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**THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE REAL AND POST-SOVIET TRAUMA:  
FANTASY CONSTRUCTION IN RUSSIAN POPULAR CINEMA.**

Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Program in Popular Culture

Brock University

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By

Olga Klimova

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of the Soviet Union's collapse on the Russian Symbolic as represented through popular cinema of the post-Soviet period.

The disintegration of the USSR in 1991 became one of the most traumatic experiences for many Russian people. The trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union penetrated the everyday reality of the Russian Symbolic, leaving the traces-symptoms in different cultural forms like literature, arts, television and cinema. Because popular culture usually reacts very quickly to any social, political and economical shifts in society, it is an excellent barometer for deeper changes in society. Focusing on post-Soviet popular cinema, this thesis analyzes the symptoms of cultural and individual trauma occasioned by the momentous changes of the 1990's. This study is grounded in post-analytic theory of Jacques Lacan and its interpretation by Slavoj Žižek, which emphasizes the traumatic encounter with the Real as a "hard core" of our reality. According to this paradigm, a new chain of signifiers is structured around the traumatic breach in the Symbolic, initiating a process of fantasy construction to deal with consequences of trauma and, thus, to support our Symbolic order.

This thesis examines three major fantasy constructions - drinking, traveling to a "happy land" and family reunion and money - in popular films by Alexander Rogozhkin, Yuriy Mamin, Georgij Shengelia, Dmitrij Astrakhan, Valerij Todorovskij, Alexej Balabanov, Sergej Bodrov Jr. and Petr Buslov. According to Žižek, enjoyment underlies any fantasy constructions, and that is why after the intrusion of the Real every individual and culture should go through the process of fantasizing about some substitutes which can help to minimize the traumatic effect and which can lead to a partial enjoyment. By analyzing the fantasies about drinking, "happy land", reconstruction of the family bonds and money in Russian popular cinema since 1991, this thesis demonstrates how the traumatic engagement with the Real affected the everyday lives of Russian people, and how individuals tried to fill the gap, the lack, in the post-Soviet Symbolic and "return" the lost feeling of unity and plenitude.



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The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/ excessive character we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.*

-- Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.  
(2001)

## INTRODUCTION

Russian cinema before and after the Revolution of 1917 has made a significant contribution to the history of world cinema by introducing the names of such outstanding filmmakers as Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Alexander Dovzhenko, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Mikhail Romm, Lev Kuleshov, Andrei Tarkovskii and many others. Although some of the films by these filmmakers became very popular in Soviet Russia, they received world recognition, and were attributed to the “elite” or “art” cinema by the Western audience.

Adele Marie Barker in her article “The Culture Factory: Theorizing the Popular in the Old and New Russia” argues that the relations between “popular” and “elite” in Russian culture have always been very complicated and different from the Western models. Barker writes that the proletariat leader Vladimir Lenin criticized popular culture for having “too many petit bourgeois antecedents” and came out for an educative culture which would be directed toward the masses as a potential elite in order for them to “understand the new proletarian art produced for them and to appreciate the art of the past that the *narod* [common people] was both repudiating and inheriting” (Barker 1999: 28).



The Communist Party always dictated to all Soviet people what to read, to watch or to listen to; only those cultural forms would become popular which met the requirements of the ruling ideology and which were approved by the state.<sup>1</sup> To support this idea, Barker gives an example of mass culture propaganda during the Stalin era, when “everything from lavish parades to Stalinist musicals in the spirit of the Hollywood extravaganzas of Busby Berkeley, to the resurrection of folklore in order to create a kind of pseudofolklore in state-sponsored form” served to control the masses (Barker 1999: 24). She asserts that Western researchers usually attribute the elite cultural artifacts of Soviet society to the dissident culture which was usually located “on the fringes of official Soviet culture” (Barker 1999: 20). At the same time, according to Barker, even the dissident “elite” artists had to compromise with the party requirements from times to times.<sup>2</sup> Both elite and popular cultures in Russia were always structured around the dominant culture, some ideological core; all the relations between these two were entirely built on their reaction to the party line in the Soviet Union. That is why sometimes even the borderline between the elite and popular art in the history of Russian culture was difficult to define.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union Russian artists did not have to fight the ruling ideology anymore: on one hand, they felt relieved and finally on their own; on the other hand, without the ideological framework, which provided some order, gave some meaning for many of the artists (even though sometimes they could not agree with the Soviet party’s principles), Russian culture seemed to come to an intellectual and emotional deadlock. And Barker argues in her article that, after the disintegration of the USSR, “there is no longer a dominant culture at Russia’s center that defines the space one



inhabits as either a producer or a consumer of that culture” (Barker 1999: 30). By introducing the market economy to the Russian society, it is the supply and demand system which dictates what cultural forms should be created and what topics may be interesting for the post-Soviet consumers.

Russian cinema always reacted to cultural changes in the Soviet society, very often leaving some remarkable works of art after the crucial historical events, like Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927), Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Aleksandrov’s *The Shining Path* (1940), Chaureli’s *The Fall of Berlin* (1950), Chukhrai’s *The Forty-First* (1956) and *Ballad of a Soldier* (1959), and many others. Anna Lawton writes that even the Russian cinema of *perestroika* (1980s) reacted to the socio-political events very quickly by “producing, if not masterpieces, certainly landmark films that attracted the attention of international cinema connoisseurs and political observers” (Lawton 2002: 98).<sup>3</sup> However, when the conversation turns to the contemporary Russian cinema, there are only a few names of Russian filmmakers, such as Nikita Mikhalkov and Alexander Sokurov, for instance, which are known not only locally, but also abroad. It may seem that the interest in the once powerful empire has decreased since the breakdown of the Soviet ideological system, and Russian cinema since 1991 has become a lacuna in the history of the world cinema.

However, an interest in post-Soviet culture among academics and cultural critics does exist and it lies in the historical fact that the Soviet Union once was among the most powerful and influential countries in the world; it vied with Europe and the United States politically, economically and culturally.<sup>4</sup> Sadly enough, there are not so many works on post-Soviet visual culture written by local, NIS (New Independent States) scholars; most



of them were written by art historians and film critics and only a few by post-Soviet theorists in cultural studies or media studies<sup>5</sup>. It can be explained by the fact that the Western models of cultural theory became widely accessible in Russia only two decades ago during the *perestroika* period when most of the scholars retrained from historical materialism and scientific communism into sociology, political sciences, philosophy and cultural anthropology; and that is why the Russian cultural theorists are still a little behind their foreign colleagues.

Despite the fact that the post-Soviet cinema has started to attract more attention among film theorists and cultural critics during the last 7-8 years, there is still not enough research on the area of post-Soviet popular culture. Many articles on post-Soviet culture and post-Soviet cinema were written by such North American and European scholars as Birgit Beumers, Nancy Condee, Julian Graffy, Susan Larsen, Vladimir Padunov, Jane Knox-Voina and others.<sup>6</sup> David Gillespie's book *Russian Cinema* published in 2003 aimed to cover the history of Russian cinema from the beginning until the present day and has nine chapters in which the author discusses hundreds of films and tries to analyze different topics and aesthetic aspects of Russian films. The book *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, published in 1999 by Duke University Press and edited by Adele Marie Barker, examines different phenomena of post-Soviet popular culture such as Aleksandra Marinina's detective novels, tattooing, graffiti, trash, nightlife, and children's songs. However, only one article from this book, "In Search of an Audience: The New Russian Cinema of Reconciliation" written by Susan Larsen, analyzes thoroughly the problem of Russian popular cinema since 1991.



There are only a few major books dedicated to the topic of post-Soviet cinema in English: one of them is a collection of articles, *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema* edited by Birgit Beumers (1999); another one is *The Revolt of the Filmmakers: the Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry* by George Faraday (2000). Both of these books received many reviews from Slavic Studies scholars. *Russia on Reels* is the first English-language collection of articles on post-Soviet cinema which focused on the question of Russian national identity and Russian idea in movies and was welcomed enthusiastically by researchers in the area of post-Soviet culture.<sup>7</sup> However, Faraday's book received a lot of negative reviews in such journals as *The Slavic Review*, *The Russian Review*, *Demokratizatsiia*<sup>8</sup>. Faraday's main contribution to the field of post-Soviet culture was considered to consist in the last 73 pages of the book where he describes the situation in the Russian film industry after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. However, Birgit Beumers criticizes even this chapter for not analyzing such popular Russian films of the 1990s as *Brother* by Aleksei Balabanov and *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* by Alexander Rogozhkin. This indicates, first of all, that there is a considerable interest in post-Soviet culture and cinema in particular; secondly, there are still a lot of gaps in this area, which may be and should be studied.

Lawton asserts that "the end of the Soviet era opened a period of financial distress and artistic disorientation for the film industry" (Lawton 2002: 98). The collapse of the Soviet Union entailed serious consequences for the Russian film industry including the breakdown of film production and distribution. Since 1991 many film directors have been faced with a funding problem; many large film studios have either been partially



privatized or divided into small production companies managed usually by a single filmmaker, and a lot of independent studios have been developed.

The factors which impeded the development of post-Soviet cinema were the breakdown of a centralized distribution network, the decline of state subsidies for the cinema industry, inadequate copyright laws and also the general decrease of disposable income among the average Russian people (Lawton 2002: 98). The rapid decrease of movie theaters, the very high prices for movie tickets, an influx of cheap foreign imported motion pictures into the TV, video and cinema market, a dissemination of pirate videos, and the antiquated film equipment also have played a crucial role in the development of the contemporary Russian cinema. Most of the films shown at the movie theaters were American and European and only 10 percent of all movies were produced in Russia (Larsen 1999: 193). While writing about the crisis in the Russian film industry, Beumers points out that, if in 1990 there were about 300 films released annually in the Soviet Union, in 1995 the numbers dropped to 46 and in 1996 to 28 (Beumers 1999: 880).

All these factors have drastically changed the situation in the post-Soviet cinema market and influenced the context of new movies. Susan Larsen mentions in her article “National Identity, Cultural Authority, and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov,” that the transition from a state-subsidized cinema market to a “free market” “has shaped the story lines, aesthetic choices, and marketing strategies” of many post-Soviet filmmakers (Larsen 2003: 492). The inflation of 1993 deteriorated the situation in the film industry; Russian filmmakers had to appeal to international audiences, look for foreign investments, or turn to the mafia or the newly



emerging class of New Russians for funding. In her article, "Russian Cinema in Troubled Times," Anna Lawton writes that many post-Soviet filmmakers had to become producers of their own films and find sponsors or organize joint ventures (Lawton 2002: 100). They had to make movies which would be interesting, popular and well-sold. In the context of a market economy with its orientation toward commercialization, it has become easier to distinguish the borders between "elite" and popular art in Russia. The post-Soviet culture became more like the Western "capitalist" model of culture and that is why Russian popular cinema, in pursuit of audience and profits, flourished in Russia in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

There are several reasons why studying post-Soviet cinema may be so important. It may be interesting to look at what is happening now to the film industry which for years was producing so many good films and has left a significant cultural heritage in the history of world cinema. According to many researchers (Lawton, Larsen, Beumers), the Russian cinema is now in crisis, which is explained by the fact that most of the films produced since 1991 are consumer-oriented films with very simple plots and very far away from being attributed to the "elite" or "art" cinema.

Russian cinema of the post-Soviet period has been deeply influenced by the cultural trauma of the breakdown of the Soviet ideological system which has necessarily left some traces embodied in the new forms and contents of Russian films. The tendency to make popular films, rather than "elite" or "art" cinema, has become evident since the disintegration of the Soviet distribution system, which George Faraday in his book *The Revolt of the Filmmakers* calls "a populist filmmaking strategy aimed at the broader public" (Faraday 2000: 163). According to Susan Larsen, the new Russian popular films



make an attempt to minimize the gap between popular cinema and “elite,” auteur cinema and, thus, “not only to chart possible paths toward national and social reconciliation, but also to reunite Russian filmmakers with a population that has lost its taste both for film going in general and for contemporary Russian film production in particular” (Larsen 1999: 199).

Most of the researchers in the area of Slavic studies, cultural and film studies, analyze in their works different ideas and topics peculiar to the contemporary Russian cinema; they examine various films and filmmakers of the post-Soviet period. However, none of them has ever looked closely at how the collapse of the Soviet Union as a cultural phenomenon has affected the content and form of Russian popular films produced after 1991. The breakdown of the Soviet ideological system has left some traces or symptoms in the Russian culture and my goal in this thesis will be to find these symptoms, to “read” them and to see how they point to the post-Soviet trauma.

The disintegration of the USSR deeply affected Russian culture in general and each Russian person individually, and popular cinema since 1991 became the main source of reflections on the collective traumatic experience. In my thesis, I will be focusing on the specific ways of dealing with cultural and individual trauma in cinema, rather than describing the social, economic and political consequences of the event of 1991. One of the main objectives of this thesis is to analyze the popular films made by the Russian filmmakers after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to find out what kind of fantasies are constructed by them and why. Many post-Soviet Russian films have a common fundamental principle – a fantasy construction, which, according to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek, includes some “kernel



of enjoyment” which becomes a part of our reality and helps us to deal with the traumatic experience. In this research I will be using the Lacanian triad (the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic); the notions of enjoyment<sup>9</sup> and *objet a*, and their interpretations by Slavoj Žižek; and the notions of *trauma*, *symptom* and *fantasy*. These theories will help me to understand better the inside mechanism of the traumatic cultural experience of the former Soviet Union, and to examine what role the traumatic encounter with the Real (the disintegration of the Soviet Union) plays in the fantasy construction and how it is reflected in Russian popular cinema of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s.

Slavoj Žižek’s ideas will be very helpful in analyzing Russian popular cinema because he has been one of the most influential theorists of popular culture for the last 15 years not only in Slovenia, but also in North America and other European countries. He is well-known in academia among philosophers, film studies theorists, cultural and political studies scholars, mostly for his sophisticated approach combining Lacan, Marx, Hegel, psychoanalysis, popular culture, political theory, philosophy, film and different artifacts of everyday life. In his works he attempts to theorize popular culture artifacts in order to give them some weight, some value, and at the same time he is capable of explaining intricate philosophical theories by providing simple examples from everyday life, like TV shows, toilet design or McDonalds. The uniqueness of this thesis consists in referring to the part of Žižek’s theory where he examines popular culture artifacts through Lacan, in using his analysis of contemporary American or Slovenian culture as a model and applying it to the Russian popular cinema after the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

The current research is an attempt to fill in the blanks in the study of post-Soviet popular culture by analyzing Russian films released since 1991. Because all NIS



countries are going through the same problems, like economical instability, shifts in social structure, a question of national identity and self-sufficiency, the Russian experience here is just an example of post-Soviet representations. The contemporary Russian film industry, in comparison with other NIS cinema industries, is better known in the post-Soviet space and abroad.

This work will explore the everyday life of Russian people and the cultural phenomenon of post-Soviet society, and the most popular and influential Russian motion pictures of the 1991-2004 have been chosen to illustrate it. For my research it is important to analyze the films which were not only produced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but which also depict the events and the everyday life of the post-Soviet people. Being an insider of post-Soviet culture myself, I have chosen the most popular Russian films which were actively advertised on TV and in movie theatres, which people around me were interested in and highly recommended me to watch.

In the first chapter, “The Encounter with the Real: The Post-Soviet Trauma through Lacan and Žižek,” I shall examine in greater detail the three Lacanian Orders, – the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which, according to Lacan and Žižek, determine all mental and cultural functioning. For Slavoj Žižek, the Symbolic order is our social reality, and the Real is something which “does not exist,” which must be “constructed afterwards so that we can account for the distortions of the symbolic structure” (Žižek 1989: 162), and which has a great influence on our symbolic reality. According to Žižek, the Real sometimes breaks through the Symbolic and leaves some tracks – symptoms, the indicators of the traumatic encounter with the Real order. The Symbolic is necessarily defined by and structured around the Real trauma, and the



fantasy construction becomes an essential part of our reality, which helps to “erase” the trauma, but at the same time always “returns,” repeats itself in symptoms.

In this chapter I shall go through the most important notions of Lacanian and Žižek’s theories, like *trauma*, *objet a*, *enjoyment*, *symptom*, *fantasy* and others which can help to understand how the encounter with the Real affects the Symbolic. For contemporary Russia the collapse of the Soviet Union has become the traumatic experience of the Real. Since this experience in 1991, the new Symbolic has started to form, which has become something new – the post-Soviet Symbolic. My goal will be to analyze how the engagement with the Real can shape cultural reality, using the example of Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. And finally I will explain why analyzing cinema, and popular cinema in particular, can be helpful in finding and understanding the symptoms of the traumatic encounter with the Real. The next three chapters will be dedicated to the analysis of particular Russian films of the post-Soviet period with the emphasis on different fantasy constructions entailed by the cultural trauma of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, such as a drinking fantasy, a fantasy about traveling to some “happy land”, and a fantasy about money and reconstruction of family bonds.

The second chapter, “The Intrusion of the Real and Fantasmatic Drinking in the Post-Soviet Films of Alexander Rogozhkin,” is concerned with the fantasy about alcohol drinking in the post-Soviet comedies of Alexander Rogozhkin. Drinking vodka is the main motif of his films, *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* (1995), *Peculiarities of the National Fishing* (1998), *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period* (2000) and *Peculiarities of the National Politics* (2003). In this chapter, I will argue that in the



*Peculiarities* series we can track the symptoms of the post-Soviet trauma which bring back the traumatic experience of separation caused by the collapse of the Soviet system. Fantasmatic drinking fills the gap in the Symbolic when the Real intrudes into the quiet and comfortable Russian reality.

In Chapter 3, “Traumatic experience and the Post-Soviet Fantasy about the Happy Land in Russian Popular Cinema,” I will be examining another type of fantasy constructed in the popular Russian films after the disintegration of the Soviet Union – the fantasy about the “happy land.” In this chapter, I will be analyzing Yurii Mamin’s *Window to Paris* (1994), Georgii Shengelia’s *The Castaway Sagittarius* (1993), Dmitrii Astrakhan’s *You Are the Only One* (1993), and Valerii Todorovskii’s *The Land of the Deaf* (1997), which are among the most popular post-Soviet films in Russia. The motif of foreign countries or imaginary lands as a getaway from the post-Soviet “unhappy” routine has become very popular in Russian cinema. And in this chapter I will be analyzing how the fantasy construction about a nice life in Paris, the United States, the Soviet past or a fictional “the land of the deaf” helps Russian people to deal with the Real trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Symbolic.

The last chapter of my thesis, “The Fantasy about Family and Money in Post-Soviet Popular Cinema: Living in the World of the New Russians and the Mafia,” is about the construction of the new post-Soviet Symbolic with the emphasis on family relations and moneymaking as the most important attributes of the new social classes in Russian society – the New Russians and the mafia. There is a tendency in Russian cinema of the post-Soviet period to create fantasies about the reconstruction of family bonds and/or financial stability and wealth. The breakdown of the Soviet system has drastically



changed how Russian people perceive the world around them. Communist ideology attempted to construct a fantasy about a “big family,” where each member of the Soviet society was supposed to function as a part of a whole and where money did not play an essential part in people’s relations. The disintegration of the Soviet Union broke this Soviet Symbolic in pieces, and the Russian people had to deal with the traumatic consequences of the encounter with the Real by creating new fantasies which would support their new reality. In this chapter I will refer to Alexei Balabanov’s films *Brother* (1997) and *Brother 2* (2000), Sergei Bodrov Jr.’s *Sisters* (2001) and Petr Buslov’s *Bumer* (2003), in order to ascertain how the traumatic experience of the Real has entailed the construction of particular fantasies about affluence and solid family bonds and how it is reflected in Russian popular cinema.

