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Russian Masculinity: How Russian Blockbusters Have Shaped Perceptions of Masculinity in the Past Two Decades

This paper will address the concept of masculinity as it is portrayed in four Russian films spanning two decades: Brother (Alexei Balabanov, 1997), Brother 2 (Alexei Balabanov, 2000), 9th Company (Fyodor Bondarchuk, 2005), and Admiral (Andrei Kravchuk, 2008). These four movies, two of which appeared during the Yeltsin era and the other two during Putin’s presidency, document evolving perceptions of masculinity in Russian cinema. They were selected for this paper simply due to their blockbuster status. The cultural impact of the films is to some extent measurable according to number of tickets sold. Themes of the monetary wealth, criminal involvement, and sexual exploitation that characterized Yeltsin’s regime transition to military accomplishment and the fulfillment of patriotic duty in cinema under Putin. The paper will analyze these evolving perceptions of masculinity with reference to changing socio-cultural contexts.

Ruling from 1991 to 1999, Boris Yeltsin was the first President of the Russian Federation. During this time Russia underwent multiple economic crises, the first war with Chechnia, and an enormous scandal surrounding the presidential election in 1996. Many Russians were skeptical of the effectiveness of Yeltsin’s political and economic reforms. The period was marked by general pessimism in civic and political life. “The government that was formed was without any clear ideology… It was based solely on personal greed… Organized crime networks replaced the state security services as centers of power” (Raimondo). The Yeltsin administration “dissolved the rule of law in the acid of corruption and criminality” (Raimondo).
The Russian people became “demoralized” (Raimondo) as “socio-cultural degradation became a factor of the lives of millions of people” (Prokofiev and Maksimenko).

Yeltsin-era films *Brother* and *Brother 2* drew upon archetypal features of post-Soviet masculinity in their depictions of mafioso men who obtain power through criminal means, who are sexually promiscuous, and who possess staggering wealth. Director Aleksei Balabanov sought a realistic depiction of the typical Russian male in the 1990s. He selected Sergei Bodrov, who Balabanov described as an “ordinary” and “typical” (Serebriakova) Russian man, to play the protagonist, Danila. Balabanov modeled Danila’s story after what, in his opinion, all men who returned from the First Chechen War were faced with – the choice of being either a vigilante or a criminal (Serebriakova).

*Brother* portrays a Russian socio-economic system dominated by organized crime networks with a single person in charge of several henchmen who protect and carry out the biddings of the boss. The plot opens with Danila’s return to his provincial hometown. Its location and name are left unspecified, implying that it could be anywhere. At home, Danila’s mother is distressed by his lack of purpose and urges him to find his brother, whom she hopes will assist him in making a living. Danila then travels to St. Petersburg, where he meets a drug addict named Kat and finds his brother, Victor. Kat takes notice of his Sony Discman – a valuable commodity in 1990s youth culture – but comments that he needs nicer clothes. Viktor enlists Danila as a hitman in the mafia organization that he works for, and the latter obtains a sizable amount of money that enables him to buy fashionable clothes. Like many Russians during the Yeltsin Era, Danila discovered that working for the Mafia was instantly profitable. The clothes serve as a symbol of masculinity to both Danila and Kat. The monetary theme is explored further as Victor offers Danila money to avoid the repercussions of his criminal acts. As part of his
masculine image, however, Danila cannot refuse the challenge of a tough life earning his pay as a hitman. The film’s themes thus shape a vision of Russian (youthful) masculinity that equates illegally obtained wealth and its potential for shaping personal image with ‘manly’ virtues.

Money is not the only factor that defines masculinity in Brother. In the course of the plot, Danila becomes involved with multiple women, the first of which is Kat. Later in the film, Danila develops a relationship with Sveta, a married woman who has been abused by her husband. Danila protects Sveta and assaults the husband. While at a concert, Danila and Sveta meet Kat, who is instantly at odds with Sveta. Danila’s masculinity is further exemplified by his pursuit of multiple romantic relationships.

