work as a high paid escort in New York, followed yet another American man to Chicago where he left her and then she got involved with drugs, which were introduced to her by her African-American pimp. This kind of history of a young Russian woman in America does not bode well for the image of the Western male and the post-Soviet phenomenon of “internet brides” cannot be overlooked here. Although Balabanov makes Dasha's confession brief, he is clearly hinting at the idea that America or, more precisely, American males, having greatly benefited from the booming online marriage agencies that quickly capitalized on the myths and notions of a traditional post-Soviet woman. However, Dasha is in no way a success story, but a woman who has been passed down from one man to another, presumably hoping for a better future than the one post-Soviet Russia provided. Not only that, but most of the eight years she spent in America are marked by sex and money; her only value there is her body, suggesting that if she were at home in Russia, no matter the social or economic circumstance, she would be treated differently. This is, undoubtedly, an outright lie, but Balabanov implies ever so delicately to his Russian audience that the motherland is, was, and always will be a safe haven for its true (ethnic) patriots.

On this note, I would like to conclude my discussion of the *Brat* films for the time being in order to consider how select television crime series of the 90s mirror and even borrow from Balabanov's problematic national ideologies exposed in *Brat* and *Brat 2*. In my final chapter, following the television series examination, I will be able to draw more

concrete and clear conclusions about the influence of these films and TV shows on the Russian population with respect to forging a new (or resurrecting an old) ultra-nationalistic, xenophobic identity. It is there, that I will return to review the films once more, this time shifting focus to Balabanov's marketing of *Brat* and *Brat 2* as well as the state of television and how they work together to ignite this post-Soviet identity.

Figures



1.1 Vladimir Visotsky



1.2 Yuri Nikulin



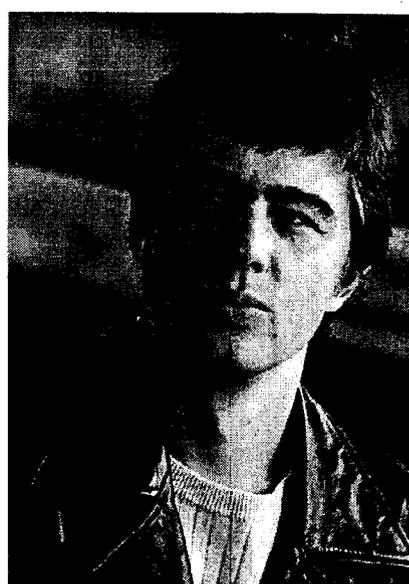
1.3 Andrei Mironov



1.4 Gosha Kutsenko



1.5 Konstantin Khabensky



1.6 Sergei Bodrov Jr.

CHAPTER THREE:

PAWNS DIE FIRST – CRIME TV AS A NATIONAL MIRROR

To discuss Russian television today is to tackle a subject of massive proportions. Most fundamentally, one must take into account the role of Soviet era of broadcasting in shaping the subsequent evolution and progression in Russia towards what the West currently understands to be free media. Although I would argue that the basic concepts and principles of free media are ill suited for describing the media system in either Soviet or post-Soviet societies, the concept is still valuable for tracing significant changes in broadcasting during Russia's transitional period. The overview in the following pages will set the framework for my discussion of select television crime series to be found later in the chapter.

Soviet media, to be sure, were always owned and controlled by the state; but Elena Prokhorova's description of Soviet television as the state's "most faithful mirror"¹¹⁷ I respectfully disagree with. Television in the USSR may have very well been a projection of what the state ideally aimed for, but it came nowhere near achieving the goal of reflecting social reality. In many ways, Soviet programming was a case of life imitating art instead of art imitating life, a phenomenon, as Dmitry Shlapentokh suggests, that is prevalent in a totalitarian society.¹¹⁸ What this means is that the Soviet people often turned to television and cinema for guidance in tackling everyday life. Shlapentokh writes that,

¹¹⁷ Elena Prokhorova. 512.

¹¹⁸ Dmitry Shlapentokh & Vladimir Shlapentokh. 22.

The ease with which ordinary people accepted essentially false images of reality was possible because the masses, under the pressure of omnipresent propaganda and out of an Orwellian fear of punishment, believed (against their personal experience) in the veracity of what they saw on the screen. Of course, their trust was made easier because so [much programming was] devoted to the past or to foreign countries, both of which existed outside of their experience.¹¹⁹

This kind of prominent identification was also possible because personal identities were not self defined but were shaped entirely by the state. Both cinema and television programming became vehicles for constructing images of socio-cultural and behavioural norms to be consumed and mimicked by Soviet spectators, who faithfully turned to these images for answers on how to survive in a period of constant uncertainty. In other words, real poverty, hunger, oppression, fear, and lack of freedom began to look miniscule as television and cinema depicted characters that were happy and satisfied with their countryside or blue collar urban living. The presumable naiveté with which most of the population approached this propaganda is baffling at best. I would be careful, however, in generalizing the attitude of all Soviet spectators. Naturally, there were those who were (and still are) loyal to the communist state and bought into the programming. There were others, however, who viewed the programming critically in the privacy of their own home, but had to act otherwise in social or workplace situations as they were always monitored. It is also entirely possible that in such an oppressed society escapism was not only favoured but necessary to sustain the Soviet state by permitting its citizens to escape the harsh realities of their everyday lives.¹²⁰ While programs about foreign cultures and national history dominated, comedy was by far the most popular genre for

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

TV films and shows, and understandably so, considering the social conditions of the time. Shlapentokh even draws parallels with the Hollywood comedies of the 1930s, which were very popular during America's Great Depression.¹²¹ I consider these to be valid observations, but would advise my readers to use caution in interpreting this type of Soviet programming as positive and necessary. Nor do I think that it should be likened to America's "escapist" programming during the Depression, because the Soviet Union's media practices bear little comparison with the more flexible media standards in America. More importantly, the argument becomes circular, i.e., TV viewers prefer escapist television because it helps them escape confronting the truth about their lives. In truth, the Soviet Union's blatant distortion of reality was a product of the psychological terror inflicted by state officials upon directors, producers, actors, and just about everyone else involved in film and television. This is also a more compelling argument, as it attributes the peculiarities of Soviet programming to production rather than to the alleged naivety of the viewers. Surely, there were handfuls of individuals who sincerely supported the state and, therefore, embraced these deceptive media practices, but most of the industry was paralysed with fear and saw state ideology as a force not to be questioned but obeyed regardless of individual preference.¹²² In addition, any funding for new television

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² When I talk about mass fear and paralysis of the media, I am most certainly referring to Soviet television. It is no secret that there were always filmmakers who, either openly or through innuendo, have questioned or criticized official ideology. Yet, while they were able to complete their productions, they were not allowed to distribute their work publicly, unless they went outside of the state or were already in exile. Those who came out of hiding and got onto the state's radar were often threatened, beaten, or jailed for long periods of time. The most famous and heartbreaking example of these consequences would be famed Soviet filmmaker Sergei Parajanov, who was a master of his craft in the 1960s, but refused to conform to or reflect state ideology. Although he was able to make a couple of groundbreaking films, the authorities were quickly fed up with his anti-socialist antics and arrested him on, what many claim to be, entirely fabricated

programs came from the state, with a member of the party always overseeing all productions to make sure they were suitable to be aired on any national network.

