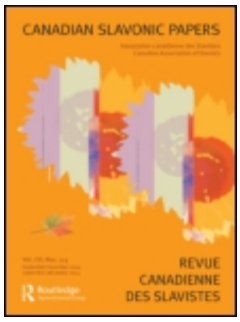

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Dina Iordanova

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Dina Iordanova

The New Russians: Nostalgia for the Occupier, Commiseration for the Immigrant

In the summer of 1984, I took a language course in the East German provincial city of Halle. One night, after seeing the movie *Tootsie*, I was waiting for the tram to take me back to my dorm on campus at around ten in the evening. The tram which came consisted of three cars. All other passengers who were waiting on the square for some reason split into two groups and got into the first and the third cars. Led by an individualist impulse, I climbed in the middle car, to understand only in seconds why the others had avoided it—it was full of Soviet soldiers, returning to their barracks from the train station. The locals had spotted them watchfully in the middle car, but I had not. And here I was, a young woman on a tram full of Soviet soldiers.

No German would ever climb into this car. But I was not a German, I was Bulgarian—by definition not as hostile and resentful to the Soviets.[1] The soldiers in the car could not possibly know this, however. To them I appeared German and what I had just done by pure mistake came out as an audacious provocation. Yes, Russians were present across Central Eastern Europe—military officers, their wives and children, their soldiers, their support staff, all stationed there to secure the status quo of the region as a Soviet sphere of influence—but they were completely ostracized, excluded, living parallel isolated lives. The most interaction they would have with the local people would be to trade in smuggled gasoline or watches. Only lowest class women would get involved with them, and orderly citizens would take every opportunity to show scornful disdain for their unwanted presence.

No one had asked the Russians to come. Everybody hated them. They were not just innocuous intruders, they were occupiers, many of them recognizing the awkward position they were in once confronted with hostility. Everything in our

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1 While countries like Poland have a long history of hostile relations with Russia, Bulgaria's long-standing relationship with Russia has been a good one. It was Russia that fought a war with the Ottomans in 1877/1878, which led to the liberation of Bulgaria. Unlike most other countries in the Soviet sphere of influence, no Soviet military were stationed in Bulgaria after World War Two. The allegiance of Bulgaria's communist leaders to the USSR was so great that Bulgaria was often referred to as a "sixteenth Soviet republic."

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lives depended on the whims of the Soviet political leaders. These soldiers represented an extension of the oppressive political will that we all hated so much.

There was a silent consensus among the East Europeans—as there is no other way, that we would endure the Russians but not get involved with them in any way. And here I was, breaking the unwritten code of no interaction. Only, I cannot tell who on that night was more terrified by this accidental incitement—me or them. There we were, caught in complete silence, I—terrified by my mistake, they—terrified by my provocation. Of course, I could get off at the next stop and move to one of the other cars. But I did not. I stayed there, petrified, for the whole duration of the twenty minute long trip through the industrially polluted and desolate city of Halle. The soldiers sat there, equally petrified. I was looking through the window, and so were they. At one point they got up and got off the tram. Mine was the next stop.

Fifteen years have passed since then, and so much has changed. The Soviet Union is no more, the Russian troops have gone, and the countries of the former Soviet sphere struggle to situate themselves favourably within the new Europe. Weakened Russia is like a wounded ogre. Russian troops have withdrawn, opening up space for an influx of new economic migrants, and Russian is spoken from the Carmel market in Tel Aviv to the beaches of San Francisco.

Alongside the changing international situation of the Russians, their international cinematic image keeps changing as well. They used to be Hollywood's traditional villains, demonised in a wide range of cold-war films. A side-effect of the warming of the political climate between Russia and America in the late-1980s was the disappearance of Russian villains, military, and intelligence officers from the American movies. Ever since, Hollywood has been living through an identity crisis, searching for replacement villains among Japanese, Arabs, Serbs, and aliens.[2] The Russians are being humanised nowadays. The shift in depictions of Russians is visible in the cinemas of Eastern Europe. No longer marked by straightforward resentment to the imposed dominance of the Russians, the new East European films reveal a mixture of love-hate relation, or even sympathy and bittersweet longing for the specific Russian kitsch and worn-out revolutionary symbolism.

It is the taste for all things Russian, in particular the fascination with the pre-revolutionary and then with the totalitarian aesthetics that seems to be of most durable attraction to filmmakers. A whole range of films paying meticulous

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2 On the cold-war Hollywood portrayal of Russians, see Michael J. Strada and Harold R. Troper, *Friend or Foe? Russians in American Film and Foreign Policy, 1933–1991.*(Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977).