Honor is another attribute of masculinity portrayed in Brother. Danila prides himself on being a man of his word. While accompanying his two fellow henchmen on an assignment, Danila meets the director of a local television station who becomes mixed up in their assassination attempt. Danila tells the director that he is “responsible” for his safety. After the targeted man returns home and is murdered, the two henchmen move to kill the director who has seen enough to incriminate them. However, Danila kills the henchmen first, honoring his word to protect the innocent director. In another instance, Danila stands by his principles of right and wrong when he protects an old German man from a hustler upon first arriving in St. Petersburg. Danila in part cultivates his masculine image by following through on his commitments.

Danila thus is the quintessential Yeltsin-era criminal. He has money in times of economic hardship, carries on several romances at once, and possesses an (ironically) moralistic view that opposes domestic violence and theft. Danila’s vigilante character must be interpreted as a response to the dissolved rule of law in the 1990s.
Brother offers a few distinct social criticisms at its close. Viktor betrays Danila, setting up a trap intended to kill him. When Danila fights his way out of the pitfall, he forgives Viktor and sends him home to their mother. Afterward, Danila goes to Sveta’s intending to throw her husband out and winds up shooting him in the leg. Sveta breaks down and chastises Danila for his careless act. She asks him rhetorically what it means to him to be killing people. Here Balabanov exemplifies the chaos and confusion that the average Russian endured during the Yeltsin era. Danila, though upholding his masculine obligations, fails to impress or satisfy the woman he cares about, leaving her distraught. Danila becomes upset at the result of both situations and leaves St. Petersburg for Moscow. The film ends with Danila uncertain of where he is going or what will become of him as he stands on a snowy road waiting for someone to give him a ride to Moscow.

Brother 2 contains a similar message to the first film. Danila and Viktor travel to Chicago to settle an issue concerning Dmitri Gromov, the brother of Danila’s Chechen war comrade, Konstantin, who was cheated out of money during the negotiation of his National Hockey League contract. Given the shaky legal system during the Yeltsin era, it is left to Danila and Viktor to handle things their own way. Danila feels a strong sense of camaraderie toward the friends he made in the war as well as with Viktor. His ability to look out for them is another example of his masculinity.

Brother 2 follows a similar pattern as Brother in defining masculinity through one’s rugged, criminal prowess, ability to make money, and suave relations with women. However, it also raises the issue of changes in the perception of masculinity during Putin’s regime as portrayed in cinema.
Vladimir Putin was the president of the Russian Federation from 2000 to 2008. During this time, Russia experienced a significant economic recovery, with a GDP of $1.61 trillion in 2008, up from $1.29 trillion in 1999 according to the World Bank and World Development indicators. Immediately after Putin took office, public spirits rose. Russian citizens saw him as a saving grace who rescued them from the Yeltsin era. Putin began his tenure by rebuilding the economy and attempting to reconcile the Russian population’s doubts about the future. The former Prime Minister of Russia said in London on November 20, 2007, “that a ‘KGB Spirit’ was dominating and haunting his country” (Tisdall).

The “KGB Spirit” surrounding Putin and his administration, along with the increase in foreign and international dialogue, cropped up in Russian cinema’s portrayal of masculinity. Putin, who held perhaps the most masculine position in all of Russia, evidenced his male supremacy by flaunting his wartime accomplishments and accolades earned while protecting his country from foreign espionage and international intelligence threats. Russian cinema switched from portraying the criminal underground as the easiest path to economic success to constructing military epics in which men defended their country and symbolized it on a global scale.

Unlike the first film, Brother 2 features Danila and Viktor abroad in the United States. Danila’s masculinity no longer merely rests on the amount of money he can accrue or the number of mistresses he has; it now depends on how he represents his country while abroad. Viktor, immediately upon arriving in Chicago and getting through customs, calls Americans “morons.” Danila runs into trouble when he attempts to protect Dasha, a prostitute, from her American pimp. Although Brother 2 begins the patriotic trend of masculinity that developed in the 2000s, it parallels Brother in that the protagonists behave less as soldiers than as criminals and gangsters, beating and shooting their way to the money that is owed to Dmitri. The vigilante
portrayal of masculinity from the 1990s, however, is complemented by an interest in upholding a positive international image of Russia in *Brother 2*.

