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ORDER AND DISORDER IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN BLOCKBUSTERS

Introduction

One of the most striking phenomena in the Russian culture at the turn of the 21st century is the explosion of popular culture (detective literature and cinema, romance, fantasy) and its diversification. For a scholar, popular culture is interesting because, on the one hand, it reflects the state of mind of the population and, on the other hand, it helps to create a special 'populous' state of mind. It is a powerful tool for the political establishment that helps to convey an ideology because it is both entertaining and easily accessible. In this vein, modern fairy tales for adults can tell us a lot about the Russian society of our days.

Due to the powerful changes within the Russian society at the beginning of the 1990s, the market for literature and cinema was heavily influenced by the Western-type bestsellers and blockbusters. For example, first introduced in translation, the crime fiction became an almost universally celebrated genre, and by the middle of the 1990s, Russia's own crime fiction, represented by the novels by Aleksandra Marinina, Dar'a Dontsova, and Boris Akunin, dominated the literary scene. The television and cinema adaptations of these books only further promoted this genre.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the first heralds announcing the summer of the Russian cinema and the revival of the public interest for the Russian films were such films as *Bimmer (Бумер)* (Petr Buslov, 2003), *Antikiller (Антикиллер)* (Egor Mikhalkov-Konchalovskii, 2002), and *Don't Even Think! (Даже не думай)* (Ruslan Bal'tser, 2003), which produced gains that, while somewhat modest by American standards, were considered financial successes by Russian standards. The real blockbusters followed soon after on the Russian screen; *The Turkish Gambit (Турецкий гамбит)* (Dzhanik Faiziev, 2004), *Personal Number (Личный номер)* (Evgenii Lavrent'ev, 2004), and the urban fantasies *Night Watch (Ночной дозор)* and *Day Watch (Дневной дозор)* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2005, 2006) all generated very substantial profits.

In this paper, I intend to focus on the few Russian blockbusters and their sequels that are traditionally qualified as thrillers. My analyses will deal with the direct correlation between those films and their sequels, and, first and foremost, how the artistic universe created in these first films evolves and changes in their sequels. I would like to suggest that this evolution is highly reflective of the ideological changes within the Russian society itself.

Play with Moral Boundaries: The Victory of Indulgence and the Romantisation of the 'Bad Guy'

Most Russian action popular films and blockbusters are male-centered. They tell stories about fight between bandits and police, terrorists and secret services, and war games. In the end of the 1990s, many works featured bad guy(s) as heroes of crime fiction. Good examples of this trend are the film *Brother (Брат)* and its sequel *Brother 2 (Брат 2)* (Aleksei Balabanov, 1997, 2000). For the hero, Danila Bagrov,[1] to kill is a very easy process, he knows how to do it masterfully. But he does not kill for money, unlike his brother (the 'real' bad guy), and that fact turns him into almost a hero. This character is attractive and is played by a very popular Russian actor, Sergei Bodrov, Jr., and was perceived by the critics as the hero of the new times, a "naively cynical" (Kanavin) guy-next-door, a knight of our days, with a romantic aura. In the literature and cinema of those years, the killer figure is a perfect symbol of a new era without restrictions *(беспредел)*. Sergei Bodrov, Jr. describes his character as a pioneer in the original chaos of a lawless world. He is the one "who creates the rules and decides who is 'ours' *(наш)* and who is the enemy, while moral and religion will appear later." (Karahan) In that sense, because of that 'untouched by civilization' characteristic *(первобытность)*, he does not possess any knowledge of the social scene common to people of his age; he is like formless clay, which is represented by the shapelessness of his character. His face is expressionless, he smiles, in a very childish and almost retarded way, only when he hears music. This kind of hero can be seen as a reaction to and a rebel against the Socialist realist positive hero, who always made morally approved choices but also as a post-Soviet embodiment of the Ivan-the-Fool from the Russian fairy tale.

[1] Danila, played by Sergei Bodrov Jr., is a young man who just returned from military service, perhaps from Chechnia (it is not explicitly said, but the intertextual link with *The Prisoner of Caucasus (Кавказский пленник)* (1996), Sergei Bodrov's film, where his son also plays the principal role, suggests that). He goes home and understands that he has nothing to do there, and comes to Petersburg where he finds his brother, who happens to be a professional killer. Danila himself becomes a killer, initially to help his brother and, in the second film, to offer protection to a friend, and to a prostitute.

