The Portrayal of Women in Russian Cinema Today: Some Preliminary Observations

The socioeconomic changes in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 have been radical. As a result of this social upheaval, traditional women’s roles, positive and negative, have been subjected to extreme pressure. Cinematic storytelling of the last twenty years has attempted to come to terms with these changing roles, to accurately reflect society. The shift to a market economy was accompanied by “calls for more rigid gender roles and a more determined process of gender socialization… [and] cinema has, again reflected these concerns,” (Attwood 363-364). Social failings have been criticized, and positive opportunities have been celebrated. Under communism, women were by law equal to men, but they “bore the double load of fulltime work and all domestic responsibilities… Russian women were in labor wherever they turned” (Goscilo 8). Most women held one or two jobs alongside taking care of the family and the home—for an additional 40 hours a week (Koval 31). Although by law equal in their right to work, women traditionally have not been equal at home. This is a facet of Russia’s historically patriarchal society in which women are subjected to the rule of the husband or the eldest male in the family. As we see in Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears (the heroine of which is a strong, single mother, going against traditional roles) (1980), traditional family roles were already under threat in the early 1980s, but the questioning of gender roles became an even more prominent theme in later films such as Little Vera (1988) (the heroine of which is a rebellious girl whose sexuality and actions lead to her family’s demise) and Intergirl (the heroine of which is a prostitute) (1989). The fall of the Soviet Union led to the accumulation of large numbers of highly educated women from Russia and Eastern Europe in sex industry jobs abroad since the early 1990s (Hughes 2005, 214). Ideas of post-Soviet femininity—including the traditional role
of wife and mother, and the prostitute or femme fatale – have been explored in the Russian cinema of the past 20 years.

In the early 1980s, under the conservative rule of Brezhnev, movies were not yet able to fully portray the grim realities of Soviet life due to strict censorship and state control of distribution. A few unpleasant realities begin to show up in *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1980), a Soviet blockbuster with over 85 million viewers. Most viewers consider this a happy movie. However, Katia life isn’t perfect. She is a single mother, has an affair with a married man, and her friend Liudmila’s life is falling apart as her marriage is failing, showing that marriage doesn’t guarantee happiness. Katia is unmarried and works in a particularly prestigious job in a factory. However, she fulfills a conventional gender role at the end of the movie when she chooses Gosha over her job, despite going thus far without a man in her life. She becomes a traditional Russian woman and mother. “Katia is rewarded with personal happiness only after she has made her contribution to social progress. The film’s popularity is largely due to its ‘feel-good factor.’ It shows that man can master his fate even in the most adverse circumstances” (Beumers 77) (emphasis added). However, Katia cannot master her own fate without losing a part of herself.

In the 1990s, there was little money or support for movie making in Russia. The studio system collapsed; there was no government funding, and most movies could be seen on TV or bought on film for about the same price as a movie ticket. After 1996, production picked up partly due to investment in serials and film production by television companies (Beumers, 74-75). In the 1990s, filmmakers were interested in rewriting the history of communism and Stalinism. It was a “time to consider the lessons to be drawn from the 1930s; to look for parallels in the quest of both decades, the 1930s and the 1990s; to define a new nationhood,” (Beumers
Burnt by the Sun (1994), which takes place during Stalin’s Great Purge, gained critical acclaim, winning the grand prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994, and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1995. Set in 1936, the past (before the Revolution) is portrayed as the happy life, one eventually destroyed by communism. The story focuses on a personal perspective of a historical period (when it was impossible for the individual to change the course of history under Stalin), and nostalgia for pre-Revolutionary life. This is contrary to overarching narratives of Soviet filmmaking, which focused on civil courage and the sacrifice of one’s personal life for communism (Beumers, 90). Marussia, though a lesser role in the movie, is a traditional woman who finds herself caught between two men she loves. Communism took her childhood love, Mitia, away from her, after which she became very depressed, even attempting suicide. Then she meets Colonel Kotov, the decorated communist Old Bolshevik soldier, and begins her life with him and their daughter Nadia. Mitia, who fought for the anti-communist White Army, returns as a secret police officer in order to arrest Kotov—who is not alarmed at this prospect, assured that his “father Stalin” will never turn his back on him. Marussia has difficulty choosing between the two men in her life. She is portrayed as an unstable and helpless woman, only happy with a man by her side.