In my first chapter, I detailed the Soviet Union's enemy discourses and how the binaries of friend and foe aided in fabricating a new national identity, supplemented by twisted ideas of nationhood. Needless to say, this obsessive preoccupation with the West, and America in particular, was as strong on television as it was in the state's film propaganda. Even for non-fiction broadcasting, Scholars Philo C. Wasburn and Barbara Ruth Burke confirm Soviet media news coverage to have been a display of material that was "an ideological product, not a set of facts," concluding that this "spectacle of politics [was] a fetish, a creation that then dominate[d] the thought and action of its creators."¹²³ As with film, Soviet networks defined their stance by way of pitting the Soviet lifestyle against and contrasting it with American culture. Wasburn and Burke note that,

[Soviet] media devoted considerable attention to the symbolic construction of the United States as a nation in which there was widespread racial conflict, unemployment, homelessness, social and economic inequality, and social injustice. In international affairs, the United States was depicted as the world's leading imperialist power, driven by military-industrial interests. Russian media also constructed a contrasting image of their homeland. While far from being a worker's paradise, Russia was depicted as comparatively free from the social ills that beset America. The nation also was portrayed as the world's leading opponent of capitalist imperialism.¹²⁴

This is hardly a new phenomenon, nor is it exclusive to Soviet media practices, but it is significant in its importance of what these scholars call "the conflict perspective," a media tactic that pits rival national ideologies against each other. More importantly,

charges. He spent most of the 1970s in jail and the USSR's horrific labour camps, until a vital letter from his friend Luis Aragon and numerous petitions from European actors and directors finally secured his release.

¹²³

Philo C. Wasburn and Barbara Ruth Burke. 669.

¹²⁴

Ibid. 669-670.

when most viewers tend to retain little information from their daily news, this tactic serves “to retain the generalized conceptions of the order of things embedded in the categories through which the news events are presented.”¹²⁵ Prokhorova adds that the

[dead] airtime between broadcasts and the virtual absence of advertising preserved individual programs as discrete texts, while the practice of “cueing” programs to coincide with anniversaries of significant sociopolitical events ensured that ideological [domination] anchored the program’s meaning.¹²⁶

To put it another way, the manner in which news and virtually all fictional and non-fictional programs were constructed in Soviet Russia conditioned the public’s view of Western nations for a long time, if not indefinitely, while the main content of the programs may have been quickly forgotten.

The fall of the USSR encouraged the Yeltsin administration to launch the privatization of numerous enterprises, including television networks, in order to generate a press freedom never before witnessed in Russia’s Soviet history. Yeltsin made sure this new found freedom included “provisions against monopoly ownership,” requiring that the networks undergo “radical reorganization with the end in view of becoming politically [independent organizations] like other world press agencies.”¹²⁷ Notably, Yeltsin’s successor Vladimir Putin would put an end to this progress in the new millennium by shutting down (or buying out) networks that posed a critical and unfavourable view of his administration. I would argue, however, that this regression into toxic media oppression began years earlier, somewhere in the mid 90s, when post-Soviet Russia was confronted with a dilemma: the state, it was believed, had either to cut

¹²⁵ Ibid. 670.

¹²⁶ Elena Prokhorova. 512.

¹²⁷ Philo C. Wasburn and Barbara Ruth Burke. 673.

ties with its manipulative media practices once and for all or to re-examine the old methods once more, even at the risk of re-appropriating them.

According to Prokhorova, the fall of the Soviet Union “involved two interconnected processes that affected television more profoundly than other media: commercialization and visualization.”¹²⁸ The former relates to the already mentioned privatization of TV networks, while visualization refers to the journey towards establishing advertisements as a valuable and stable form of revenue. It was not long before Russian television (and culture, for that matter) began prioritizing “the commercial packaging of product” whether it was informational, entertaining, or political, making it appealing to viewers of both high and low brow tastes.¹²⁹ Post-Soviet television began to offer Russians an array of programming where there was something available for everyone's taste, while also bringing forth new material that had been censored or banned during Soviet rule. The popular response to this new availability and lack of censorship, however, was not without criticism. Prokhorova adequately summarizes Russia to be a “book loving and (high) culture-venerating society” that was now undergoing an identity shift “represented by colourful pulp fiction on the bookstands and serialized productions on the television screen.”¹³⁰ To put it mildly, the age of reading Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, it was feared, was over.

In the wake of these changes, television became, for the first time in Russian history, a focus of critical discussion among Russia's leading film and cultural critics.

¹²⁸ Elena Prokhorova. 512.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 512-513.

Many drew attention to its questionable content of “gratuitous violence, privileging of light genres, imitation of western models, and lack of professionalism.”¹³¹ In no way were the critics suddenly nostalgic for the equally flawed television practices of the past. Instead, the debate raged on about whether or not the new programming went too far in watering down its intellectual content and whether these programs properly reflected Russia's new post-Soviet identity. The cheaply produced TV serials and novels that had become suddenly prevalent adequately expressed a new cultural identity forming in Russian society.

The new police and detective series, which comprised the majority of programming in the 1990s, provide some of the most accurate portrayals of the social and cultural changes that went on in post-Soviet Russia. Although these crime serials have been explained by Russia's paradoxical desire to imitate Hollywood, they nonetheless have a firm base in the Soviet mini-series of the 1970s. A key example of the latter is the police show by the name of *Mesto Vstrechi Izmenit' Nel'zia* (*The Meeting Place cannot be Changed*, 1979). Starring the iconic Vladimir Visotsky as the lone-wolf detective hero, the series, set in Stalin's post-war years, successfully combined “official Soviet mythology with Brezhnev-era populism [and] a lurking nostalgia for Stalinist 'order'.”¹³² The show established a massive following and made Vysotsky a household name, but, more importantly, it began to educate the public about what at the time could be understood as the right and wrong moral principles. For example, the show's motto “a thief belongs in jail” amounted to a direct proclamation of the official notion of “a

¹³¹ Ibid. 513.