In summary, this thesis will show how post-Soviet popular culture reacted to the breakdown of the Soviet system; it will explain what kind of fantasies are constructed in Russian popular cinema since 1991 and how these fantasies help to deal with the traumatic intrusion of the Real into the Russian Symbolic.



## CHAPTER I

### THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE REAL: THE POST-SOVIET TRAUMA THROUGH LACAN AND ZIZEK

#### **The Lacanian Triad: the Real-the Symbolic-the Imaginary.**

The goal of the current research is to analyze how the traumatic encounter with the Real is reflected in Russian popular cinema, but before examining the post-Soviet films created in Russia after 1991 we should take a look at the theoretical framework provided by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. To explain what the Real is, what role it plays in our everyday lives and why the encounter with it necessarily leads to the traumatic breakdown, we need to look closer at the three Lacanian orders, or registers—the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, their specifics and their interrelations.

Lacan's works are usually divided into three main periods: the first period is between 1932 and 1948, the second one between 1948 and 1960 and the last one between 1960 and 1980. It was during the last period when the philosopher worked more closely on the notions of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic "registers" (Sarup 1992: 101). Lacan believed that human experience is divided into three dimensions, three orders – the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The human being is first positioned inside the mother's body, and the child belongs to the Real order; this is his/her biological nature. Elizabeth Grosz states, in her book *Jacques Lacan: a Feminist Introduction*, that one cannot experience the Real as such and it "has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of 'raw material'" (Grosz 1990: 34). The maternal body and the child's body constitute a certain plenitude, which is one of the characteristics of the Real and which will be destroyed by the child's birth. When the child comes into the



world the image of his/her body becomes “fragmented” for the first time. This is the first gap, loss or primary trauma which entails “a motor incapacity” and “a nursing dependence” for the human being (Lacan 1977: 2).

According to Lacan, the Imaginary begins with *the mirror stage*, which is caused by “the specific prematurity of birth” and becomes a constitutive moment in the formation of human subjectivity (Lacan 1977:4). Lacan believed that the relations between man and nature are “altered by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor unco-ordination of the neo-natal months” (Lacan 1977: 4). Unlike animals, human beings are not ready to walk or to eat by themselves for a long time; they are born too early. To survive in this world they need somebody, the other – the Real Other.

In his lecture “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan asserts that:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development (Lacan 1977: 4).

The notions of *separation* and *alienation* are very important here. The mirror stage is the beginning of the Imaginary Order, and it occurs between the age of six and eighteen months when the child still depends on adults for food, comfort and security and he/she does not have a control over his/her body. The mirror gives the child a complete image or *Gestalt*, the main characteristics of which are great motor activity, independence and



totality. This *Gestalt* “symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination” (Lacan 1977: 2). The child is enchanted by the image in the mirror and tries to play with it and control it. He/she gets a whole image of him/herself as a “total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power” (Lacan 1977: 2).

At the same time the child realizes that his/her own reflection is somehow separated from him/her, is something other than him/herself. There is “*I*” here and “the Other” there, through the looking glass; and this Imaginary Other possesses more sophisticated motor activity than the child. This realization induces the child to replace his/her mirror reflection, his/her own ego, by a great number of different objects (*imago*). As he/she simultaneously realizes him/herself as *I* in relation to the *Other*, the series of continuous identifications begins. According to Grosz, the mirror stage is a “necessarily alienating structure because of the unmediated tension between the fragmented or ‘fragilized’ body of experience; and the ‘solidity’ and permanence of the body as seen in the mirror” (Grosz 1990: 42). Subjectivity begins to form when the human being can perceive the image of his/her body during the imaginary stage. In the Imaginary, the child can see him/herself only in relation to his surroundings, through his projected image which establishes the connection between the infant and the rest of the world.

Malcolm Bowie writes in his book on Jacques Lacan that:

The Imaginary is the order of mirror-images, identifications and reciprocities. It is the dimension of experience in which the individual seeks not simply to placate the Other but to dissolve his otherness by becoming his counterpart... The imaginary is the scene of a desperate delusional attempt to be and to remain ‘what



one is' by gathering to oneself ever more instances of sameness, resemblance and self repetition (Bowie 1991: 92).

From this moment on, lack becomes the essential basis of human existence and the way to enter the Symbolic order. The lack will be filled up with new identifying images of self-stability and constancy (the Imaginary) and with the help of language (the Symbolic). The child has been positioned within the Imaginary order of images, representations, doubles and Others. Thus, subjectivity depends on the recognition of a distance between *I* and *Other*. The child realizes that his/her body is fragmented, split, alienated, and the image of the Other has an apparent totality and a completeness which the child is envious of. According to Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, "the primary conflict between identification with, and primordial rivalry with, the other's images, begins a dialectical process that links the ego to more complex social situations" (Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986: 58).

The Symbolic register, which constitutes our social order and culture with its norms, roles and language, helps to deal with and accept the traumatic experience of alienation and otherness. Visual objects, images, must be articulated by the other, must be maintained by words and symbols, must be given a meaning, and thus the Imaginary will be structured. John P. Muller characterizes the Symbolic order as the "relatively closed system of reciprocally differentiated units, each of which has no meaning in itself but is differentiable solely with reference to all the other units in the system" (Muller 1996: 94). Through language the subject can represent his/her desires, thoughts and feeling, and thus can be constituted. Lacan states in his seminar, "Function and Field of Speech and Language," that the process of self identification becomes possible through language, but



only at the cost of objectifying the subject (Lacan 1977: 86). The Symbolic becomes “the realm of movement rather than fixity, and of heterogeneity rather than similarity..., it is the realm of language, the unconscious and an otherness that remains other” (Bowie 1991: 92).

The Symbolic order, together with the Imaginary, constitutes “reality”, our everyday existence and this reality is different from the Real. For Lacan the distinction between these two notions became very important in his later works. If the early Lacan paid more attention to the Imaginary, in the 1950s he concentrated more on the Symbolic and its relations with the Real. And it is this shift in Lacan’s thoughts which has become very important for the development of Slavoj Žižek’s theory, with its emphasis on the role of the Real in our culture.

### **The Encounter with the Real.**

In his book, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Bruce Fink describes Lacan's notion of the Real as “a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric,” which lacks any lack, which is defined by its plenitude, completeness. It is the Symbolic order which tries to break up the Real in pieces and, thus, to structure it:

It [the Real] is a sort of smooth, seamless surface or space which applies as much to a child’s body as to the whole universe. The division of the Real into separate zones, distinct features and contrasting structures is a result of the Symbolic order, which, in a manner of speaking, *cuts into* the smooth façade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and distinguishable entities and laying the real to rest, that is,



drawing or sucking it into the symbols used to describe it, and thereby annihilating it (Fink 1995: 24).

For Lacan, the Real is something abrupt, unexpected, which can break into our dreams. The Real lies outside the network of signifiers and cannot be symbolized or defined, and thus, becomes a major object of our concerns (Lacan 1978: 53-54). John P. Muller calls the Lacanian Real a “brute, undifferentiated experience that invades us from time to time but to which we usually have a relationship mediated by language,” and through these mediations we enter our social “reality” (Muller 1996: 93).

Slavoj Zizek develops his own theory based on the Lacanian psychoanalytical reflections on the Real and reality and, because of his concern to analyze everything through the dimension of the Real, he has been called by the British scholar Sarah Kay and other researchers “the philosopher of the Real.” For Zizek, the Real is something transcendental which lies outside our understanding and which resists any process of signification, but which at the same time has very tight bonds with the Symbolic order or our social reality. Kay, in her book *Zizek: a Critical Introduction*, makes an interesting comparison between Zizek’s construction of the world and a doughnut, where the Symbolic is the dough and the Real is the hole in the middle of it, without which the doughnut would be something else. Similarly, the Real is not present in our reality, but actually defines the Symbolic, makes it what it is for us (Kay 2003: 4).

We leave Nature, or the Real, and enter the Symbolic order because of a primary gap, lack or loss; and because we always try to resist or to erase this trauma it becomes the essential part of our being, a “hard core” of ourselves. This gap, this missing part, which makes us the way we are, is a “muteness which resists being signified but which



shows up negatively as the outer limit of our discourse, the point at which our representations crumble and fail” (Eagleton 2003: 197).

In his book, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Žižek writes that the Lacanian Real plays an ambiguous role: “it erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but it serves at the same time as a support of this very balance” (Žižek 1991b: 29). Anything can intrude into the routine cycle of our everyday lives, and the damage caused by this intrusion cannot be undone. Terry Eagleton calls Žižek “an alarming, uncanny sort of theorist altogether, who teaches that the Real which makes us what we are is not only traumatic and impenetrable but cruel, obscene, vacuous, meaningless and horrifically enjoyable” (Eagleton 2003: 196).

For Žižek, “social reality is then nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb that can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the Real” (Žižek 1991b: 17). There is always a meaningless leftover of the Real which resists symbolization and which cannot be inscribed into the network of signifiers, and this unsymbolized part supports the whole social structure:

The contingent Real triggers the endless work of interpretation that desperately tries to connect the symbolic network of the prediction with the events of our “real life”. Suddenly, “all things mean something”, and if the meaning is not clear, this is only because some of it remains hidden, waiting to be deciphered (Žižek 1991b: 31).

Meaning is born when a piece of the Real is symbolized, read as a “sign,” and the Real is not something we can construct, produce, but it is something which has been always there



and we can only discover, find its signs, “the answers of the Real.” Žižek points out that the Symbolic register is indispensably structured around the Real because there is an essential gap, void, impossibility, ‘non-sense’ right in the middle of the “barred, crippled, porous” Symbolic order – “an extimate kernel” around which it is already structured (Žižek 1991b: 33). And the function of “the answer of the Real” is to take the place of this lack and, thus, the Symbolic always contains some elements of the Real: the Real is “immediately rendered” by the symbolic form. That is why the Real is always for us both familiar and unknown, intelligible and beyond our comprehension, comforting and dangerous at the same time.

We are afraid of it and impatient to touch it, to experience it; it brings enjoyment, or more precisely speaking, a desire for enjoyment which Sarah Kay calls “the thrill of the Real” which “can never be directly experienced or acknowledged, but colors our responses in the guise of an obscene smear, an opaque, contaminating stain” (Kay 2003: 4). According to Kay, the Real is something inside the Symbolic, “the disgusting, hidden underside of reality which we cannot fail but step on, however much we imagine that our minds are set on higher things. Indeed, the more we keep our heads in the air, the more it clings to our feet” (Kay 2003: 4).

The Real and the Symbolic reality are tied together in a knot of intricate, perplexed connections: as Žižek states in his book *On Belief*, both the Real and reality become a “grimace” of each other. Being a “grimace” of the Real, our social reality transforms, distorts, mutates the Real, and makes it “a certain imperceptible, unfathomable, ultimately illusory feature” (Žižek 2001b: 80). At the same time, the Real is only a “grimace” of reality because it interrupts, changes the regular flow of signifiers



in the Symbolic order, it is “the obstacle, the “bone in the throat” which forever distorts our perception of reality” (Zizek 2001b: 81).

### **Trauma.**

In his seminar, “Tuché and Automaton,” Lacan writes that the Real appears in the form of trauma when the conflict between the pleasure principle and the principle of reality arises (Lacan 1978: 55). Zizek attempts to distinguish between the role of traumatic experience for animals (e.g. ants) and human beings. He asserts that animals can experience traumatic disruption, and it destroys the usual order of their lives. As for human beings, the encounter with the Real, through its expression in a traumatic event, becomes a starting point for the process of becoming a subject; they can “counteract its destabilizing impact by spinning out intricate symbolic cobwebs” (Zizek 2001b: 47). It is the traumatic Real which initiates the process of entering the Symbolic order and is necessary for human beings to become speaking subjects. Every human has to experience the primary traumatic separation, which is the same for everyone, and then through the processes of identification and language, the person can become a subject of social interactions. But even in the dimension of the Symbolic trauma returns, follows the subject, and this time it is different and unique for every person.

Trauma always repeats, often through our dreams; sometimes it can clearly appear and sometimes it is concealed, and we can only guess what is hidden behind some images or signs. We assume that there is something which we cannot grasp being inscribed into the Symbolic order and that is why we desire it even more, and this something is the Real. We try to bring the Real into our social reality by means of language, through the



process of symbolization, but there is always a piece of the Real which we cannot reach and transform; there is always a leftover of the Real which causes us a discomfort, a fear or a pain and, therefore, initiates the traumatic experience. According to Žižek, “trauma” is a “violent intrusion of something which doesn’t fit in” (Žižek 2001b: 47).

We cannot totally experience the Real even in our dreams because “the Real’s representation is lacking and what we find in the dream is its place-holder, its stand-in” (Fink 1995: 227). According to Lacan, anything can stand in for the Real: any accident, traumatic event, catastrophe, noise or any other “small element of reality,” but none of them will be able to represent the Real as it is. The Real signifies some lack, some absence for us, existing in the Symbolic order, and it is “represented but never presented” (Fink 1995: 227). As in the case with the absent objects (*objets a*), which have never existed but which are “retroactively constituted as having had to have been lost”, the Real is also constituted as a gap, as a split in our reality (Fink 1995: 227). Our construction of the Real as a lack necessarily leads to the continual attempts to represent the Real, to fill up the gap, and these representations never answer the question of what the Real actually is.

Lacan compares life, or our social reality, with a dream and believes that the main function of both is to prolong the current condition of comfort and satisfaction. Fantasy is a veil, a curtain, which helps us to deal with the trauma and hides the Real from us. According to Žižek, fantasy does not help to fill the gap, the lack in the desire, but, on the contrary, constructs and constitutes the desire as impossible to satisfy, to fill up. He writes that fantasy gives “the coordinates of the subject’s desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it...*through fantasy, we learn how to desire*”



(Zizek 1991b: 6). Fantasy belongs to the dimension of our reality and gives some consistency to it. It both protects us from the Real and brings it into our world; it is “shot through with the traumatic enjoyment which it helps to repress” (Kay 2003; 163).

Therefore, life comes *after* the dream in which the Real escapes from us.

For Zizek, any traumatic event constitutes the main relationship between two registers – the Real and the Symbolic. When the Real intrudes into our reality it always remains the same, and it is the Symbolic which always tries to change, to structure and to give a special meaning to the residue of the Real. Through the disorder, disturbance or dysfunction we get an opportunity to touch the Real, when “the Symbolic fails to deliver a consistent and coherent reality” (Daly 2004b).

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek states that we always miss the exact traumatic point which has to return over and over, and we try to inscribe it into the dimension of the Symbolic; the symptom as a ‘real kernel of enjoyment’ works its way through the attempts to be integrated, to be “domesticated,” to be erased “by means of explication, of putting-into-words its meaning” (Zizek 1989: 69). Zizek then discusses the problem of symbolizing the traumatic event in *For They Know Not What They Do*:

The logic of Freud’s notion of the “deferred action” does not consist in the subsequent “gentrification” of a traumatic encounter by means of its transformation into a normal component of our symbolic universe, but in the almost exact opposite of it – something which was *at first* perceived as a meaningless, neutral event changes *retroactively*, after the advent of a new symbolic network that determines the subject’s place of enunciation, into a trauma that cannot be integrated into this network (Zizek 1991a: 221-222).



In other words, when the traumatic event first breaks into our life it remains neutral for a while until it gets its traumatic status, and only then can we start (but never finish) integrating it into the Symbolic order in the form of a “traumatic wound.”

### **Symptom and Fantasy.**

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek attempts to analyze the notion of “symptom” in accordance with the different theoretical stages of Lacanian thought. He writes that at the beginning of the 1950s, Lacan saw the symptom as a message, a code, a “signifying formation” which is directed toward the big Other, who later gives it its meaning. The symptom is intended for interpretation by the big Other and it can never exist without being addressed to somebody; thus, a psychoanalyst discovers and interprets the symptoms of his patients. According to Lacan, because of a similar structure to language and because “it is from language that speech must be delivered,” the symptom can be discovered through the analysis of language (Lacan 1977: 59). Lacan defines the symptom as “a signifier of a signified repressed from the consciousness of the subject” (Lacan 1977: 69).

Slavoj Žižek argues that the Symbolic order is full of meaningless traces of the past which obtain some meaning from “the transformation of the signifier’s network;” every historical fracture brings changes into the “narration of the past” and opens the opportunity to interpret the past differently (Žižek 1989: 56). And thus, according to Bruce Fink, a symptom always becomes a filter, a selector which prevents us from seeing some things and permits us to see other things (Fink 1995: 125).



For Žižek, the Lacanian symptom is not only a “ciphered message” but also the organizing principle of any enjoyment. It is not enough to interpret the symptom to dissolve it; because the subject “loves his symptom more than himself,” he must find the source of his enjoyment. Through fantasy the subject can get access (or, precisely speaking, near access) to the *objet a* which becomes the source of the subject’s “impossible” desire. In the notion of *objet a* the ‘a’ signifies ‘autre’, or ‘other,’ and this is very important for Lacan’s and Žižek’s theories. Thus, Lacan differentiates ‘*petit a*’ (small ‘other’) and ‘*le grand Autre*’ (big ‘Other’). The Other, for Lacan, is somebody (or something) to whom our language and our desire are directed, it is a “subject of the unconscious.” The Other (with a capital a) is something more perfect than me, and the other (with a little a) is what alienates the subject from the Other.

In his seminar, “The Subject and The Other: Alienation,” Lacan writes that the Other is another place or ‘locus’ “in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject – it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear” (Lacan 1978: 203) and with which the subject wants to identify him/herself. *Objet a* is a small part of the Other which we can perceive only when we are “looking awry” at it, with a changed, distorted by desire, gaze, and, as Malcolm Bowie writes in his book on Lacan, “it is anything and everything that desire touches, and cannot exist where desire is not” (Malcolm 1991: 166).

In *Looking Awry* Žižek writes that:

The object *a* is always, *by definition*, perceived in a distorted way, because outside this distortion, “in itself”, *it does not exist*, since it is *nothing but* the embodiment, the materialization of this very distortion, of this surplus of



confusion and perturbation introduced by desire into so-called “objective reality” (Zizek 1991b: 12).

Zizek compares the *objet a* with the screen on which we project the fantasies supporting our desire; it becomes “a surplus of the Real that propels us to narrate again and again our first traumatic encounter” (Zizek 1991b: 133) and a “hole in the Real” which initiates the process of symbolization. The ambiguous role of fantasy is to disguise “the horror of the Real” and to produce “what it purports to conceal, its ‘repressed’ point of reference” (Zizek 1999: 92).

Fantasy transforms and shapes social reality. It does not fulfill our desires, but on the contrary, “realizes, stages, the desire as such”; it gives “the coordinates of the subject’s desire, specifies its object, locates the position the subject assumes in it” (Zizek 1991b: 6). If the symptom as a “signifying formation” can be interpreted and analyzed, the fantasy as a “kernel of enjoyment” avoids any interpretations. Zizek writes:

Symptom implies and addresses some non-barred, consistent big Other which will retroactively confer on it its meaning; fantasy implies a crossed out, blocked, barred, non-whole, inconsistent Other – that is to say, it is filling out a void in the Other (Zizek 1989: 74).