The Thief, set in the late 1940s through most of the 1950s, is another movie that looks back on communism through the eyes of the 1990s. It was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and won the Nika Award for Best Picture and Best Director. A young single mother, Katia, and her son, Sania, meet a charismatic World War II soldier, Tolia, on a train. Tolia makes Sania call him “papa,” but his actions are not that of a true father. Fatherlessness is one of the movie’s main themes—the loss of fathers or men during World War II (Beumers 91). Tolia is a con artist who steals from communal apartments, after living with the
neighbors and gaining their trust when he treats them to a day out. Sania sees him stealing from their neighbors, as well as kissing another woman that is not his mother. Although Katia knows about his flaws, she still follows Tolia wherever he goes, and believes him when he says he will not steal any more. Katia is a traditional woman who cannot survive without her man once she has met him, although she did not have a companion before Tolia. Even when Tolia is sent to prison, Katia waits outside with the other mothers and wives, hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

*Lubov’ Morkov’* (or *Lovey Dovey*), released in 2007, the tenth most popular movie of the 2000s in Russia, provides a snapshot of contemporary upper middle-class life in Russia. Andrei, a successful divorce attorney, and Marina, a successful art dealer and gallery director, are growing apart after seven years of marriage. They decide to meet with a successful psychiatrist for one last shot at making it work. When they wake up the following morning, the unexpected happens. They have switched bodies. The switch brings out stereotypical gender roles. The first few moments when Marina is in Andrei’s body, she whines, screeches, and slaps “Marina.” When Andrei is in Marina’s body, Marina becomes slovenly—neglecting to wash herself, and wearing baggy clothes and no makeup. “She” becomes uncaring and irritable, and drinks all day. Comedy is often used to hyperbolize stereotypical behaviors, and *Lubov’ Morkov’* does this to the extreme regarding masculinity and femininity. Historically, the man as the superior power or oppressor jokes about the women as the inferior or oppressed to reassure himself of his own superiority (Rappoport 103). Implicit cultural beliefs about male and female roles are at the root of this gendered humor; thus *Lovey Dovey* displays a cross-section of gender stereotypes in Russian culture today.

In the early 1980s as a result of Gorbachev’s glasnost’, or “openness,” movies such as *Little Vera* and *Intergirl* begin to portray a different reality from what we find in earlier Soviet
movies. The despair and dullness of everyday rural Russian life in Soviet Russia are evident in *Little Vera*. Although written in 1983, it was not produced until 1988, before which the director Vasili Pichul and screenwriter Maria Khmelik took it to every studio in the USSR. It was rejected repeatedly for its content, and was later known as “the first ever Soviet sex film,” (Beardow 8). Khmelik said she wrote the screenplay “as ‘a biting indictment of the misery which the “heroic proletariat” was consigned by the Soviet leadership’” (Beardow 2003, 4). Pichul stated that, “‘the film is an attempt to come close to the abyss of our life today… actually our life is even darker, and yet I remain an optimist,’” (Beardow 5). The film was a success, garnering over 55 million viewers at a time when attendance at cinemas was decreasing (Beumers 72).

Vera, a rebellious young woman, meets Sergei at a Saturday night concert, and eventually becomes engaged to him. Vera, which also means “faith” in Russian, is truly a femme fatale; her involvement with Sergei lead herself and her whole family into destruction. Because of her actions, her alcoholic father almost kills Sergei, which puts him at risk for being sent to jail. Vera becomes “ruined” as her family falls apart. Vera was also the first young girl to be depicted in a sexual light, and the first naked woman in a Soviet film.