¹³² Ibid. 515.

communal, moral, and emotional, rather than a legal, foundation for Russian justice.”¹³³

It would seem, then, that the crime serial's Soviet lineage was equally responsible for the success of its more contemporary counterparts, although traces of Hollywood action films and TV shows are equally evident. In addition, the success of crime dramas in post-Soviet Russia over other genres clearly signalled that it was the crime genre and not comedy or the soap opera (popular for their projection of normality), which reflected the values and social atmosphere of the nation.¹³⁴ What it means, perhaps, is that this normality was non-existent within the Russian society itself; instead, Russian society was conceived as a dystopia that had to be continually redefined through these crime series.¹³⁵

The surge in popularity of these crime shows can be attributed to the fact that post-Soviet Russia has experienced a massive spike in crime and, naturally, TV shows were there to showcase and mirror that spike. Prokhorova, however, deems this explanation to be too simplistic. Instead, she suggests that Russian producers were not experienced enough in producing humorous or dramatic soap sitcoms (after all, criminal and historical series were the only ones available in Soviet times) and the struggling Russian people were also

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ As a side note, I would like to add that the second most popular programming on Russian TV was a stream of Latin American soap operas, usually working class melodramas, shown daily and on multiple channels. Perhaps their unparalleled popularity can be attributed to their much lighter content than that of their criminal counterparts, which offered little but a bleak, negative perspective on the changing society and provided no spiritual guidance or emotional satisfaction. The most popular Latin soap operas were *The Rich Also Cry* (Mexico, 1977) and *Simple Maria* (Mexico, 1989). Both aired on Russian TV in the early 90s and although the networks were initially sceptical about the shows' potential, the massive written and oral positive response from viewers quickly solidified the shows as profitable favourites. Interestingly, the 90s also saw American soap imports such as *Dynasty* (USA, 1981-1989) and *Santa Barbara* (USA, 1984-1993), which became equally popular and were loved by the Russian audiences. There is a clear lag in the broadcasting of these shows, since most were new to Russia after they have already peaked (and even went off air) domestically. This was always a common practice in Russia and exists even today, where older German, French, and Italian series from 80s and 90s are just now gaining new viewer-ship in the former Soviet bloc.

¹³⁵ Elena Prokhorova. 518.

not prepared to see their own 'rich' crying.¹³⁶

In my introductory chapter, I briefly acknowledged St. Petersburg not only as the setting for the series *Ulitsy Razbitykh Fonarei* and *Banditskii Peterburg* (*Kamenskaya* is set in Moscow), but also as the crime capital of post-Soviet Russia in the 90s. Coincidentally, Balabanov's first *Brat* film is also set in St. Petersburg, which likewise depicts the city as a dark hole that swallows the innocents who come there looking for a better future. To be sure, Moscow saw its fair share of murderers and thieves, as *Kamenskaya* will later illustrate, but St. Petersburg went from Russia's most prolific literary, intellectual, and cultural city to one overrun with crime, and I think this phenomenon merits a closer look. Jennifer Tishler's worthy article on the subject rationalizes the cultural mythology of St. Petersburg and proposes a few motives behind it. She traces the fascination with the city all the way to the 1700s (it was founded in 1703) and points out that there has not been a Russian thinker, philosopher, artist, writer, or historian who, in one way or another, did not contemplate the city's significance, especially the notion that St. Petersburg may possess "a singular identity, both part of and apart from Russia."¹³⁷ Tishler notes that the fall of the USSR resulted in escalating crime all over Russia, but several high profile murders and widespread allegations of local government corruption helped establish St. Petersburg as the capital of crime. In the meantime, disillusioned and scared Russians could focus their "widespread fears of disorder and chaos onto a particular locale."¹³⁸ In sum, St. Petersburg was quickly

¹³⁶ Ibid. 517.

¹³⁷ Jennifer Ryan Tishler. 127.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 129.

associated with gang wars (as we will later see in *Banditskii Peterburg*), street pickpockets, a high rate of unsolved crimes, and mass institutional corruption, which the local police forces were ill-suited to tackle because they too were not immune to extortion and bribes.

Furthermore, while it was obvious that the city had a crime problem, its reputation as the crime capital originates from more fixed cultural forces where St. Petersburg “has always demonstrated both Russia's ideals and its disappointments when those ideals [were] not realized.”¹³⁹ Because the city always stood for “an idea, an ethos, and ideal” in Russian culture, its new identity as a capital of crime became yet another emblem, this time of “the exasperation and insecurity experienced by Russians both inside and outside Petersburg in the ongoing period of economic and political transformation.”¹⁴⁰ The insecurity came from sheer confusion about the legality of certain practices like privatization, though not illegal in theory, privatization in practice - the way it was structured and executed (mostly due to poorly set up reforms) - challenged the basic notions of honesty and propriety.

The changing but consistent myth of St. Petersburg became a very telling and meaningful backdrop for both the *Ulitsy* and *Banditskii* series, in the same manner that Balabanov presented the city in *Brat* almost as a separate character. *Ulitsy* operates as a police procedural and is set on a smaller local scale than its aforementioned counterparts. That is, where *Kamenskaya* often revolves around an analytical investigation of Moscow's corruption and organized crime, *Ulitsy* focuses on St. Petersburg's infamous

¹³⁹ Ibid. 128.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

street crime.¹⁴¹ Tishler describes it as such:

Although [*Ulitsy*] is a television series about the work of *militsonery* (police officers) in St. Petersburg, it does more than merely depict Petersburg as Russia's crime capital. The series explores several avenues of the myth of Petersburg, including its celebrated architecture, its unreal and phantasmagoric quality, and its status as the cradle of Russian literature. Although the television cops seem awash in crime week after week, references to the enduring Petersburg myth send the implicit message that the city, which has endured floods, revolutions, blockades, and benign neglect, will also survive this infiltration by criminals.¹⁴²

Ulitsy has been critically acclaimed and has quickly gained a loyal and substantial viewership. Nevertheless, there were detractors, like critic and filmmaker Aleksandr Rogozhkin, who claimed that the show lacked continuity both in its style and character construction, defects attributed to Russia's lack of experience with creating “long” series.¹⁴³ Interestingly, Rogozhkin was one of the many guest directors for the show. Even he, however, acknowledged that the series, at the very least, “expressed some simple 'Russian' notions of fairness and justice.”¹⁴⁴ Perhaps Rogozhkin's criticisms come from the show's unusual narrative construction, for it privileges multiple investigations and numerous 'main' characters that rotate from episode to episode, creating fluidity in their relationships instead of having fixed partnerships often seen in American detective dramas. Because of these inconsistencies, the show may appear to have convoluted plot lines and disparities in character behaviour. Regardless, it depicts police work in a very realistic manner, openly showcasing “the dilapidated buildings and appalling work conditions in a society where old structures have collapsed.”¹⁴⁵ The station, the inside of

¹⁴¹ Elena Prokhorova. 520.

¹⁴² Jennifer Ryan Tishler. 129.