Symptom can cause us not only dissatisfaction and discomfort, but, at the same time, satisfaction from the process of explaining its meaning; fantasy can give us an immediate pleasure and some tension and shame when we try to share our fantasies with others. Zizek derives from this the idea that the psychoanalytic process involves “interpretation of symptoms – going through fantasy” (Zizek 1989: 74).



The analysis of symptoms is the way to get into the heart of the primary fantasy which resists any further interpretation, and we need to penetrate this “fundamental fantasy,” to distance ourselves from it, to realize that through it the lack, the emptiness in the big Other, is concealed, veiled. Žižek defines symptom as a “pathological” signifier, a “binding of enjoyment, an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation, a stain which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse ... but is at the same time a positive condition of it” (Žižek 1989: 75). Thus, according to Žižek:

By means of ... an identification with the (social) symptom, we traverse and subvert the fantasy frame that determines the field of social meaning, the ideological self-understanding of a given society, i.e., the frame within which, precisely, the “symptom” appears as some alien, disturbing intrusion, and not as the point of eruption of the otherwise hidden truth of the existing social order (Žižek 1991b: 140).

In the symbolic reality there must be always a certain misrecognition, a certain reticence which does not belong to our order and the subject can be punished for disregarding this by “the very substance of his being.” The consistency of our being can be sustained by some unsymbolization, some “nonknowledge,” and that is why Žižek defines the symptom as “a certain formation that exists only insofar as the subject ignores some fundamental truth about himself” (Žižek 1991b: 44).

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek asserts that “reality itself is nothing but an embodiment of a certain blockage in the process of symbolization. For reality to exist, something must be left unspoken” (Žižek 1991b: 45). If the subject was able to get a total knowledge about the Real, if every single part of the reality was articulated and



symbolized, the world as a symptom would disappear. For Žižek, the paradoxes intrinsic to language always determine the process of symbolization of the Real and our knowledge about the world itself: “Symbolization as such is by definition structured around a certain central impossibility, a deadlock that is nothing but a structuring of this impossibility” (Žižek 1991b: 47). The impossibility is the essential characteristic of the dimension of the Real along with the necessity of the Symbolic and the possibility of the Imaginary; and the symptom is something which combines these three registers together.

### **The Collapse of the Soviet Union as a Cultural Trauma.**

The breakdown of the Soviet ideological system can serve as an example of the traumatic encounter with the Real, described by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek in their works. To support his ideas that the Real penetrates the Symbolic Order from time to time and leaves some tracks symptoms in our everyday life, Žižek gives different examples of unexpected events from world history which initiated traumatic reaction. He describes such world-known calamities as the Afghan war, the Chernobyl tragedy in 1985, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001 and the recent war in Iraq. Similar to many of these historic catastrophes, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its consequences can illustrate the cultural traumatic experience entailed by the encounter with the Real.

Robert Service describes the disintegration of the USSR in his book *Russia: Experiment with a People*:

As the clock struck midnight in Moscow on 31 December 1991, a great state ceased to exist: the Soviet Union had suddenly vanished. This did not happen as a



consequence of nuclear war with the USA. Nor did it result from revolutionary struggle in Russia. The whole scene was bizarrely uneventful. The red flag – with its hammer and sickle in the top right-hand corner – had already been lowered from its pole on the Kremlin ramparts and the tricolour of the Russian Federation – white, blue and red – had been hoisted in its place (Service 2003: 13).

The Soviet Union disappeared because of the political and economic crisis in December, 1991 when the Belovezh agreement to form the Commonwealth of Independent States was signed by three leaders from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine – Boris Yeltsin, Stanislav Shushkevich and Leonid Kravchuk. This historical point initiated a different experience for the Russian people in the 1990s, who for the last 74 years had been living under the Soviet regime. It was one of the most important changes for all former Soviet republics and a “classic example of ‘surprise’ in history” (Yergin and Gustafson 1993: 6).

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a lot of positive and negative moments for the Russian people. On the one hand, all states finally got a chance to regain their independence, their cultures and languages. Throughout the period of transition the Russian people have had an opportunity to enjoy their private lives and to separate themselves from the state. They could think and share their opinions more openly than during the Soviet period; they started to enjoy intellectual and religious freedom. Sex discourse came out from the underground, and there was no “iron curtain” any more: a lot of foreign goods appeared in the groceries and the department stores, the borders to the West were open for travelers from Russia who had enough money.

On the other hand, a lot of reconstruction in the economic, social and cultural spheres took place during the period of transition which had dramatic consequences.



Anna Lawton points out in her article, "Russian Cinema in Trouble Times," that it was an abrupt transition to the free market economy for most of the industries in Russia (Lawton 2002: 98). The first few years of market reforms were beneficial and improved the social status of a small group of people who "have built their fortunes on the ruins of state property and the collapse of the financial system" (Beliaeva 2000: 43). The standard of living for the majority of the Russian population went down drastically: a lot of businesses went through a restructuring process and as a result many people lost their jobs. The Russian people, like other people from the former Soviet Union, had to come through the process of national and cultural self-identification; they had to position themselves in a new world of political, economic, social and cultural changes and uncertainty.

Service asserts that most Russians reacted negatively to the new changes in the social, political, economic and cultural structures of the post-Soviet society. According to him, "a plutocracy of ministers and financiers took power and the Russian people justifiably concluded that their rulers had cared more for themselves than for the common good" (Service 2003: 6-7). Everything seemed unclear and abstruse: the Russians could not define the new geographical and cultural borders; the question of national characteristics became vital to all new countries.

With all the sudden cultural, social, economical and political changes, the collapse of the Soviet Union became one of the main traumatic intrusions of the Real in the Russian Symbolic (along with the Revolution of 1917, the Great Patriotic War, the death of Stalin, the Afghan war and others). And this trauma inevitably left its traces in the



post-Soviet Symbolic, and its symptoms can be discovered in Russian literature, art, media, television and cinema.

### **The Real and Cinema.**

The Lacanian notions of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real played an important role in the development of film theory. Since the 1970s many film theorists have focused on the relations between the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the process of cinematic identification (Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, Jean-Louis Baudry and others), and the importance of the register of the Real was largely ignored. Metz in his essay, "The Imaginary Signifier," draws a parallel between cinematic representations and the Lacanian mirror stage when a child is going through the process of identification with the images in the mirror. According to Metz, cinema belongs to the Imaginary order with its emphasis on images, resemblances and doubles, and hinders the smooth entrance into the Symbolic order. By giving a subject an illusory control over the images on screen, cinema offers "the imaginary lure necessary for subjects to accept their subjection" (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: xvi). Christian Metz asserts that, "insofar as it abolishes all traces of the subject of the enunciation, the traditional film succeeds in giving the spectator the impression that he is himself that subject, but in a state of emptiness and absence, of pure visual capacity" (Metz 1982: 96). Later, Metz was criticized by film theorists for simplifying the cinematic identification and putting it only into the dimension of the Imaginary. Because images cannot exist separately from the social structure and the cultural background of the spectator, cinema must also necessarily reside in the Symbolic register, and the role of the Real with its important role in



“constructing” the social order should not be ignored. Without the gaps, lack, disruptions of the Real, the Symbolic order cannot exist. Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle point out the paradoxical nature of our reality – “in order to function properly, the Symbolic order must function improperly” (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: xvii).

As a result, if earlier Lacanian film theorists concentrated mostly on the ideological function of the cinema, film scholars like Frances L. Restuccia, Hilary Neroni, Juliet Flower MacCannell and others have turned to the analysis of the Real in cinema which hinders the work of ideological fantasy. McGowan and Kunkle write that, “ideology cannot be said to produce the subject; instead, ideology functions to conceal the void that is the subject, to fill in this void with a fantasmatic content” (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: xviii). Thus, in film we can track down not only the work of ideology (as a part of the Symbolic) through its imaginary supplement, but also what impedes this process – the Real, or more precisely, something which masks, conceals the Real gap within ideology. As McGowan and Kunkle write in the introduction to the book *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, “the ideological fantasy can serve as the vehicle through which the Real manifests itself” (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: xviii).

One of the key notions of Žižek’s theory – “enjoyment” or *jouissance* – has been used by film theorists to explain why popular culture, and popular cinema in particular, becomes so important in constructing different fantasies. Thus, Sarah Kay indicates the connection between Žižek’s notion of “enjoyment” and popular culture and argues that the entertaining aspect of every popular culture artifact comes from ‘surplus enjoyment.’ She writes that this enjoyment “derives not from the direct satisfaction of the drives (if such a thing were possible), but from the satisfaction of *not* directly satisfying them” and,



through popular culture products, “this enjoyment spreads its tentacles into every aspect of our lives” (Kay 2003: 50). Kay argues that the Lacanian *objet a* becomes an important element in the relations between the three orders and it plays a central role in Žižek’s enjoyment of popular culture. Through popular culture and its tendency to construct a fantasy, we can define our relations to enjoyment and to the Real in general. Fantasy usually becomes the source of ‘surplus enjoyment’ and we can establish the Symbolic order or our social reality by putting this surplus in the centre of the fantasy. Kay writes that:

Different cultural products, through their manipulation of fantasy, strike a different balance between ‘reality’ and the Real – controlling the dosage between the two, as it were. But what they can also do is to make explicit the way fantasy always constructs ‘reality’ for us and the relation which such ‘reality’ bears to the Real (Kay 2003: 51).

Žižek applies Lacanian theory to the analysis of popular culture artifacts and in most of his books usually uses the examples of popular cinema to support his argument.

McGowan and Kunkle also consider that cinema becomes an interesting cultural material for applying Lacanian theory because film analysis involves both the Symbolic structure and the traumatic expression of the Real which, as they believe, is “often unleashed in the cinema” (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: xxvii). In two of his books, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* and *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Žižek analyzes the relations between the Symbolic and the Real, the problem of trauma, enjoyment, symptom, fantasy, and uses popular films by such Hollywood directors as Alfred Hitchcock, Charles Chaplin, Francis Ford



Coppola, David Lynch and Steven Spielberg as examples to support his ideas. Likewise, we can use popular films by Russian filmmakers such as Alexander Rogozhkin, Dmitrii Astrakhan, Yurii Mamin, Georgii Shengelia, Aleksei Balabanov, Valerii Todorovskii, Sergei Bodrov Jr. and Petr Buslov to disclose the consequences of the encounter with the Real by analyzing the fantasy formation through the symptoms of the Real.

Bruce Fink affirms that the main objective of psychoanalysis should involve not the symbolization of “every last drop of the Real,” but rather it should concentrate on the traumatic “scraps of the Real.” By encouraging a patient, an analysand, to meanderingly talk about the event which has provoked a traumatic reaction, we give him or her an opportunity to relate it through words to other signifiers. According to Fink, “by inciting the analysand to say it and bring it into relation with ever more signifiers, it undergoes “dialectization,” being drawn into the dialectic or movement of the analysand’s discourse and set in motion” (Fink 1995: 26). Similarly, meaning can be discovered in popular films through isolating the traumatic element of the Real within the text, through disclosing the points in the text where the meaning necessarily fails. In the same way as a Lacanian psychoanalyst tries to reveal the cause of the patient’s trauma, we can endeavor to find the symptomatic points of the encounter with the Real in Russian popular cinema (the collapse of the Soviet Union) which has caused a traumatic reaction and around which a new symbolic meaning, a fantasy, is constructed.



## CHAPTER II

### THE INTRUSION OF THE REAL AND FANTASMATIC DRINKING IN ALEXANDER ROGOZHNIKIN'S FILMS.

#### **Alcohol Drinking and the Russian Symbolic.**

In his book, *The Fright of Real Tears*, Slavoj Žižek writes that there is always a gap, a cut in reality which becomes a “suture” of our everyday reality and has an ontological status. Some lack, or gap, in the Symbolic initiates the whole process of constructing the meaning around it, and thus, what we call our “reality” is constituted, and fantasy is what sutures the ripped patches of our reality:

The ‘whole’ of reality cannot be perceived/accepted as reality, so the price we have to pay for ‘normally’ situating ourselves within reality is that something should be foreclosed from it: this void of primordial repression has to be filled in – ‘sutured’ – by the spectral fantasy (Žižek 2001a: 71).

The traumatic disintegration of the Soviet Union affected the post-Soviet Symbolic, made it impossible to ignore a gap in the social order and made the perception of separation, alienation and loss in Russian culture more intense. It worked for the Russian people the same way as the primary separation of the child’s body from the maternal body. The only difference is that, before the child is born he previously belongs to the dimension of the Real, whereas for Russian culture the experience of the Real was different. The Russian culture belonged to the Soviet Symbolic and the collapse of the Soviet ideological system brought a piece of the Real into Russian reality. This piece of the Real was abrupt, recondite, and minatory; it created a gap, a hole in the familiar, comfortable reality of the Russian people. In order to fill this gap, to suture this hole in the Russian Symbolic, a



number of different fantasmatic constructions had to take place, and drinking, or as I would argue, fantasmatic drinking, helped the Russian people to deal with the consequences of the intrusion of the Real and made the realization of “the thrill of the Real” possible.

Drinking vodka has always played an important role in Russian culture and has become a stereotypical definition and a national characteristic in the eyes of many foreigners – it has become an important part of the Russian Imaginary and Symbolic. The interest in the problem of drinking and the role of alcohol in contemporary Russian culture has increased within the last decade and has become one of the main motifs in the popular comedies made between 1995 and 2003 by the Russian filmmaker Alexander Rogozhkin: *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* (1995), *Peculiarities of the National Fishing* (1998), *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period* (2000), and *Peculiarities of the National Politics* (2003). All these comedies were made after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the portrayal of Russian everyday life is different from the films of the Soviet period. Consuming alcohol was never an essential part of the plot in the Soviet cinema: it could either become a minor element in the major events of the film, or could be simply ignored. Rogozhkin’s interest in alcohol consumption as a symbolic phenomenon in the post-Soviet period can indicate that there is a special connection between the traumatic experience of the disintegration of the USSR and fantasmatic drinking. In Rogozhkin’s *Peculiarities* drinking becomes a fantasy which comes into play when the Real collapse of the Soviet Union breaks through the stability of the Russian Symbolic order leaving traumatic tracks in post-Soviet culture. Birgit Beumers writes that the Russian drinking tradition may look purposeless, but “it is a habit



which makes social and national differences disappear, which lifts temporal boundaries in bringing together past and present, and annihilates the borders between animals and humans” (Beumers 1999: 80).

In Rogozhkin’s comedies alcohol becomes an important element of symbolic relations: it has a market value in human relations and becomes a source of bribery. When, in the *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*, the policeman Semjonov arrives to fine the hunting team for shooting and making loud noises, a glass of vodka is all that “saves the day,” and later in the film, again bribed with alcohol, Semjonov forgives them the lack of a hunting license. In *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*, the military pilots agree to transport Kuzmich’s cow to his friend on a bomber plane for a few bottles of vodka. In *Peculiarities of the National Fishing*, the main characters bribe the naval captain with liquor to get access to the submarine. People are even evaluated by their ability to drink: in *Peculiarities of the National Fishing*, the former local public prosecutor is proudly mentioned because of his ability to drink half a pail of vodka and to do public speaking afterwards on the harmful influence of alcohol on a human organism. In *Peculiarities of the National Politics*, the image-maker Inna Usman receives recognition and trust from the male characters after she drinks a glass of vodka in one gulp. Kuzmich states: “She is a normal *baba* (woman). Can drink.”

For the Russians in Rogozhkin’s films, vodka also becomes a mythical structure of the Symbolic order, like wine for the Frenchmen, described by Roland Barthes in his essay, “Wine and Milk.” In this essay the French philosopher analyzes the cultural significance of wine and its role in French society. He writes that:



It [wine] is above all a converting substance, capable of reversing situations and states, and of extracting from objects their opposites – for instance, making a weak man strong or a silent one talkative. Hence its old alchemical heredity, its philosophical power to transmute and create *ex nihilo* (Barthes 1972: 58).

According to Barthes, wine has different meanings and supports a variety of myths; it erases any class and economical differences and helps to solve difficult problems by giving some extra strength. He goes on to argue that the objectives of drinking wine in France are totally different from the objectives in many other countries: Frenchmen drink not to get drunk – “drunkenness is a consequence, never an intention”; they enjoy the process of drinking itself as a social, symbolic act. Drinking wine in France becomes an important characteristic of the nation, it “serves to qualify the Frenchman, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control and his sociability” (Barthes 1972: 59). The fantasmatic consumption of alcohol in Russia has a very similar meaning to drinking wine in France; it has very interesting connotations and cultural significance.

Rogozhkin’s comedy *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* has become very popular with the Russian audience and won “Nika” and “Kinotavr” awards (at the main film festivals in the post-Soviet countries) for the best picture, director and actor and received the Grand Prize at the Sochi Film festival. As Susan Larsen mentions in her article, “New Russian Cinema of Reconciliation,” the film was ranked one of the seven most popular videos in the Moscow region between October 1995 and January 1996 (Larsen 1999: 201). However, the director has received international recognition only for his anti-war dramas *Checkpoint* (1998) and *The Cuckoo* (2002).



The plot of *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* is very simple: a group of Russian men and a Finnish writer go hunting in the woods near the Finnish border. A lot of absurd things happen to the characters throughout the movie: a bear cub breaks into the Russian sauna and drinks all the vodka left on the table; one of the characters is trapped in a barn by an inflatable boat; the Finnish writer Raivo sees a Yeti (Bigfoot) in the Russian woods; Kuzmich's cow travels on a military plane and so on.

In his article, "The State of Contemporary Russian Cinema," David Gurevich calls Rogozhkin's *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* "the Russian version of Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe* – without food" (Gurevich 1997). And, indeed, consuming alcohol occupies a major part of the whole plot; in almost every episode of the film, military men, policemen, dairymaids and even animals are shown drinking; there are many bottles of vodka present in almost every scene. In this film, drinking vodka seems to satisfy many stereotypes of "Russian-ness" and becomes an important part of the Russian Imaginary, in much the same way as Roland Barthes defines the myth of "Roman-ness" in his essay "The Romans in Films." For Barthes, the main signs of being Roman in the movies are to wear a fringe and have a special type of forehead; likewise, "Russian-ness" in the movies can be defined by having a beard, wearing a sheepskin coat and being associated with vodka. The imaginary structure of the "real" Russian-ness constitutes the Russian man as a strong, tough, but usually uneducated "muzhik" who can finish a bottle of vodka in a few minutes, who can spend the whole night consuming alcohol and whose purpose is just to get drunk. At first sight, one of the main characters, the forester Kuzmich, can fit into this stereotype; but, the fact that he practices Zen Buddhism and builds a Japanese stone garden in his backyard, easily communicates with



Raivo without knowing the Finnish language, and cultivates pineapples near his house, points to the more complicated fantasmatic structure of the narrative.

