

Beyond Socio-Historical Trauma with Olga Zhukova and Iskra Babich: Re-Reading Cinema of Perestroika

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Abstract

Cinematography of perestroika (and the early post-Soviet period) entails mixed terra-in, often described as a socially-critical “black wave” chernukha; the period saw an unprecedented number of works by female directors, which remain to be addressed by film scholarship. This article examines the cinematic opus of Olga Zhukova (1954-) who produced five feature films in the period 1990–1994. This article discusses her films, which were not well received by critics and accused of being pretentious and artificial, alongside another Soviet director, Iskra Babich (1938–2001). I re-examine the formation of Zhukova’s cinematic speech, focusing on the interplay of the audio-visual and corporeal, to argue that her works create specific times paces which defy the immediate socio-political references provided by the seemingly formative linear narratives, and bypass the patriarchal dichotomies underpinning the latter.

Keywords: *Perestroika, Chernukha, Post-Soviet Cinema, Female Directors, Time space.*



A. INTRODUCTION

There is a popular Soviet anecdote referring to the period of glasnost, the famous penultimate democratization under then Secretary-General of the ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, that preceded the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. During a television talk show between audiences in the U.S.A and in the Soviet Union on 17 July 1986, a certain Lyudmila Ivanova from the USSR famously responded to a question posed by an American woman about the topic of sex by saying: “There is no sex in the Soviet Union.” Loud laughter muffled the second part of her response, which stated that there was no sex in the Soviet Union “on television”. Indeed, sex was not a subject that Soviet television or cinema was generous with depicting, at least not directly. Other such taboo subjects involved alcohol (particularly during numerous anti-alcoholism campaigns) and all kinds of speculative, ideologically ambiguous fiction. Therefore, genres in Soviet cinema of the socialist-realist period and until the perestroika developed unevenly, as plots and aesthetic conventions were largely dictated by the ideological directions of the USSR State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino) (cf. Woll 2000; Lawton 2002). The policy of glasnost introduced by Gorbachev in 1986 changed this dramatically, heavily influencing the cinematic landscape of the time: cinema was given incomparably greater access to directors, themes, and styles than it had had since the introduction of the socialist realist canon in 1934 (cf. Lawton 2002; Gorky et al. 1977). Perestroika cinema evidently embraced this contextual

transformation, flooding screens with audio-visually provocative, socio-politically transgressive messages, genres and styles.

Contemporary scholarship usually views this phenomenon, commonly associated with the so-called *chernukha*, a stylistic and thematic “blackening” of Soviet (popular) culture, as a rebellion against or an “acting out” of historical socio-political trauma, instilled by Communist ideological directives in their more or less authoritarian variations (cf. Isakava 2005; 2009). This legitimate perspective provides an informative and productive interpretation of *chernukha*, linking its formal characteristics (naturalist style, excessive stereotyping of characters and excessive use of contextually-bound inter textual references) and thematic preoccupations (physical violence inc. rape, previously unexposed problems linked to the Soviet “underground”, such as prostitution, shady business operations, inefficient and corrupt state institutions, rude and uncompassionate state officials, all-pervasive alcoholism) to its immediate socio-cultural and political context. However, this interpretation tends to underemphasize another aspect of the dominant mode of *perestroika chernukha*, which spilled over to significantly mark the first decade of post-Soviet Russian film production (cf. Borenstein 2008). While it has been noted e.g. by Isakava (2005) that the emergence of *chernukha* during *perestroika* involved the rise of an unprecedented number of female film-makers, their original and remarkable contribution to Soviet (and early post-Soviet) cinema is often overlooked, as if following the socialist mantra, stating that the socio-political order instated in the USSR by the Communist party had rendered the gender question obsolete. And, as the aforementioned Lyudmila Ivanova might have added, removed sex from screens altogether.

Nevertheless, this article will argue that *chernukha* cinema, often seen as an excessive pre-apocalyptic moment in Soviet film history, should be examined precisely from the perspective of its female directors, which received an unprecedented chance in Soviet history, to produce and publicly present their works, uninhibited by censorship. This article will focus on one such film-maker, Olga Zhukova, who produced a remarkable number of five feature films in 1990–1994 (*Noch' dlinnykh nozhey* (Night of the Long Knives) (1990), *Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe* (Merry Christmas in Paris) (1991), *Shou dlya odinokogo muzhchiny* (A Show for a Lonely Man) (1992), *Sikimoku* (1993), *Tango na Dvortsovoy ploshchadi* (Tango on Palace Square) (1994)) before sinking into cinematic anonymity, only to be remembered as the director of the “first lesbian kiss in Soviet cinema” (Tsirkun 2010). Referring to all five of Zhukova’s productions, I will argue that her films provide an insight into the core of the aesthetic impulse of *chernukha*, focusing on their timespace and subjectivity construction mechanisms, and that this impulse follows in the footsteps of another, by no means as provocative Soviet film-maker, Iskra Babich

B. METHOD

This research is qualitative in nature with a literature review method. Data were collected using several techniques, including observation, focus group discussion of documentation studies. The data is then analyzed so that a conclusion can be made of the research results related to this research.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Why Chernukha and Where Do Female Film-Makers Take Us?