attention to what can be described as a Russian or Soviet style was made by international filmmakers in the 1990s. In his 1993 *Les Enfants Jouent à la Russie* (Kids Play Russian, France, 1993, Jean-Luc Godard) Godard cast himself as count Mishkin and offered his vision on what the Russian soul is all about. Veteran avant-guardist Chris Marker explores the life and times of Alexander Medvedkin, the maverick Soviet director of avant-garde *Schast'e* (Happiness, 1932) in his *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (The Last Bolshevik, France, 1992, Chris Marker). US-made *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey* (USA, 1993, Steven M. Martin) is a stylish documentary about the life of Leon Therman, a Russian inventor who emigrated but was then forced to leave the States, and whom the filmmakers attempt to bring back to America nearly 60 years later. Another stylish documentary is *East Side Story* (Germany/USA/France, 1997, Dana Ranga) which discusses the Soviet musicals from the 1930s. The Australian satire *Children of the Revolution* (Australia, 1996, Peter Duncan) evolves around a fictional love affair of an Australian communist (Judy Davis) with Stalin, which results in the birth of a son who follows in the footsteps of his father in his native Australia. In *Disgraced Monuments* (UK, 1993), film theorist Laura Mulvey and Mark Lewis visit Russian parks which have now turned into cemeteries sheltering the demolished monuments of the Soviet period. A unique combination of mock revolutionary symbolism and the sumptuous image inventory of the Russian criminal underworld, Hungarian Péter Gothár's dreamlike and gritty *Vaska Easoff* (Hungary, 1996, Péter Gothár) offers a fairy tale of two St. Petersburg thieves in the 1930s.[3] A Russian protagonist determines the intricate plot in another Hungarian film, *Büvös vadász* (The Magic Hunter, Hungary/Germany, 1994, Ildikó Enyedi).

In the 1990s, there have been numerous international adaptations of Russian classic literary texts as well. Chekhov is the all time favourite. Hungarian Andor Lukátz made an adaptation of *Három Növér* (Three Sisters) in 1992. In the US, French Louis Malle filmed *Vanya on 42nd Street* (USA, 1994) as a highbrow Broadway show. A year later, *Uncle Vanya* was adapted in the not too convincing Australian setting as *Country Life* (Australia, 1995, Michael Blakemore). Greek Michael Cacoyannis made *Varya* (Greece/UK, 1999), an Onassis Foundation-produced adaptation of *Cherry Orchard* with British actors

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3 For now, however, *Vaska Easoff* remains the only film made in a former Soviet-sphere country that does not seem interested in cashing in directly on the changing role of the Russians and gaining ad hoc applause for what is considered politically correct in today's Central Europe. Both suspenseful and poetic, *Vaska Easoff* is my favourite film. I would hope to see more of this type of works of vision gain momentum and treat the Russian topic in a way that is raised above the immediate concerns of the moment.

Alan Bates, Catherine Cartlidge, and Charlotte Rampling. Bulgarian Marius Kurkinski made his small-budget film based on Gogol, *Dnevnikŭt na edin lud* (The Diary of a Madman, Bulgaria, 1995). Hungarian veteran Karoly Makk adapted Dostoevsky for a production of *A Játékos* (The Gambler, UK/Hungary, 1997) with Michel Gambon. For Pushkin's bicentennial British Martha Fiennes directed an adaptation of *Evgenii Onegin* (UK, 1999), starring her brother Ralph Fiennes and Liv Tyler.

It is some of these films that I would like to discuss here. I am especially interested in the significant proliferation of East European films from the 1990s featuring plots or subplots involving Russians—a body of works that needs to be surveyed cross-culturally to enable us to discover trends which we cannot see if we focus on a single film. I see two leading trends in all these films: the first one is the tendency to demystify the forthright oppressive master; the second one is the interest in the dynamics of the new Russian diaspora within the changing context of the new Europe.

Never before have East Europeans been able to provide their own uncensored view on the Soviets. Today's interest in the Russians, therefore, is quite understandable. Until recently, the Russians were seen as impersonal embodiments of an oppressive power. Since the end of the Soviet Union, however, the Russians are gradually turning into ordinary people, susceptible to the demystifying scrutiny of East Europeans. The subject of the disintegrating Soviet Union itself is treated with a mixture of curiosity and caution, the way one approaches a beast just killed—one knows it is dead, but there may be some surprises still hiding. The tyrant has disappeared, leaving behind a nostalgia-filled void.

My work draws on a number of existing studies which have explored cross-cultural representations and transnational filmmaking. This scholarship has been of particular importance for me, since unlike the traditional studies on East European cinema which adhere to the confines of the national approach in cinema studies, they stress the importance of transnational and diasporic dynamics as a leading factor of today's world cinematic culture. It is this same cross-disciplinary and dynamic nature of the study on post-communist Russian culture in the recent collection edited by Nancy Condee that made this book relevant to my work as well.[4]

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4 See Lester Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images. Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Hamid Naficy and Teshome H. Gabriel, eds., *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged* (Langhorne, PA: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994); Dina Sherzer, ed., *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the*

THE BEAST DEMYSTIFIED

Back then, when one did not yet know how things were to evolve in 1989, everything in Eastern Europe depended very much on the predisposition of the Soviets, so the real sentiments that their presence evoked were rarely directly discussed. If Russians appeared in East European films, their characterisation would largely reflect the general political attitude to Russia itself. In Bulgaria, for example, dubbed the "sixteenth Soviet Republic," one could come across a relatively favourable depiction of Russians along the lines of the long-standing tradition to relate to Russia as "grandfather Ivan," with respect. Some early works of Bulgarian cinema cultivated the image of the friendly Russian, in particular the popular romantic comedy *Bŭdi Shtastliva, Ani!* (Be Happy, Annie, Bulgaria, 1961, Vladimir Ianchev) in which a well-wishing fatherly Russian expert on a business trip helped his young Bulgarian interpreter to sort out her love affairs. In Hungary, a director like Miklós Jancsó displayed interest in the much deeper and complex psychological interactions between his young Hungarian protagonist and a Russian soldier in the post-war drama *Igy jöttem* (My Way Home, Hungary, 1964).[5]