¹⁴³ David MacFadyen. 194.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Beumers, Birgit. “The Serialization of Culture, or the Culture of Serialization.” in *The post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, eds. Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings, and Natalia

which is seen in nearly every episode, becomes a point of reference and draws attention to its shabby interior. The audience grew accustomed to the setting's minimal space, old equipment, and drab decor. In this sense, the series exposed the degree to which state officials, in this case a police force, were in the same economic crisis as the rest of the population. To illustrate, one of the earlier episodes from the show's first season sets up an exchange between a couple of police detectives, Captain Larin and Kazantsev "Casanova," and some crooks. Kazantsev is in his office, on the phone with one of the bandits. They decide on a meeting place, which is yet another abandoned apartment building under construction. Larin and Kazantsev arrive in an old "Ziguli" car, a brand synonymous with the Soviet Union. Of course, the exchange goes wrong because one of their own has set up the detectives, who still come out victorious anyway. Scenes like this can be observed in one form or another in many episodes, but it is not their narrative content that interests me as much as their surroundings. More precisely, the surroundings often feature alleyways, rundown neighbourhoods, and old buildings that seem to be under permanent construction. The latter are usually contrasted with more modern buildings that were built with lightning speed while the work on older structures was halted or abandoned altogether. To illustrate, another episode much later in the series shows an assassination for hire in the "Kupchino" district of St. Petersburg, whose history dates back to the 1700s when it was just a small village. In the 90s, it underwent changes from being a blue collar housing district to one of more modern entertainment, with newly built shopping centres and fancier apartment buildings for the upper middle

class. However, the Soviet presence is still visible, as the old *khrushchevka*¹⁴⁶ buildings dominate the landscape. The opening shot of the assassination sequence is filmed atop a high-rise in a long take as the camera pans across the cityscape. We are made aware of the run-down grey *khrushchevkas* that stand right next to newly erected red brick high-rises; the absolute lack of harmony between them is glaring. At street level, there are Volvos and a Mercedes, which probably belong to someone from the red brick high-rise, but the policemen arrive at the scene in a “Ziguli.” Prokhorova draws on critical reviews to point out that there is a feeling that the series is shot from the point of view of a garbage can, for the show mostly depicts “dirty courtyards instead of central streets or monuments, placing all five police members in one cluttered room” and “whenever the Neva River appears [...] there is a three-day-old corpse floating in it.”¹⁴⁷ Similarly, when the city's landmarks do appear, the criminals look entirely out of place next to them, for they do not belong in a city that has historically prided itself on being culturally and intellectually superior. Tishler suggests that this is because these uncultured thugs and petty thieves “have less claim to this city” than everyone else even though they are technically residents.¹⁴⁸ Notably, the show makes no overtly explicit references to the old cars the cops drive (while new Russians are stocking up on the latest Mercedes models), the bad housing, or their deteriorating workspace, but it definitely creates a kind of gnawing atmosphere where the audience senses a hopelessness in the characters' day-to-

¹⁴⁶ *Khrushchevka* apartment buildings were built during Nikita Khrushchev's time in office from 1953 to 1964. They were very compact five story blocks of flats with minimal space, but Khrushchev claimed that it was the ideal amount of space for an individual. What he failed to acknowledge, however, is that most of these apartments housed families with multiple generations, not just a single individual.

¹⁴⁷ Elena Prokhorova. 521.

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer Ryan Tishler. 132.

day routines. Curiously, the very first episode introduces the characters not by following their procedure of solving a crime, but by showing how they deal with a busted sewer pipe at the precinct. This, of course, becomes a funny event, but one of very dark humour as it still works to establish the shoddiness of their workspace. In addition, even though “in its verbal rhetoric the show may express a yearning for stability, order, and the rule of law, [...its...] characters repeatedly refer to contemporary Russian life, the city, and their job as a “nuthouse” [or *durdom*, in Russian].”¹⁴⁹ That is to say, the characters are, for the most part, burned out.

This kind of narrative chaos may be yet another reason for why the series often seems disjointed and its plots loose and episodic. According to Prokhorova, however, this chaos is intentional because “the very messiness of Russian life and the extremes of the Russian national character are presented as values in and of themselves and are linked to cultural myths, and they feed into an idea of national uniqueness that constantly 'spills over' genre conventions.”¹⁵⁰ That is, the characters' surroundings and behaviour serve to provide a cultural context familiar to the audience, in which the policemen can make jokes about other law enforcement officials, bond over vodka, be cynical regarding their work, and even have a “bribes” jar in the office for occasions when criminals are brought in for questioning.¹⁵¹ In a memorable instance, one of the officers arrests a criminal, but permits him to have sex with his girlfriend at the station before going to his jail cell. In another case of morbid humour, “an old woman is mistaken for a corpse because she is

¹⁴⁹ Elena Prokhorova. 520.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

sleeping in a decaying apartment covered with mould.¹⁵² These instances are not only humorous, but serve to showcase the policemen's strengths, weaknesses, fears, and beliefs – making them more human and down-to-earth for their audience. In the show's very first episode, Russia's FSB service (former KGB) is actually monitoring the local police department by having planted a microphone there. Naturally, this suggests a hierarchy of government forces, leaving the audience to speculate that even the local police are being victimized by someone in a higher position. This suggestion makes these characters even more likeable because they are the “every-man” and do not belong to the “distant, omniscient, and historically brutal power structure.”¹⁵³ In this way, the series' policemen are shown as a new unorthodox breed of heroes, ones that are sceptical about their own authority and integrity, but ones that will never question the value of friendship or protection of the poor, helpless, and abused.

Banditskii Peterburg, however, operates on a different premise altogether. Since its debut in the year 2000, the show which comprises ten installments, has been described as a gang saga that “privileges fate, emotion, and visual excess.”¹⁵⁴ “[C]onceived as an epic à la *Godfather*,” the narrative concentrates on a mafia empire run by notorious elderly crime kingpin Victor Pavlovich Govorov, nicknamed “Antibiotic.”¹⁵⁵ Although filmed in 2000, the first installment is set in 1992 in St. Petersburg. The plot begins with a *vor v zakone* being robbed by one of his men. *Vor v zakone* translates into English as a thief within the law, meaning it is a person or a group of people who are part of Russia's

¹⁵² Ibid. 521.

¹⁵³ Jennifer Ryan Tishler. 134.

¹⁵⁴ Elena Prokhorova. 521.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 521.

elite criminal underworld. These are not petty thieves or murderers, but are considered to be a society of organized crime who have ties with and connections to government officials and large corporations. They tend to operate on a global scale. Most of the Russian Mafia that I discussed in chapter two in relation to *Brat 2* are considered to be *vory v zakone* (plural). The members of this society are collectively responsible for maintaining the codes and rules by which they function. The show's *vor* is robbed by an elite elderly criminal known as the Baron. Among the jewels and the money taken from his extravagant apartment is Rembrandt's *Egina*,¹⁵⁶ a painting that is supposed to be hanging in St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum. It is quickly revealed by "Antibiotic" (a friend of the robbed *vor*) that the painting in the Hermitage is a copy and the one stolen was, in fact, the original. The Baron is suspected, but because he is also a *vor* it is easier for "Antibiotic" to summon on his contact in the city's police department to retrieve the painting before the Museum gets word of the switch. Right away, the show establishes officer Vashchanov as a high ranking policeman who has clear ties to the top members of the criminal underworld. In a private conversation between him and "Antibiotic" he is shown as loyal and unflinching; the mess has to be resolved and buried. Moreover, this leader of St. Petersburg's police department lives very differently from those in *Ulitsy*. He owns an upscale apartment furnished with leather and even a *banya* (Russian sauna); he drinks expensive liquor and eats like an aristocrat. It is safe to assume that these are not the perks from his daytime job but the result of collaborating with "Antibiotic" over

¹⁵⁶ Rembrandt's *Egina* is actually fictitious and the painting itself is never shown in its entirety in any episode. At one point, a corner of the painting is revealed and it greatly resembles Rembrandt's masterpiece *Danae*, which is, indeed, part of the permanent collection at the Hermitage.