a. On Concepts and Methods

In contemporary scholarship, chernukha is usually firstly defined descriptively, with stress being laid on its etymological closeness to an older term, ochernenie, “blackening” (cf. Graham 2000: 9–10). Indeed, Soviet cultural producers had used glasnost and its removal of censorship as permission to “blacken/.../ Soviet reality” in their dark artistic representations of it. Many scholars interpret the main message of chernukha accordingly: it intended to reveal, without mercy or hopes for improvement, the inherent violence, darkness and brutality of Soviet social reality (cf. Brashinsky et al. 1994). While chernukha emerged during the perestroika, many chernukha films actually came out in the 1990s and early 2000s, implying that the impetus to criticise or at least reveal pertinent socio-political problems of a certain time created a formally territorialised referential domain, operating with recognisable themes and stylistic preferences.

Graham (2000: 10–11) influentially related chernukha to Brooks’s (1976) definition of the genre of the melodrama. While melodrama, according to Brooks, is governed by expressive emotional excess, chernukha is governed by an equally excessive and hence-forth functionally similar naturalist impulse, which underpins the coordinates and laws of the chernukha cinematic universe. Chernukha films belong to a universe of all-pervasive filth, deteriorating urban spaces, penal institutions, such as police stations, prisons, (mental) hospitals, shady semi-public spaces, such as underground off-licence bars, toilets, dirty staircases in deteriorating apartment buildings, stray domestic animals and uncared for human offspring. This universe is governed by common law, according to which desires, violence and addictions persistently override state law, even to the point of inducing bodily deformations, illness, and injuries. Graham (2000: 13) insists that while chernukha, often dubbed as “antistroika” or “anti-art”, and heavily criticized by Soviet film critics and public intellectuals, is not a genre, it may be viewed as an aesthetic mode. This is the definition that I would like to pay extra attention to in this text. Graham’s understanding of aesthetic modes relies heavily on the descriptive coordinates of the chernukha cinematic universe outlined above. In this text, I will discuss the implications this definition of the aesthetic mode might have if examined in terms of its basic, spatiotemporal structures or timespaces – spatial constellations which “materialise” time and thereby manage to emphasize certain structural characteristics of a film, which are not necessarily as evident from basic narrative analysis. The methodological focus on timespaces relies on contemporary work on the Bakhtinian category of the chronotope, as explored in relation to film theory

particularly by Montgomery (1994) and Sobchack (1998), whose work pointed out the significance of the term for film analysis through specific case studies related to theme and genre, and by Keunan (2010), who productively related the category of the chronotope to Deleuze's work on the time-image. I argue that this conceptual abstraction – preceded by necessary focused close, almost ethnographic readings of the films in question – allows us to take a closer look at specific cinematic styles and governing principles of particular chernukha films and directors, pointing to the works' significance outside of the referential context of chernukha. I will test this assumption through a detailed reading of the opus of Olga Zhukova – an enfant terrible of late Soviet and early post-Soviet cinema. Olga Zhukova's works (five feature films produced in 1990–1994) clearly belong to the chernukha period in terms of thematic preferences and style, subscribing to the aforementioned descriptors of the chernukha universe. However, the ways in which her films construct and organize public and private time and space, particularly using specific combinations of audio-visual formations and corporeal images, reveal a different overarching impulse to be at work. I will argue that Zhukova's films do not merely exploit the loosening of socio-political and ideological rules governing Soviet film production that had produced chernukha, but use this context to stress and work through a construction of individual and collective subjectivity, related to the impulse that can be deciphered in, although this is often not the case, in films directed by Iskra Babich, known by her sentimental melodramas, produced between 1960 and 1983. In this correlation between two seemingly stylistically incompatible directors – provocative Zhukova and ideologically “non-problematic” Babich, whose films often appear somewhat reactionary in the light of democratisation impulses of the Soviet thaw and perestroika – I will approach the question of why it might be of scholarly use to re-read Soviet film history from the perspective of its female film directors, beginning with this perspective rather than by stipulating that their production firstly belongs to a certain historically determined period and aesthetic mode.

b. Iskra Babich's Legacy as a Methodological Guideline and a Key Contextual Reference In her inspection of representations of femininity on Soviet screens, Navailh (2003: 210)

From the early seventies a new genre made its way on to the Soviet screen: zhenskie fil'my, or films about women, their problems, and their relationships with men. The first example of the “feminine” tendency is *The Old Walls* (V. Tregubovich, 1973). Those zhenskie fil'my are very popular and seem to reflect both public demands and official policies. Despite the imposition of socialist realism, they show what society admits about itself and what it fails to admit, as well as revealing the moral and ideological values they convey and the social impact of the message on the masses. Finally, it is among such films that the greatest box office successes in the last decade can be found – the so-called kassovye fil'my, or “bestsellers”.