Films made in East Central Europe subtly (and sometimes quite directly) problematised the traumatic experiences associated with all things Soviet. Such films grew in number and came into the mainstream cinematic output only in the 1980s, alongside with the Polish dissident movement Solidarność and the new open-minded Soviet policies of glasnost, which allowed for previously suppressed themes, mostly relating to historical events and to social sores kept in silence until then, to become valid subjects within the lively public discourse of the time. The questionable moral foundations of the Bolshevik ideology bordering with anarchy were deeply problematised in the 1981 award-winning *Gorączka* (Fever, Poland, 1981, Agnieszka Holland). In Martha Mészarós's utterly personal Diary Trilogy (*Napló gyermekeimnek* [Diary for My Children, 1982], *Napló szerelmeimnek* [Diary for My Loves, 1987], *Napló apámnak, anyámnak* [Diary for My Father and Mother, 1990]) the Hungarian director recounted the traumatic experiences of her childhood in Stalinist Soviet Union, and eventually the years of her study in Moscow during the 1950s. A recurring motif in the trilogy was Mészarós's restless revisiting of the painful theme of her lost parents who voluntarily went to the Soviet Union to end up destroyed by the

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French and Francophone World (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); and Nancy Condee, ed., *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia* (London: BFI, 1995).

5 Jancsó's *The Red and the White* (Hungary/USSR, 1967) was set in the West of Russia during the years of revolutionary terror, and again dealt with Russians.

Russians. Toward the end of the 1980s, in a direct assault on the Russians-as-oppressors, the Polish epic *Panny i wdowy* (Maidens and Widows, Poland, 1990, Janusz Zaorski) followed, in an elaborately contrived plot-line, the fate of several generations of Polish women whose beloved ones were inevitably exiled to Siberia, humiliated and tortured in all conceivable ways by the evil Russians.

In the 1990s, the scope of Russian portrayals started widening up and diversifying. Jerzy Hoffman's *Prekrasnaia neznakomka* (Beautiful Stranger, Russia/Poland, 1992) was a white-guard stylish romantic adventure, and Juliusz Machulski's gangster-cum-Eisenstein comedy *Dejà Vu* (Poland/USSR, 1989) featured a mock Battleship-Potemkin-Odessa-steps sequence, while Jan Švankmajer's animation *Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (Czechoslovakia, 1991) made use of rolling pins to depict the Russian invasion of 1968.

Again in the 1990s, it became possible for the first time to directly approach the topic of the Russian military presence, to practice straight talk and demystify rigid stereotypes. I will consider three examples of such demystification—Yugoslav émigré Dusan Makavejev's *Gorilla Bathes at Noon* (Germany, 1993), Czech New Wave veteran Jiři Menzel's *Život a neobyčejná dobrodružství vojáka Ivana Čonkina* (The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin, Czech Republic/UK/France/Italy/Russia, 1994), and Czech popular newcomer Jan Svěrák's *Kolya* (Czech Republic, 1996). All these films subvert deeply-seated clichés about Russians and explore their changing presence in the popular culture of the countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence.

Gorilla Bathes at Noon

Dušan Makavejev has a long-standing interest in subversive explorations of major cultural icons, the Russians in particular. In his early feature *Ljubavni slučaj ili tragedija službenice P.T.T.* (Love Affair or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator, Yugoslavia, 1967), Makavejev used documentary footage of revolutionary Russians taking down crosses and blasting church buildings in a context that challenged phallic symbols across the establishment. In *Nevinost* bez zaštite (Innocence Unprotected, Yugoslavia, 1968), he used clips from Grigoriy Alexandrov's vintage musical *Tsirk* (Circus, USSR, 1934) which illustrated the vaudeville side of Stalinism in a more definitive manner than any documentary. In *W.R.—Misterije organizma* (WR: Mysteries of Organism, Yugoslavia/U.S.A., 1971), he included a fictional narrative featuring the love affair between a Serbian communist, Milena, and a stiff Russian ice-skater, named Vladimir Ilich (after Lenin). In *Sweet Movie* (Canada/France, 1975), a proletarian hooker had decorated her bed with enlarged photographs of Beria's eyes and was spending time in it with a sailor-lover called Luv Bakunin.