Another film of this era, *Bimmer,* is a road movie which shows four young villains who, after stealing a car, embark on a last trip to try to escape unharmed from another gang. All the narrative perspective is biased: the spectator is in the position of a virtual fifth 'buddy,' he is in it with them. The director, Petr Buslov, appears in the film as the chief of a gang in a little provincial town. We could see here a reference to the film *Sisters (Сестры)* (Sergei Bodrov Jr., 2001), where Bodrov appears in a black car with his men. In both films, the director projects himself as a bad guy, and that choice demonstrates the romantisation of that character in the Russian cinema of those years.[2] Although *Bimmer* eventually portraits the demise of the bad guys, the director's bias still demonstrates more mercy and pity than contempt: their crime is more the result of circumstances then of evil nature. It is traditional for Russian culture: as Antony Olcott points out, that indulgence is typical for the Russian/Soviet crime fiction (75-80), and we may say for all Russian literature also.

Thus, boundaries between the villain and the hero are not very solid. In the black comedy *Mama, Don't Worry! (Мама, не горюй)* (Vadim Pezhemskii, 1997) the cop and the villain, Kolian, fraternize, because they both fought in the conflict in Afghanistan: the male, military solidarity is stronger than the position for or against the law. In fact, in most situations in crime fiction, the cops often act like the criminals they are looking for. Lis, the hero of *Antikiller*, is a former cop, who has been fired and jailed because his ways with villains are fairly unconventional for a police officer. He has killed a bandit; in other words, he has used the same methods as the villains themselves. As the film opens, we see him pledging allegiance to the Soviet flag in the background *(Служу Советскому Союзу!)*. But the camera close-up distorts his lips in a deforming way: the state has failed him, he is in jail, and his oath is now meaningless.

The ambiguity of good and evil is even more obvious in Timur Bekmambetov's *Night Watch.* The critics pointed out that the script and the morality of the film come together to create a sincerely confusing package. Action is set in Moscow, mostly in 2004, with some time spent in prologue in 1992, and focuses on the 'Others.' These characters are in fact demons, Light Others and Dark Others (blood-drinking vampires), keeping night and day watch, watching each other and living among normal people. The author and the director do not give direct and explicit moral characterization of these characters, but the spectator, due to ever-present cultural archetypes and references, links light with good, and night and vampires with evil. Nevertheless, the conflict between the night watchers and the day watchers is not as clearly defined as we would expect from a picture of this genre. Their whole world is based on the balance of evil and good, rather than the elimination of evil.

[2] Television series also provide a large number of such heroes, as for example *The Brigade (Бригада)* (Aleksei Sidorov, 2002), the very popular television series where the spectator follows the destiny of a group of friends who became rich and powerful not in especially a legal manner.

The night watchers' purpose is to confine the vampires' activity; and yet they are the very ones who grant blood-drinking licenses to the vampires, the fact that underlines the extreme ambiguity of their position in the film. Furthermore, it is the acceptance of a crime which gives the hero Anton, a Light Other, the revelation of his true nature. This crime, in turn, will be the motive for his son Egor to reject his father and join the vampires, the dark forces, at the end of the film.

The fact that Anton is not assuming the responsibilities of his fatherhood is a sign of immaturity and irresponsibility. The rejection of responsibility is very typical of the post-Soviet years: the four buddies of *Bimmer* run away because they will not take responsibility for their actions (one of them challenged another gang, another killed a member of that gang). They are losers on the edge of society, new rebels without a cause, without family (only the chief, Kot, has a girlfriend) and even without last names. In fact, the film is "a real hymn in honour of panicky irresponsibility and neutrality *(непричастность)*" (Kudriavtsev). *Mama, Don't Worry!* is also representative of a very typical state of mind for the 1990s: the couldn't-care-less attitude (*«наплевизм»* or *«пофигизм»* if we use the terms of the writer Iurii Poliakov) consists of the rejection of all rules, in this case in a comic way: the scene where the female actress masturbates the hero Artur in front of a typically and overtly Soviet old woman in a Soviet-style apartment *(совковая квартира)* is typical of that break of taboo and defiance of good taste. Artur, played by Gosha Kutsenko, is very ambiguous, and that same ambiguity follows the actor, when he plays the role of Lis in *Antikiller*.