This observation reflects two important circumstances: the previous (pre-Thaw) relatively acute absence of Soviet films focusing on women, noted in virtually all sources on the history of Soviet cinema, and the stark diversification of

genre films, which became particularly apparent around the early 1970s, and entailed an influx of melodramas, to which the *zhenskije fil'my* mentioned by Navailh tend to belong. Nevertheless, Navailh also notes that even the greater attention that women were suddenly granted on screen does not reflect any significant change in perspective: the gaze that Soviet women on screens are subject to remains – regardless of the gender of the director, or even of the ambition of a certain film – an objectivising gaze that treats women as entities, inaccessible in their own right, and only decipherable through common social categories, such as family, careerism, motherly devotion, etc. Navailh (2003: 224) concludes:

The films of the past gave greater importance to the Soviet female citizen, a self-confident and fervent communist. The films depicted her evolution. /.../ The optimistic ending emphasized her dynamism and her efficient vitality. The films of today are characterized by a lack of assurance, and by a crisis situation. Woman has become a wounded soul with little ambition, given to passivity, and dominated by her love-life. It is man who breaks her routine and creates movement. The endings remain open or else the woman's failures are punished. Her energies are wasted away. The film titles and dialogues dealing with belated love emphasize loneliness, sadness and a wealth of squandered affection. She is the resigned and passive subject of events – she does not prompt them or influence them.

While all of these observations give an accurate image of the way Soviet women of the 1970s were represented on screens, it ignores the dimension of femininity which transpires through certain films which do not necessarily operate with a feminist narrative on the surface. Four melodramas directed by Iskra Babich are a telling case in point, bearing, as I will argue, a dynamics of feminine cinema that will re-surface with accelerated vigour during the *perestroika*, when the remnants of the socialist realist canon are ultimately lifted and/or inverted, particularly in Zhukova's oeuvre. Interpreted through the representations of women, given in film narrative, Babich's films depict the very lamentable situation described by Navailh: Babich's first film, *Pervoye svidaniye* (First Date, 1960), recounts the beginning of a premature marriage, decided upon soon after the protagonists' (a 19-year-old woman and a 21-year-old man) first date, and the many quarrels and misunderstandings encountered by the couple, and often initiated by the woman's unexpected independence. The film ends happily, the woman realizing that her love for her husband is a valid reason to persist in the relationship. Babich's second film, *Polovodye* (High Water, 1962) also deals with the theme of a woman's (Daria's) struggle to accommodate her independence, her union with her husband Zinovii, and her wish to be a respectable and compassionate member of the *kolkhoz*. Babich's most successful film, *Muzhiki!* (The Guys, 1981) approaches the issue of family from the opposite end of the spectrum, showing us Pavel Zubov's slowly evolving realization that he should take care of his adolescent daughter and two young sons that his deceased wife had had with another man. Babich's last film, *Prosti menia, Alyosha* (Forgive me, Alyosha, 1983) shows a similar struggle from a woman's perspective: devastated by her unrequited love, the protagonist wishes to

abandon her new-born child, the result of this affair. She finally decides against it, but the outcome, which seemingly glorifies her temporary saviour, Alyosha, who saw her on the street, escorted her to the maternity ward, and took care of her child throughout the film, is not as important as the dynamics of the storyline.

Babich's work, which should be interpreted against the backdrop of the Thaw (the late 1950s and early 1960s) and the gradual re-entrance of the individual and entertainment into Soviet cinema (cf. Woll 2000), uses cinematic conventions of the time to performatively elaborate a very unconventional point: all of her films not only portray individual stories, but also, arguably even more efficiently, integrate them into complex images of Soviet society. All of the narratives described above would be impossible and unbelievable, were they not woven into specific socio-cultural fabrics where gender is a very present and non-essentialised category. The world of Polovodye especially relies on relations within a female-dominated kolkhoz, where Daria explores how she can develop her individuality and organise her life regardless of social presuppositions about how a woman should be(have). This exploration is both intersubjective (she is aided, defied, advised by other women and her husband), and brings about the final subjective and extra-subjective, collective transformation. Daria establishes herself as a complex and variegated individual, and transforms the rigid code of conduct previously dominant in the kolkhoz. The kolkhoz accepts her individuality and no longer expects her to behave as a genderless robotic worker. This trajectory of gradual co-transformation of both the individual and their immediate microcosm guides all four of Babich's films, and is –which is meaningful – always initiated by inquisitive and defiant women. However, it does not mean that Babich's women simply undergo educational personal transformations; they are, rather elements that co-structure their worlds, and evolve in this process. This impulse is, as I will argue, even more explicit in Zhukova's work, where it is stripped of any kind of teleology, which effectuates interesting results. Therefore, the methodological focus of the article on timespace analysis is contextually grounded in the legacy of the feminine impulse as the latter can be, upon close reading, weeded out from works of earlier Soviet female directors. This brief recourse to the history of Soviet cinema and, specifically, to Iskra Babich's legacy serves as an important methodological guideline and tool: firstly, it provides the necessary historical background to our own, more recent case study, points to the possible analytical complications (the discontinuity between the surface-narrative and underlying cinematic structure, the possible split structure of female agency, which only transpires if several characters are considered as a single subjective formation), and prevents us (and the reader) from overemphasizing the formal, seemingly transgressive aesthetics of chernukha.

Furthermore, the reference to Babich's case should also be seen as an addition to the exploration between the analogies between chernukha and the genre of the melodrama initiated by Graham (2000): while an analysis of Babich's melodramas does point to certain analogies with Zhukova's cinematic worlds, it also, as I shall argue in the conclusion, contests the thesis that the analogy should primarily be

sought on the level of genre. It is neither the formal descriptors of melodrama or the chernukha universe per se, which allow for analogies, but the capacities which they offer to utilize the principle of excess as the motor of new, potentially emancipatory, aesthetic modes.