Throughout the 1980s, Makavejev seemed to have abandoned this type of socio-political associative cross-referencing for the sake of an increased stress on sexuality. In *Gorilla Bathes at Noon*, however, he comes back to it. Here he uses lengthy quotations from Mikhail Chiaurelli's *Padenie Berlina* (The Fall of Berlin, USSR, 1949) featuring Berlin in May 1945 where Stalin is shown arriving to greet and speak to the cheering masses.[6] Makavejev ironically juxtaposes the images of the triumphal arrival of the Russians with the present-day story of a Soviet Army major who deserts the Soviet forces at the time of their withdrawal from Berlin and attempts to stay in the West. The film is rich in controversial historical cross-referencing. In addition, it features documentary footage of the demise of the gigantic 60-foot statue of Lenin in Berlin, as well as a fictional subplot of a fantastic love affair between the protagonist and Lenin's ghost.

The straightforward part of the narrative in *Gorilla Bathes at Noon* explores the ironical tides of history which make Russians come and go. The protagonist—Major Boris Lazutkin—describes himself as "a noble idiot inviting a comparison with Dostoevsky's Count Myshkin." He deserts the army at the time his unit leaves for Russia, and stays behind in Berlin. He quickly becomes a homeless outcast, with an exclusion order from Germany but still hanging in Berlin, living on rooftops or amidst Kalashnikov-trading lumpens, and occasionally stealing food from the zoo animals. Lazutkin wears civilian clothes but is easily recognised by his Russian army boots, the only quality clothing item on him. He rejects the offer to become a contractual hitman because, as he explains, he was trained to destroy scores of people, and not just one at a time. Lazutkin gets involved with a young German woman, but after sex at her place they are caught by her Arab husband, who chases the Russian away shouting "Ausländer raus!!!"

Lazutkin's story is interrupted by extensive intercutting with the concluding sequences of *The Fall of Berlin*. These propaganda images, and, in particular, the descent of Stalin's aeroplane on Berlin, bear direct comparison to the opening sequence of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, Germany, 1934).[7] In a voice-over commentary, Lazutkin claims direct

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6 In *WR: Mysteries of Organism* Makavejev extensively used footage from the earlier Stalin-feature of Chiaurelli, *Kliatva/The Vow* (USSR, 1948).

7 "I liked *The Fall of Berlin* and its grand finale, because it has an operatic quality. It is naive and pathetic, grandiose and moving. Its author believed he was producing an important epochal historical fresco, but it was just a beautiful comic strip. He made references to Leni Riefenstahl's work and it was something between strong inspiration and plagiarism. His film is one of the rare examples of symbiosis between communist and nazi art. So you feel moved and uneasy at the same time," Jürgen Brunow, "I Admire

lineage to the characters of this classical Stalinist feature. This commentary justifies the seemingly frivolous intercutting by reassuring us that is done in order to trace the personal historical and ideological background of the protagonist, who grew up listening to the Soviet rhetoric of greatness and looking at visuals like the one that we see on a modern-day Berlin street billboard showing Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honeker in a brotherly embrace.[8]

A further subplot of *Gorilla Bathes at Noon* evolves around the 1992 demolition of the gigantic statue of Lenin in Berlin. The statue is stained with paint, but a crowd of leftist intellectuals have gathered for a candlelight vigil to protest the demolition. Lazutkin appears and climbs the statue, trying to clean it up with soap water. When journalists ask him why he is doing it, he replies in a heavily accented German, "Ich bin ein Berliner!" Soon thereafter, Lenin's statue is decapitated and the head hangs in the air. The statue's pieces are loaded onto a truck which Lazutkin escorts out of Berlin.

It is precisely this moment which intercuts dynamically with the scenes of Stalin's descent on Berlin from *The Fall of Berlin*. The footage showing Stalin's triumphal arrival is juxtaposed with that of the downfall of Lenin's dismembered statue in 1992. Greek Theo Angelopoulos also exploited the symbolic power contained in the image of a dismembered statue of Lenin. He used it in his *To Vlemma tou Odyssea* (Ulysses' Gaze, Greece/France/Italy, 1995) where, symbolically, the statue was shown travelling westwards, from a Romanian port on the Danube up to Germany where it had been bought by a wealthy collector.

The statue is gone, but Lenin's ghost keeps returning to Lazutkin's dreams, asking "Do you still love me?" (*Liubish' li menia eshche?).* Lenin sings the revolutionary anthem *Varshavianka*, and mostly speaks sentences composed by the titles of his books. At one time, Lenin complains of a headache, and Lazutkin's bloody fingers are shown carefully pulling anarchist Fanny Kaplan's bullet out of Lenin's head. Then Lazutkin and Lenin embrace and get married.

In this unique post-communist and post-modern montage, Makavejev combines two lines of signification—on the one hand he traces the underlying ideological formation of his harmless protagonist who cannot be other but Homo

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Monkeys: A Serious Interview with Dusan Makavejev," in Gerald O'Grady, ed., *Makavejev Fictionary. The Films of Dusan Makavejev*. Harvard Film Archive/American Museum of the Moving Picture/ Film and the Public (Boston/New York: Spring 1995) 36.

8 Other footage used in the film evokes direct associations with Helke Sander's *Befreier und Befreite* (Liberators Take Liberties, Germany, 1992) and with Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Deutschland, Bleiche Mutter* (Germany, Pale Mother, Germany, 1980) where rapes of German women by Russian soldiers during the war are depicted.