In *Peculiarities of the National Fishing* all events are also constructed around fantasmatic drinking. The characters of the film go fishing to the same place where they hunted before; they enter Finland on a boat by accident without any documents and forget sixteen boxes of vodka in a small private motel. The whole story is about how the group rescues the alcohol and uses it to fuel a submarine, and their adventures end when they find a box of a very expensive French cognac more than 200 years old. All these ridiculous and absurd situations are not surprising for the post-Soviet audience; the disintegration of the Soviet Union has become the most preposterous fact for the majority of Russian people, and Rogozhkin's films reflect the emotional reactions of the Russians to this drastic historical change, such as bitterness, sarcasm and regret. That is why the researcher Birgit Beumers states, in her article, "To Moscow! To Moscow? The Russian Hero and the Loss of the Centre," that "the breakdown of social order in contemporary Russia is treated with self-irony" (Beumers 1999: 80).

*Peculiarities of the National Hunt* begins with scenes of the Russian hunt in the nineteenth century with elegant horses, borzoi hounds and conversations in French, which Raivo, the writer, imagines in his dreams. For Raivo, the main objectives of this trip are to get more information about the Russian hunting tradition for his book, but the only thing he learns from his adventures is that the Russians drink very much and drinking means something special to them. In this film drinking becomes a fantasmatic construction so that the goal of all members of the hunting team is not to hunt but to get enjoyment from drinking together. The Russian social reality has been disturbed by the



intrusion of the traumatic Real, and that is why the Russians in this film try to “erase” or to minimize the consequences of traumatic eruption with a dozen boxes of vodka during the hunting trip. Even the Finnish writer’s dreams indicate that the whole process of hunting (and drinking) is a fantasy that unites people and puts all the “bits and pieces” together after the fundamental demolition.

The first scene of the film when the Finn is dreaming about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian traditional hunt proves that hunting is just a fantasy constructed by Raivo’s desire, which seems to be the main motivation and the driving force of the filmic narrative. It is Raivo who wants to see what the “real” Russian hunting tradition is; it is he who refuses to drink with other Russians in the beginning and who finally becomes a part of the drinking fantasy at the end of the movie: he identifies himself with the drinking fantasy when he is the only one who can offer a bottle of vodka to Kuzmich. In his essay, “Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance,” Žižek writes that in our everyday life “we are immersed in ‘reality’ (structured and supported by the fantasy), and this immersion is disturbed by symptoms which bear witness to the fact that another, repressed, level of our psyche resists this immersion”. We should “traverse” our fantasy which “structures the excess that resists our immersion in daily reality”, we should fully identify ourselves with it (Žižek 2001c: 17). And Raivo has to “traverse” the drinking fantasy in order to fit into the Russian Symbolic, into Russian everyday reality.

*Peculiarities of the National Hunt* begins with the scene of the old traditional Russian hunt, and it ends with the scene when the hunters from the nineteenth century hunting fantasy intrude into the reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hunting team, which proves once again that both “realities” are constructed by desire.



There is a very similar structure in *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period*, which begins with the story of the Japanese hunter Hu Zhou from Fudzian province, which intermingles with the “reality” of the hunters from the twentieth century throughout the film. The Japanese hunting fantasy intervenes into the Russian hunters’ reality in the middle of the film when Kuzmich is making some tea and gives it to Hu Zhou, and at the end of Rogozhkin’s comedy the hunter from Fudzian province joins the Russian hunting team. Once again two different fantasies collide and the igniting force for both of them is a desire: the Japanese desire to find the truth of the hunt and the Russian desire to restore the broken unity through drinking and hunting. If in the first film it was Raiva whose desire was to reach that “impossible” *objet a* and through whom the fantasy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian hunt was constructed in *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period* it is through forester Kuzmich’s desire that the Japanese fantasy becomes so “real” and transfers into the Russian hunters’ Symbolic order.

The idea of the hunt for the Finnish writer in *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* becomes an *objet a*, which expresses the desire for enjoyment and which can never be totally fulfilled and experienced. In his book *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Žižek writes that the *objet a* functions as a split in the circle of pleasure, as “a rift in the closed circle of the psychic apparatus governed by the “pleasure principle,” a rift which “derails” it and forces it to “cast a look on the world,” to take into account reality” (Žižek 1992: 49). This incomplete enjoyment has necessarily to fail and the desire to obtain the lost, or missed, object – *objet a* – evokes the continual movement toward it. In *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*, the hunt, as the Finn pictures it, never happens, even if in some scenes it



looks like they are hunting. In one scene the Russians and the Finn go to the woods and start hunting, but instead of killing animals, two of them – Serega and the policeman Semenov – are attacked by a bear cub. They run away and climb a tree, but the bear pursues them and leaves only after taking away from them all the bottles of vodka and drinking them up. The bear cub with a hangover becomes a symptom of the traumatic experience which does not fit into our everyday perceptions about social reality. This symptom indicates that enjoyment cannot be reached, because vodka, which is necessary for the illusion of achieving the *objet a*, is gone, and the desire for enjoyment is not satisfied. Raivo's meeting with a Yeti while hunting in the Russian woods becomes another symptom of the returning Real trauma which indicates that the flow of the Symbolic order is disturbed. The Finnish writer experiences something outside his comprehension after returning to his companions, and he tries to inscribe the strange event into the Symbolic order through naming it and, thus attempts to obliterate its traumatic consequences. Raivo, struggling with words, tries to tell his friends that he saw a huge monkey, or a Yeti, thus, attempting to give a meaning to the Real, trying to bring it into the Symbolic order through the chain of signifiers. However, neither interpreter Zhenia nor Kuzmich accept his explanations: the encounter with the Real is interpreted only partially, leaving Raivo confused and uncomfortable.

At the end of *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*, the hunting team runs through the woods, shoots invisible animals, and later accidentally kills Kuzmich's cow, and for Kuzmich this incident also becomes a symptom of the Real. Because the desire for the unity through hunting and drinking has not been totally achieved, the traumatic gap is constituted and the cow, as Žižek would argue, becomes "an answer of the Real" and



takes the place of this lack. The hunters find Kuzmich's cow dead and decide to butcher it, and when Serega tries to skin it, the cow emits a terrible sound, pokes him with its horns and escapes. Kuzmich's cow "returns" from the world of the dead, from the dimension of the Real, and fills out the gap of the "impossible" desire. "The answer of the Real" points to the lack in desire, ensuring that the process of desiring enjoyment, the attempt to touch the "untouchable" will continue.

Throughout the movie Raivo refuses to drink vodka with his Russian companions, asks them all the time "When are we going to start hunting?" He does not realize that the process of "okhota" has already started and that the drinking is just a part of the Russian desire for reconnection, reunion. With regard to the current discussion, Susan Larsen's comment about the specific significance of the film's title can support the idea stated above. She writes that the Russian title *Osobennosti natsionalnoi okhoty* can be translated differently: "okhota" can have two meanings here – "hunt" and "desire," or "wish," or "inclination". According to Larsen, Rogozhkin's comedy is not about the peculiarities of the Russian hunt anymore, but about the Russian "national desire," or the universal desire peculiar to the Russians (Larsen 1999: 201). Larsen connects the "national desire" with the short toasts being proposed usually by General Ivolgin (or "Mikhalych" as his friends call him) throughout Rogozhkin's comedies. Mikhalych plays the role of guru for all the other Russians in *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*: it is he who proclaims the most important cultural and ethical values for the Russians in the form of toasts: "To the meeting!", "To the fraternity!", "To beauty!", "To justice!", "To art!" Mikhalych proposes toasts to the intellect, to the Motherland and to unity. Larsen suggests that these



toasts constitute the “okhota,” the desire for wholeness, friendship, brotherhood, which can only exist in the realm of fantasy.

In *Peculiarities of the National Fishing*, the general shares his thoughts on the importance of vodka for the Russian people: “Vodka is a unique invention of our people. It is our nationality, our ethnicity; it is something which unites us all and restrains us from total disintegration.” The general, like many other post-Soviet people, realizes that one of the most important characteristics of the Soviet Symbolic was the aspiration to be a whole, solid system where everyone is equal, every element is important – that is what communism was about. The desire for unity became a hard core of survival for many Russian people, and in his films Rogozhkin is able to show how, after the breakdown of the Soviet ideological system, this incomplete desire has transferred into the post-Soviet Symbolic order.

Alcohol in Rogozhkin’s films belongs to the symbolic structure of Russian everyday life, because through fantasizing about it the Russian people can get a “near-completeness”, a “near-unity” which is constantly disrupted by the Real. In *Peculiarities of the National Fishing* and *Peculiarities of National Politics*, vodka becomes a symbolic object similar to “the circulating object of exchange” which Slavoj Žižek analyzes in the introduction to the collection of articles on Hitchcock *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*. There, Žižek describes different types of objects in Hitchcock’s films: the McGuffin,<sup>10</sup> or *objet a*, which represents the Real split, gap, lack in the middle of the Symbolic order; the symbolic object, “the tiny element which sets in motion the crystallization of the symbolic structure” and, finally, the object Phi, or “the imaginary objectification of the Real” (Žižek 1992: 8). While



analyzing the second type of objects in Hitchcock's films, Žižek writes that such a symbolic object, in contrast with the *objet a*, should be materially present in our reality as a "leftover, remnants which cannot be reduced to a network of formal relations proper to the symbolic structure" (Žižek 1992: 6). It becomes a suture, a juxtaposition, between different subjects, which guarantees their functioning within the symbolic structure.

Žižek designates the contradictory role of "the circulating object of exchange:"

Although it is a leftover of the Real, an 'excrement' (what psychoanalysis would call the 'anal object'), it functions as a positive condition of the restoration of a symbolic structure: the structure of symbolic exchange between the subjects can take place only in so far as it is embodied in this pure material element which acts as its guarantee (Žižek 1992: 7).

Therefore, vodka as an object of symbolic interaction amalgamates all the characters of *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* unites people from diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds: the Finnish writer, the military general, the forester, the businessman, the policeman, the dairymaid and so on. In Rogozhkin's comedies bottles of vodka are present in almost every scene as the reminder of the desire for the impossible enjoyment. When Mikhalych and Leva Soloveichik accidentally smash a bag full of bottles of vodka (previously hidden by Kuzmich in the lake), a split in the symbolic relations takes place: Kuzmich takes the broken bottles with him and leaves his companions not even saying a word. It is a traumatic recognition of the loss of some core structure in the Symbolic order, but in the next scene the team is reunited at the dinner table with a few bottles of vodka and they drink "to friendship" – vodka has restored the broken connections. *Peculiarities of the National Fishing* ends with the fishing team and



the marines on a raft drinking old French cognac. In *Peculiarities of the National Politics*, after winning the elections, General Ivolgin and his friends go to the woods where they cook shish-kebab, drink some vodka and play volleyball.

In the introduction to *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan*, Slavoj Zizek argues that in Hitchcock's films "the circulating objects of exchange" appear when there is a lack, a gap, in the symbolic relations:

And the paradox is that this symbolic pact, this structural network of relations, can establish itself only in so far as it is embodied in a totally contingent material element, a little-bit-of-Real which, by its sudden irruption, disrupts the homeostatic indifference of relations between subjects (Zizek 1992: 7).

According to him, if in the beginning we may have imaginary, pre-symbolic relations between objects and unstructured relations between subjects, with the introduction of "the circulating object of exchange" or through "the shock of the Real," the Symbolic order is established. 200-years-old French cognac accidentally found by the characters of *Peculiarities of the National Fishing* in the lake becomes this object, which has a "material presence of a fragment of reality" and which connects all the characters at the end of the movie.

In *Peculiarities of the National Fishing*, vodka obtains more characteristics of the first type of objects defined by Zizek – it becomes more like Hitchcock's McGuffin or *objet a*, "an empty place, a pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion" (Zizek 1992: 6). This type of object, according to Zizek, should be necessarily absent and indifferent, and should signify something important for the characters. Zizek defines this type of object as "the lack, the void of the Real setting in motion the symbolic movement



of interpretation, a pure semblance of the Mystery to be explained, interpreted” (Zizek 1992: 8). In *Peculiarities of the National Fishing*, sixteen boxes of vodka left at the Finnish motel become such a missing object around which the whole narration is structured and which all members of the fishing team are trying to return. Thus, Kuzmich, Leva and Serega try to elaborate a plan with the captain of submarine to get the boxes back and finally rescue the vodka using the military submarine. But ironically, they have to use it all as fuel for the submarine in order to escape from the Finnish police – the object of enjoyment is gone again.

Because all events in *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period* take place during cold winter months, the main characters drink a lot of hot tea in addition to vodka. When the ecology inspector Ol’ga Valer’evna Masliuk arrives with her assistant Piatakov at Kuzmich’s lodge, vodka is completely superseded by tea. Masliuk announces, “I am against vodka. All our misfortunes are because of it and I would advise you not to drink it too,” and here she acts as the Other whose law interferes with the hunter’s desire for enjoyment. Later in the film the whole hunting team goes to the woods to hunt wild pig, and at night Ol’ga Valer’evna and Piatakov are attacked by an invisible force which presses down their car, trapping both of them inside. The shocked inspectors cannot even understand what happened to them, and this accident becomes the first painful traumatic encounter with the Real in this film. It is Kuzmich who tries to inscribe the inexplicable phenomenon into the familiar Symbolic order by telling other members of the hunting team that it was just a migrating wild pig. The twisted wreckage of the inspector’s car becomes a symptom of the Real trauma, an indicator of how social reality can be distorted, deformed, mutated by the intrusion of the Real. Ol’ga Valer’evna asks for a



glass of vodka, thus, “traversing” into the drinking fantasy and through it attempting to conceal, to erase “the horror of the Real.” Instead of killing a wild pig and thus satisfying the desire for the hunt, drinking vodka becomes a substitute for the object of desire.

There are two other moments in this film when the symptoms of the impossible desire for the Real entail fantasmatic drinking. When the team goes deer hunting, they use a special hunting horn to attract the animals; after a few unsuccessful attempts they finally hear a sound similar to the deer’s bellow, and when they reach the place they discover that it is only a train whistle. For the characters of *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period*, this whistle becomes the surrogate of the desirable object – the deer – and once again points out the gap in the desire. That is why in the next scene the members of the hunting team are sitting at the dinner table, drinking vodka all together, united by fantasmatic drinking. Later in the film they go ice fishing and Piatakov catches a trout. But because the trout is too big to pull through the hole in the ice, all his companions try to help him, and finally one of them plunges into the water and catches the fish. However, when his friends pull him out from the water there is only a small whitebait in his hands instead of a big trout. The whitebait stands for the *objet a*, offering some satisfaction of the desire, and at the same time shows that there is always a gap in desire and that “the little thing of the Real” is never accessible. Because of his disappointment and discomfort, this character has to take a big sip of vodka from the metal mug right away and so, through the work of the drinking fantasy, returns the consistency to the Symbolic.

*Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period* ends with a scene about the Japanese hunter Hu Zhou. The voiceover narrates that Hu Zhou, after spending a lot



of time trying to understand the meaning of the hunt, finally came to the conclusion that the most important thing is not the kill but the notion of hunting itself. Very similarly, Žizek asserts that the “hard core” of our lives is not the result of achieving the object of desire, but the continual attempts to get this object, to hide the gap, the split in the Symbolic, through which our social reality is established.

The role of vodka in *Peculiarities of the National Politics* becomes more ambiguous and complicated: it is missing from the narrative, and wine becomes the main drink in the film. In this film the main characters from the previous Rogozhkin comedies come to help Mikhalych (general Ivolgin) with his election campaign. The company drinks only red wine throughout the movie, and the only reminder of vodka here is Kuzmich’s home-made magic liquor which plays the role of *objet a* for all other characters. Kuzmich and policemen Semenov arrive at the airport at the same time as the professional image-maker Inna Usman and the speech-writer Alex Lyks. Kuzmich brings a huge bottle of blue liquor, which, according to him, is endowed with special magic qualities and works very similar to Viagra by arousing sexual desire. Inna drinks a glass of Kuzmich’s drink and thus “traverses” the drinking fantasy (the same way Raivo does in the first film). From that moment Kuzmich’s liquor starts to function as a McGuffin: Mikhalych’s political opponents, the police, the mafia, – all want to get this magic liquor, to discover its mystery. The home-made vodka becomes a desirable object for other characters in the film; it indicates the desire for enjoyment. Two policemen get a glass of Kuzmich’s drink by chance, but they have to drink it up when they are caught by the mafia members and it never reaches the police office. Instead of the magic liquor, water from the lake is analyzed by the police investigators, and the enigma of Kuzmich’s



homemade vodka remains undiscovered. It becomes the *objet a* and helps the drinking fantasy to function in the Symbolic order. As Sarah Kay writes in *Zizek: a Critical Introduction*, *objet a* helps to hide, to veil the gap, the split in the subject, to stabilize our perception of social reality, but at the same time it also perturbs it “with the uncanny menace of the Real” (Kay 2003: 57). On one hand, Kuzmich’s magic liqueur gives an illusion of possible enjoyment, a feeling that the desire can be satisfied (both the desire to drink and the desire to get sexual pleasure); on the other hand, because it is inaccessible to many characters it returns the primary lack, gap, rift in the Symbolic order.

The drinking fantasy in *Peculiarities of the National Politics*, as in other Rogozhkin comedies, emerges from the uncomfortable, threatening, traumatic encounter with the Real. At the beginning of the film Mikhalych is interviewed by a foreign journalist on the balcony of his luxurious house. Leva and Serega discover a mine beneath the general’s car, but Mikhalych reassures the journalist that he already received a few faked mines in the past and there is nothing to worry about. However, when his companions try to neutralize it, Mikhalych’s SUV and the journalist’s car, which stands next to it, explode. First, the explosion occupies the whole frame and, then, the audience can see the cars on fire through the open doors of the balcony with a snow-white coffee set on the table in the foreground. This is the way the Real intrudes into the Symbolic order: first, it breaks into our comfortable, secure reality and fills it up (explosion), and then it becomes framed by signifiers from our familiar Symbolic dimension (the table with the coffee set). The exploded cars are the symptoms of the Real and because the symptoms, according to Zizek, should be analyzed, interpreted, Mikhalych tells the shocked journalist: “Now you see that these people [political opponents] are game for



anything,” thus, trying to explain the traumatic experience in words. Right after this accident Kuzmich arrives at the airport with his magic liqueur, and the drinking fantasy can start playing its role in re-establishing the Symbolic order.

In Rogozhkin’s comedies alcohol, usually vodka, has also another paradoxical function – it becomes the bridge to the dimension of the Real. Because the characters of Rogozhkin’s *Peculiarities* are afraid of the obscurity of the Real, but at the same time look forward to experiencing “the thrill of the Real,” vodka becomes not only the essential element of the drinking fantasy, but also leads to the “near-experience” of the Real. When the main characters drink too much alcohol, they fall into unconscious inebriety, which becomes very similar to death or insanity when the chain of signifiers in the Symbolic order is disrupted, when the contact with social reality is lost. When the characters wake up the morning after the heavy drinking with a terrible hangover, they experience the gap between reality and the Real which becomes very painful and traumatic. It is almost like the return of the primary trauma and the characters have to drink again, to “traverse” themselves into the drinking fantasy. As an *objet a*, vodka not only hides the Real from us but also evokes the repetition of the traumatic encounter with the Real enjoyment.

Thus, in Rogozhkin’s films, vodka has a very ambiguous meaning and plays an essential role in the fantasmatic drinking which helps to deal with the Real split in the Symbolic order of Russian reality. It becomes an important element in the symbolic relations, can serve as the symbolic object (“the circulating object of exchange”) and as the object of impossible enjoyment (*the objet a*). By drinking vodka, the characters in



Rogozhkin's *Peculiarities* "traverse" the drinking fantasy, become inscribed into the Russian Symbolic order and at the same time can also experience "the thrill of the Real".