2. The Audial and Temporal Frameworks of Zhukova's Naturalism

a. A Brief Overview of Zhukova's Oeuvre

In her encyclopaedic overview of newer (1986–2000) otechestvennoe (i.e. domestic, i.e. Soviet and post-Soviet Russian) cinema, Nina Tsirkun gives one of the very few, if not the only account of Olga Zhukova's film-making career, describing Zhukova's directing style as an "acid concentrate of the collective outrage of the early 1990s" (Tsirkun 2010). According to Tsirkun, Zhukova's degree in film direction (1984) was her second university degree: she first graduated from a medical school (1978), which allowed her to develop an individual "femininely-physiological" style (Tsirkun 2010). Zhukova graduated from one of the most renowned Soviet film academies, the Moscow Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), and received Best director award for her graduation work, a "somber-naturalist" (Ibid.) adaptation of Anton Chekhov's short story Pomilui mya vsyakogo (Have Mercy on Everyone's Name) (1989) at the Molodost' young filmmakers' festival in Kiev in 1990. 1990 was also the year that marked the commencement of the formation of her reputation as a polemical, provocative, and controversial director and script-writer. In less than four years, she produced Noch' dlinnykh nozhei (1990), a brutal and cruel thriller about a coup d'état, followed by Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe! (1991), her most infamous production, involving allegedly the first lesbian scene in Soviet cinematography, an incest-spiced melodrama Shou dlya odinokogo muzhchiny (1992), a liquor-infused New Year's eve fairy tale Sikimoku (1993), and Tango na dvorstovoi ploshchadi (1994), a satirical drama about the peculiarities of forming amorous relationships in transitional post-Soviet Russia.

Zhukova's films may be accessed and viewed on Russian online film databases, and are occasionally aired by Russian commercial television channels. Some old and contemporary reviews of the films by anonymous lay audiences and critiques, produced around the time of the films' production, are also available online and were examined for the purposes of this text. Interestingly enough, the few contemporary reviews on the Kino-teatr.ru website, as well a brief overview of Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe! by Tsirkun (2010), are quite positive about the works, appreciative of the director's original aesthetics, her attention to detail, sombre humour and daring choice of topics. Notably, Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe!, later additionally titled as Banda lesbiianok (A Gang of Lesbians) provoked an array of mixed reviews upon production, all of them evidently irritated by Zhukova's choice of alternative title, and by the presence of a homosexual kiss. Interestingly enough, recent reviewers tend to be much more positive about the work, emphasising that it is actually "anything but" a senseless provocation, as the standard interpretation of the film went in the early 1990s (cf. Kino-Teatr 2015).

The outlined context of the films' reception and its (albeit slight) temporal transformations are necessary to grasp the significance of the very fact of production of non-mainstream cinema by Soviet female film directors. Although the perestroika involved an unprecedented breakdown of censorship mechanisms, the context of freedom of expression, different and arguably greater from that around of the period of the October revolution in 1917, the question of female artistic expression remained one of the many blind spots of the new political agenda of glasnost. Although the 1980s witnessed an influx of translations of foreign feminist literature, the emergence of new (Soviet) female prose, articulating previously untold facets of female experiences, the immediate reception of these developments (often by established male critics) was all but welcome. Female artists of various media were charged with producing chernukha (in all of its negative connotations) and "pathophilology" (Adzhikhina 2006). An important aspect of Soviet perestroika was serious ignorance of the gender question, continuing the several-decade-long tradition of Soviet politics. Although the perestroika produced or consolidated the standing of several prominent Soviet and post-Soviet female auteurs, such as notorious Kira Muratova, Svetlana Proskurina, Dinara Asanova, etc., their work is most often analysed in complete ignorance of any possible specificities of their styles and their reflections of post-feminist themes (cf. e.g. Lawton 2002; Brashinsky et al. 1994). On the other hand, Zhukova's mild (as I will argue in the following chapter) trespassing of unsaid rules of on-screen physicality earned her unparalleled criticism and disgust of the prevalent part of her contemporary professional community. What is even more worrying is that her work was left on the margins and in the most far-off drawers of Post-Soviet film analysis, despite its certain productive statements which arguably enriched and diversified the very definition of Soviet chernukha cinema; these aspects of Zhukova's work will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

b. Between skazka and Kafka: The Role of Music in Zhukova's Timespaces

In Strike, The Mother, and Fragment of an Empire, the representation of women is the articulation of the relation – always problematic, always ambiguous – between the personal and the social. Some may see in this yet another example of woman as victim or the image of woman as nothing but the object of the male gaze. But I see affirmation of the strategic, central role of women in the experience and the critical examination of private and public space. That such an affirmation occurs completely at the unconscious level in these films is not a problem – it is precisely the point (Mayne, 1980).