Sovieticus, raised on slogans of eternal friendship and Lenin's greatness. On the other hand, he lets the protagonist routinely face continuous sarcastic denial of this glorious background.

Combining documentary footage and fictional subplots in an associative order is an enabling approach. It allows Makavejev to make statements that are unsupportable by strict historical evidence or unsuitable for a purely fictional format. Makavejev does not hesitate to impose his own associations in a cross-referencing that disregards the standard dimensions of historical time and ideological doctrine. Neither is he considerate in the numerous occasions when he not only uses, but even creates stereotypes—like the Serbian simpleton-strongman in *Innocence Unprotected*, the stiff Russian lover in *WR*, the hygiene-obsessed Texas oil tycoon or the sensually-glamorous Latino singer in *Sweet Movie*, and the sexually inhibited Swedish housewife in *Montenegro* (Sweden, 1981). In fact, Makavejev defies all stereotypes he uses by placing them amidst a non-traditional associative sequence of cultural icons and signifiers. This approach allows him to subvert commonplace pillars of historical imagination. His work proves that it is possible for a filmmaker to at least challenge and even seriously shatter ordinary mentality by confronting it with seemingly frivolous but in fact intentionally provocative symbolic collages. Because by placing all stereotypes amidst a non-traditional associative sequence of cultural icons and signifiers he defies stereotyping. His approach allows him to subvert many of the worn-out pillars of historical imagination. His work proves that it is possible for a filmmaker to challenge and seriously shatter commonplace mentality by confronting it with seemingly frivolous but intentionally provocative symbolic collages. One could quote many other examples of associative usage of documentary footage in the Yugoslav cinema tradition (Zelimir Zilnik, Lazar Stojanovic), but there is nothing as brazen as Makavejev's daring montages that make his generally superficial plots look as if loaded with numerous layers of significance. Makavejev does not hesitate to be bold in his cross-referencing, and this boldness is probably what makes his films stand out.

The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin.

The works of the Soviet underground and émigré writers, interestingly enough, have not been the subject of many adaptations. Besides *Doctor Zhivago* (USA/UK, 1965, David Lean), the only other literary text critical of the Soviet regime that has been filmed in the West is the Swedish adaptation of *One Day of Ivan Denisovich* (Sweden, 1988, Casper Wrede), based on Solzhenitsyn's

novella, and starring Tom Courtenay.[9] For now, however, the only East European adaptation of a Russian dissident literary work is Jiři Menzel's one of the 1977 novel *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* by Russian exile Vladimir Voinovich.[10] A satire set in the front's rear during World War Two, it follows the moves of private Chonkin, a character created to counter Aleksandr Tvardovskii's brave soldier Vasilii Tërkin—the literary hero of the official Soviet war-time propaganda. Chonkin is an insipid and naïve chap who would never admit he is a deserter but who is nevertheless more inclined to spend the war hiding amidst piles of pillows with his bosomy squeeze Niura than ride the aging bi-plane which he keeps parked in the backyard next to the pigsty. When the time for fighting comes, however, Chonkin and Niura are more courageous than the zealous military who shit in their pants. As the happy end comes, Chonkin is awarded a medal for bravery.

The film was scripted by Zdeněk Svěrák, who also wrote and starred in *Kolya*, and was shot on location in Milevice, Czech Republic. The Russian village in the film, however, looks pretty much like a Czech one. In spite starring mostly Russians, Chonkin is marked by the specific Czech humour and feels as if it were a direct continuation of the sensibilities in Menzel's *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Closely Watched Trains, 1966) and *Vesničko má, středisková* (My Sweet Little Village, 1985) although it fails to reach the success of these films. Exposing shallow military zeal and satirizing ineffective propaganda is an extension of the Czech habit to make fun of chauvinistic rhetoric that takes itself seriously, a tradition that can be traced back to the time of World War One. More than anything else, it focuses on characterisation details and on little funny moments. The story is told with a good-humoured tenderness, maybe the most appropriate way to make fun of military stupidity and incompetence, not only of the Soviet-style but of all kinds.

The reception of the film was lukewarm. The reason? *Chonkin* was the first officially released satire that exposed some of the myths about the heroism of all Russians during World War Two. Long before the film, however, such

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9 Edward Limonov's controversial text *I am Eddy* (New York, 1979) was recently mentioned as the subject of interest by Yugoslav director Srdjan Dragojevic (*Pretty Village, Pretty Flame*) but the production has been put on hold for now. If made, however, the film will tell the story of a Russian immigrant to New York who recklessly ventures into tasting the Big Apple. If faithful to the literary original, the film will be an audacious exploration not only of displacement and migration, but also of bisexuality and should include Tom of Finland-style scenes of gay sex between a black man and a Russian on the top of a New York skyscraper.

10 This internationally financed film was produced by another East European, Marin Karmitz of the Paris-based independent company MK2, the Romanian-born producer responsible for Kieslowski's breakthrough in the West.

demystification had been carried out within the much more captivating setting offered by the Russian émigré literature. The texts of Russian émigré writers appeared in clandestine samizdat editions, or were published in exile on cigarette paper, so that they would weigh less and would be easier to smuggle back to the Soviet Union. Getting such a book and reading it was a dangerous and exciting experience in itself. Voinovich's *Chonkin* was a well-loved piece of dissident literature. But it was made into a film just a bit too late, when the "forbidden fruit" thrill was no longer there. As an officially endorsed adaptation, it was no longer of interest.