many years. In fact, four years earlier in 1988, when “Antibiotic” was under investigation, it was Vashchanov who ordered to close the case for lack of proper evidence. In this new case, Vashchanov enlists one of his best men to convict the Baron and soon enough the *vor* is caught and sent to prison. There, he is repeatedly interrogated and finally decides to give an interview about his life to a local journalist writing under the pseudonym of Seryogin. In the interview, he tells Seryogin about *ponyatia* (closest translated as truths or individual ethics) that the real *vor*y used to live by and that they faintly resemble the “criminal carnival” that has overtaken the current St. Petersburg. He states that these *ponyatia* included not killing policemen, or anybody for that matter, and that murder was an extreme and desperate act of violence. Now, this notion has been lost and the city is full of bloodshed. At the end of the interview, the Baron tells the journalist about the stolen painting and that it has been safely kept with his lover Irina, who must be warned or they will kill her too. He asks Seryogin to find Irina and remove the painting from her possession before “Antibiotic” catches on. All of the stress causes the Baron's health to rapidly deteriorate and he passes away in a prison hospital. Upon hearing the news, “Antibiotic” becomes furious with Vashchanov and threatens to have him transferred to “the shittiest” precinct in the city if he fails to solve the mystery. A few minutes later he apologizes for losing his cool and offers Vashchanov an expensive fruit and wine basket to take home to “spoil the wife.” Vashchanov is touched and says that “Antibiotic” reminds him of Stalin, to which the other replies, “That is a worthy candidate for imitation.” Meanwhile, Seryogin decides to honour the Baron's last wishes and sets out to find Irina, who works at the Hermitage as an art historian. However, the

Baron failed to give him a last name before his death and Seryogin approaches the wrong Irina, who is immediately killed by “Antibiotic’s” men, thinking that she is associated with the Baron. When his search finally yields the real Irina, who is in Moscow for a conference, it comes after a string of dead friends and colleagues for the murders of which he is blamed, but that were, in reality, set up by Vashchanov and his men. Seryogin hitchhikes to Moscow to meet Irina and reconnects with an old war brother, Kondrashov, from Afghanistan, whom I will return to later. When Seryogin meets with Irina, she reveals to him that the painting is hidden at her cottage in a small village outside of St. Petersburg. They decide to meet there in a few days to remove the painting and alert the press, but when he arrives at Irina’s cottage, it is engulfed in flames. Irina, Kondrashov, and a few of “Antibiotic’s” men who surprised them there are all dead. The painting, which was hidden inside, is also destroyed.

Such a harsh, almost apocalyptic ending, where most of the “good” people introduced throughout the series are now dead, evokes the bleakness and hopelessness aesthetic of *chernukha*. Prokhorova agrees, proposing that “in its representation of social life, [*Banditskii Peterburg*] is the gloomiest of recent Russian crime dramas” because it posits the mob as essentially the only alternative to the state that has been proven to be untrustworthy and corrupt.¹⁵⁷ She goes on to explain that,

While the show creates several strong and dramatic underworld figures, its main focus is on people who get involved in criminal activity by accident. In exploring dramatic fates, choices, and extremes of national character, [*Banditskii Peterburg*] is, perhaps, the most Russian series of the late 1990s. The absence of social structure is mirrored in dramatic transformations of its characters’ fates.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Elena Prokhorova. 521.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 522.

One of the main differences in fate can be seen in the show's second installment. This time around,

two university friends find very different fates in post-Soviet Russia [...] one becomes an investigator, the other a criminal after life-changing experiences in Afghanistan, yet even the more upstanding and institutionalized of the two is obliged to look “beyond the law” for social clarity and fairness,¹⁵⁹

especially after his own parents are suspiciously murdered. The first season shows similar parallels. After all, when Seryogin visits Kondrashov in Moscow, the latter has also given into temptation (or necessity?) and now works for an old kingpin, who has his own ties to the Baron and “Antibiotic.” These two are not only war brothers, but were in college together and even though their lives have taken different directions, even the honest journalist is inevitably pulled into the criminal world. As he heatedly explains to Kondrashov, “I got myself into a lot of shit, the saddest and most frustrating part is that it isn't even my own.” He has a similar encounter with another war brother back in St. Petersburg, but the friend is quickly killed. These circumstances, however, readily evoke very comparable moments from Balabanov's *Brat* films, because all of the situations between the “innocents” are based on the notion of brotherhood, surrogate family, and friendship. In fact, at the purely visual level, *Brat* and the first season of *Banditskii* looks almost the same in their colour schemes, decor, and indoor/outdoor settings, followed by narrative similarities in dialogue and character behaviour. For example, *Banditskii* and *Brat* both stick to a very muted grey palette in their indoor/outdoor settings. The apartment interiors are equally drab, showcasing similar wallpaper and furniture. During

¹⁵⁹

David MacFadyen. 171.

the Soviet period, most people had nearly identical apartment interiors due to limited supplies because stores had little or no variety when it came to wallpaper, flooring, tiles, or furniture. The outside streets appear cold and cloudy. It is possible that the film and the show are both set in late autumn. The narrative similarities are noticeable in how innocent people are drawn into the crime world. Danila is drawn in by his brother and Seryogin is drawn in by the police when he is asked to interview the Baron. Neither man is a willing participant, but both fall deeper and deeper into the criminal world. Danila must protect the German, Sveta, and his brother, while Seryogin must protect Irina, Kondrashov, and the painting that symbolically represents the historical and cultural value of St. Petersburg. Although *Banditskii* has far more devastating consequences than *Brat*, both men fail. Likewise, Danila and Seryogin can no longer return to their previous life; instead, the men must learn to function within the criminal world as they work to take down the kingpins.

While the acting in both the films and the show is extraordinary, Prokhorova draws attention to the choice of actors in *Banditskii*; specifically, the role of Kirill Lavrov as the Baron. Lavrov is a renowned actor in Russia, but his appearance in the series is not just a mere cameo. Prokhorova suggests that casting old Soviet actors in post-Soviet crime dramas was common practice, but they were always cast as either “wise and experienced policemen or as equally wise and experienced mafia bosses.”¹⁶⁰ The same applies to Lev Borisov, who plays “Antibiotic.” The reason for this practice, she suggests, is that the characters “express nostalgia for the real heroes of the Soviet period

¹⁶⁰ Elena Prokhorova. 522.

and lament the degeneration of Russians.”¹⁶¹ This is evident in many instances and the most obvious is in the construction of the Baron himself, for he is a thief, but not a petty crook; instead, he is reflexive, philosophical, and highly cultured. In his interview with Seryogin, he expresses his disdain for thieves without boundaries. He, like Irina, is a great art enthusiast and says that even though he is the thief, he understands that stealing from the Hermitage is as punishable and revolting as burning down an Orthodox Church. Yet, the very people who work there do not understand these principles and have smuggled out the Rembrandt painting to the *vor* whom the Baron later robs. It slowly becomes clear that the Baron did not steal the painting to receive compensation, but took it in order to protect it and, symbolically, protect the intellect and culture that is behind it - the same intellect and culture that St. Petersburg is known for. The ending however, openly declares that regardless of the nostalgia, the city and its dying cultural and historical attributes cannot be salvaged.