### CHAPTER III

#### TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE AND THE POST-SOVIET FANTASY ABOUT THE HAPPY LAND IN RUSSIAN POPULAR CINEMA.

##### The Post-Soviet Trauma and the Fantasy about the Happy Land.

The breakdown of the Soviet ideological system has caused a lot of changes in the social and economic systems of post-Soviet society which were unexpected and traumatic for most of the Russian people. Academicians, doctors, engineers, who during the Soviet period formed the middle class, could not economically survive in the new culture. The middle class almost ceased to exist in the post-Soviet world. The role of the *intelligentsia*, which in the last few decades of the Soviet culture was very powerful and respected, has been depreciated.

All the political, social, economic and cultural changes which affected the everyday life of the common Russian people have been reflected in many Russian popular films of the 1990s. Very similar to Rogozhkin's comedies, where the drinking fantasy, or fantasmatic drinking, is a consequence of the traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union, such popular Russian films of the 1990s as Yurii Mamin's *Window to Paris* (1994), Georgii Shengelia's *The Castaway Sagittarius* (1993), Dmitrii Astrakhan's *You Are My Only One* (1993), and Valerii Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf* (1997) offer a fantasy about the "happy land". In his book *Russian Cinema*, David Gillespie defines family happiness or lack of it as one of the major topics of post-Soviet cinema (Gillespie 2002: 151), and Mamin, Astrakhan, Todorovskii and Shengelia tend to construct a new fantasy of "happiness" in order to conceal the split in the Russian Symbolic order after the breakdown of the Soviet system.



Slavoj Žižek returns to the topic of fantasy in the book *Conversations with Žižek*, recently published by Polity Press, where he once again analyses the relations between fantasy and enjoyment. He writes that in order to enter the Symbolic order, to become social subjects, we need to renounce our enjoyment which never really belonged to us, and the role of the fantasmatic construction is to point out the spot where the enjoyment was lost (or where it was never obtained):

Fantasy is ultimately the fantasy about the sin of enjoyment, but in a double sense. Fantasy not only articulates the sin of enjoyment but... it stages the mythical narrative of how enjoyment was lost. This is the more important function of fantasy. It is not so much, 'Oh my God, we have it' that concerns fantasy, but how enjoyment was lost, how it was stolen (Daly and Žižek, 2004a: 110).

So, in many Russian popular films, the traumatic experience is caused by the recognition of the lost enjoyment, by the realization that there is a gap in the post-Soviet Symbolic, and the fantasmatic formation about the "happy land" serves as a veil and as an indicator of that loss which was caused by the collapse of the Soviet ideological system.

### **The Magic Portal and the Parisian Fantasy in Yuri Mamin's *Window to Paris*.**

Mamin's *Window to Paris* was the best Russian movie of 1994, according to many film reviews. Stanley Kaufmann in his review for *New Republic* calls this film "an anomaly, a light romantic fantasy from Russia" (Kaufmann 1995: 27). The researcher Anna Lawton writes that Mamin's *Window to Paris* provides its audience "an easy escape into the wonderland of Western consumer society" and notices that in this movie there is a parallel between the symbolic portal to France and a historical "window to



Europe,” the political reforms of Peter the Great in the eighteenth century which were directed toward the westernization of Russia (Lawton 2002: 111).<sup>10</sup>

In *Window to Paris*, St. Petersburg is represented as a world of dirty streets, drunken people, half-ruined buildings and long lines to the grocery and liquor stores. There are no fish in the river because the water is polluted, people relieve themselves on the streets, and there is a big chance of stepping into excrement right at the entrance of a public washroom. The main character of Mamin’s film, Nikolai Chizhov, a school teacher of music, after consuming too much vodka with his new housemates, discovers a temporary magic portal to Paris in the communal apartment in St. Petersburg. The magic portal is located in an old woman’s room from which she has suddenly disappeared with her cat. After the cat returns, the other tenants follow it and find the portal into France in the wardrobe. For the characters of Mamin’s film, life in Paris is presented as a fantasmatic formation with beautiful clean streets, big fish in the river, cozy restaurants and bars, stores full of food, nice clothes and electronics; Paris is depicted here as a consumerist haven. One of the characters, Ogurtsov, tells Nikolai: “Look, all the streets are full of goods, but there are no customers!” The characters see the French capital for the first time at night, full of lights, almost like in a dream; and through the whole movie Paris is depicted as a fantasmatic city, most of the time from a bird’s eye view, with a beautiful sky, full of light. After discovering the magic portal the inhabitants of the communal flat start bringing different goods (such as clothes, electronics and even a small French car) from France to their post-Soviet reality. They make money on the streets of Paris by performing in traditional Russian costumes and selling Russian souvenirs. Ogurtsov and his family bring a few pianos for sale to Paris and start dancing



right in the middle of the street, and later on the Frenchmen join them in a fantasmatic waltz.

The symbols of the new post-Soviet order can be traced through the whole movie. First of all, the principal of the school wears a gold jacket, which, according to David Gillespie, became the signifier of the New Russian philistinism (Gillespie 2002: 184). Secondly, the school itself, or business college, as the principal calls it, with its interest in business courses, rather than literature or music, is a consequence of the new socio-economic order with its orientation towards moneymaking. Chizhov rebukes the principal for the loss of moral values and for the money cult: “You used to prepare the builders of communism, and now you are preparing the builders of capitalism.” Pictures of banknotes from different countries are hung up on the walls of the principal’s office, and Nikolai’s music class is interrupted by people bringing in boxes with new computers. The new post-Soviet Symbolic is being constructed through the signifiers of financial stability, and, in the middle of this new reality, the Real erupts in the form of a magic portal in the old woman’s wardrobe. In *Window to Paris*, this portal is represented as a “grimace” of the Real, as a distortion of the post-Soviet social reality. As Žižek writes in *On Belief*, the Real is just “the appearance as appearance, it not only appears *within* appearances, but it is also *nothing but* its own appearance – it is just a certain *grimace* of reality” (Žižek 2001b: 80). Ogurtsov tries to explain to Nikolai that the trip they had the night before was not a regular walk on the streets of Moscow but a spatial jump into Paris, and after that Ogurtsov steps into the portal where his body gets blurred, awry, and transformed. Only when he passes through the portal and enters the French “fantasy”



does his body returns to its previous form. That is an example of how the Real changes or mutates the Symbolic.

The Parisian fantasy becomes a temporary reality for Nikolai and his mates, and the magic portal serves as a bridge between the two symbolic realities: Russian and French. In *Window to Paris*, the portal in the communal apartment is nothing else but a piece of the Real, abstruse and threatening. When the inhabitants discover the portal, the room is enshrouded in darkness, and the old lady appears from her wardrobe wearing a white robe like the old countess from Alexander Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* to which Chizhov refers earlier in the day during his class. In Pushkin's novel the dead countess becomes the answer of the Real to Germann, and after the horrifying encounter with the Real he is not able to traverse the fantasy and goes insane. In Mamin's film the old woman and her cat also become the answers of the Real, the symptoms of trauma for the inhabitants of the communal apartment. They all think that the woman is already dead and, when she suddenly appears in her room in the middle of the night like a ghost, it scares them and makes them perplexed and anxious. Nikolai and his mates first see the old woman as a symptom and, after meeting with her, they enter the Parisian fantasy through the Real portal. Similarly, after the traumatic experience of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian people have tried to construct a new post-Soviet fantasmatic reality around the Real gap or loss. In this film the black cat belonging to the old lady also functions as an *objet a*: it appears for the first time in the communal apartment after the party, and after that its presence signifies that the portal is open and the encounter with the Real is still possible. Chizhov's companions try to catch the cat and, when they succeed, they force the old lady to tell them the secret of the magic portal



by threatening to castrate her cat. Through this cat the inhabitants of the communal apartment try to get access to the Real enjoyment and at the end of the movie, Nikolai and his friends follow the cat to the big wall in the hope of finding another magic portal.

Having “traversed” the Parisian fantasy Nikolai decides to stay in France forever and asks his old friend, a musician, whom he meets in Paris, to find him a decent job; but the only job he is able to get there is playing the piano without his pants at a nudist concert. The musician-immigrant makes a lot of money in Paris and can afford to have his own apartment (in comparison with the St. Petersburg communal flat where about ten people share the same apartment). He has a car and has already traveled a lot, but the price for this financial haven is his pride and self-respect when he has to entertain people at the restaurant without pants. The immigrant shares his thoughts with Nikolai: “No one here needs Mozart with pants,” which implies that one must be humiliated in order to make money in the West and which breaks into and distorts the fantasy about the happy land.

Nikolai’s friend is homesick and nostalgic for “a hundred bottles of vodka and one pickle” in the communal apartment on Lenin Square and for intellectual conversations about “art, the fate of Russia and God.” He constructs his own fantasy about the ideal Motherland, which he lacks even though he has a financially stable life in France. He fantasizes about Russia, because playing the violin half naked with the violin bow between his legs disturbs his own reality, the Symbolic order with social moral values and norms. However, when Nikolai brings him back to Russia blindfold through the magic portal and leaves him in front of the monument of Lenin, the musician is horrified and panicked. The illuminated monument of Lenin standing in the dark in the



middle of the square becomes an answer of the impossible Real, which brings shock and fear to the immigrant. He wishes to get his Motherland back, but when his dream almost comes true, the monument of Lenin indicates the lack, the gap in this desire – he cannot get what he wants, because his fantasy is different from what he imagines the reality should be. This realization becomes very painful and traumatic: he weeps and begs Nikolai to return him to his comfortable Parisian fantasy. Only after getting back to his French reality does the musician feel relaxed and secure, and he travels through the portal a few more times without any problems and participates in a drinking party with other Russians.

For the main characters of *Window to Paris* life in France becomes a fantasy of a place with a plethora of goods and food (in comparison with post-Soviet Russian reality), where enjoyment can be achieved. Ogurtsov and his family bring all the goods, like clothes, electronics and a Citroen, from Paris in order to “plug up” the hole, the split in the post-Soviet Symbolic, to conceal the lack caused by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Even the lack of fish in the river Neva becomes the symptom of the split in the post-Soviet reality. The old man Kuzmich complains to Nikolai that all the fish in the river are gone and that it was not like this before: “I used to catch breams huge like this!” For Kuzmich the fish becomes an *objet a*, and he spends a lot of time on the Neva river trying to catch some, and thus to fill the gap in the post-Soviet Symbolic with the absent breams. Kuzmich’s desire is constructed around this lost object, and that is why the old man inevitably appears on the streets of Paris with his fish-tackle. Even the other inhabitants of the communal apartment do not know how he has found out about the secret passage. He “traverses” the French fantasy with the river full of fish because he



can deal thus with the traumatic realization of the Real intrusion which always points out some lack in the Symbolic order.

In the Russian reality the main character Nikolai Chizhov also lacks a lot of things: he has lost his job at the college, he does not have a partner and even a decent apartment to live in. So, for him the French woman-artist, whom he sees for the first time at her apartment located next to the magic portal and with whom he later falls in love, becomes the object of his desire. She can satisfy his sexual desires and solve his housing problems; but at the end of the movie Nikolai leaves Paris and loses a chance to be with her. That is why he desperately tries to find another magic portal to Paris by breaking the wall through which the old lady's cat disappears.

At the end of the movie Nikolai brings a group of students from his school to Paris, and the children decide to identify themselves with the French fantasy; they make up their minds to stay in Paris and make their living by begging, working at MacDonald's, doing dishes at restaurants or even by prostitution. Chizhov tries to persuade them that all ideals and values are corrupted in the West; he realizes that the fantasy of the happy land can never fully mask the crack, the split in the Russian Symbolic. He convinces his students to return to Russia and try to make their Motherland better: "You were born at the wrong time in an unhappy ruined country. But it is still your country. Why can't you make it a better place?" Mamin refers to a popular motif from the fairy tale when Nikolai plays a "magic" pipe to make the students follow him back to St. Petersburg. By realizing that the full satisfaction of desire is impossible, even through fantasizing about France as a happy land, Chizhov wants to reconstruct a fantasy about the Russian Motherland, similar to what the musician-immigrant does earlier in the



film. But when all the characters finally meet near the magic portal to “traverse” back into their Russian reality, they receive another answer of the Real in the form of a brick wall instead of the getaway; the absence of the magic tunnel indicates that their desire to return home cannot be satisfied. However, Nikolai and his friends come back to St. Petersburg by hijacking an airplane; and at the end of the movie they try to dig a hole in the wall where they think another magic portal may be. Similarly to the child, described in Lacanian theory, who always desires for something he/she lacks (for example, the breast, the departed mother or the absent toy), the main characters of Mamin’s *Window to Paris* are always looking for something they have already lost, or have never had before.

#### **Georgii Shengelia’s *The Castaway Sagittarius*: Back to the Happy Soviet Past.**

The filmmaker Georgii Shengelia also approaches the topic of a magic passage in his film *The Castaway Sagittarius* (1994); this time it is not a spatial, but a temporal portal. The main character of *The Castaway Sagittarius*, the former journalist German, who has emigrated to France a while ago, returns to Russia to spend the last days with his dying grandfather-scientist and finds out that there is a temporal passage in the basement of an old summer cottage which leads to the year 1966. The old man gives his grandson a case full of denominated Soviet rubles, which German uses to buy gold and jewelry in the 1960s and bring them back to the 1990s. When he travels back to the Soviet past for the first time, he experiences his first engagement with the Real, which is represented by a sharp flash, and a second later German enters the Soviet fantasy. He buys a gold chain with a Sagittarius pendant which later serves as a sign of travel through the temporal portal, as a symptom of the encounter with the Real. As in Mamin’s film, the temporal



portal in *The Castaway Sagittarius* belongs to the dimension of the Real: it becomes an inexplicable phenomenon for German and an object of desire for all other characters (for example, German's ex-wife Natalia and her lover Goga). For Natalia and Goga the mysterious passage serves as a way to fulfill their desires: Goga needs to know how to find the gold German has sold to him; Natalia hates her life in the new post-Soviet Symbolic order and dreams of another place, a "happy land." For both of them the secret passage is necessarily connected to the impossible desire, which they never achieve.

In Shengelia's film the Soviet past is represented as a dream, as a fantasy: if the colors of the post-Soviet reality are dark and pale, life in 1966 is portrayed as happy and joyful with bright colors, music on the streets and delicious food in the stores. German explains to Iulia, the girl from the 1960s fantasy who works at the jewelry store, that he does not like his reality: "I am an eternal debtor there." With the collapse of the Soviet Union, German's reality has been broken into pieces: with the post-Soviet orientation towards business and commerce, he could not continue to work as a journalist. At the beginning of the film he just wanders through the streets of Paris, poorly dressed, craving for a drink, totally lost and alienated as a result of the traumatic "dismemberment" of the Soviet Symbolic.

Very similar to what happens to the main character in *Window to Paris*, German falls in love with Iulia, who resembles a lot the beautiful girl whom he met in Paris near the floral store earlier in the movie. It seems almost impossible for German to be with this girl, at least because of his beggar-like appearance, but her Russian double from 1966 falls in love with him very quickly. In *On Belief*, Žižek asserts that love as a miracle belongs to the dimension of the Real and writes that lovers always think of another place



and time when their love would be truly fulfilled, and the only obstacles to achieve enjoyment are unforeseen circumstances. But, according to him, when the lovers dream about the fulfillment of their desire in another place, in some “mythical Otherness,” it appears to be “the very Otherness of the fantasy”:

The “Real as impossible” means here that THE IMPOSSIBLE DOES HAPPEN, that “miracles” like Love ...DO occur. From “impossible To happen” we thus pass to “the impossible HAPPENS” – this, and not the structural obstacle forever deferring the final resolution, is the most difficult thing to accept” (Žižek 2001b: 84).

If in the post-Soviet reality it is impossible for German to be with the girl he likes, because he is not handsome, not rich, does not have a job and his own place, then in the 1960s fantasy Iulia reciprocates his feelings, and the paradox of these relations consists in what Žižek describes as “the impossible happens.” At the end of *The Castaway Sagittarius*, after Goga and his assistants blow up the summer cottage to prevent German and Iulia from running away with Goga’s money through the temporal passage, German wakes up on the streets of Paris as though nothing has happened before. He is convinced that everything that happened to him in Russia is just a figment of his imagination. He wanders around the city, as he did at the opening scenes of the film, until he ends up near the floral store where he sees Iulia’s double smiling at him. She holds a black briefcase with Goga’s money which, first of all, proves that she was able to escape from the Soviet Russian fantasy and that there was always only one girl who belonged to both worlds at the same time, however paradoxical it may seem, and thus their love becomes possible in the post-Soviet reality. Secondly, the briefcase becomes a symptom of the encounter with



the Real; it indicates that the transcendental experience has occurred: the house exploded, the access to the Real dimension is denied, but the trace of it in the form of the briefcase initiates a new fantasy for the main character – a fantasy about a happy life in France with money and the beloved one.

### **Dmitrii Astrakhan's *You Are My Only One*: Fantasizing about America.**

Another type of post-Soviet film, such as Astrakhan's *You are My Only One* (1993) and *Everything will be O'K* (1995), Proshkin's *To See Paris and Die* (1992), Maslennikov's *Winter Cherry 3* (1995), Shakhnazarov's *American Daughter* (1995), Surikova's *Moscow Vacations* (1995), has become very popular after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and mainly explores the topic of *zagranitsa* (abroad, foreign countries) as a land of happiness, financial stability and realized dreams. However, in almost all of them, Russia is constituted as a poor country with higher moral and cultural values than any Western country. The protagonists of these films, very similar to the characters of Mamin's *Window to Paris*, reject the opportunity to leave their Motherland and realize that "for all the country's problems, their connection to Russia is organic and indissoluble" (Faraday 2000: 177). Astrakhan's melodrama *You are My Only One* differs from Mamin's and Shengelia's films mostly because the main characters get an opportunity to travel to the "happy land" not through some magic portal but by "real" actions, for example, by marrying people who have emigrated from Russia before.

Jane Knox-Voina ascribes Astrakhan's films to the new trend of "optimist" cinema in post-Soviet Russia. She writes that after a period of *chernukha* (black hole) and *pornukha* (pornography) during the glasnost and postglasnost years, this type of film has



brought some positive content into the Russian film industry (Knox-Voina 1997: 286). According to Julian Graffy, Astrakhan's films have established the new "myth of endurance and survival" (Graffy 1999:167).

*You Are My Only One* was released in 1993 and received several awards at the Russian "Nika" and "Kinotavr" film festivals. The events in this film take place in St. Petersburg. The main character is Evgenii Timoshin, an engineer who is in danger of losing his job because his bureau is transforming into a new "joint enterprise." But the person who is in charge of hiring employees for the new company is Anna Kolevanova, who moved to the United States 20 years ago with her brother during the Brezhnev period and who still has a crush on Timoshin. Evgenii represents here the "ordinary" Russian *intelligentsia*, who during the first most difficult transitional years had to sacrifice their highly "moral" and cultural values to survive and feed their families. The lack becomes an essential survival force for those people in Russia who have been living below the poverty line since the disintegration of the Soviet system. The traumatic encounter with the Real is repeated again and again in the construction of small splits, gaps in post-Soviet everyday life, thus, reminding them of the primary split in the Soviet symbolic caused by the historical events in 1991.