Instead of focusing, like most aforementioned critics, on the film that appears to be tackling the most provocative topic, let's approach Zhukova's oeuvre of five independent works as something closer to a Moebius strip. I argue that each film reveals a facet of the oeuvre, and functions as a comprehensible plane, with a distinct narrative, set of characters, themes, and set of audial elements, but that at the same time, the entire oeuvre belongs to a common universe, a common temporality bound by internal inter-textual references— apart from certain explicit references, binding the universes of the films into one, a less evident inter-textual reference is the striking importance of both diegetic and extra-diegetic music in all of the five films.

It can of course be argued that this feature merely points to the director's individual style, but the reference to the Moebius strip nevertheless remains compelling in the context of the temporal and thematic proximity of the films, and their diversity in terms of genre and structural statements, which will be explored below. This perspective is also helpful for assessing Zhukova's auteur contribution to the *chernukha* universe in particular, and to the history of Soviet female film-makers and their work on a more general level.

Graham (2000: 12) insightfully notes that Soviet *chernukha* cinema seems to be "on middle ground between *skazka*² and Kafka". Indeed, an overall tendency to privilege visual expressionism and combine it with Kafkaesque thematic preoccupations, such as incomprehensible and self-serving official and unofficial power mechanisms, and the accompanying alienation of individuals, caught up in their midst, is not difficult to note in most *chernukha* productions. Zhukova's films efficiently foreground this aspect without pointing fingers at possible culprits, or demanding anyone to take on responsibility for the state of affairs. Rather, Zhukova's films manoeuvre between naturalist *skazka*, full of easily undressable everyday princesses and princes, and their Kafkaesque modes of existence. Moreover, Zhukova's cinema hints that the fairy tale and horror aspects not only co-exist, but are mutually dependent.

Zhukova's first film, *Noch' dlinnykh nozhei*, draws the first decisive strokes, defining her cinematic universe and its principles. The opening shots of the film, depicting a popular uprising against authorities, are accompanied by the song *Predchuvstvie grazhdanskoi voyny* (Premonition of Civil War) by famous perestroika rock singer Yuri Shevchuk. The song proceeds to appear in the film several times in varying contexts, framing both public and private spaces (e.g. car rides, personal homes). The song frames the basic coordinates of the film, suggesting that the main preoccupation, or rather the dominant perspective, dictated by the director's point of view, is an imaginary collective rather than a private perspective. In this particular film, which operates with a narrative with a strong interpersonal emphasis, the protagonist being a male hero who navigates transitional socio-political reality, involved in shady business affairs, and perchance falls in love with a sentimental and inexperienced prostitute, the audial framework, inaugurated by Shevchuk's song, creates a striking inconsistency. The incoherence between the leading "voice" of the film (the song is often heard louder, and appears more significant, more present than conversation) and the visual presence of the narrative creates a liminal timespace (cf. Gomel 2009: 18): characters are caught up in a liminal, apocalyptic temporality, which they personally only partially belong to. Moreover, the second audial motif present in this film are traditional Russian and Soviet folk and state-supported popular songs; these evoke the impression that there is another temporality right under the surface of the impending political transition. These "traditional motives" emerge in private (home), sacred (church) and imaginary spaces (wedding hallucination), as if revealing the *skazka* pole of the film.

Zhukova efficiently employs soundtrack as a means of embedding conflicting temporalities into the very texture and framework of all five of her films. The notorious *Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe! / Banda lesbiianok*, her second feature film has about as much to do with actual Paris (as an actual place), as it does with homosexuality. The film is set in a remote Russian community in winter, and revolves around a group of pubescent and adolescent girls, who live under the guidance of an adult woman, and are guarded by a middle-aged benevolent man in traditional Caucasian clothing, whom they address as Baban. The leading song of the film is “Tombe la neige” (The Snow Falls), a popular French tune released in 1963 and performed by Salvatore Adamo. Under the auspices of Russian snow and the French tune, often performed by the protagonists with a heavy Russian accent, the film follows the girls as they carve out their existence in this cold and sombre universe by luring prostitute-seeking men into their home, where they drug them and steal their money before releasing them to shamefully embrace the consequences of their lust. These consequences involve the unsuccessful “suitors’” inability to report the girls’ crime without being charged with participation in prostitution. The scent of Paris, transferred into the film by the French song and by one of the youngest girls’ desire to reunite with her mother, who allegedly lives in the French capital, wraps the film into a fairy tale ambience. The girls’ intimacy, depicted in several scenes exactly as overtly as the corporeal was almost canonically treated in chernukha cinema, reinforces this fairy tale timespace, which refers strictly to private space and to eternity. In this film, the framework created through the dominant soundtrack and the theme of amorous relations within this female collective, is eternal and unsustainable at the same time: the girls need Baban, who helps them manage their “clients” and protects them from the outside world; yet, they loathe Baban and eventually dispose of him, the youngest girl deliberately strangling him with a scarf. This highlights the structural hopelessness of the situation: a fairy tale is only possible in the presence of a foreign and potentially dangerous element in the “community”.