*Intergirl* (1989) was the first Soviet film to acknowledge the existence of prostitution in the USSR, and to portray this grim reality to the masses. The absence of the prostitute in Soviet discourse was “necessitated by the supposed eradication of prostitution as a social ill;” (Borenstein 83) thus the production of this movie, even during perestroika, was groundbreaking. Tatyana, “the image of the perestroika prostitute,” (Borenstein 85) is underpaid in her job as a nurse and becomes a prostitute working for international clients. The new source of income helps to pay for her sick mother’s care. Tatyana learns about life outside of the USSR, and decides to marry her Swedish client to escape from Soviet Russia. However, in her new life,
she faces different challenges. She suffers from homesickness and cannot escape the stigma of being a former prostitute. Her only source of solace is her friendship with a Soviet truck driver; he eventually loses his job. Her mother commits suicide when she finds out about Tanya’s past as a prostitute. Tanya herself dies in a car accident. With 41.3 million viewers, this movie had the highest Soviet distribution in 1989. One political reading of this movie interprets the prostitute as a symbol of Soviet society as a whole, that everyone is being forced into prostitution. Tanya’s story also can be seen as an allegory of Russia’s relationship with the West, in which Russia sells herself to foreign suitors, but is overcome by nostalgia and regret (Borenstein 86). Even ten years after its release, Intergirl is blamed for the prostitution problem in Russia, even by major newsmagazines. Many find that the media has glamorized and romanticized prostitution to the extent that people are unable to differentiate between liberalization and exploitation (Hughes 225).

Many movies since the fall of communism have drawn inspiration from Little Vera and Intergirl, the groundbreaking Soviet movies that portrayed women in sexual roles. Vera’s single-handed destruction of herself and her family in A Driver for Vera recalls the theme of Little Vera. A Driver for Vera, produced in 2004 by Pavel Chukhrai, is set in 1962 during the Khrushchev Thaw, a period when Soviet politics were slightly liberalized but remained fundamentally unreformed. The movie received mixed reviews; it was disqualified as a submission from Ukraine for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film because too much of its production was Russian-based, but it won Best Screenplay and Best Director at the Kinotavr Film Festival in Sochi. Vera, a general’s daughter, is a passive-aggressive and angry woman who is lame due to a childhood illness and has been impregnated by a man she barely knows. She is portrayed as sexually promiscuous and manipulative. Viktor is assigned to be
General Serov’s driver, but becomes a servant, spy, supervisor, and potential suitor to Vera. Another servant, Lida, also portrayed as flirtatious and sexually promiscuous, throws herself at Viktor. He ignores her, until he rapes her and returns to ignoring her. Vera, who gets pregnant out of wedlock, becomes a disgrace to her father and his high status. Due to a KGB plot, General Serov is betrayed and killed by his friend, Captain Savelev. During their escape from Savelev, who attacks their house in his betrayal of Serov, Vera is killed, and the child is left with no one but Viktor. He leaves the child with Lida at the end of the movie, and promises to return. The movie constructs a dichotomy between the natural beauty of the scenery and human suffering, but ultimately it has hope in humanity and advocates a life of beauty without suffering (McCausland).

In *Franz + Polina* (2006), Polina is portrayed as an unintentional femme fatale. This movie can be seen as a “watered down” version of Ales Adamovich’s original version of the screenplay, which was edited by Vladimir Stepanovich, director Segal, and cinematographer Maksimo Trapo— all credited with writing the “dialogue” (Youngblood) but with the financial backing of multiple countries, including Russia, Belarus, and Germany (Youngblood). This movie tells the story of a Belarusian village occupied by German soldiers in 1943 during World War II, where Franz, a German soldier, becomes infatuated with Belarusian Polina. Polina coyly encourages his interest and flirts with him, although they don’t share a common language. She resists him, however, as soon as she suspects him of attempting to be physical with her. Later, Franz’s unit receives an order to burn and destroy the town that they have peacefully inhabited because of Franz’s interest in Polina. Franz kills his captain in order to save Polina and her mother, becoming an enemy of both armies. They go on the run. Polina and Franz come across partisan soldiers, including Polina’s brother, who is very happy that Polina and her mother are
alive. Later, Polina’s mother dies of a broken heart when she is unable to save the lives of her friends in the village. Franz and Polina end up making love in a shack, when feral dogs attack them. Later, in contact with partisan soldiers, Polina tries to pass Franz off as her deaf mute brother, though she is eventually shot. Franz saves her, killing a German guard in order to buy medicine. They meet up with other refugees, continuing to lie about Franz’s nationality, though the refugees eventually discover his true identity. Kazik, a young boy seeking to avenge the death of his family, plans to kill Franz—no one can convince him otherwise. When Franz goes into the woods to fetch Polina water, there is a shot—Polina screams. Polina, no matter her intentions, is a true femme fatale. She leads Franz to betray his commanding officer in her village and finally to his death at the hands of Kazik.