The life of Timoshin's family is constructed around a constant lack: lack of money, house, sex, courage and happiness. Thus Evgenii has to work as an engineer during the day and as a security guard at a warehouse at night. He even does not have the courage to calm down his neighbors from upstairs who regularly have very loud parties late at night. His wife Natasha, a sexologist, gives advice to sexually frustrated people and, according to Julian Graffy, her job symbolizes "the humiliation of attempting to



adapt the new “free” mores to all of post-Soviet society” (Graffy 1999:164). However, sex for the Timoshins becomes something which they desire but cannot have, first of all, because three of them (Evgenii, Natasha and their teenage daughter Olia) live in a tiny studio apartment and Olia’s bed is separated from her parents’ “bedroom” only by a wardrobe. Secondly, they are always interrupted either by phone calls, noisy neighbors or the truck honking for Evgenii to come to his night job, and thus sexual satisfaction is always postponed, leaving a gap in the desire.

America for both Evgenii and Natasha becomes a fantasmatic land of realized dreams and desires. Graffy points out that in Astrakhan’s films America becomes the main element in the filmmaker’s mythology, and all the characters either have already emigrated to the United States or dream of emigration; it becomes “a mythical Russian expression of the hope of a better life” (Graffy 1999: 165). For Timoshin getting a job in the United States will mean constituting himself as a “potent” man who will be able not only to support his family but also to buy such desirable things, for almost every Russian person, as “a flat, a car, a dacha (summer cottage), furniture and a plane.” For Natasha her biggest dream is to get a new bra in addition to “a limousine and a villa,” and it is not surprising that she mentions a bra because, for many Russian women of the transitional period, to have more than two bras would be considered a luxury. People did not have enough money for clothes, or even for food and living essentials. Natasha also encourages Olia to marry her boy-friend whose father is leaving for the United States and, thus, to “traverse” the American fantasy and avoid the post-Soviet “*sobachya zhizn*” (dog’s life). In *You Are My Only One* the post-traumatic symptoms of the collapse of the



Soviet system, for example lack of bra or lack of sex, initiate the construction of a fantasy about a better place, a “happy land,” where all desires will be satisfied.

For Anna Kolevanova, the post-Soviet reality becomes the fantasmatic construction of “getting back” the lost *objet a* in the form of Evgenii Timoshin: since she was a girl, he has been an object-cause of her desire, “the empty frame that provides the space for the articulation of desire” (Žižek 1994: 76). As a girl Anna followed Evgenii everywhere: to a boxing match, to parties, even to his wedding with Natasha. She mentions to Evgeny that she was married once, but the marriage did not work out. Anna’s marriage was an attempt to substitute the *objet a*, but the realization of the impossibility of doing that has created a fantasy about satisfying the desire by going back to Russia and finding her first love.

Anna invites Timoshin to come with her to the United States not only as a new employee of the Russian-American “joint enterprise” but also as her lover, or even husband; she buys him a new suit in a very expensive boutique, but at the end Evgenii rejects this seductive offer and comes back to his family. After her sexual encounter with Evgenii, Anna thinks that her desire is finally satisfied, and she invites him to “traverse” the American fantasy with her: “First you will have to take an intensive English course for three months. Then, you will come to America as a visiting specialist. And everything will be so wonderful!” However, Timoshin realizes that Anna’s fantasy will never become his reality: “Ania, isn’t it all delusion?” Evgenii decides not to leave Russia with Anna after he meets a male transvestite prostitute who gives him one US dollar in front of Anna’s hotel. First of all, this one dollar bill reminds Timoshin of the money Anna spent on him early in the day; secondly, it becomes a symptom of the traumatic lack caused by



the breakdown of the Soviet Union, points out the lack of money, stability and happiness in the post-Soviet reality. Evgenii realizes that going to the United States would not satisfy his desires and that the “capitalist” American dreamland is not a part of his reality. For Anna the realization of the impossibility of her desire leads to a very traumatic and painful nervous breakdown: for a few minutes she slips out from reality, runs away and tries to jump out of the window to return to the Real where there are no gaps and splits, and where enjoyment is complete. Anna is stopped by her bodyguards, the Symbolic order is reconstructed and she can return to her American reality: “Everything is fine, uncle Zhenia [that is what she calls him]. Everything will be OK!”

Graffy argues that the end of *You Are My Only One* thus represents “a reassertion of Russian values, the values of naturalness, vital energy and melodramatic sentimental excess” (Graffy 1999: 166). Astakhan’s film ends with a birthday feast earlier in the morning right outside Evgenii’s apartment building, organized for Timoshin by his father, who usually makes his living by begging in the streets. Very similar to Rogozhkin’s *Peculiarities*, fantasmatic drinking becomes the way to conceal the gap in the post-Soviet Symbolic after the fantasy of the American “happy land” did not help the main characters to erase, to deny the traumatic experience. According to Graffy, *You Are My Only One* suggest “a sobering of the late and post-Soviet consciousness, an awareness that the (Russian) America of their aspirations will remain, for most of them, an illusion, the stuff of fairytale” (Graffy 1999: 166). Many neighbors join Evgenii and his father for shish kebab and vodka. Even the noisy neighbors whom Timoshin beat up earlier in the movie come down for the birthday party and put up with Evgenii. Drinking vodka unites them all and thus their own “happy land” is constructed instead of the American one.



## **Valery Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf*: Dreaming about Non-Existing Countries.**

Many post-Soviet movies have an imaginary journey into another, better place as a main theme, and Valerii Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf* is among them. Unlike other post-Soviet films discussed earlier, the "happy land" here is not a real place like France or America, but the imaginary "land of the deaf" to which the main female characters Rita and Ia Ia want to escape from the cruel post-Soviet reality of poverty, the mafia, murder and prostitution. The deaf girl Ia Ia describes this happy world: "It is a big island. Sea. Palm-trees. White mountains. Sun. Money is all around." Rita wants to find happiness with her boy-friend Alesha, a gambling addict, who has lost a lot of money at the casino and now has to deal with the Russian mafia. However, Alesha betrays her, and the girl faces financial hardships and the danger of being killed by the mafia. Rita becomes friends with Ia Ia who works at a strip club, and both of them try to realize their dreams by making a lot of money through prostitution or working for the mafia.

Almost every character in *The Land of the Deaf* lacks something; their lives are constructed around a traumatic lack or loss. Alesha needs money for gambling; his life is shaped around the constant lack of money, the main motivation for him in the post-Soviet reality is to find more money and to lose it again. Alesha's desire is to get access to enjoyment through money, but every time he gambles he receives an answer of the Real in the form of losing, and thus, his desire cannot be completed.

Rita needs to be loved, to be accepted by her boy-friend, and that is why she tries to find the money for Alesha's debt and thus to become the object of his desire. As Zizek



writes in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, desire is always directed to somebody else, to some Other, “the subject’s desire is the desire of the Other” (Žižek 1994: 177). Ia Ia and the deaf mobster Hog lack hearing which they need to survive in the new post-Soviet world. Hearing becomes the lost *objet a* for the deaf people in Todorovskii’s film. Žižek writes that:

*Objet a* is simultaneously the pure lack, the void around which the desire turns and which, as such, causes the desire, and the imaginary element which conceals this void, renders it invisible by filling it out. The point, of course, is that there is no lack without the element filling it out: *the filler sustains what dissimulates* (Žižek 1994: 178).

Rita, who can hear perfectly, becomes such a filler, a substitute for the lost *objet a* for both Ia Ia and Hog. Hog tells the girls the story about his wife who was able to hear and who saved his life once when she heard “something she was not supposed to hear.” The traumatic loss of his wife in a car accident leads Hog to look for the new “ears,” which may not only help him in his business but also become a substitute for the lost wife. Rita learns sign language and works for the deaf Mafiosi as his “ears” during negotiations with drug dealers. She agrees to become the object of Hog’s desire because of her deep devotion to Alesha who constantly loses money and needs it so much that he is even ready to “live off his girl-friend Rita and turn her in at the first hint of danger” (Tsyrukun 1999: 65).

Ia Ia is very attached to Rita: first of all, because she spent all her childhood in the orphanage and needs somebody to fill out the gap in her desire to have a family; secondly, she also needs Rita to be her “ears.” While having dinner at her sculptor-



friend's studio, she demonstrates to Rita two of her laughs and asks which one sounds better. Rita suggests that she smile instead of laughing, and for the rest of the film, Ia Ia follows her advice. Rita also saves both of them at the beginning of *The Land of the Deaf* when she asks Ia Ia to stop talking because she hears that the mafia members are very close to their hiding place. For Ia Ia the loss of hearing was caused by a personal trauma – she was abused and brutally beaten by her step-father when she was a little girl. The traumatic experience of her childhood always follows her: at the sculptor's studio Rita tells Ia Ia a terrible story about a prostitute who had her ears cut off by the mafia; later in the film, the owner of the casino threatens to cut off Ia Ia's ears if Rita does not find money to pay Alesha's debt. The deaf girl is shocked and horrified; the threat of cutting her ears off becomes the symptomatic repetition of the initial personal trauma and serves as a reminder of the lack in the Symbolic.

If Rita needs the money to save her boy-friend from the mafia, Ia Ia dreams about “the land of the deaf” where “it is always warm... all people are kind, everybody smiles...you don't need to think about money, you are deaf and you get money for free.” Ia Ia shares her fantasy about the “happy land” with Rita after the girls' first humiliating experience of selling themselves to the deaf mobsters. Rita wakes up in the middle of the night and finds Ia Ia naked, sobbing in the shower; for the deaf girl the encounter with the Real comes in the form of painful and degrading sexual intercourse with two mafia members. The trauma is repeated again and the fantasy of the happy “land of the deaf” is constructed in order to hide the lack in the desire.

During the gunfight between the two gangster groups in the last scene of *The Land of the Deaf*, Rita finally “traverses” the fantasy about “the land of the deaf.” Prior to



that scene, the girl experiences the traumatic separation from her boyfriend who breaks up with her, and the money which Rita has made by risking her life is lost by Alesha at the casino. At the end of Todorovskii's film, Rita hears only one gun shot which becomes the answer of the Real and which initiates the construction of the fantasmatic "land of the deaf." When she realizes that her hearing is gone, she smiles because "from now on, she is to play a part of a holy fool, a blissful inhabitant of the promised land" (Tsyrkun 1999: 65). The only sound she can hear now is the quiet sound of the ocean. Both girls try to find a permanent shelter in this imaginary "happy land" of the deaf, away from the post-Soviet reality, the most important elements of which are money, drugs, gunshots and the chalk traces around the corpses drawn by the police. If Brigit Beumers believes that the deafness in *The Land of the Deaf* is "a retreat from reality" (Beumers 1999: 81), I would argue that, on the contrary, the fantasy of the happy land becomes for Rita and Ia Ia the fundamental element of their new reality primarily affected by the traumatic encounter with the Real.

Nikolai Chizhov and his housemates from *Window to Paris*, Evgenii Timoshin and his wife Natasha from *You Are My Only One*, and finally Rita and Ia Ia from *The Land of the Deaf* – all of them try to survive in the new brutal world of post-Soviet reality when there is excrement on the streets, women cannot afford to have an extra bra, people must have at least two full time jobs to support their families, and even young girls have to become prostitutes to make money. In most of these films the main characters represent the largest part of the Russian population who live below the officially recognized poverty line. They always dream about the perfect land of happiness and financial stability, and after the realization of the traumatic gap in the post-Soviet



Symbolic each of them has to “traverse” their own fantasies about the “happy land” by digging a hole in a wall, having a feast with lots of vodka, or enjoying the sound of the ocean in the land of the deaf.



## CHAPTER IV

### LIVING IN THE WORLD OF THE NEW RUSSIANS AND THE MAFIA: THE FANTASY ABOUT FAMILY AND MONEY IN POST-SOVIET POPULAR CINEMA.

#### **The New Russian and the Mafia: New Classes in the Post-Soviet Culture.**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union has contributed to the construction of the post-Soviet Symbolic with a new chain of signifiers: on one hand, the “New Russians” and the mafia, money, expensive German cars, gold chains, luxury apartments, burgundy jackets, guns, drugs, casinos, boutiques and, on the other hand, the new Russian poor, economic dislocation, hunger, dirty streets and homeless people. Since the breakdown of the Soviet ideological system many artifacts of post-Soviet popular culture (mass media, anecdotes, TV series, detective novels and films) have started to portray a new extremely masculine Russian Symbolic with the manifold representations of strong, tough, violent guys with money, cars and guns.<sup>11</sup> In the post-Soviet discourse of the New Russians and the mafia there is no place for strong women and all the power resides in male hands. In Russian popular culture of the post-Soviet period, women usually play the roles of girlfriends, wives, mothers, prostitutes, victims of financial intrigues, sexual assaults and domestic violence; they are just weak and submissive partners of tough guys in black cars with guns and are not supposed to be in charge of financial operations and people’s lives.<sup>11</sup>

George Faraday, in his book *Revolt of the Filmmakers*, uses a slang term “*krutoi*” (cool or tough guy) to define the New Russians and writes that this term denotes “a fearless, hypermasculine, streetwise young man who knew how to make money and how to splash it about” (Faraday 2000: 152). Later he writes that:



In the early 1990s the stereotypical *krutoi chelovek* could be recognized by his crew cut, Mercedes, and, most distinctively, his burgundy blazer: the expression *krasniy pidzhak*, “red jacket” sometimes functioning as a convenient metonym for its wearer. The *krutoi* ideal can be seen, therefore, as blending Russia’s long-established criminal subcultural traditions with a specific appropriation of Western consumerism (Faraday 2000: 152).

Seth Graham defines the New Russians as people who always carry cell phones and pagers everywhere and who very often, during conversation, use special gestures or a non-verbal lexicon, such as “the fanned fingers” with the exposed index finger and little finger (Graham 2003: 45). Mark Lipovetsky, in his article “New Russians as a Cultural Myth”, associates the new elite with “the vital, constructive, and destructive energies hidden within the social chaos of the post-Soviet era” (Lipovetsky 2003: 55).

There were well-to-do people in the Soviet period, but usually those were people from the top of the party pyramid or academicians. Since 1991 a new wealthy elite has formed, and it plays a great role not only in the economic, social and political life of “new” Russia but also influences the formation of cultural tastes, values and thoughts. The New Russians have introduced a new form of consumerism, a new life style with the most expensive cars (Mercedes Benz, BMW, Jeep, Cadillac), luxury apartments and cottages, brand name clothes and lots of jewelry. Harley Balzer writes, in his article “Routinization of the New Russians?” that this new class has become “an emblem of the apparent “stability” of the Putin era;” however he questions whether that “stability is sustainable” (Balzer 2003: 15).



Faraday mentions that the rise of the new wealthy elite meant the “marginalization of the cultural values” of the *intelligentsia* because of the New Russians’ self-motivation, criminal connections and “cultural philistinism” (Faraday 2000: 152). According to Balzer, “on the one hand, they are people who have caught the wave of change, and turned it to their advantage; on the other hand, they are corrupt, boorish, and, unforgivably, illicitly rich” (Balzer 2003: 16). Being the most important signifiers of the new Symbolic, the New Russians are defined by such things as money, connections with the criminal world, lack of taste, moral values and education. Seth Graham names such attributes of the new rich class as “stupidity, violence, drunkenness, amorality” (Graham 2003: 45). However, not all of these stereotypes are true. Thus, some of the New Russians have come from the top of the communist party; they were the part of *nomenclature* who had a chance to exploit the commercial opportunities during the economic crisis. Some of them (and multimillionaire Boris Berezovskii is a typical example) had been academicians or people in charge of cultural and educational activities.

The mafia is another signifier of the post-Soviet Symbolic, whose presence is difficult to ignore. During Soviet times there were criminals, but they were not so visible in Soviet culture, they never became an essential part of the Soviet Symbolic. The Soviet people only found out about the existence of the mafia or organized crime during the period of Gorbachev’s *glasnost’* at the end of the 1980s (Rawlison 1998: 348). Before that, all discourses on crime, drugs, prostitution and mendicancy were marginalized and controlled by the government. But with the collapse of the Soviet ideological system, the mafia has started to pervade the Russian Symbolic: they not only carry on illegal



businesses, like drugs and arms dealing, trafficking and pornography but also restaurant business, hotels, stores and banks. Lynne Attwood, in her article “Men, Machine Guns, and the Mafia: Post-Soviet Cinema as a Discourse on Gender,” analyzes the fascination of the post-Soviet films with the mafia and sees it as a natural continuation of the themes in the *glasnost*’ cinema whose young protagonists “have grown up and entered business, bringing their cynicism with them” (Attwood 1995: 513). In her essay Attwood refers to Natalia Siravlya’s article “Mafia – Our Steersman” published in *Iskusstvo Kino* in 1993 and tries to distinguish the characteristics of the new Russian mafia, such as their presence in almost every aspect of post-Soviet society and their connections with the official state organs. According to Syravlya, the mafia has become a symbol of post-Soviet turmoil “which knows no bounds, a margining of total corruption from above and criminality from below into a single sea of evil” (Siravlya, quoted in Atwood 1995: 514).

In post-Soviet culture, due to a great number of anecdotes, movies, TV series and video clips, representations of the New Russians and the mafia have become dominant. The encounter with the Real and its traumatic consequences have led to fantasizing about financial stability and money as a “plug” for the gap in the Symbolic Order. In the post-Soviet world with the orientation towards a market economy, money has begun to play a much more important role than during the Soviet period. Money has become the main attribute of the new classes – New Russians and the mafia – and one of the main topics of popular Russian cinema.

There is another important element in these films which also plays the role of the filler of the lack in the Symbolic – the fantasy about brotherhood and family bonds. So, money and/or family as objects of everybody’s desire, as the *objets a*, became the main



topic of Alexei Balabanov's *Brother* (1997), *Brother 2* (2000), Sergei Bodrov Jr.'s *Sisters* (2001) and Petr Buslov's *Bimmer* (2003).

### **Money and Brotherhood in Alexei Balabanov's *Brother* and *Brother 2***

The tendency to make action films with the mafia or New Russians as the main heroes has become evident since the movie *Brother* made by Alexei Balabanov in 1997. All the protagonists of subsequent films, such as *Brother 2*, *Sisters*, *Antikiller* and *Bimmer*, have something in common: in order to reconstruct their reality after the traumatic encounter with the Real, they need to "traverse" the fantasy either about big money or about very tight family relations and, thus, fill the gap in the Symbolic. The New Russians themselves have become some kind of fantasmatic construction, and, as Lipovetsky states in his article, they have got a lot of things that the Soviet intelligentsia lack and can only dream about. He writes that,

New Russians had power, money, and freedom from moral norms and social limitations. Unlike the pauperized intelligentsia, New Russians represented that segment of society which enjoyed the fruits of perestroika and glasnost, economic reforms and the politics of openness – the ideals cherished and cultivated by the intelligentsia for decades (Lipovetsky 2003: 56).