Kolya

Kolya's plot evolves around cross-cultural tensions, once again presented by means of tongue-in-cheek Czech humour. The film tackles the relationship between a Czech man and a Russian boy whose unusual interaction invites a subtle examination of the tensions between occupiers and occupied in the Soviet sphere of influence. The film is set in the period immediately preceding the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The protagonist, Mr. Louka, is a middle-aged citizen of Prague who can barely make ends meet with his meagre salary as a cemetery cellist. Listed politically untrustworthy and barred from better-paying jobs, desperately short of money and badly in need of a car, Mr. Louka hopes to scrape together enough for a used Trabant. So he accepts an offer of a fictitious marriage to a Russian woman, the mother of the five-year old Kolya. Mr. Louka gets his Trabant, but soon thereafter the mother disappears to join a lover in Germany, leaving Kolya behind. A few more unforeseen moves, and Kolya ends up with Mr. Louka as his only "relative."

From there on the story builds on a comical series of events, a process in which Mr. Louka's long-standing anti-Soviet political allegiances gradually soften, defeated by the power of personal bonding. In principle terrified by the idea he may have to care for a child, especially someone else's, who on top of it all is Russian, when it comes down to it, Mr. Louka turns out to be a very considerate parent and grows genuinely devoted to Kolya. For the sake of the child's sensitivities, he starts playing down his own political views and does a number of things he would normally not do—like speak in Russian, for example, or sit through a Russian film at the theatre.

The bond between Mr. Louka and Kolya unravels against the backdrop of well-founded Czech resentment to Russians, whose military were a permanent occupying presence in the country after World War Two and particularly since 1968. Mr. Louka's own mother comments bitterly that while at the beginning of the occupation no one wanted to have anything to do with the Russians, later on economic conditions made most people get engaged in an embarrassing black

market trade with the occupiers. When the truth of Kolya's nationality comes to light, she is outraged—the enemy's offspring has penetrated her house. She wants him out. Mr. Louka objects, and because of Kolya, mother and son end up in confrontation—one of them regards the boy as a symbol of the occupation, the other one as a fragile human being in need of loving care.

The ambiguity of "ours" and "yours" is replayed on many occasions in the film. As Kolya and Mr. Louka lie in bed one night, for example, they hear Russian tanks moving down the street and they see reflections of their lights on the ceiling. "Are ours going to Moscow?" Kolya asks. "No, they are here forever, they live here," says Mr. Louka bitterly but refrains from commentary—what is *ours* to Kolya is *yours* to him.

But even if in 1988 the Russian presence seemed everlasting, it took only a year longer to realise its transience. The Russian military started a reluctant withdrawal from Central Eastern Europe early in 1990. By the end of the film, Russian troops start vacating the Czech lands and going back to where they came from, leaving behind memories of distress and a feeling of relief. Kolya leaves around the same time, reunited with his mother and moving westwards. Mr. Louka remains in Prague, relieved but lonely.

Josef Koudelka, the Czech photographer whose pictures of the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968 became famous all over the world, recently said: "I was as sorry for those Russian soldiers as I was for our own people. They were not guilty. It could have been me in one of those tanks."[11] One wonders if he would have put it this way even a decade earlier, when the traumatic memories of the brutal invasion were still fresh. Barely. The theme of *Kolya* may have been remotely present in its screenwriter's mind but it is not very likely he would pursue it a decade ago. Back then, we all were still in the grip of the cold war. Things changed fast, however, and so did many entrenched attitudes and conventions. The cross-cultural appeal of *Kolya* lies in its assertion of personal commitment, against all odds. Putting individual bonding higher than abstract allegiances paved the way to the international success of the film. The Svěráks, father and son (Zděnek as screenwriter and actor, Jan as director and co-producer) declared it in public—they were ready to forgive. This absolving attitude certainly paid off for them.

DIASPORA IN THE MAKING

So, the Russians were gone, but not for long. Soon they were back, only now in a different capacity—as a new diaspora, a clandestine one for the most part. The Russian government eased off the travel restrictions, thus enabling a huge wave

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11 In "The Unknown Snapper," *The Guardian* 1 October 1998: 9.

of black-market-related travel and economic migrations. Russian mafia bosses and small-timers alike were now moving around freely. Many of them settled in the countries of the former Soviet sphere and claimed control over these territories.

Bolshe Vita

To date, Ibolya Fekete's 1996 *Bolshe Vita* (Hungary/Germany, 1996) is the best film to explore this new situation. The film opens on the Pacific coast near Vladivostok, in Russia's Far East, in the early 1990s. The two Russian protagonists, Iura and Vadim, stand at the harbour and look into the ocean, realising that if they go a bit further East, this would actually get them into the West. But there is no way across the sea; they have to go the other way around, like Columbus. So they take off and later in the film they end up in Budapest, Hungary. Once there, along with other fellow-Soviet fortune-seekers, they rush to mix with Westerners, who, in their own turn, have been driven to Hungary by the fashionable trend in experiencing the lifting of the Iron curtain first-hand.