Zhukova’s third film, *Shou dlia odinokogo muzhchiny* (1992) opens up another dimension of structural inequalities and their role in shaping individual temporalities. If individual temporalities are subordinated to collective transition in *Noch’ dlinnykh nozhei* and pushed into the sphere of the fairy tale in *Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe!*, Zhukova’s first melodrama foregrounds the gap between *skazka* and Kafka in the realm of individual, private temporality. This film, a love triangle between a mother, the love of her youth (who does not know that he has a daughter from this woman) and their daughter (who does not know that the man she loves is her father), uses the ambience of Russian *nouveaux riches* to highlight the antinomies between publicly promoted values and individual desires. The film is framed by (mostly Soviet) pop-songs, which are heard and performed at a sea resort, where the melodrama takes place. The soundtrack not only once again hints at the proximity of *skazka* – the formal setting of the Soviet, too Soviet (for the post-Soviet context) resort – and Kafka – the horror imposed on the protagonists by what they

consider to be ruling socio-cultural norms – but also efficiently creates a stark contrast between the individual realities of the protagonists and the atmosphere of collective joviality stipulated by the resort.

The director's fourth film, a New Year's Eve fairy tale, *Sikimoku* (1993) opens up yet another facet of public-private coordinates in Zhukova's cinematic world. *Sikimoku* is another episode in a static, liminal world: the change that occurs at the end of the film is the beginning of a new year, coincident with a baby's birth and the appearance of an alien, detached Japanese woman who does not speak the language and cannot utter anything other than "Sikimoku!" – a word that does not mean anything in Russian. However, the only function of this finale in the film is to provide an irrational and unpredictable happy ending to the film, upholding the form of a fairy tale. The happy ending appears somewhat misplaced, as there is no real linear narrative to the film. The film progresses along the linear temporal axis of the impending beginning of a new year; however its internal temporality is cyclical, and hinges on a persistent tune, and on the protagonist's profession. The protagonist is a doctor, Dmitry, who is on duty on New Year's Eve, and has to attend to ambulance calls. His colleague, the ambulance driver, drives the duo around the city all night, so Dmitry can attend to the needs of patients who had called for an ambulance. As the film progresses, it turns out that none of the patients seeking medical help actually suffer medical issues: their main problem is loneliness and disorientation – aloneness, which they have not asked for, which they do not desire and which is even frowned upon by society. Dr. Dmitry's mission becomes to alleviate their Kafkaesque suffering for one sole night; the ambulance, where these "patients" all end up after Dmitry's visit, becomes a refuge for social outcasts, connected in space and in song: all of the passengers of the ambulance van are familiar with and appreciative of the same tune: "U moria, u sinego moria" (By the sea, by the blue sea). Interestingly, this evergreen tune, originally "Koi-no Bakansu" (Jap. 恋のバカンス), or "Holidays of Love" in English, performed by Japanese pop-duo "The Peanuts" in 1963, was translated into Russian by poet Leonid Debrenev and featured in several Soviet films: Soviet nouvelle vague classic *Nezhnost'* (Tenderness, dir. Elyor Ishmuhamedov, 1966), *Zarechenskie zhenikhi* (The Grooms of Zarechye, dir. Leonid Millionshchikov, 1967) and *Chyornyi kot* (Black Cat, 1989 television film). This song connects Zhukova's cinematic universe to the history of Soviet cinema, as does the common topic of contemporary New Year's Eve miracles, developed in popular films, such as director Eldar Ryazanov's *Ironiya sud'by ili s lyogkim parom!* (Irony of Fate, 1975) or *Karnaval'naya noch'* (Carnival Night, 1956). At the same time, unlike Ryazanov's works, Zhukova's everyday miracle in *Sikimoku* remains entirely restricted to the carnivalesque, i.e. temporarily egalitarian coordinates (cf. Montgomery 1994) of New Year's Eve. Nothing hints that any consequences of the miracle might transcend this fairy tale reality and manifest themselves in everyday life.

If *Sikimoku* creates a utopian collective world, grounded in the impossibility of self-sufficient individuality, popular cultural iconic images and tunes, and the

liminality of the timespace of New Year's Eve, following the trajectory charted by Noch' dlinnykh nozhei, Shou dlia odinokogo muzhchiny and Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe, Zhukova's last film pioneeringly explores an undercurrent, which remains underdeveloped in her previous works. Tango na Dvortsovoi ploshchadi no longer operates within a liminal domain. Rather than being set in transitional times, on vacation or during festivities, it explores the reality of transitional everyday life (and love). Zhukova's everyday post-Soviet Russian world is kept together by Soviet cultural patterns and their post-Soviet reverberations (inc. an elderly professor, meticulously exploring the prices and offer of telephone sex, advertised in the lo-cal newspaper), and Western 1960s and 1970s popular music (particularly "The Beatles"). Western popular music frames the somewhat light-hearted atmosphere of the film, and the deliberately superficially presented social context of the main theme: the development of an amorous liaison between two marginalized individuals. The privileged temporality of this film, however, is interpersonal, and is stressed by the sounds of tango, as if frantically navi-gating between a man and a woman, and trying to converge in the ups and downs of their passionate romance. This slow, gradual shift from a preoccupation with the collective, and with many facets of "transition", to post-transitional (and, according to Zhukova's cinematic worlds, post-apocalyptic) coordinates is not only framed by the choice and structural role of music in her films, but also resonates in other means that she uses in her constructions of cinematic subjectivities, which I will examine in the following paragraph.