That fascination with irresponsibility and evil shows the desire to live an easy life, to be above the laws of common people, to stand out of the ordinary. In other terms, it is one extreme way to valorise the individual. Individualism is a new element in the Russian culture and it is particularly prominent in thrillers. Individualism is linked with efficiency and independence — the key features in the Westernization of Russian mentality, as pointed out by Zborovskaia. (151) But Russian culture resists that individualization. The bad guy was tougher in the American hard-boiled fiction of the 1940s than he is in the Russian crime fiction at the end of the 20th century. The hard-boiled fiction reflects a society in trouble, both unstable and in search of new values. It is now evident that the Russian society longs for order and a quieter life with an understandable set of rules.

Return to Order: Patriotism and Militarism

The sequels *Bimmer: The Second Film*, *Brother 2*, *Antikiller 2: Antiterror* and *Day Watch* all make clearer what was suggested in the first films and some of them also mark a very significant evolution.

The end of *Bimmer* was hopeless: three of the friends died, while the fourth, Dimon, whose childish behaviour started the whole adventure, ran away. In the

sequel, the chief of the band, Kot, didn't die after all. Instead, he is in jail, and the 'traitor' Dimon, who has become rich in the meantime, helps him to escape by means of a trick of identity theft. But Dimon dies thus saving his friend for a second time when the prison warden who orchestrated the identity theft attempts to kill Kot. This is the second redemption of Dimon the traitor. The road movie begins again, but now with only two people: Kot falls in love with a very young girl (the sister of the dead prisoner), who is, in turn, far more cruel and amoral then he was himself in the first film. In the sequel, the moral discourse is pivotal: Kot has evolved into a better man; he tries to start a new life and also puts a lost sheep on the right path. The film is focused on the conflict between the young girl and the tired adult, who assumes the ambiguous role of father and potential lover. It is the sign of the coming of a new era of responsibility and the return of a strong father-figure. At the end of the film, Kot dies, and we return to the 'right' state of things. The vision of paradise and Kot's voice-over may be seen as the girl's dream of a better world and a promise of a glimmer of hope for her, while the 'bad guys' all die, as died almost all the characters of *The Brigade*.[3]

The beginnings of the two *Brothers* films are indicative of the difference between the two pictures: in the first film Danila interferes in the shooting of a film, fights with the director and ends up at the police station. The sequel begins with a film shooting as well, but with an ironic twist: the 'actor' who looks like an ugly and clumsy Mafioso, poorly recites romantic verses (the well known poem by Mikhail Lermontov "No, I am not Byron") in the street. Danila passes by and enters the TV headquarters. He is now one of them, he is no more naive, and the mockery toward the bad actor underscores Danila's own success. The films' endings are also significant: in *Brother* Danila goes to conquer Moscow on board a truck while in *Brother 2* he comes back from America to Russia, or, as he says, "home," in an airplane. The shift from a truck to a plane can be read as a clear sign of social ascension.

While in *Brother* and *Antikiller* both heroes fought local mafia in urban settings (Saint-Petersburg and a big provincial town, respectively) or in closed spaces, in the sequels to both films the heroes' conflict as well as its territory spreads itself to international dimensions. Danila in *Brother 2* goes to US and fights simultaneously against the Ukrainian mafia and American gangsters. In *Antikiller 2*, Lis is reinstated into the police force, and into the 'normal life': at the beginning of the film we see his wedding party. The hero thus becomes head of family, which indicates his ascension to responsible adulthood. Once again, he is a part of a larger collective and now he is on his way to fight Chechen terrorism, which is, in the

[3] We can see an intertextual link between the two projects because Vladimir Vdovichenkov, the main character of the two *Bimmers*, Kot, played the role one of the *The Brigade* four heroes (Fil, who dies first). We can also say that the number of heroes in *Bimmer* is also four; they are like the musketeers of the new times.