The gritty camerawork gives a realistic feel, which is further enhanced by the use of documentary footage: of scenes from the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary and then of scenes of Hungarians cheering at the sight of Soviet troops leaving the country. Symptomatically enough, the Russian protagonists have never heard of the 1956 uprising and invasion: they are the product of an educational system that has spared them such minor historical details.[12] Iura and Vadim, now illegal aliens, soon learn all of Budapest's underbelly as their daily itinerary evolves around loitering at the flea market, hanging out in all sorts of drab interiors, and sleeping on a folding bed behind a cotton-print curtain under someone's crumbling staircase. This all brightens up when they get involved with Western girlfriends whom they find in Bolshe Vita, the bohemian bar where the iron curtain fall-out is celebrated nightly in a never ending party, and where former enemies can happily mix as they please. The excitement is short-lived, as soon the Russian Mafia takes charge and "westernises" the bar by turning it into a topless joint.

In a symbolic East-meets-West scene, the Russians almost enter a McDonalds franchise as if it were a shrine but the Western girlfriends pull them away at the door and tell them it is just American junk food. The American girl who gets involved with Vadim comes from Texas, and via Amsterdam has

12 In response to the increased demand of the Hungarian government for independence from Moscow, Soviet troops invaded the Hungarian capital in 1956, and introduced a violent military regime. A large number of Hungarians fled to the West at that time, many of whom settled in Canada.

ended up in Budapest. Headed in a direction quite opposite that of the Russians, she later on goes on further east, to Tashkent. This nomadic spirit, however, proves not contagious for Iura's girlfriend, who is British. As soon as she gets pregnant, she is happy to settle down with him under the grey skies of England.

Hungary is probably the best place to explore the new dimensions of Babylon. Everybody talks in one own's language, no one listens, but because they all tell each other how awful it is to live in their own countries, and because they are all driven by a longing for the unexplored, there is perfect mutual understanding. The presence of two secondary characters who cannot adapt to the new times, however, is a reminder that all this subculture does not spread far beyond the margins it occupies. One is the deserter Sergei, a good looking Russian, who does not seem attracted by the cosmopolitan lifestyle. Homesick all the time and contemplating a return, he becomes the absurd victim of a stray bullet. The other one is Erzsi, a former Russian teacher, who, like the protagonists of István Szabó's *Édes Emma, drága Böbe - vázlatok, aktok* (Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe, Hungary, 1992) is now being retrained to work as an English-language one. There is little which Erszi can do to resist this imposed re-qualification but behave as a stubborn Russophile, persistently giving shelter to homeless Russians whom she encounters on the streets. Helping them gives her the rare chance to feel useful in a society which does not need her. Yesterday's Russians, feared and resented yesterday, have turned into humble asylum claimants today.

A diaspora in the making, migrating Russians have been an object of interest in media and cinema alike. But while media most prominently reported on the brain-drain of Russia and on the jet-set of the nouveau riche, the spotlight in cinema seems to be taken by mafiamen and prostitutes.[13] A decade ago, the topic of the migrating Russian call-girl was treated with the attitude of a social worker solely by Petr Todorovskii in his *Inter-devochka* (Intergirl, USSR/Sweden, 1989). During the 1990s, the Russian prostitute abroad appeared in a whole range of films, many of which featured her as the central figure. Occasionally she would be the focus of interest for people who, if not employed by the social services, at least had an interest in eliminating trafficking in women, like in *Vaarwel Pavel* (Farewell, Pavel, Netherlands, 1998, Rosemarie Blank). In many films she was treated as a victim, like in the Greek *Avrio tha xeroume, Dharma Blue Bums* (Tomorrow We Will Know, Greece, 1997,

13 According to Israeli scholar Dafna Lemish, the mainstream Israeli press in the 1990s has displayed the tendency to depict new Russian immigrant women as prostitutes or criminals (Dafna Lemish, "The Whore and the Other: Images of Female Immigrants from the USSR." A paper presented at International Association of Mass Communication Research, Glasgow, July 1998).

Andreas Thomopoulos) telling the story of a beautiful music-school student who, in order to support her child, signs up with an "agency" back home to do two years of call-girl service in Athens or in the Greek *Apo Tin Akri Tis Polis* (From the Edge of the City, Greece, 1998, Constantine Giannaris) telling the story of new Russian immigrants settling around Athens, where several of the protagonist-pimps compete for "ownership" of the victimised Russian girl. In other films, the Russian prostitute is not as naive and innocent, as in the Croatian *Rusko meso* (Russian Flesh, Croatia, 1997, Lukas Nola), the Dutch *Siberia* (Netherlands, 1999, Robert Jan Westdijk), and the black comedy from Austria, *Berezina* (Austria, 1999, Daniel Schmid). In his *Tango je tužna misao koja se plese* (Tango is a Sad Thought Which One Dances, Yugoslavia, 1997) Serbian veteran Purisa Djordjevic showed local prostitutes pretending they are Russian to attract more clients.