Zhukova's Individual and Collective Subjectivities

Above, I described which strategies Zhukova typically uses to create different constel-lations between the individual and private realm, and the realm of collective experience. The framework of these constellations allows her to produce very peculiar subjectivities. If Iskra Babich's subjects mentioned in Chapter 2 are individual subjects who seek to reaffirm their individuality within a given community, Olga Zhukova's individuals are radically different. Zhukova's individuals rarely appear on screen alone, unaccompanied by others. Their bodies are not there for the sake of their owners, and their lives are not aimed at individual satisfaction. Rather, Zhukova's characters desire to belong within a community. If Babich's characters typically wish to find their space in a given world, and then contribute to the development of this world, Zhukova's characters are rid of any such far-reaching ambitions. Their chernukha alcohol-infused worlds are beyond salvation, and the only salvation they see and wish to achieve is collective unity. The only exception to this formula is Zhukova's last film, Tango na Dvortsovoi ploshchadi, which emerges from the ashes of a socio-political apocalypse, and prefers a specific kind of collectivity – love between two individuals, to any other.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed once again that all five films produced by Zhukova may productively (although certainly not exclusively!) be interpreted as elements from a single, Moebius-strip shaped corpus, and may be regarded as a single collective forma-tion. They are bound by intertextual references, which are

notable on both a meta level, relating to both the context of chernukha aesthetics, the director's stylistic attentiveness to the power and potency of music in the creation of convincing cinematic worlds and a single auteur-universe, governed by the same laws, as well as by very particular intertextual references, such as the song "U moria, u siniega moria", which appears both in *Noch' dlinnykh nozei* and in *Sikimoku*, as does the phrase "There is a place in Africa, where it rains all year long". They are also, all apart from *Tango*, conceived within liminal, pre-apocalyptic timespaces, and, as I shall elaborate below, concerned with the same issue of finding salvation in heterogeneous collective unity.

Sikimoku is perhaps the most telling illustration of this idea. The film brings together an array of individuals, uniting them in time (New Year's Eve), space (an ambulance car), and vocation (none, whatsoever). The rollercoaster ambulance drive through snowy Russian streets is initiated by a woman who calls the ambulance in order to prove to gossip flatmates of her communal flat that she, in fact, has a husband, who regularly writes her letters from the Polar Circle, where he is a doctor. Dmitry, the doctor who is on duty that night and responds to her call, is initially irritated by her cheekiness ("You need a psychiatrist, not me!" he scolds her), but gradually develops sympathy for her, even helping her rock the couch in her bedroom to convince the neighbouring elderly ladies that they are having spectacular sex. He takes her into his ambulance, where they are greeted by a musical band, which the ambulance driver had invited in to "warm up a little bit". As the night progresses, the group is expanded to include another "patient", young Anton, who was abandoned by his fun-loving parents and sister, and left alone on this festive night, an old lady who peculiarly cannot remember "if I am dead or alive", but can recount all of the details of her extremely long and intense life, and, finally, a lost Japanese woman, whose only utterance is "Sikimoku!", which no one understands. No hierarchy develops within the group, and no common code of conduct, apart from one rule: Dmitry the doctor should be waited for at all times (the rule is imposed by the ambulance driver). A similar group-maintenance principle is also at work in *Noch' dlinnykh nozhei* and *Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe!* These two films are based on group formation for the sake of community and, only secondarily, for the sake of survival. *Shchastlivogo rozhdestva v Parizhe!* illustrates this issue very well: a community of girls protected by an adult woman, and a man, Baban, evidently offers a more secure way of existence than a similar group without Baban. However, eventually, the youngest community member, a girl that Baban is shown to have friendly relations with, playing card games with her and showing her his tattoos upon her request, eventually strangles Baban with a scarf. The other girls see this but do not react. The gesture does mimic the way the girls treat their clients and (at the same time) perpetrators: they drug them, slightly strangle them and then let Baban carry them outside where they slowly regain consciousness. However, killing Baban, a friendly and useful male, is a strikingly irrational gesture. Because it is followed by a physical, amorous scene between the "gang" of girls and their leader, it may be interpreted as a gesture of rejection on the basis of non-identity.

The community sought by the girls excludes males altogether; it is a symbolic, hermetically closed bond, which tolerates no intrusion from the outside, even if this may cost it its sustainability (because who, if not Baban, will henceforth aid the group in their business ventures?) The community is most vividly depicted in terms of corporeality and colours: the girls' closeness is demonstrated in their carefully chosen and complementary clothing, at the same time hinting at their individuality and belong-ing to the group; furthermore, the girls' nude bodies, shown often, and not exclusively in scenes depicting intimacy, evoke the image of ethereal paleness, as if hinting that they belong to a different world than their male clients and Baban.

A similarly irrational principle of community formation and sustenance is to be observed in *Shou dlia odinokogo muzhchiny*. This melodrama, featuring the Russian nouveaux riches, i.e. a mother and a daughter at a luxurious sea resort, revolves around the desire of two women to belong with (and not necessarily to belong to) one man – Ivar, once upon the mother's (Anna's) lover. Ivar first engages in a passionate affair with Anna, but is increasingly irritated by her mood swings and unresolved past traumas. So, he turns to her daughter, Maria, who is a teenager, unfamiliar with intimacy, and becomes obsessed with Ivar, to the point of malevolently pushing away her mother. Anna watches the degradation of this otherwise idyllic family vacation, hesitating to inform Ivar that he is in fact involved with his own daughter. The melodrama drags on, sinking in increasing amounts of alcohol and tears, to find no resolution. Ivar tellingly exclaims towards the end of the film: "I wish I were dead! I am dead, you hear? I never existed!". However, he does not abandon the women.