Another movie reminiscent of Little Vera and Intergirl, is The Spot (2006). The Russian title, Tochka, means a corner or point, and refers to where a prostitute can be found. The Spot won the Chicago International Film Festival Silver Hugo, and was nominated for the Grand Prize at the Festival at the Sochi Open Russian Film Festival. It deals with the problems of prostitution and sexual trafficking in Eastern Europe. “According to estimates from the International Organization for Migration, between 1991 and 1998, 500,000 Ukrainian and Russian women had been trafficked to the West” (Stojanova), a problem that Stojanova believes has been ignored by Russian fictional cinema since Intergirl. One possible reason that media in general ignores this problem is that communist ideology officially did not consider prostitution within the social discourse. It was seen as foreign and beyond the code of decency promoted by the traditionally repressive society (Stojanova). The movie concerns the lives of three prostitutes in Russia, and the grisly realities they face. The three main prostitutes—Ania, Kira, and Nina—are forced into prostitution due to various circumstances in their lives, told in flashbacks. The pimps, the police,
and the clients all abuse their power to take advantage of the girls’ situations. Compared with other movies on similar themes, this movie includes few scenes of graphic physical and psychological abuse. The film’s bleak outlook on prostitution—with none of the pretty clothes, fancy parties, or heroic male figures of other films—is reminiscent of post-Perestroika chernukha—which emphasizes the darkest, blackest, bleakest moments of life during perestroika.

The Spot contains a message generally expected from a documentary: look at these circumstances, understand the problem, do something about it.

Gloss (A Bitter Comedy about the Sweet Life), released in 2007, is about a provincial girl, Galia, who goes to the big city with dreams of becoming a supermodel. In an interview with Rossiiskaia Gazeta, writer and director Andrei Konchalovskii, “frames his motivation for the film in terms of revealing the difference between real life and ostentation to Russian viewers who may live in poverty and yet escape into fantasy by reading glossy magazines” (Razor). This movie reflects a deteriorating feminine condition, similar to Little Vera and Intergirl in the 1980s. Its characters’ preoccupation with class, luxury, and notoriety acts as a portrait of Putin-era Russian “glamour.” Konchalovskii stated that, “Gloss, in my understanding, is a certain world where everyone is white and fuzzy. We all want to get there. And when we leave this glossy world, we find ourselves in… [real] life,” (Mesropova). When Galia gets to Moscow, she doesn’t make it as a supermodel, but begins working as a housekeeper to Petia, who runs a “dating” business. She eventually becomes his assistant, and then a “chick for sale.” In Petia’s business, a woman is literally transformed and “packaged” into an image that fits the clients’ wants for about $70,000 per “unit,” meaning per girl he repackages. Galia’s fairy-tale metamorphosis is seen from a cynical and repulsive angle (Mesropova 2008) that is parallel to Tanya in Intergirl, in that Galia sells her body and her soul in a symbolic form of market
exchange. The difference is that Galia becomes a commoditized object for a Russian, not a Westerner, like Tanya. In this “cautionary tale about ‘soulless’ consumer culture,” (Mesropova 2008) Galia, originally a strong protagonist, fails to develop a sense of true agency and objectifies herself by going blonde to resemble Grace Kelly and selling herself to her client. As in *Intergirl*, Galia presumably meets an untimely death, when her jealous ex-boyfriend shoots her at the end of the movie. Even if she survives the shooting, she will die a spiritual death living with her oligarch.

