

The Emerging Identity as Expressed through Russian Art House Cinema

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union filmmakers from Russia have been forced to reconcile their problematic history with the ambiguity of the future. Andrey Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003) and Alexei Popogrebski's *How I Ended This Summer* (2010) are Russian films that focus on the cultural dialectic between the Soviet past and the emerging post-communist identity in contemporary Russian culture. My analysis will reveal the current Russian zeitgeist's interaction with its past by focusing on the symbolic importance of 'the father' in a patriarchal society and state paternalism.

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At an outing at the Russian Embassy this past October, a Russian diplomat asked me what aspect of his country I was studying. I replied by saying "Russian identity." He then asked me a poignant question, for which I was ill prepared. The diplomat looked me square in the eye and with a slight grin he said, "Tell me who I am."

Here, the ambiguity of identity and the broad nature of cultural identity studies pose problems. In the case of the diplomat, it would be impossible to answer his question without touching on a personal and individual perspective. Never should we presume to tell a Russian who he or she is within their cultural context - whether they are a diplomat, a director, a scholar, or an ordinary person. We must be wary and vigilant, for the trappings of creating an obdurate and dogmatic closed box demarcated as THE RUSSIAN IDENTITY.

Film is an important medium in the quest to unpack national identity. Andrey Zvyagintsev's *The Return* (2003) and Alexei Popogrebski's *How I Ended This Summer* (2010) are Russian films that focus on the cultural dialect between the Soviet past and emerging post-communist identities in contemporary Russian culture. I am not referring to the greater shift in all strata of society, but to a very specific age group in contemporary society. Specifically, to those who had been born during the collapse of the Soviet Union, who are now in their twenties to early thirties. The films mentioned act as self-portraits of current cultural, Russian identities, and address the multiple concerns found in constructing a post-Soviet cultural identity.

It is pertinent to actively seek out a healthy and well-informed understanding of Russian culture. We must not seek definitive answers, but put

forth a continued effort to understand the act of understanding. From the periphery, a Western scholar can see the issues at a distance, which can provide an objective view of the whole (Geertz 28). This Western scholar can even speak to the perception of Russian identity that is being transmitted internationally, whether it is explicit or implicit, deliberately crafted or unintentional. In contrast, a Russian scholar's perspective is intimate in detail because of his or her immersion within their own culture. An amalgamation of both the distant and the immersed is necessary for a cohesive understanding of the totality of contemporary Russian culture. Russian cultural studies should be comprised of an amalgamation of both these parts.

Through analyzing collective memory in conjunction with contemporary concerns, it is possible to gather an understanding of the contemporary Russian cultural atmosphere, as ever evolving as it may be (Olick 3). The goal is not to tell Russians who they are, but rather, to create a balanced picture through deep and open minded research and analysis. We must investigate the various layers in identity by using a variety of cultural sources.

Cinema as a source of cultural study has varying degrees of academic acceptance depending on genre, mode and perceived readability. Film is a constructed narrative, not a documentation of actual events; it is not purely empirical. However, this visual representation and narrativization of culture has benefits that no other medium can provide. The early film theorist Béla Balázs famously wrote that film is the “the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh. Man will become visible once again” (Balázs 70). A three-dimensional human appears before us on a two-dimensional screen, in which we interpret his identity through his facial expressions, gestures and postures. His being is communicated to us through his visible presence. Balázs refers to his belief that the discovery of the printing press decreased mankind's ability to relate visually to the moving world and each other. Prior to the ubiquity of the printed word people frequented and learned from their outings to carnivals or cathedrals. In exterior locations they huddled together and visually read each other. They had a reverence for physical communication and were astute at reading minute details in each other's posture, gestures and physicality. He believed that “the discovery of the printing press had rendered the human face illegible”. Since the advent of distributable writing, humans ceased to be seen and instead were conceptualized. Gestures, mannerisms, and tones of speech, all ceased to be studied in favour of the bare dehumanization of man as concept.

Man has never been more visible than in our contemporary society. In our increasingly visual culture, film is still a medium, which not only acts as a creative outlet for the director and film crew, but also creates an impression upon its audience. Films are available “everywhere and [in] every way” through a

multitude of viewing platforms (Acland). Films from around the world are widely accessible, and as the audience, we are subject to impressions of other cultures from the comfort of our own homes.

Russian cinema has a long history of being conscious of its unique power of expression and impression. Cinema has historically held a special place in Russian politics and policy. Lenin's declaration that cinema will be the tool for furthering revolutionary sentiments, especially with illiterate peasants, to Mosfilm's strict censoring of filmmakers and their dangerously "creative" ideas (Beumers *Pop Culture Russia* 2) reflects this. Contemporary Russian cinema is ripe with trends of the past, as the lines between monitored, state condoned films and "Other" still exists today.