*Brother* depicts the new post-Soviet Symbolic as full of "dirt, destruction, malodorous communal apartments, toothless old men, ugly drunken women, unearned money and constant violence" (Dondurei 1998). The main protagonist of *Brother* and its sequel *Brother II* is Danila Bogrov (Sergei Bodrov Jr.) who comes back from the Army to his provincial town. Danila spent some time in Chechnia where, even though he claims that



he was stationed at headquarters; he was well trained as a warrior (probably at the special antiterrorist units): he is a good sniper, adroit in hand-to-hand fighting, and can make his own gun. At the beginning of *Brother* Danila's mother sends him to St. Petersburg to "make his way" in life. Very similar to Mamin's *Window to Paris*, Shengelia's *The Castaway Sagittarius*, Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf* and Astrakhan's films, there is a motif of a better place in Balabanov's film, where the big cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg function as the fantasmatic "happy land" for the people from small villages and towns wishing to attain some financial stability. *Brother* ends with a scene in which Danila goes to Moscow with a truck driver, and, as Pavel Romanov suggests in his article, "Fraternity: Masculinity in Post-Soviet Cinema," Moscow becomes here a symbol of something "big, indefinite and promising" (Romanov 2002: 616). That is why Danila's elder brother Viktor (Viktor Sukhorukov) advises him to move to Moscow: "We should go to Moscow. Moscow is a power!"

At the beginning of the film, Danila Bagrov follows his mother's advice and goes to St. Petersburg for the brothers' reunion, but upon arriving there he finds out that Viktor is making his living as a killer for hire. Viktor tries to recruit the younger brother to finish all his "dirty" work for him: to kill the boss of the Chechen Mafia and some other St. Petersburg criminals. A lot of money is involved in this task, and Danila accepts it as something casual: with his first "salary" he buys the discs by the famous Russian rock-band Nautilus Pompilius, which he desires so much, and some new clothes.

In *Brother* the songs of Viacheslav Butusov, the leader of Nautilus, function as the symptoms of the traumatic lack, as the reminder of the impossible desire. At the beginning of the film, Danila watches the music video of Nautilus's *Wings* being shot in



his hometown, but, because he intervenes into the shooting, the filmmaker has to ask security to expel him and Danila does not have a chance to hear the song until the end. The ellipses seem to play an important role in Balabanov's film: they are assigned to hide, to veil the violent and traumatic moments of the main characters' experience. Thus, the blackout erases the whole scene where Danila fights the security guard, and the omission of brutality, violence and pain intensifies the traumatic effect.<sup>12</sup> The blackout also "cuts" the first scene, creating the rift in the main character's desire; from then on Danila is driven by the necessity to find the album with this particular song. In the next scene we see him with bruises at the police station, which indicates the traumatic encounter with the Real enjoyment where the desire to hear the song until the end can not be satisfied. It becomes the symptom of the primary trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union with the discovery of a lack in the Symbolic. Danila looks for the album at the local store, but is kicked out by the saleswoman; he asks about it at a music store in St. Petersburg, but *Wings* has already sold out and he does not even have enough money to buy other albums. The satisfaction of his desire is postponed, delayed; by carrying out his brother's order to kill one of the Chechen mafia leaders he can get money, buy Nautilus's albums and, thus, partially conceal the gap in desire.

Birgit Beumers believes that Butusov's songs play the role of a dream, a fantasy in Balabanov's film, because they "endow the film with a dream-like quality" (Beumers 1999: 85). According to her, most of the time Danila's movements are framed by the rhythm of Nautilus's music. She writes that:

Nautilus's songs are about another reality, daydreams, making this other reality a good one, and about the crippling effect of this reality – the wings that enable man



to fly have been lost and all that remains are scars. The songs accompany Danila's arrival, his 'new life', the lead-up to the shootings at the market and in Viktor's flat (Beumers 1999: 85).

The music following Danila during his 'adventures' in St. Petersburg is from the albums of Nautilus which the main character is not able to acquire; thus, according to Beumers, "the spectator is entangled in the illusionary quality of sound as much as Danila is entangled in the illusionary quality of his perception of reality" (Beumers 1999: 85). At the same time it is not the fantasmatic music, but the fantasy about the restoration of family ties that stimulates him until the last scenes in which he kills the 'bad guys' who want to hurt his older brother Viktor.

At the beginning of the film, we find out that Danila's father, a criminal, was murdered in prison, Viktor left his home town looking for a better life, and Danila himself spent some time in Chechnya; so their family has always been incomplete, split. The personal trauma and the recognition of the lack in Danila's family in *Brother* become the symptoms of traumatic separation, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union which has to be repeated through smaller traumatic events. That is why the money which Danila takes from the dead mobsters is used in order to fill out the gap in his desire to have a full family. He gives money to the drug addict Kat, trying to establish some bonds of friendship with her, and she is willing to communicate with him only after she finds out that he has enough money to buy her some drugs; he buys his temporary girl-friend Sveta, the tram driver, an expensive VCR player and also leaves some money after their breakup. Danila is not greedy at all: he also shares the money with a homeless guy, Nemets (a German), and even with his own brother after his betrayal. On the one hand,



money does not seem to be the main force of his actions; on the other hand, Danila realizes that with its help he can try to mask the lack in the Symbolic Order by creating some close attachments with people around him.

Money and family belong to Danila's "fundamental fantasy" which only augments the traumatic effect of the encounter with the Real. As Slavoj Žižek writes:

The 'fundamental fantasy' is ...an entity that is exceedingly traumatic: it articulates the subject's relationship towards enjoyment, towards the traumatic kernel of his being, towards something that the subject is never able to acknowledge fully, to become familiar with, to integrate into his symbolic universe (Žižek 1994: 178).

For Danila the construction of the fantasy about financial stability and family bonds inevitably leads to the recognition of the impossibility of his desire, of the existence of a hole, rift in the fantasy, and thus, in the Symbolic itself.

With the Russian mafia's money, Danila comes to Sveta and asks her to leave with him, telling her, "Sveta, I have come for you. I have money. Let's go somewhere," a scene reminiscent of Astrakhan's *You Are My Only One* when Anna wishes to take Evgenii Timoshin with her into the American fantasy about financial stability and satisfied desires. In *Brother*, Sveta rejects her boy-friend and asks him to leave her alone; very like Timoshin, she refuses to "traverse" the fantasy with her boyfriend and for Danila, her denial becomes the indication of the impossibility of achieving enjoyment. Nemets also does not accept Danila's money: "What is good for the Russian is fatal for the German." Danila has to leave St. Petersburg for Moscow in the hope of finding a place where the gap in his desire will be filled by family ties and money.



In *Brother 2* money also becomes the main leitmotif of all Danila's adventures. This time he goes far away to America, and it is not a surprise that the filmmaker chooses the United States for the scenario. For many post-Soviet people, America has become the common name for the place with a lot of money and opportunities, and that is why this country has been chosen by Astrakhan in *You Are My Only One* and *Everything Will Be OK* and by Balabanov in the sequel to *Brother*.

The purpose of Danila's trip to the United States in *Brother 2* is to get the money back from one of the richest American "capitalists" Mennis who took advantage of the Russian hockey player, Mitia, a brother of Kostia, Danila's best friend. Kostia tries to help his brother and wants to talk to Mennis about the money he owes to Mitia, but Belkin, the New Russian businessman and Mennis's partner, gives order to his bodyguard to eliminate this conflict, and Kostia is murdered. Danila decides to retrieve Mitia's money because brotherhood bonds are very important for him. Susan Larsen writes about the relations between the brothers in Balabanov's films that,

The non-negotiable bond of brotherhood – and its often fatal consequences – is hammered home in the proliferation of brothers of all sorts in *Brother 2*, among them: Danila and his two former army "brothers," Il'ia and Kostia; Kostia and his twin brother, the international hockey star Mitia; Danila and his own brother, Viktor; and the international criminal "brotherhood" (or *bratva*, a homophone for the film's Russian title, *Brat 2*) (Larsen 2003: 509).

For Danila the reunion of the three friends, who went through the war in Chechnya together, in Moscow during a TV show, becomes a fantasy about the reconstruction of family bonds and, thus, the satisfaction of the primary desire to feel the gap in the



Symbolic. However, Kostia's murder becomes a traumatic answer of the Real, indicating that Danila's desire cannot be fulfilled. He comes to Kostia's apartment and finds his dead body in the hallway; this event causes him shock and frustration and at the same time gives an impetus to the fantasy construction about family ties. Danila looks at Mitia's picture on the poster above Kostia's body; the substitute, the filler has been found, the fantasy has begun and Danila goes to the United States to solve his new "brother's" financial problems.

One poem recurs several times during the movie and becomes a part of the fantasmatic construction through which Danila tries to fill the gap in the desire to have a family and thus to conceal the rift in the post-Soviet Symbolic caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Danila first hears this poem at a concert in a private school from Fedia Belkin, the son of the Russian businessman whose people killed Kostia:

I've learned that  
I have a big family:  
A trail, a wood,  
Every ear in the field.

River, blue sky  
This is all mine!  
This is my Motherland!  
I love everyone in this world!

Danila knows that Belkin, the New Russian, is somehow responsible for his best friend's death, but after he hears this verse he grants him a life: "Thank your son for still being alive, nit. I don't want to deprive such a nice boy of a father!" After that the patriotic verse becomes a kernel of the fantasmatic construction about family bonds: Danila recites it while killing a black pimp and his friends to free the Russian prostitute Dasha in Chicago, and he repeats it over and over while climbing the skyscraper to get Mitia's



money from Mennis's office. The impossibility of finding a substitute for the absent family determines Danila's adventures and his life in general.

Money is another main force which brings Danila and his elder brother to Chicago, and it becomes a kind of McGuffin, an *objet a*, which Slavoj Žižek calls "nothing at all", an empty place, a pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion," and which the characters must find in order to make their friends and themselves happy (Žižek 2002: 6). Danila's intentions for the trip to the United States are very "pure": he wants to keep the promise to his friend Kostia murdered by the New Russian businessman-Mafiosi to solve his twin brother's problems. Viktor joins the younger brother only because he wants to stay in the land of financial opportunities no matter how, and that is why at the end of the film after killing the Ukrainian mafia members he surrenders to the police, so they will take him to the American prison. According to Viktor, money is the global moving force of everything. He tries to explain his position to Danila: "The world powers are in America. These powers are contained in money. Money rules the world and those people who have more money are the strongest."

Danila and Viktor's new American reality in *Brother 2* is represented by the filmmaker as a dream-like fantasy; thus, he uses a technique from the computer game *Doom* when Danila walks around a night club and kills everybody he sees (supposedly, gangsters) and the spectators only see Danila's hand with a gun shooting everyone in the way. Seth Graham writes about *Brother 2* that in this film "the brute violence that is customary in the action film is sent abroad in the service of national pride" (Graham 2003: 52).



In *Brother 2* Danila and Viktor “traverse” the American fantasy and kill a lot of people to achieve their goals – to “reunite” family or to get access to big money. They act in the post-Soviet Symbolic world of outlaws whose existence is defined by the “aggression, animal competition and survival rules of the prison and criminal world” (Romanov 2002: 617). In Balabanov’s films the Russian mafia torment people: in *Brother* the poor, homeless Nemets who sells old clocks at the market place has become the victim of a racket and is told to pay money even if he does not make any profit. The Russian mafia members rape girls: thus, Danila’s girl-friend Sveta is raped and brutally beaten for not giving information about her lover. Danila kills the Chechen mafia members in St. Petersburg and the American gangsters in Chicago who humiliate his new friend, Russian prostitute Dasha, or who make porn movies with Russian girls, rape them and then strangle them.

All the mafia’s actions in these films, like rape, murder, swindling, racketeering, and shooting, indispensably become the traumatic events for the main characters when the Real erupts through the Symbolic membrane. To neutralize its effect, Viktor in *Brother 2* “traverses” the fantasy about financial luxury in America: he buys new clothes, smokes expensive cigars, spends a lot of money at a restaurant and on girls, and finally shoots the Ukrainian mafia members and is escorted by the police into prison. Danila fantasizes about returning the wholeness of his family, which is why he decides to come back after the Russian prostitute and kill the black pimp who treats her very badly: “Dasha, I have come for you. The Russians don’t abandon their own in wartime.” Dasha came to the United States in search of a better life a while ago, but the traumatic events in her life, like a divorce and drug addiction, broke up her dreams and created a lack in her



desire. She has become a prostitute because she lacks money and needs it for living and drugs. Danila becomes a source of financial prosperity for her with the money he has taken from millionaire Mennis, and through him she can regain the family bonds she lost after emigrating to the United States. He takes care of her as if she were his sister. At the end of the film, they leave the United States for Russia together, and this time, very similar to Mamin's *Window to Paris*, the fantasy about the Motherland as a happy place replaces the fantasmatic construction of wealth.

### **Running from Mafia and Reconstruction of the Family in Sergei Bodrov Jr.'s *Sisters*.**

The lives of step-sisters Sveta and Dina, the main characters of Bodrov Jr.'s *Sisters*, are also centered on two main things – money and the reconstruction of family ties. The girls are running away from the criminals who want to kidnap them and exchange them for the money Dina's father Alik owes them. Alik is originally from Dagestan and has connections with the criminal world, but he is represented as a "good" bandit: he has already spent some time in prison for his sins, he also claims that he did not take the Mafia's money and he is willing to do everything to keep his family safe. The younger sister Dina has a very comfortable life: she lives with her parents in a luxury apartment with *evroremont* (European interior design); her father drives very expensive cars – a black BMW and a Jeep Cherokee; they can afford to buy a house in Austria. Sveta lives with her grandmother in a small apartment and has a very simple life in comparison with her sister. They live in different worlds: Dina – in the rich world of the mafia, Sveta – in a world of ordinary Russian people "from paycheck to paycheck."



In *Sisters* even children have to take up guns to survive in the brutal and violent world around them. Sveta is only thirteen years old, she goes in for sport shooting and is very good at it. The mafia kills, Dina's father kills, everybody kills each other, and when danger comes, it is Sveta's turn to shoot. Both girls become witnesses of the mafia's cruel actions: the summer cottage which has become Sveta and Dina's shelter for a while is burnt by the mafia, and the girls barely survive during the last gunfight. Their lives are jeopardized just because a big sum of money is involved.

For both sisters money becomes the main source of danger and fear; the money which Dina's father supposedly owes the mafia initiates the process of fantasizing about building up a stronger family. Alik tries to find a way to protect his family by killing the mafia bosses; Sveta takes her younger stepsister outside the city, spends her last money to buy Dina some food, and takes care of her through the whole movie. All Sveta's life is determined by a lack in her desire – she desires to have a full family which she has not had for a long time. For Sveta, who has never known her father and who lives with her grandmother because her mother has another family, the sisterhood bonds become very important and help to conceal the gap in her desire. Dina becomes a filler of this gap; the girls find a temporary shelter in the summer cottage and their life there looks like a dream, a fantasy, when the younger sister pretends that she has an invisible hat and the elder sister dances to Indian music.<sup>13</sup> When Sveta cannot find her sister in the house after coming back from the train station, she panics because the loss of this “filler” would remind her of the primary lack; the trauma will be repeated. Because the disappearance of the younger sister has caused the return of the traumatic event, she gives Dina a slap when she finds her hiding in the backyard.



When Sveta and Dina return to the house after a walk they find the summer cottage on fire because the mafia listened in to their phone conversation with their parents and have found their hiding place. The burning house becomes an answer of the Real, a symptom of the Real trauma which brings the painful realization of the impossibility of fulfilling Sveta's desire to have a family – the place where the fantasy about the family reconstruction took place is destroyed. After the encounter with the Real, the girls have to “traverse” another fantasy about strong family bonds. They meet a Gypsy boy at the train station who takes them to his house where about fifteen people live together. Sveta and Dina are invited for dinner and thus get a place within the family structure. The Gypsy family looks very friendly and close to each other: they talk over dinner a lot, share the food, and the elder children in the family take care of the younger ones (thus, the Gypsy boy looks after his “sisters,” gives them orders and buys them yogurt at the market). Dina and Sveta have been accepted into the Gypsy family and are given special responsibilities and duties. One of the main goals of the girls' adventures is to find money to survive, and, as members of the Gypsy family, they have to make money on the streets. Thus, Dina sings songs on the train and plays the violin for passers-by, and Sveta sells pop at the market. But the fantasy about the wholeness of the family is interrupted by the Gypsy boy who betrays them to the police, and the sisters have to “traverse” another fantasy.

Bodrov's *Sisters* has some similarities with Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf*: in both films the fantasy about the happy land is constructed when the gap in the desire is discovered. Sveta performs a traditional Indian dance in the summer cottage when the girls are hiding from the mafia: later on, the younger sister repeats the same dance in their last shelter. At the end of the film Dina shares with the elder sister that she would like



them to go to India together, but, after the girls are rescued by Alik, the fantasy about sisterhood bonds collapses again. Alik decides to take his wife and his daughter to Austria where he has already bought a house, and Sveta does not “fit” into this fantasy and has to stay with her grandmother. If, at the beginning of Bodrov’s film, Dina refuses to stay with the elder sister, at the end she dreams about performing the Indian dance together on stage. In the last scene she opens a gift box from her elder sister and discovers a fancy mirror and some stickers for her forehead which Indian women usually wear. She puts a sticker on and starts dreaming about both of them dancing together in Indian national costumes; and now it is she who through this fantasy attempts to fill the gap in the Symbolic.

#### **The Car, Money and Friendship: The Mafia *Bratki*<sup>14</sup> in Petr Buslov’s *Bimmer*.**

After the traumatic disintegration of the Soviet Union, a deep feeling of alienation and separation has imbued the Russian people; the experience of the “touch” of the Real has impelled the fantasy construction about brotherhood, fraternity, and this is especially evident in popular Russian films about the mafia. The main characters of Petr Buslov’s *Bimmer* (*Bumer*), released in 2003, are four friends – Kostia-Kot (The Cat), Dimon-Oshparennii (The Scalded), Leha-Killa and Petia-Rama (The Frame) – who make their living by carjacking and for whom the fraternal bonds are very important. None of them seems to have family or to be in a committed relationship, except Kot who has a girlfriend Nastia who wants him to quit his dangerous “profession” and emigrate with her to France. Once again, very similar to Astrakhan’s *You are My Only One* and Todorovskii’s *The Land of the Deaf*, there is a motif of a fantasmatic “happy land” in



*Bimmer* into which the main characters can “traverse” in order to hide the lack, to fill the gap in the Symbolic.

Kostia has a chance to achieve enjoyment and go to France with his girlfriend, but, when Dimon calls and asks for help, Kostia leaves Nastia and goes to rescue his friend-*bratok*. An accident with Dimon’s Mercedes, when some other Russian gangsters expropriate the car, breaks through their reality and points to the impossibility of Kostia’s desire. A dream about the better place somewhere abroad, about the “happy land,” crashes and now it is a fantasy about brotherhood, fraternal bonds, which can support their Symbolic. When Oshparennii is seriously wounded by drunk and angry truck drivers, Kot, Killa and Rama carry him through the woods to the closest village; and in the last scene Kostia refuses to leave the fatally wounded Leha on the streets even at the cost of his own life.

As in Balabanov’s films, there is another element which determines their actions – money, or lack of it. The main characters of *Bimmer* bribe policemen who stop them on the road with all the money they have right at the beginning and then continue their journey without a single ruble. Money becomes for Kostia, Leha, Dimon and Petja the *objet a*, which they are always trying to find until the end of the road trip. To find money to survive, to buy food and gas, becomes the driving force for all of them. First, the four friends try to exchange the auto CD player for gas; then, Kostia steals money from a police car; and finally they decide to rob a company which sells computers, but instead of money they get a machine-gun burst – an answer of the Real which causes the traumatic realization of the impossibility of “traversing” the fantasy about strong family bonds and loyal fraternity.