Both *Shou* and *Shchastlivogo rozhdstva* activate desire, embodied by their female protagonists, as their driving principle. These characters' desire, which is directed towards communal belonging at all costs, intervenes into the coordinates provided by the liminal timespaces which set the frameworks of the films. This impulse of active and non-submissive female protagonists unmistakably transpires in all of Zhukova's films, perhaps most innocently and inconspicuously in *Noch' dlinnykh nozhei*. Here, an inexperienced prostitute is sent to a client's home. She is portrayed as far more self-confident and attractive than the said client – a middle-aged, balding, short and skinny man, who keeps his shirt and socks on while preparing for intercourse. He gives her money, stating: "This is an entrée." The prostitute eats the pack of bills, washing them down with a hearty sip of vodka. The man lays her down onto the bed and lies on top of her. After a few seconds, she panics, pushes him away, and runs out of the abandoned house without putting on any clothes. He runs after her, demanding his money back, but does not manage to catch her as she reaches the car where a driver is waiting for her. The driver is silent, but eventually enquires: "So, how much did he pay you?" "A lot," she replies. "So, where is the money?" he asks. "I ate it," she admits, unable to come up with any explanation for the act, but "I don't know."

D. CONCLUSION

Soviet narrative cinema occupies a particular juncture central to a socialist-feminist theory of cinema. There is one line leading from film narrative to the bourgeois narrative tradition, primarily that of the novel, that it taps and transforms. Another line leads from the visualization of space, personal and social, on the screen to the ways in which Soviet women and men perceived themselves in relation to the changing public sphere of socialism. And another leads from the representation of women as figures of private space, not directly to the lives of women in Soviet society but to the ways in which women in Soviet society imagined their activity and how they saw links between that activity and revolutionary consciousness (Mayne, 1980)

The image of cash, swallowed by our prostitute in *Noch' dlinnykh nozhei* without any particular reason, and washed down with vodka, just because the latter was on the table, is an illustrative example of chernukha portrayals of women on screen, produced by both male and female directors. It belongs to the filthy, physical, disoriented, abusive and abused universe of chernukha cinematography. However, the intention of this article was to demonstrate, that along with these explicitly defiant and socially-critical references, exposing the socio-political problems of a given time, perestroika cinema, particularly chernukha, offered an unprecedented amount of space and freedom to explore narrative, femininity, agency and genre in terms that they had not been addressed in earlier Soviet film history.

Therefore, if chernukha is to be assessed as an aesthetic mode, as proposed by Graham, two methodological remarks may be of particular use. Firstly, the universe of chernukha descriptors, which are relevant to the majority of chernukha films, should not be overstressed, obfuscating the internal heterogeneity of chernukha films. Chernukha style is just as useful as a palette of new "building blocks" for old models, as it is for constructing new, experimental worlds. Secondly, chernukha cinema may serve an interesting starting point for constructing alternative histories of Soviet cinema, revealing the persistence and continuities of certain topics, impulses, and issues. In this article, I particularly stressed the formalist and structural continuity between two female directors, Iskra Babich and Olga Zhukova, whose aesthetics may appear radically different if inspected from the surface, but whose attempts to construct alternative worlds, not governed by the principles of linear narrative and conventional social roles, but rather, by the principle of performative fluctuation, stand out and testify to an unexpected richness within two corpuses of Soviet film production: melodrama (Babich) and chernukha (Zhukova).

To conclude, this article wished to "get to the very bottom" or "to the (structural) flesh" underneath the surface of genre and formal features of Soviet cinematic excess, as demonstrated in Babich's melodramas and Zhukova's chernukha productions. In doing so, I wished to stipulate that close readings of overlooked cases from Soviet film history, which, sadly, a lot of works by female directors still belong to, to this day, may provide starting points for reassessments of the aesthetic potency of certain genres. Re-read through the lens of core spatiotemporal organizing principles, such films may unveil that more space than

existed and exists for articulations of female agency and aesthetics, than might have ever been anticipated in more standard analyses of film as representation. The readings of Zhukova's oeuvre and its contextualization within the legacy of Iskra Babich complements recent studies on the history, legacy, and strategies of Soviet and post-Soviet female film directors by providing a conceptual bridge that allows one to account for both their local, socio-cultural, and broader, global cinematic significance. Namely, it seems that the coupling of melodrama, chernukha, and productions by female film directors, is neither as evident nor as simple as it might seem to an essentialist eye. I tried to argue in this text, that what gave rise to the spurt of female agency within these formal coordinates, was primarily the organizing principle of excess, at work in both the genre of melodrama and the aesthetic mode of chernukha, which created a metaphorical umbrella or a greenhouse, which allowed for alternative, previously unforeseen subjectivities to bloom, flourish, and make inexplicably uncomfortable statements in a given context, statements, which are at the same time reasons to re-inspect these very films time and time again.

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