In this sense, *Kamenskaya* combines the violence of organized crime from *Banditskii* with the more personal partnerships between policemen seen in *Ulitsy*. Where *Banditskii* was structured around a single narrative that unfurled throughout the season, *Kamenskaya* keeps *Ulitsy's* episodic structure, where each episode is focused on solving a new unrelated crime. Unlike *Ulitsy*, however, *Kamenskaya* has a central heroine (as the title itself suggests) and her relationships with her boss, her partner, and her husband are fixed. The first episode of the series “Coincidental Circumstances” introduces Anastasya Kamenskaya as a high-ranking criminal analyst whose expertise is needed at one of the

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

main Moscow precincts lead by Gordeev. There, one of Gordeev's former policemen, who now works for a detective firm, is accused of murdering a woman after giving her a ride home. At the precinct, where all of the officers are men (women are only rarely shown, except as secretaries), Kamenskaya finds it hard to fit in. The men approach her cautiously and she has to prove her intellect and show her capabilities in order to be embraced. She proves her worth, as she helps the team uncover the real contract killer who murdered the woman, but it is not until Kamenskaya's own life is put on the line as bait for the killer that the team finally accepts her as "one of the boys."

In the season's fourth episode "Pawns Die First," Kamenskaya is faced with yet another case where one of her closest colleagues and friends is accused of being bribed by the mob and murdering another policeman to obtain some compromising paperwork. Unlike with *Banditskii*, where police departments are corrupt from desk clerks to the chiefs themselves, *Kamenskaya* is focused on portraying the police force with integrity. Naturally, her colleague Lesnikov was set up (by one of his own, nonetheless) and the episode revolves around him and Kamenskaya trying to prove his innocence. Lesnikov holes up with a woman he meets on the Metro and gains her trust. She believes that he has been set up and is willing to make calls for him and investigate. The episode, however, has a second story line that develops simultaneously. A sniper is shooting men in the woods on Sunday afternoons and Kamenskaya is on the case. Through her inspection, she concludes that the sniper is actually Kira Levchenko, a young woman working as a librarian. Levchenko, who used to be a sharpshooter, is now assassinating the men in cold blood in order to prove to a mob organization that she can be a valuable

asset to the group as their hit woman. It is not long before the audience understands that Lesnikov's new female companion is, in fact, the sniper. Levchenko is finally hired by the mob and her very first assignment is to kill a man named Lesnikov and the woman with whom he has been staying. She quickly realizes that the contract includes her too and she is not sure how to pull it off. When Kamenskaya becomes aware that the killer hired to murder Lesnikov and the woods sniper are the same person, she wonders what the woman will do. She asks her male colleague, to which he replies, "How should I know, you are the woman so you know better what she will do." It is here that Kamenskaya begins to "think like a woman" appealing to her intuition and emotional side in order to predict Levchenko's next steps. She decides that "as a woman" Levchenko will want the least amount of casualties, while trying to save herself and her lover, Lesnikov. To accomplish this, Kamenskaya states, Levchenko will try to kill the man who set up Lesnikov so she can later escape with him and go into hiding. Interestingly, this is exactly what Levchenko tells Lesnikov in the following scene. The episode, however, has an unexpected ending. Prokhorova explains that the episode's "web of fateful meetings, unlikely coincidences, romanticized mobsters, and self-reflective policemen cannot be untangled through conventional detective motivation."¹⁶² Following this logic, Levchenko and the traitor who set up Lesnikov are scheduled to meet in a car, but when they get in, the car is blown up by the mob that were waiting nearby. There is no explanation for why the mob would have wanted her dead or how they would have traced her to be Leskinov's lover. Nevertheless, Prokhorova suggests

¹⁶²

Ibid. 521.

violent, but farfetched endings are “a typical deus ex machina resolution for post-Soviet plots.”¹⁶³

To track back a little, I find Kamenskaya's earlier exchange with her male colleague very peculiar, yet substantial for two reasons. It at once implies that: 1) were it a male sniper, he would have been cold, focused, emotionless and, therefore, unfazed by his assignment, 2) a male investigator cannot possibly understand the irrational motives of a female criminal and, therefore, only another woman can shed light on the sniper's behaviour. This narrative device is not uncommon in this show and is used without restriction, for even in the many instances where the criminal is male, Kamenskaya still has to call on her female intuition to solve the crime. In other words, it is precisely her woman's intuition that sets her apart from her male colleagues and proves her to be a more valuable asset to the department than any of the men. Even Kamenskaya's name indicates her strength, for *kamen'* in Russian translates as “stone,” and perhaps this further alludes to her hard and, for the most part, unflinching personality that can be embraced by both a male and female audience. On the one hand, women can relate to her because she is strong and empowered, a role model for aspiring career women in Russia. Men, on the other hand, can relate to her for the same reasons, but glimpses of her emotions and vulnerability, especially in the moments with her husband at home, do not make her as threatening as a female police heroine otherwise could be. In short, Kamenskaya easily appeals to both sexes.

In sum, all of the television shows discussed in this chapter propose that the law

¹⁶³

Ibid.

enforcement and the mob are the only available communities in post-Soviet Russia “that function as compensation for the social incoherence” that has paralysed the country.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, all of the series suggest that even people who want nothing to do with either group are inadvertently drawn in by chance or, more commonly by blind fate, which happens to play “a significant role in shaping characters' lives and in providing narrative motivation for criminal plots.”¹⁶⁵ What this means is that shows like *Ulitsy Razbitykh Fonarei*, *Banditskii Peterburg*, and *Kamenskaya* are using these dichotomies not only to propel their respective story lines, but to provide their audiences with new alternative identities and possible social models. Although the choices are slim and do not much differ from the war, crime, and corruption integral to Russia's daily newsfeed in the 1990s, they are still considered to be valid, if not altogether positive models for imitation. To put it another way, these crime series become both a reflection of the contemporary social life in Russia and an experimentation with new identities for struggling and disillusioned citizens. It is no coincidence that Balabanov's *Brat* films function on the same principle.

In my next and final chapter, I will mobilize all of my findings from the previous chapters to conclusively tie them to the *chernukha* aesthetic, illustrating how film and television in Russia are constantly borrowing from and building upon one another. I will also consider the fandom of the *Brat* films and the overall state of both television and film industries in the late 90s to explore if they had any bearing on the success of these films and shows. It is entirely possible, however, that the film and television productions

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 522.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 521.

would have been successful regardless, given the cultural and social necessity for them.

CHAPTER FOUR: UNSETTLING FANDOM & THE DANGEROUS STATE OF TELEVISION

My research has shown that the fall of the Soviet Union allowed a sense of freedom for those working in the entertainment industry because they no longer had to be coerced into becoming state-appointed prophets of Soviet ideology. Post-Soviet Russia yielded young filmmakers such as Balabanov, who expressed little concern about the effect their “black” cinema had on the national psyche. Although the new filmmakers rejected Lenin's earlier notion of cinema's role in nation building, they, inadvertently, reinforced his ideals. They may not have wanted to be held responsible for their potentially propagandistic messages, but it was clear that the audiences were turning to film and television for guidance in times of national turbulence. In this chapter, I consider the marketing strategies and reception of the films and series in question as well as the state of film and television between 1995 and 2000.