picture, clearly led by foreign entities. The lonely hero of the first film serves the state again: it is no more the Soviet Union, but Russia. In the sequel of *Brother,* Danila is far from becoming a cop, but it is clear that he is fighting not only for himself, but also for his country. The very anti-American tone of *Brother 2* and satirical representation of the United States underscore Russia's nationalism and pride: Russian bandits are even more 'tough' *(крутые)* than Ukrainian villains who, in turn, are far stronger than their American counterparts. Danila's return at the end of the film to his Russian motherland is reassuring for the public: Russia is better than 'America,' the Russians are better than the Americans. The Russians also always demonstrate acute sense of solidarity with their own; in the film Danila saves the Russian prostitute and frees her from her black American pimp. Danila now has a goal: he is not a loose cannon anymore. Instead, he defends Russia and justice, albeit in his own, Robin Hood-esque way. The film (and its success) signifies, first and foremost, the nationalist state of mind among a large stratum of Russia's population, which is composed not only of old disoriented and humiliated people, but also of youth.

The movie *Day Watch* elaborates on the idea suggested in the film *Night Watch*: the night watchers represent the old-fashioned, Soviet people, working in poor offices (with the very Soviet name *Gorsvet*) and driving old cars. The day watchers — the vampires — have their offices in the luxury hotel Cosmos in Moscow and are ostentatiously rich. So, the *Watches* present the conflict between old Soviet Union and new, capitalist post-Soviet Russia. At the end of the second film, the narrative completes the circle and returns to the year 1992, precisely to the start of the first film: the hero Anton invalidates the making of both films, going back in time and rejecting the witch's murder of his unborn son. As Thomas B. Campbell points out, it is the first year after the fall of the Soviet Union, the year of the economic "shock therapy" by Egor Gaidar, the minister of finances, and the ending of *Day Watch* may suggest that, if the El'tsin period would have not taken place, Russia today would have been better off. (2)[4] The chaos and anarchy of fifteen years wouldn't have happened: the ending shows the chiefs of both watches, Geser and Zavulon, chatting on a bench like two old friends or two peaceful retired old men, two grandfathers: they view Anton as their good son, and Egor, his son, is alive and well. The film director does not offer any other alternative than a metaphoric portrayal of the devastating outcome of the El'tsin politics and his happy ending is an apology of stability and continuity.

The analysis of these sequels reveals the strong message that escaping the chaos is possible only with the help of a strong hand, and that power is primarily em-

[4] According to Campbell, the rejection of the new capitalist era is underscored by the Asian plot line (the search of the sacred chalk which will allow the return to the past): "it also evoques the Asian component of the Eurasianist equation as a source of perennial wisdom and an antidote to the excesses of westernization." (2)

bodied in the police or secret services. In many films or series, the fight against terrorism is used to rebuild the image of Russian secret services (KGB and then FSB). In the blockbuster *Personal Number,* which has no sequel yet, but easily could be continued at some later point, the hero is a good-looking young and strong FSB agent, played by Aleksei Makarov. In this movie, as in its American equivalents (*Personal Number* is the most Americanised among contemporary Russian films), the secret agent is an action hero who saves the entire world. The action in the film is purely physical, without major psychological elements. This shift represents a radical change in comparison to the demonized image of the Soviet secret agent (KGB), predominant in the dissident literature as well as in the first post-Soviet films, such as, for example, *Burnt by the Sun (Утомленные солнцем)* by Nikita Mikhalkov (1994), or in the contemporary adaptations of family sagas *The Children of Arbat (Дети Арбата)* (Andrei Eshpai, 2004) and *The Moscow Saga (Московская сага)* (Dmitrii Barshchevskii, 2004), as well as in recent films about the past such as *A Driver for Vera (Водитель для Веры)* by Pavel Chukhrai (2005), where the action takes place at the beginning of the 1960s, or in the television serial *The Brigade*, to which I have already referred.[5] The new hero is far away from the sadistic, almost insane, sly and wily agent who interrogates the heroes in a very humiliating way. The choice of space plays here an important role as well: while the KGB agent works in a closed and dark spaces, mostly in a cell or in an underground location, the new FSB agent runs and fights in open spaces, often in the mountains (namely, in the Caucasus). Beautiful landscapes are a metaphor of the youth, energy, and physical and moral goodness of the hero.[6] On the Internet site of the film *Personal Number*, the hero is qualified as "calm" (*спокойный*) and his superior, the general as "reserved" (*сдержанный*).[7] That type of Americanised secret agent represents the "triumphant masculinity," that Susan Larsen noticed in the films of Mikhalkov and Balabanov (495), and emphasises the need for a strong masculine figure. Not surprisingly, the critic Igor Tolstunov suggests:

[5] In both *A Driver for Vera* and *The Brigade*, the role of the KGB agent is played by Andrei Panin; in *A Driver for Vera*, he is in charge of watching over the general and at the end of the film orders to kill him, in *The Brigade* he is the opponent of the hero, Aleksandr Belov, and is the one who is responsible for the death of the hero's friends.