Contemporary Russian cinema has two main branches: mainstream cinema, with high domestic ratings and large budgets, and art cinema, which is made on small budgets and by reoccurring auteurs. Mainstream Russian film is often used as a cultural source due to its quantitative nature. Mainstream cinema is largely accepted domestically, which is evident in its big budgets funded by oligarchs, supplemented by government funding, and high audience attendance (Beumers *Pop Culture Russia* 11). It is easy to make the claim that because of the higher attendance rate, Russian mainstream film is more easily identified with by the audiences. The accepted and sponsored images have a greater chance to seep into the consciousness of the majority, who are looking for light-hearted and escapist entertainment. These mainstreams films partake in exemplifying the Russian spirit, and are accepted as such. These films, with their government backing and big business funds, are limited in their scope of subject matter. Rarely, if ever, do they show a portrayal of Russia that may be deemed to be controversial by the State or its people.

Russian art cinema is unique because it premieres outside of Russia proper at international film festivals such as Cannes, the Venice Film festival, and Berlin Festival, to name a few. The first audiences are a mix of nationalities and probably comprise more Russian émigrés than citizens. As these films are premiered within international platforms and removed from the Russian national microscope, these films can pursue a specific idea, rather than strictly adhere to traditional topics in mainstream Russian film. Usually, current concerns and questions of identity are not neatly presented and answered for the audience within art films.

While there are fewer restriction on the content within Russian art cinema today, they are forced to contend with more setbacks during production, such as lower viewership and minimal funding. The freedom of expression and choice in subject matter allows art house cinema to pursue issues and concerns that are not politically compliant. Russian art house cinema is a qualitative source

due to its under-the-radar nature and low domestic popularity, coupled with the rarity of major, national theatrical releases. It is a source that can show precarious subject matter that exists or is developing within the Russian psyche, often visually highlighting topics of unease on the silver screen. These films can elaborate upon or qualify uncertainty, especially when it has to do with Russia's future and its past.

German New Wave Cinema emerged to resurrect a dying film industry ruined during National Socialist party rule. The same cinema had a more difficult task, which was dealing with and coming to terms with Germany's Nazi past. Contemporary Russian cinema, too, shares this burden of creating a new national Cinema while addressing its Soviet past. In her book *A History of Russian Cinema* says, Birgit Beumers states that:

After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the issue of national identity dominated many cinematic narratives, but also debates among filmmakers about the role of Russian cinema in society. Soviet identity disappeared and made way for the formation of a new Russian identity (212).

Russia had to go through the process of shedding its old Soviet identities while creating a new one. Beumers argues this was the case in films produced during 1992 -2000. However, art films well into the 2000s are still addressing the obstacles in building a new Russian identity, all while reflecting on a past Soviet identity, which still exists within the psyche of Russian culture.

The Return, directed by Andrey Zviagintsev, and *How I Ended This Summer* directed by Alexei Popogrebski, are two prime examples of how this notion of identity, born out of a divorce from the past, remains cinematically unsolved. Film has the ability to break spatial and temporal rules. Only in film can the past and present meet in what appears to be the same physical space. Both films employ the intergenerational gap between fathers and sons as a way to create a dialogue between the past and present. The father figures are reincarnations of the "remembered" Soviet past, while the sons are still constructing their own identities within a new Russia. In both films, the sons are searching for something, while the fathers are dictating, trapping them in heated pedagogical discourse, which functions as the dramatic turning point or climax.

The Return is about the return of a father into the lives of his two sons, Andrei and Ivan. He appears suddenly after being absent for most of their lives and forcefully takes them on a coming of age journey (Barker 375). The father is shrouded in mystery; he is not even given a name. The life he has led is never

talked about, only hinted at through his meeting with a secret contact, and his inability to eat “anymore” fish.

The father and his identity represent the Soviet past. He is hardened, stern, violent, unpredictable, secretive, vigilant, and consumed with procedure and timeliness. This authoritative, and at times tyrannical, father figure harkens back to the stately paternal figures such as Lenin or Stalin. The patriarchal society saw the father as loving in his assuredness and strength. These historical statesmen were also responsible for dictating and influencing Russian identity.

The two sons behave differently when confronted by their father’s assured position of dominance. Andrei becomes subservient and fearful. He seeks his father’s approval in much the same way a henchman to the regime would. He obediently wears his father’s watch while keeping his father’s time. He tries desperately to avoid confrontation, and ultimately does the will of whomever he is with. Andrei cannot be a leader while the father is alive (Hashamova 171). Ivan stands in juxtaposition to his brother. He is rebellious and suspicious of his father’s parental status. Ivan frequently disobeys his father’s commands, even after receiving repetitive punishments of increasing severity. Ivan is selfishly fighting for his own freedom to pursue his own enjoyment. Ivan’s rebellion is strong but not moralistic. The sons’ demeanors are reminiscent of two extreme archetypes that are coping with the imposing Soviet government.