When Balabanov's *Brat* first made its rounds at the festival circuit, it was approached with overwhelming praise from Russian and foreign critics alike. The buzz suggested that the film was a refreshing and successful effort for a country whose filmmakers had apparently given up on producing relevant and captivating material. Not since the Soviet Union, with all of its oppressive practices, has a filmmaker gained as much recognition and notoriety as Balabanov, praised for his “accurate” portrayal of the *glasnost* generation of disenfranchised youths who were desperate for change. In *Danila*, the critics saw a performance of ideal Russian masculinity, a hero who was the answer to

Russia's woes if only the rest of the nation could absorb and channel his behaviour. Then there were others, like Danila's friend Kat, also a youth, but one trying her hand at embracing the capitalist pleasures of McDonalds, drugs, and sexual freedom.

Balabanov's film made clear that capitalism offered false promises for Russian people by embracing Danila's problematic moral center; the audiences embraced it too. In a time of national uncertainty, this is precisely the kind of pro-Russian anti-capitalist/West marketing the film needed. The film's official website,¹⁶⁶ which has been modified to incorporate *Brat 2*, was Balabanov's main marketing tool for the general public with the second installment. Word of mouth and the frequent advertisement of the site on Russian entertainment web pages and television programs contributed to the film's promotion.

Unlike with *Brat*, which gained most of its popularity with the public through promotional interviews and the already strong cult following of Sergei Bodrov Jr., *Brat 2* relied purely on its official website for recognition. The site was designed for hardcore fans of the first film, who were eager to follow the new adventures of their hero Danila. The homepage boasts Danila's screen grab from *Brat 2* with the tag-line, "Danila is back!" Aside from that, this is no ordinary film site, but rather an interactive social experiment meant to rouse its visitors, whether negatively or positively. The site includes numerous subcategories that allow the users to read plot summaries, actor and crew biographies, location descriptions, press releases, view various photo galleries, and behind-the-scenes clips; but, more importantly, it has interactive categories such as fan chats and multiple Q & A sections where visitors can contact cast and crew with

¹⁶⁶The official website for both films is <http://brat2.film.ru/>

questions, suggestions, and criticism. For diehard fans who were unsatisfied with a slew of unanswered questions and unresolved storylines in *Brat 2*, the website provides a computer game called “Back to America” where Danila, upon hearing that his brother Viktor was kidnapped by the mob from the police precinct, returns to the States to cause more damage. Although film-based games are a common marketing practice in Hollywood to boost sales, this comes as a surprise for a low-budget foreign production such as *Brat 2*. Therefore, the game's sheer existence speaks volumes about the film's massive cult following in Russia. Recalling the scene where Danila asks the American businessman who is in the right, the one who owns truth or the one who owns money, the game's description asks the same question of the visitor, stating that “the answer is now in your hands.”

However, the most disturbing section of the website and one that merits the most attention is called “Black & White.” Although its content is still in Russian, it is the only section that has an English title. Inside, visitors can read the musings of Sergei Bodrov Jr., on the issue of race in America. This is a crucial addition to the website, especially for those who idolize Bodrov not just as an actor, but as a real person. Thus, for better or for worse, his ideas about race are integral to the way the audience, in some cases, approach *Brat 2*. Bodrov's first thought is that in the pursuit of answers to racial inequality, the whites have backed themselves into a corner. He explains that during his stay in America, he noticed the fear the whites have towards the blacks, concluding that the blacks now have more power and lead more privileged lives. If whites and blacks apply for the same job position, it will be “the Negro” who gets hired. Likewise, the

whites have to be careful when they are servicing blacks in any kind of social setting, for one wrong gesture can easily result in a lawsuit for racial discrimination. For Bodrov, all black families have too many children that cannot be supported without welfare or food stamps. He says so much fuss has been made about “making this race comfortable” in a predominantly white society that he could not even talk about watermelons around blacks because they were still upset about the stereotypes of “jazz dancing, watermelon and fried chicken eating Negroes.” Unfortunately, it seems that this lack of sensitivity is not exclusive to the character of Danila, but is present in Bodrov himself. When he mentions the bar scene, where Danila walks in only to find all of the patrons to be African-americans, Bodrov states that it took them weeks to find a “real nigger bar” as none of the “mixed” ones would suffice. He fails to mention what a “real” bar like that entails, but his tone and the ease with which he recounts his Chicago experiences is truly disturbing if not altogether infuriating. After all, arguments have been made that the film is not an accurate representation of America because the cast and crew had no real experiences or idea of what it was like. Yet, their shooting on location, along with Bodrov's and Balabanov's interviews, seems to further solidify this inaccurate portrayal. The webpage is capped off by a quip from Balabanov about political correctness and how, for him, the mere idea of it is foolish and harmful to the public. He proclaims that America's belief in equality is a myth, while Hollywood keeps churning out movies that suggest otherwise. Where Balabanov is concerned, the American society is ill and the black community is now full of thieves, drug dealers, and pimps who live on welfare and do not care for a real job. This social catastrophe, he concludes, is a real possibility in Russia, if

minorities from the Caucasus region decide to “invade” the country's metropolitan areas. In short, Russia's society could catch America's virus. I have spent a significant time summarizing this section of the website because its message has made me uneasy. I have argued in earlier chapters that Balabanov should not be dismissed as a provocative xenophobic filmmaker who is taking advantage of Russia's social and cultural turbulence to rouse his audiences. Yet, after taking his and Bodrov's thoughts into account, I can no longer be sure of his intentions. Balabanov is definitely not uneducated or uncultured, but his films are so infused with hatred for anyone or anything not ethnically Russian that I have to wonder about his motives. He has maximized on the use of the *chernukha* aesthetic as is evident in his post *Brat* films such as *Voina* (War, 2002), *Gruz 200* (Cargo 200, 2007) and *Morfiy* (Morphine, 2008). For example, the piercing misery of *Gruz 200*, chronicling the last days of a kidnapped young woman by a maniacal policeman, caused dozens of walkouts from critics and the general public alike, making the film intolerable for even the most dedicated cineastes. The film polarized the public and the film industry. Some called it Balabanov's best work, while others were outraged that his decadent use of the no longer relevant or necessary *chernukha* aesthetic actually garnered him a Kinotavr¹⁶⁷ award. What confuses me most, however, is his dismissal of both contemporary Russia and the West. The use of the *chernukha* aesthetic signals Balabanov's dislike of the current state of Russian society. Yet, he points to the West not as a solution, but as more trouble for Russia. According to his films, neither approach

¹⁶⁷ The Kinotavr Award is one of the most prestigious Russian prizes that can be given for excellence in filmmaking. It can be equated to the American Academy Awards or the French César Awards, for example.

works, but his work has failed to provide a possible resolution. What I do see, however, are glimpses of nostalgia for Soviet Russia; ones that are evident in Balabanov's use of Soviet memorabilia in the mise-en-scène and brief exchanges between characters. Danila still calls St. Petersburg "Leningrad;" Viktor marvels at the find of an old Kalashnikov that was once used by Vasily Chapayev himself, a celebrated commander in the Red Army and, for many, a national hero; Dasha's hideout has a USSR flag hanging in the background. Because of this understated nostalgia, I feel Balabanov has modified the *chernukha* aesthetic to reflect his own insecurity about contemporary Russia. The original *chernukha* movement lacked nostalgia and was instead laden with fear, for people had yet to live through the consequences of *perestroika* and, therefore, could not begin to feel nostalgic for things past.