[6] It is interesting to note that the physical strength of Makarov was exploited a few years earlier by the conservative director Stanislav Govorukhin as the incarnation of the insolence, rudeness and violence of the 'new Russians': in *The Voroshilov Shooter (Ворошиловский стрелок)* (1999), Makarov's character takes part in the rape of a young girl.

[7] This shift of the KGB image spreads over the works of literature as well and can be observed in *The One Who Knows (Тот, кто знает)* (2000), Aleksandra Marinina's only non-crime fiction novel and also in the TV-series, *Adventured-ness (Авантюристика)* (Dmitrii D'iachenko, 2005), where the beloved stepfather of the young heroine is a former KGB colonel.

> At the center of our contemporary narratives we should place not freaks but real heroes, whose help and support we should be able to count on. And then the country will believe in them. We *need* a hero like the one in *Personal Number*. Because we want to think that the state defends us. Because we should be able to walk the streets safely. Because if something happens to us, the law should be on our side. (25)

The strong and tough guy is no more the villain or the Mafioso, but an FSB agent — or a good soldier, like the ones in *The Ninth Company (9 poma)* (Fedor Bondarchuk, 2005). Order came back to Russia; Russia is a strong nation that is capable of saving the world — that is what the cinematographic fiction wants to portray now, and that is what the Russian public wants to believe in.

Filmography:

Антикиллер (2002), *Антикиллер 2. Антитеррор* (2003), Егор Михалков-Кончаловский
Брат (1997), *Брат 2* (2000), Алексей Балабанов
Бумер (2003), *Бумер. Фильм второй* (2006), Петр Буслов
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Элен Мела

ПОРЯДОК И БЕСПОРЯДОК В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ РОССИЙСКИХ БЛОКБАСТЕРАХ

Резюме

В российском прокате вышли за последние 10 лет первые блокбастеры и их сиквелы, в жанре триллера и фентези. Очень интересно проследить идеологическую эволюцию между фильмами и их сиквелами, поскольку эта эволюция кажется характерной для сегодняшней России. В фильмах «Брат», «Антикиллер», «Бумер» или позже «Ночной дозор» романтизацией бандитов и смыванием точных авторских указаний отражается беспорядок общества, потерявшего прочные социальные и моральные критерии. В сиквелах наоборот выражается тоска по порядку, по сильному мужскому герою и по национальной идентичности. То есть масскультовая кинопродукция, путем заимствования американских кинематографических моделей, предоставляет зрителю осуществление мечты о возвращении позиции или по крайней мере самоощущения великой державы. Не красота спасет мир, а Россия.

Hélène Mélat

PORZĄDEK I CHAOS WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ ROSYJSKIEJ KULTURZE POPULARNEJ

Streszczenie

W Rosji w ciągu ostatnich dziesięciu lat pojawiły się pierwsze filmy z gatunku thriller i fantasy. Bardzo interesująca jest charakterystyczna dla współczesnej Rosji ewolucja, którą można zaobserwować, badając te filmy oraz ich kontynuacje. W takich filmach, jak *Brat*, *Antykiller*, *Bumer* czy późniejsza *Straż nocna* w romantyzacji bandytów i rozmyciu pozycji autorskiej odzwierciedla się brak porządku społecznego, utrata trwałych społecznych i moralnych wartości. W sequele'ach natomiast wyrażona jest tęsknota do porządku, do silnego męskiego bohatera i narodowej tożsamości. Produkcja filmowa z domeny kultury masowej, zapożyczając modele bohaterów z kina amerykańskiego, proponuje widzowi realizację marzeń o znaczącej pozycji Rosji lub przynajmniej dostarcza poczucia poważnej imperialnej rangi ich kraju. To nie piękno zbawi świat, lecz Rosja.