*Ninth Company* is a film about the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. It tells the story of the 9th Company’s journey through military training and engagement in the war, culminating in a bloody battle in which the soldiers’ patriotism and loyalty are tested. According to Mos News, *Ninth Company* achieved a domestic record of $7.7 million at the box office in only five days after its release. It received the Golden Eagle Award for best feature film in 2006. The portrayal of masculinity in *Ninth Company* is more fleshed out than in the movies of the 1990s. *Ninth Company* shows the protagonists in their hometown in Siberia, waving goodbye to their families before they leave for the army. At this time, they are still naïve boys who don’t know what to expect from military service. Their first stop is the training camp, where the warrant officer tells them that here they are “nothing… shit… nobody.” Their training represents the first step away from their provincial childhood.

In Afghanistan, the soldiers participate in the horrors of war, fighting non-stop with enemy combatants. The action culminates with the events on Hill 3234, where each man fights to the death to protect and preserve the honor of his country. The bonds forged between the soldiers at training camp motivate them during the fight. The only man left standing, Oleg, is bloodied, beaten, and physically and mentally reduced to pulp when the commander comes to relieve him. Oleg reports that the mission was successful. The members of the 9th Company had fulfilled their duty to their country and held the hill. While *Ninth Company* defines masculinity as the ability to serve one’s country by leaving home and enduring all of its terrors of war, other films such as *Admiral* exemplify patriotic masculinity from a slightly different perspective.
Admiral is a historical epic that narrates the life of Admiral Alexander Kolchak, a rear admiral in the Russian Navy on the Baltic Sea during World War I. The film grossed $38,135,878 at the box office. In the first scene, Kolchak displays the masculine attribute of bravery, ordering his own ship into the mines they had just released in order to evade pursuing German ships. Kolchak crawls to the top of a gunnery tower amid the chaos of incoming German fire, mans a cannon, and single-handedly shoots and destroys the bridge of a German ship. Kolchak fulfills his duty to his country by standing strong in the face of danger instead of abandoning ship. He displays his patriotism and, correspondingly, masculinity throughout the film.

In the middle of the story, the Bolshevik revolution takes place in Russia. The Tsar is ousted, and the communists come to power, executing many of the old military officials and statesmen. Kolchak is approached by members of the new government and offered a high position in the new system. He refuses, stating that he is loyal to Holy Russia. To him, an imperial Russian, man it would be unacceptable to join the communists. Kolchak then leaves and travels across the country to Siberia where he waits to assemble the manpower to stage a counter-revolution. Eventually, after gathering enough troops and allies, Kolchak campaigns across the country aiming for Moscow. This innate drive to protect his country by defeating communist forces is seen as the source of Kolchak’s masculinity.

With the mass exposure to the cinema that exists in Russia now, youth culture is to some extent shaped by the ideals established in popular movies. For the parents of children throughout the Russian Federation, it has become apparent that “nourishing children’s minds through the media is like nourishing their bodies” (Anderson et al.) in the sense that it is neither simply achieved nor is something that can be overlooked. Russian youths are exposed to memorable
images in *Brother, Brother 2, Ninth Company*, and *Admiral* that potentially condition their perception of masculinity. A certain development in the images is discernible from *Brother* to *Ninth Company*. This is reflected in Danila’s lifestyle change; at first he leads a seemingly aimless life while struggling to survive, then transitions to a very structured life characteristic of Admiral Kolchak and the men of the 9th Company who fought for what they believed in. Danila, however, left the Chechen war with no higher ideal to sustain him, and his itinerant life of crime was the result.

The portrayal of masculinity in Russian cinema reflects changes in the socio-cultural climate of the 1990s and 2000s that correspond to the shift from the uncertainty and lawlessness of the Yeltsin Administration, qualifications set forth by the filmmakers, to what they see as the hope-inspiring Putin Administration. Balabanov stated in an interview that “he decided to make films for the masses — films that people want to see in the theater” (Klimova). Every director and producer identifies with the social and political atmosphere in their immediate context and adapts their projects to fit the conditions they identify in their society. The change in the times likewise corresponded to a change in Russian moviegoers’ preferences for subject matter. By the 2000s, audiences identified with themes of accomplishment and purpose rather than those of existential anguish and hopelessness.

**Works Cited**


Brat, 10 let spustya (Brother, 10 years later), dir. Alena Serebriakova (St. Petersburg: OOO Studiya 8, 2007).