The portrayal of a woman as either traditional homemaker or femme fatale has been reinforced in many popular movies since the fall of communism, but is there a middle ground between the two dichotomous roles in contemporary Russian society and cinema? In regard to culture, one theory is that “a society not only has geographical boundaries (occupies a certain physical territory) but also occupies a cultural territory (a moral space)… Members of society are subject to some central moral values,” (Erikson, in Lalo and Schitov, 177). Where is this moral space in Russian society? Communism rejected American and western society and its emphasis on individualism, supporting communal and social success. The feminist movement in Russia has been very far behind the western world, almost non-existent, with the exception of some small groups. The Cinderella-type story of American culture has never been popular in Russia. The release of *Waiting for a Miracle* in Russia, which received financial support from the American company Sony, demonstrates one instance of its unpopularity. The film is about a young girl who is chubby and not well liked, who finds mystical powers in her life that help make her more beautiful and popular. The film was heavily advertised to a younger audience that would understand its references to popular American movies. The advertising campaign featured a pop rock soundtrack and the catchy slogan “Help Maiia reach her goal!” It may have attained
some commercial success, but many reviewers rejected it as a plausible Russian reality. According to MacFadyen’s recent article, “The Presumed Threat of Digital Culture to Russian Cinema,” “Maiia does, however, manage to buck tradition (or her cultural subconscious!) and get things together. This social talent was not well-liked by Russian critics. It simply wasn't real.” Another critic commented that, “There's a typically American approach to life here. A Western Cinderella won't hope for a miracle, she'll rely on herself. She'll never lose her slippers, running away from the Prince, in fact quite the opposite. She'll be wearing shoes by Prada on her way to a date with the Prince” (Zavarova). Some went so far as to call the movie ridiculous, while others compared it to *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979). The characters of *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* were called Cinderellas by the Russian press, since the women tried to forge their own destinies, although within the realities of Soviet life. However, it seems that most—other than young teenage Russian bloggers who said it was “very classy,” and “simply super” (Kinoafisha)—found *Waiting for a Miracle* not reflective of Russian culture or attitudes, thus rejecting the American stereotypes and common portrayals of women in media.

*The Balzac Age (Or All Men are Bast...),* the Russian version of *Sex and the City,* is another example of Russian culture taking an American discourse and changing it to fit Russian society. It is about four fashionable friends in their thirties, who help each other through the trials and tribulations of being single—in this case, in Moscow. The director, Fiks, bases the show on *Sex and the City* by “employ[ing] the same building blocks used to construct *Sex and the City*—comparable characters, an endless series of dating calamities, stylish settings, and a comedic streak to counterbalance the melodrama of romantic disappointment. However, one has to wonder how well these building materials fare in contemporary Russia...where the feminist movement stands on increasingly shaky ground,” (Seckler). However, the show does defy many
Russian stereotypes about women that are often portrayed in the media. It shows the women in their thirties, not as old biddies or nagging wives, but as attractive working women who date and cultivate strong friendships. It does, however, insert each character into stereotypical female roles as the mother, the gold-digger, the one who cannot keep a man, the one who is constantly manipulated. Thus in one sense, the show refuses to challenge the limited social functions available to women. The era of third-wave feminism in America, during which Sex in the City was created and became popular, cannot be translated to pre-feminist Russian society (Seckler). Even the actresses and director do not challenge the roles or stereotypes that are being portrayed by these women. In an interview, actress Iulia Menshova (Vera, the mother figure) said, “Of course, a career and independence are good, but a woman is created to have a family.” Lada Dens (Alla, the lawyer) said, “I don’t understand feminists. It seems to me that those unhappy women are simply not lucky in life with men. Happiness is having your favorite man, with whom you hope to have children, nearby. I, for example, have two children and dream of a third” (Seckler).

Portrayals of the traditional Russian wife and mother and the prostitute or femme fatale are still present in popular and highly acclaimed contemporary Russian films. Since Russian culture and society has questioned the capability of American media to convey Russian values, where is the middle ground between these two portrayals for Russian cinema? The answer lies in a modified version of western or American ideals, changed to fit the history and culture of Russia. The absence of a feminist movement in Russia continues to figure in the marginally individualized and “traditional” portrayals of women in Russian cinema.
Works Cited


*The Balzac Age, or All Men are Bast...* 2004-2007. Produced and directed by Dmitrii Fiks. 34 episodes. NTV.


*Franz + Polina*. 2006. Produced by Oleg Urushev, directed byMikhail Segal. 119 minutes. Iugra-Film Company.


**Little Vera.** 1988. Directed by Vasilii Pichul. 128 minutes. Gorky Film Studios.

**Lovey Dovey.** 2007. Directed by Aleksandr Strizhenov. 94 minutes. Vox Video.


**Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears.** 1980. Directed by Vladimir Menshov. 142 minutes. Mosfil’m.