The father’s death serves as the metaphorical demise of the Soviet Union. Much like the real end of the Soviet period, it has not been premeditated but ended abruptly. He climbs up a dilapidated tower, chasing Ivan, who in his final protest screams, “I could have loved you if you were different.” His statement signifies the break between the way the system was in practice, versus the ideological promises after the revolution. His words speak of the disillusionment felt by the original communist advocates. The father falls off the tower to his death, yet this does not mark the end of the film. The sons have to deal with his corpse, which brings us to witnessing them attempt to deal with the cadaver that is the Soviet identity.

In this abrupt shift of power, Ivan crumbles and Andrei naturally mimics his father’s previous behavior. Andrei adopts his father’s removed and dutiful attitude; doing what needs be done with little sentimentality (Hashamova 175). While dragging the father’s corpse across the island, the camera focuses on the watch that is on Andrei’s wrist; he is still wearing his father’s watch and keeping his time. This is a logical progression for Andrei, in that those who were close and subservient to the previous Soviet leadership kept their positions of power, even with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this way the roles of power do not change dramatically, but instead pitters out slowly over time.

The film ends with the accidental burial of the father. While the sons

leave their father's corpse in the boat, the boat springs a leak and begins to sink. The immediate reaction of both brothers is to cry out to the corpse. They scream in unison "Papa, Papa, Papa!" as if realizing that he is actually gone and pleading with him not to go. This reaction from the sons is one that we have previously not seen in their interactions with their father. Their reaction of despair is one coloured with regret, fondness, longing, and even love; this reaction is one that evokes feelings of nostalgia. For Ivan, this exemplifies is the longing for an authority to fight against, and for Andrei, the longing of an authority to please.

Zvyaginstevev does not venture into what will become of the children, and thus, what will become of the new Russian identity. *The Return* is, just as the title signifies, the return of the past. The confrontation of the new generation with the Soviet past is necessary for the creation of a new and progressed separate identity. According to the visual imagery and narrative of *The Return*, there has to be a break from the Soviet identity so that a new contemporary Russian identity can evolve.

Seven years later, the same confrontations between the past and present, between father and son, reappear in Alexei Popogrebski's *How I Ended This Summer*. This film is about a young technocrat named Pavel, who is sent on an internship to a meteorological outpost in Northern Siberia. Pavel is a playful and lighthearted man in his twenties, and is completely reliant on technology, for both his work and for his personal well-being. Barely does a scene go by without showing him as 'plugged in', either by the headphones round his neck, his digital watch, or through his playing of war themed video games. This serves to reflect contemporary Russian youth, who enjoy the technological pleasures of a free market economy.

The Northern Siberian outpost is manned by Sergei, who is depicted as an ideal working man with a sense of duty to his position. He keeps a tight schedule and distrusts new advancements in technology. He keeps a handwritten ledger and relies on information physically collected from weather measuring apparatuses. He is a man in favor of mechanical machinery. The Soviet naval uniform that he wears visually evokes his connection to the past. He is the doppelgänger of the father from *The Return* in that he mirrors the same threatening and hardworking Soviet characteristics.

As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Sergei feels that it is his responsibility to turn Pavel into a real Soviet man, or a Stankovite, a man who keeps a tight schedule as though he is being watched. Sergei uses tactics of paranoia and the threat of danger to make Pavel aware of Russia's harsh reality. Sergei tries to forcefully take Pavel out of his digital fantasy world by making him aware of the invisible threats that exist within Russia.

A radioactive isotope beacon plays a key role in filling the air with a

sense of invisible danger. Ultimately, the beacon acts as validation for Sergei's paranoia. Despite this unseen but ever present source of instability and harm, there is never any true danger at hand. This is a cultural mnemonic that harkens back to the memory of Chernobyl, and the dangers of everyday life under a regime that kept so much hidden from its citizens. Sergei makes certain that Pavel knows that Siberia has its dark secrets, specifically citing the year 1935, which serves as a reference to the early period of the gulags and Stalinist terror. Once again, we see the paternal authority clashing with the new citizen. The patriarchal role of Sergei in this film does not die, as he does in *The Return*, but instead remains in the far depths of Russia, where he is both hidden and present. The film does not show the ramifications of these experiences. We do not see how his confrontation with the past affected his identity.

In these films, a struggle for power emerges: one in which both father figures use scare tactics, paranoia and heavy-handed threats to coerce their sons into becoming real Soviet men. Their failure to do so sets the path for a new identity however we do not get a glimpse of what the characteristics of this will be. Once the confrontation with the past is over, so are the films. In typical art cinema fashion, the endings leave problems unresolved, just as emerging post-Soviet identities are themselves unresolved. These films highlight major concerns facing the emerging identity: how will Russia deal with a haunting Soviet past and identity? Is it gone for good or is it lurking in the recesses of the collective unconscious? The current generations of Russia are faced with these questions. Despite them not having personally experienced life in the Soviet Union, they are unable to escape its legacy.

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