The most interesting treatment of Russian prostitutes that I have come across was in Fred Kelemen's *Verhängnis* (Fate, Germany, 1994), an acclaimed film shot in sepia and strongly influenced by the aesthetics of Andrei Tarkovskii and Aleksandr Sokurov. *Fate* is set in an unidentified German city, where an intricate set-up of events leads the viewers to an encounter with a good looking and sensual Russian woman, Liuba, who is married to a German but who practices prostitution while the husband is away. Liuba's client is killed in an accidental shoot-out, and she, terrified, escapes in the night wearing only a coat over her naked body. She ends up in a pub where, after drinking a bottle of vodka, she is raped by the men who happen to hang around. At dawn she slowly comes back to her senses, now finding herself in a desolate industrial area. She gets up and walks back to town, joined by a displaced Russian compatriot. The film's fatalist title is indicative: it seems that Russia's fate is to endlessly prostitute itself, to be readily raped and abused. This message certainly would deserve attention had it not been for the stereotypical approach to the Russian protagonists, who are depicted mostly in the framework of drinking vodka and acting mindlessly.

In a similar way, the figure of the Russian racketeer is also present in a whole range of international films from the 1990s. I expect that the large number of cinematic Russian prostitutes and mafiosi in the West will soon reach its saturation point and will decrease in the near future. Yes, there is still some novelty quality to the Russian gangster and the Russian hooker. But it will surely be exhausted soon. We may continue seeing an occasional Russian villain in Hollywood productions, and we may continue seeing an occasional Russian prostitute in European social dramas, but I do not expect these clichés to stay as a durable trend. The Russian immigrants will more likely be depicted in the way any other immigrant group is—marginalised, ghettoised and disillusioned, as in

the earlier story of the Russian newcomer to the capitalist system, played by Robin Williams in *Moscow on the Hudson* (USA, 1984, Paul Mazursky). In American independent cinema, we see the new immigrants of the 1990s flash on the periphery of suburban American life—in Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (USA, 1998), for example, a philandering Russian small timer and his noisy Russian wife shortly cross paths with the protagonist. In European cinema we see them even more often. In *Suzie Washington* (Austria, 1998, Florian Flicker), a Soviet woman is first arrested, then goes on a five-day-long run through Austria and rapidly grows disillusioned with the paradise-like image of the West.

In a trend which is here to stay, a growing number of films reflect the world of migrations and the constant mixing of traditionally isolated spheres, and here the figure of the Russian is coming into the picture more and more often, occasionally taking the limelight. Some films already give a strong indication to support this claim. British Paul Pawlikowski, a Polish expatriate, made the hilarious mockumentary *Dostoevsky's Travels* (UK, 1992) featuring a re-enactment of the European travels of the writer's great-grandson, a St. Petersburg tram driver, who skilfully juggles between his *Dostoevsky Gesellschaft*-financed lecture tour and the more mundane concern of visiting Europe's junkyards in search for a bargain used Mercedes. In Israeli *Clara Hakedosha* (Saint Clara, Israel, 1996, Ari Folman and Ori Siva), the protagonist is a young Russian immigrant with telekinetic powers. In the French *Western* (France, 1997, Manuel Poirier), a non-traditional sensible and nice Nino, a Russian from Italy as he describes himself, hitchhikes around the French countryside alongside a displaced Spaniard from Catalunia, both strangers, both speaking in heavily accented French. In the French/Canadian *The Clandestins* (Switzerland/Canada/France/Belgium, 1997, Nicolas Wadimoff and Denis Chouinard) a group of stowaways sail through the Atlantic locked in a freight container. A young Russian is destined to spend this claustrophobic journey together with a streetwise gypsy boy, a destitute Romanian mother, and a couple of desperate Arabs, all longing for the promised shores of Canada. Unlike the others, all inferior outcasts, the Russian emits superiority, keeps his distance, and takes charge whenever he gets the chance to brutalise the others. His nastily displayed confidence makes him an object of everybody's hate, and he is nearly killed in the spontaneous assault he himself triggers.

To conclude, I will have to come back to the beginning. It took only a decade for the beast to be demystified. Despised and feared until recently, the Russians are now pitied. They can barely be content with this new cinematic image, in the same way that they are not content with the new international order where they

are allotted a much smaller role than the one they used to have in the times of the Cold War. Economic pressures are at work, creating a new worldwide Russian diaspora. All these processes are reflected in film, in a wide range of mainstream and art-house representations.

Who knows today where the soldiers are who rode the tramway in Halle on that night? Did they return home, then return soon thereafter, in their new role of economic migrants? Very likely. Fifteen years later, I myself am no longer in my native Bulgaria, and have been a globe-trotter for a decade now.

We live in a universe where old borders have crumbled and new spaces have come into existence. Worlds that were unlikely to touch unless they collided, now interact and overlap. Russians and Catalonians, Russians and Texans, Russians and Arabs—the world is on the move. No longer apart, they all appear within the same cinematic frame, together. In our time of migration and radical cultural and historical shifts, all this moving around is driven by an elusive vision of an imaginary Promised Land. Today's workings of the cinematic imagination in building and maintaining this elusive vision are stronger than ever.