The state of post-Soviet television mirrored that of the film industry. In the early 90s, the industry stepped away from the system of state-ownership and operation that was so prevalent in the Soviet era. Yet, it was not long before commercially operated networks were taken over by the state once again and by 2002 the majority of all Russian networks, such as Channel One, Two, and Center Television, were either state or Moscow owned.¹⁶⁸ The few channels that remained independent, NTV and TV-6, managed to stay afloat for a short while before being crushed by state disapproval and subsequent bankruptcy. It was not long before the commercial TV stations were bought out by tycoons from Gazprom, the largest Russian company and exporter of natural gas in the world. The consequences of this privatizing move are mirrored in the television

¹⁶⁸ Mickiewicz, Ellen. "Television, Power, and the Public in Russia." Cambridge, UK: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 29.

series discussed in this thesis.

Out of the three I previously discussed, *Ulitsy* is probably the most comic, and, in a way, nostalgic. While it features elements of *chernukha* in its mise-en-scène, the characters and their exchanges are constructed with a sense of humour. This is why the show becomes reminiscent of its soviet predecessor *Mesto Vrstrechi Izmenit Nel'zia*, by paying homage to the streetwise, no-nonsense policeman played by Visotsky, who was not afraid to bend the law or forge evidence as long as the criminal ended up in jail, where he belonged. *Ulitsy* portrays a similar shifting moral center, but one that is now modernized with a bribe jar and feelings of self preservation in time of need. The nostalgia for Soviet order is present, but modern necessity for survival prevails.

Banditskii is the series most closely associated with the *chernukha* aesthetic as it saturates both the show's visual style and narrative content. In fact, it is the only show out of the three where *chernukha* transcends the fictional world of the series and starts mirroring reality. This is not to say that *Ulitsy* or *Kamenskaya* are unrealistic or inadequate in their portrayal of post-Soviet Russia, but their embrace of comedy and romance genre conventions, respectively, softens their representation of the gritty and heavy *chernukha* reality. *Banditskii*, on the other hand, unapologetically bombards the audience with its apocalyptic tale where there is no hope, salvation, or redemption. Instead, the show only reinforces loss, one that comes in multiple never-ending forms – emotional, psychological, physical, cultural, historical, and societal. While *Banditskii* is captivating, it leaves the viewer completely drained because it deliberately lacks any of the occasional comedy and romance conventions that lighten the content of the other

shows to make them emotionally satisfying. The show's relevance becomes even more significant in its exploration of journalistic freedoms in Russia. Although the brutal assassination of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 stirred international outrage, Russian investigative journalists have always lived and worked in a state of fear. In 1994, Dmitry Kholodov, who was investigating military corruption, was killed when he opened a parcel at work containing a bomb. In 1995, Vladislav Listyev, one of the most influential journalists on television, was murdered in his apartment building because authorities were growing uneasy with his growing political influence on the nation. Both of these incidents were contract killings. While these are the most high-profile murders in the circle of Russian journalists, there are at least a dozen regional and local reporters that are killed yearly since the dissolution of the USSR. The character of Seryogin in *Banditskii* becomes the face of investigative journalism in Russia. He is blackmailed, intimidated, threatened, and chased. Yet, even though he escapes death, the death of his coworkers and loved ones surrounds him. In what seems to be a take on Kholodov's death, Seryogin's newspaper colleague opens a booby-trapped parcel that arrives at the office and he is instantly killed. His death serves as a warning message for Seryogin to stop his investigation of the missing painting. In this way, the series, which came out in the late 90s but was set in 1992, was a perfect mirror, a diary, of the events that plagued the nation. The show chronicled in detail the downward spiral of a nation that affected everyone from journalists, to art historians, to police officers, to grocery cashiers; people who had absolutely no connection to crime were swallowed by fear and corruption. Even worse, there was little to no solidarity amongst these groups to at least curb the readiness

and freedom with which higher powers bribed, threatened, and coerced the rest of the country. In this sense, the dangerous state of television and journalism was clearly evident in the plots and subplots of these crime shows and although the subject matter was rarely emotionally satisfying, the spectatorship and love for these serials were undeniable. In other words, Russian viewers had (and continue to have) a morbid fascination with the *chernukha* aesthetic in both film and television.

CONCLUSION

This research project was undertaken with the intention of exploring the *chernukha* aesthetic in film and television well beyond the *chernukha* movement during the late 1980s. Balabanov's *Brat* films and select television series from the late 1990s were chosen in an attempt to see why certain filmmakers and television producers were still utilizing an aesthetic that was characteristic of the transitional *perestroika* period where uncertainty and hopelessness dominated the emotional, psychological, economic, and political state of the nation. The images of broken family units, poor living conditions, violence, and widespread corruption have once again made their way into mainstream media. Was it possible that the collapse of the USSR brought about a second wave of *chernukha* by filmmakers who were not convinced by the benefits of the disintegration? If so, was the aesthetic modified to reflect the nostalgia that was setting in for the (idea of) stability and order advocated by the Soviet Union?

After years of stabilization in post-Soviet Russia, it appears that the quest for freedom from an oppressive dictatorship was a circular one. Whether intentional or not, the Russian state has once again gained iron control over its citizens. Perhaps the realization that freedom was a concept not entirely plausible for Russia is what caused a second wave of *chernukha* in film and television industries. This research was meant to determine if select films and television series of the late 90s were re-appropriating the *chernukha* aesthetic and why. In my quest for answers, I now speculate that *chernukha* is not a mere form of visual and narrative practice, but, for contemporary Russians, it is also

a way of life. Russia and, more importantly, the Russian people have often been associated with a love for their own suffering and an ever-present sentimentality for loss and sacrifice, whether personal or national. In “Crime and Punishment” Dostoyevsky wrote that “for broad and deep feeling, you need pain and suffering.” I think, however, that Dostoyevsky’s suffering had religious connotations; it was the suffering of the soul that could, for some, lead to inner peace and enlightenment. The formation of the Soviet Union, however, stripped Russians of these notions as they were quickly trumped by communism, the new “religion” for the masses. In this case, *chernukha* does not represent the same form of (spiritual) suffering. Instead, the suffering now comes in the form of corruption and oppression that feeds the despair of the people. Still, it is entirely plausible that the sudden re-emergence of *chernukha* is not an extraordinary phenomenon, but a continuing reflection on and an expression of what has always been underneath the surface of the Russian people, a romanticized infatuation with seeing, feeling, and enduring despair.

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