The film critic Irina Liubarskaia compares Buslov's *Bimmer* with Balabanov's *Brother* and affirms that, if Danila is looking for a better life in the capital of Russia, Kostia, Leha, Petia and Dimon leave Moscow for small, provincial towns and villages, for "a solitude, a poky hole of a place, a wild field" (Liubarskaia 2003). The four friends fantasize about a safe place where they can hide from the police and the other mafia members, but their reality is distorted by the intrusion of the Real in the form of corrupt policemen who plant drugs in their BMW, Dimon's wound, and the death of three of them at the hands of the police at the end of the film.

A new expensive BMW 750 IL, a signifier of the new post-Soviet Symbolic and a distinctive attribute of New Russians and mafia, which the four friends carjack one night from the street, becomes an object of their desire and one of the main things, which keeps them together. After stealing the car, Kot, Killa, Rama and Oshparennii have to go on a road trip where a lot of misfortunes happen to them: first of all, they have to give all their money to the corrupt policemen; then, they are brutally beaten by truck drivers and Dimon is stabbed with a screwdriver; the tires are ruined and the car is stuck in the middle of nowhere. It is evident that a black BMW plays a significant role in this film: even the title "bumer" is a post-Soviet slang word for BMW cars. If money in Buslov's film becomes the *objet a*, the black car serves as Zizek's "circulating object of exchange," a leftover of the Real, which unites the main characters of the film and serves "as a kind of guarantee, pawn, on their [subjects'] symbolic relationship" (Zizek 2002: 6).

It is through the black BMW 750 IL we are introduced to the main characters at the beginning of the film: we first meet the four friends when they are trying to break into the car late at night. For the rest of *Bimmer* Kostia, Petia, Leha and Dimon depend on the



black BMW which becomes an important element in their fraternal relations. It never occurs to them to sell or to leave the dangerous car somewhere: even though they would not need to spend money on gas or their time on fixing it, and they would get rid of the identifying sign which might finally lead the police or the mafia members to them.

The four friends stop at a small village in the middle of nowhere and find a house which belongs to an old woman-folk doctor. She cures Dimon's wound and allows the friends to stay at her house. When the old woman sees their BMW she says, "All of you will be killed. And your car is dreadful, it looks like a hearse." She feels that this car somehow does not belong to the Symbolic Order and as a piece of the Real can become a threat to the social reality. At the end of the film the old lady's prediction comes true: three of the friends are shot by the police, and the last one, Dimon, betrays his friends and escapes from the crime scene in the car. In this dramatic scene, the black "catafalque" plays its crucial role as a traumatic answer of the Real: when Kostia-Kot, Petia-Rama and Leha-Killa leave the computer company they were planning to rob and run into the patrol car, Dimon-Oshparennii tries to start the BMW but does not succeed. He is able to start the car only after Petia and Leha are shot by the police officers, which indicates that the important elements of the fantasmatic construction about fraternal bonds are extracted, creating the lack in the desire for enjoyment. Dimon leaves Kostia in the middle of the street with two dead friends and a lot of policemen, realizing that the split in the Symbolic has always been there, that the fantasmatic construction about money and fraternal ties would not be able to conceal this gap in his desire.

In Buslov's *Bimmer* there is another object – Kostia's cell phone – which also serves as a reminder of the traumatic encounter with the Real, "the tiny element which



sets in motion the crystallization of the symbolic structure” (Žižek 2002: 8). At the beginning of the film, when the four friends start their trip into the Russian solitude, Kostia-Kot discovers that his cell phone is gone. They look for it everywhere, but cannot find it, and for Kostia it becomes a symptom of the first traumatic lack in the Symbolic. Later in the film he makes a call to his girlfriend Nastia from a pay phone but only finds out that she has already left for France. It is at that moment when his fantasy about having a family somewhere faraway in the “happy land” is shattered. The lost cell phone becomes a symptom of the lack in Kostia’s desire because, only if Nastia contacts him through it, can he get a second chance to reconstruct the fantasy about family bonds and satisfy his desire. The cell phone rings in the car a few times at night when nobody can hear it, just as a reminder of the lack, a leftover of the Real. At the end of the film, after Kostia, Leha and Petia are shot by the police, Dimon-Oshparennii hears the phone ringing in the car and picks it up to find out that it is Nastia who is looking for her boyfriend. The sound of the phone becomes a symptom of the previous traumatic encounter with the Real when he witnessed the deaths of all his friends. Dimon leaves the BMW in the woods with hazard lights flashing and the cell phone inside it and takes a bus in an unknown direction. The melody on the cell phone smoothly turns into the off-screen music, and the lights of the BMW slowly dim – because the subjects are destroyed and there is no need for the objects of the symbolic relationship anymore.

The main characters in the films of Balabanov, Bodrov jr. and Buslov have a lot in common: they all exist in the post-Soviet Symbolic of the New Russians, the mafia, expensive cars, luxury cottages, danger, deception, murder and kidnapping. Danila and Viktor from *Brother* and its sequel, Sveta and Dina from *Sisters*, and the four friends



from *Bimmer* experience the traumatic touch of the Real which points out the lack in their desire and the impossibility of satisfying it. In each of these films the fantasy is very similarly constructed to fill this lack, specifically, a fantasy about money, financial prosperity, and strong family bonds. And for each of the characters this fantasy becomes a part of their reality which determines their functioning in the post-Soviet Symbolic.



## CONCLUSION

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 became an encounter with the Real, an unexpected event, for many Russian people, and caused far-reaching consequences to the political, socio-economical and cultural framework of post-Soviet society. It was a new experience for many post-Soviet countries which had to adjust to the changes and learn how to mitigate the traumatic outcome of the breach of the Soviet ideological system. As my thesis has stated, the disintegration of the USSR left some symptoms in the new Russian Symbolic, and Russian popular cinema of the 1990s-2000s became one of the main sources of the traumatic traces of the encounter with the Real. Therefore, in my thesis, I analyzed how post-Soviet popular cinema managed to deal with the traumatic intrusion of the Real into the Russian Symbolic through constructing different fantasies, such as drinking, traveling to a “happy land” and money and restoration of the family connections. I attempted to explain the post-Soviet trauma through the prism of Lacanian and Žižek’s ideas about the intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic order, or our reality.

As has been argued in the first chapter of this thesis, the human experience should always come through three stages– the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic – in order to be positioned within the socio-cultural system. And for Slavoj Žižek, the dimension of the Real becomes the most important element in this triad: it lies outside our perception, but at the same time it determines our social reality. According to Lacan and Žižek, there is always some gap, or lack, in the Symbolic, because when a child is being born, he/she breaks all connection with the Real (Nature) to which he/she primary belonged. There is no lack in the Real; it is determined by totality and completeness. The separation from the



Real brings the first traumatic experience for the human being and, after that the individual attempts to obliterate, to deny this traumatic loss which becomes the hard core of his/her subsequent life. But the Real is always somewhere around: it is threatening and consolatory, strange and familiar at the same time. It intrudes into social reality in the form of unexpected, eerie, inexplicable events, objects or noises, disturbs the Symbolic order, leaves the symptoms of the traumatic encounter and impels us to construct some meaning around this split. But because it cannot be totally symbolized, cannot be fully inscribed into the Symbolic order, the process of building a chain of signifiers around this traumatic cleft becomes a continuous support of the balance of our everyday life. It is the Symbolic which changes, distorts the Real, and which gives this event, or object, its traumatic status. Fantasy, as the “kernel of enjoyment” and the essential part of the Symbolic order, helps to deal with the traumatic consequences of the encounter with the Real. Through fantasy the desire to fill the gap in the Symbolic is constituted as impossible to satisfy completely and the enjoyment from the touch of the Real cannot be fully achieved.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union became for Russia such a traumatic encounter with the Real, like the fall of the Berlin Wall for Germany or the collapse of the World Trade Center for the United States. The breakdown of the Soviet ideological system has left symptoms in Russian culture, and the signs of this traumatic experience are more obvious in popular culture (and popular Russian cinema as an example) because it inevitably reacts to all economic and political changes in the social structure and also shapes the everyday life of Russian people. According to Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, culture and individuals react to the traumatic intrusion of the Real by constructing



different fantasies which, first of all, conceal the painful experience and, secondly, repeat it over and over in order to initiate the process of creating meaning.

As shown in my thesis, after the traumatic event in 1991, the post-Soviet cinema created different types of fantasies in order to deal with its consequences. All fantasies constructed by post-Soviet Russian cinema are deeply intertwined, but some of them are more obvious in some films, and less detectable in other movies. In this thesis I was able to distinguish three different types of fantasies peculiar to Russian popular cinema after the collapse of the Soviet Union: fantasmatic drinking, the fantasy about traveling to a “happy land” and the fantasmatic construction about family bonds and money.

In the second chapter of my thesis, I analyzed Alexander Rogozhkin’s comedies *Peculiarities of the National Hunt*, *Peculiarities of the National Fishing*, *Peculiarities of the National Hunt in the Winter Period* and *Peculiarities of National Politics*, which belong to the first category when the events in all four films are structured around alcohol drinking. As stated in this chapter, in Rogozhkin’s films alcohol is something which brings people together, which eliminates the feeling of loss and separation caused by the disintegration of the USSR. The main purpose of fishing, hunting or political games is not the catch, the kill, or the seat in Parliament, but the process of consuming alcohol together. Everyone should traverse the drinking fantasy in order to fill the gap in the Russian Symbolic after the collapse of the Soviet system and through this support the Russian Symbolic.

In the *Peculiarities* series the symptoms of the encounter with the Real haunt the Russian Symbolic in different forms, and all these symptoms remind us once again that there is always a gap in desire and even when there are some substitutes, *objets a*, desire



can never be fully satisfied and enjoyment cannot be achieved. In Rogozhkin's comedies vodka (or alcohol in general) can serve as an object of symbolic relations between the characters, whose function is to connect and reunite, or as an *objet a*. In these films alcohol also has another function: it becomes the bridge between the Symbolic and the Real, it brings the Real into our social reality in the form of painful hangover. It reverts to the Real trauma and reminds us of an essential split in our reality.

In Chapter 3 of my thesis, I analyzed another fantasy constructed after the disintegration of the USSR in popular Russian films by Yurii Mamin, Dmitrii Astrakhan, Georgii Shengelia and Valerii Todorovskii. Mamin's *Window to Paris*, Shengelia's *The Castaway Sagittarius*, Astrakhan's *You Are My Only One* and Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf* describe the fantasies about a better place to which the main characters travel or wish to travel. The desires of the characters of these films are directed towards "happy lands" where they would have a safe, comfortable life, money and true love. In *Window to Paris*, France becomes such a perfect place for the main character Nikolai Chizhov and his roommates. But at the same time the Parisian fantasy constitutes the impossibility of satisfying all desires and that is why at the end of the film the main characters try to find another magic portal in the wall in search of what they have already lost. The main character of Shengelia's *The Castaway Sagittarius* German has access to the Soviet past through a similar magic passage located in the basement of an old house that leads to the Soviet past where German constantly travels to find money and love, but at the end of the film the fantasy of the Soviet past is interrupted by the explosion of the magic portal which initiates the construction of another fantasy in France with a briefcase full of money and a new girlfriend. Life in post-Soviet Russia for Evgenii Timoshin and his



family from *You Are My Only One* is also centered around some fundamental lack.

Evgenii gets an opportunity to traverse the fantasy of a better life in the United States, but the realization that there is always a gap in the Symbolic and enjoyment can never be complete leads to Evgenii's refusal to go to America and his decision to stay with his family in Russia. In Todorovskii's *The Land of the Deaf* the main characters Rita and the deaf girl Ia Ia dream about the imaginary land of the deaf where they can have a lot of money and be happy. The traumatic intrusion of the Real initiates the process of traversing the fantasy of a better place, and, with the loss of hearing caused by the final gunshot, Rita joins Ia Ia at the 'land of the deaf'.

The final chapter of this thesis described the fantasmatic construction about money and family bonds in the popular Russian films of Alexei Balabanov, Sergei Bodrov Jr. and Petr Buslov. Danila and Viktor from Balabanov's *Brother* and *Brother 2*, Sveta and Dina from Bodrov Jr.'s *Sisters* and four friends from Buslov's *Bimmer* exist in the post-Soviet world of the mafia and the New Russians and have to negotiate between money and loyalty to their brothers and sisters. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its traumatic consequences for the Russian people initiated the process of the fantasy construction about family reunion and money, which plays an essential role in the restoration of family ties. Thus, Danila always tries to find somebody to become a part of his family: his elder brother, his new girl-friend Sveta or a Russian prostitute in Chicago. The feeling of loss and lack caused by the disintegration of the Soviet system for the main character of Balabanov's film is being substituted with the feeling of strong family bonds. Through reconstructing family ties Danila attempts to fill the gap in the post-Soviet Symbolic. The step-sisters Sveta and Dina from *Sisters*, while running away from



the mafia, dream about a restored sisterhood. Because of the lack of strong family connections both girls dream of a family which would fill the gap in their desires. Money becomes a threat to their lives, but at the same time brings them closer to each other. At the end of the film Sveta realizes that her desire to have a real family will never be fully complete and the gap in the Symbolic cannot be filled with the fantasy about sisterhood bonds. Fraternal bonds become a support for the post-Soviet reality of four friends Kostia, Dimon, Lha and Petja in Buslov's *Bimmer*. The only thing, which the four *bratki* have from the beginning to the end of the film, is a carjacked BMW, which becomes the important object of their interrelations and also functions as a leftover of the Real, but at the end three of the friends are killed and the last one left, Dimon, escapes in the BMW, which breaks the fantasy about the fraternal loyalty, creates another lack in their Symbolic and reminds them once again of the impossibility of satisfying the desire for enjoyment.

All three fantasies, about drinking, traveling to a happy land and money and family ties, constructed in the post-Soviet popular cinema, inevitably lead to the realization of the existence of a lack, a split, in the Russian Symbolic and the understanding that this gap cannot be completely filled by any substitutes.

Further research on the topic of the encounter with the Real and its reflection in popular cinema could address the analysis of other traumatic experiences in Russian culture. Thus, the Revolution of 1917 would be one of the examples of the intrusion of the Real into the Russian Symbolic, with its symptoms traced in Sergej Eisenstein's *October* and *Battleship Potemkin*. Other examples of the Real trauma for the Russian



people would be the “Great Patriotic War” in 1941-1945 with its traces left in many postwar films, the Cold War and the war in Afghanistan.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union is not an isolated instance of the traumatic encounter with the Real. Many other cultures have also had different experiences of a collision with the Real which can be addressed in further analysis of fantasies constructed in national cinemas: the explosion of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, the strike of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1989, the collapse of the World Trade Center in the United States and so on. The analysis of such traumatic experiences in different cultures can lead to a better understanding of the relations between the Real and the Symbolic and of the role of the Real in fantasy constructions.

This thesis is an example of how the post-psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and its interpretation by Slavoj Žižek can be used for the analysis of the traumatic experiences reflected in popular cinema. By using the methodology provided by this thesis we can analyze other national cinemas which were affected by the traumatic intrusion of the Real, like the Yugoslavian, German, Polish cinemas, Hollywood after September 11<sup>th</sup> and many others.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Socialist realism, originated from the beginning of the 1930s, can serve as an example of such interaction between the ruling ideology and arts in the Soviet Union. As *The Columbian Encyclopedia* states, socialist realism rested on the persuasion that all artistic forms should glamorize the ideas of communism. The Communist Party tried to control every artist through its ideological apparatus by establishing a special organ, the Union of Soviet Artists. Thus, the Soviet artists had to portray in their paintings either some communist ideas, or the socialist leaders. See, *The Columbian Encyclopedia*. Sixth edition. New York: Columbia University Press. 2001. Accessed July 02, 2005. <<http://www.bartleby.com/65/so/socreal.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Thus, in her article, Adele Marie Barker gives the examples of the famous Russian musician and composer Dmitrii Shostakovich, who during Stalin's governance had to make a concession in order to continue composing, and the Russian poet Evgeny Evtushenko who also had to follow the party rules to survive.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Vasilij Pichul's *Little Vera* (1988), Sergej Solovjov's *Assa* (1988) and *Black Rose Is an Emblem of Sorrow, Red Rose Is an Emblem of Love* (1989), Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle* (aka *Igla*, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Western scholars were always interested in the strong philosophical and literary tradition in Russia since the nineteenth century with such famous poets, writers and thinkers as Alexander Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova, Alexander Blok, Lev Tolstoi, Fedr Dostoevskii, Vasilii Rozanov, Vladimir Solovev, Sergei Bulgakov and many others, who in their works focused on the emotional and spiritual reflections of individuals and culture.

<sup>5</sup> See in Russian, A.G. Dubrovin and M.E. Zak, eds. *Rossijskoe kino: Parodoksy obnnovlenia*. Moscow: Materik. 1995; M.I. Zhabskii, ed. *Ispytanie konkurentsiei: Otechestvennoe kino i novoe pokolenie zritelei*. Moscow: VNII Kinoiskusstva, 1997; Sergei Kudriavtsev. *Svoe kino*. Moscow: Dubl'-D. 1998; Yelena Stishova, ed. *Teritorria kino: Postsovetskoe desjatiletie. Kino stran SNG, Latvii, Litvy, Estonii*. Moscow: Pomatur. 2001. Many film critics, like Andrei Plahov, Evgenii Margolit, Yelena Stishova, Igor Mantsov and Natalia Sirivlya, regularly publish their articles and film reviews on contemporary Russian cinema in the magazine *Iskusstvo Kino* (Moscow, Novaia Kniga Press), also on-line <<http://www.kinoart.ru>>.

<sup>6</sup> Also see, Lily Avrutin. "The Soldier, the Girl and the Dragon: Battles of Meaning in Post-Soviet Cinematic Space". *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2. 1999: 72-97; David Gillespie. *Russian Cinema*. Harlow, London: Longman, Pearson Education. 2003; Janet Swaffar. "Identity Signifiers in Contemporary Russian Films: A Lacanian Analysis." *American Imago* 57, no. 1. 2000: 95-119; Emma Widdis. "The Unmappable System: The Collapse of Public Space in Post-Soviet Film." *Film Criticism* 2, no. 2. (Winter 1996): 8-23.



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<sup>7</sup> For the reviews on *Russia on Reels* see, Anthony Anemone's review in *Slavic & East European Journal* 45, no. 1. Spring 2001:143-145; P.J. Cavendish's review in *Slavonic & East European Review* 79, no. 2. April 2001: 333-339; Jane A. Taubman's review in *Slavonica* 6, no. 2. 2000: 129-130.

<sup>8</sup> For the reviews on Faraday's book see, Denise J. Youngblood's review in *Russian Review* 60, no. 2. April 2001: 281-282; Birgit Beumers's review in *Slavic Review* 60, no. 3. Fall 2001: 687-688; Josephine Woll's review in *Demokratizatsiya* 11, no. 3. Summer 2003: 462-465.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan's notion of "jouissance" is often used by many scholars as a synonym for the word "enjoyment". It comes from the French word "jouir" which is usually interpreted as a very deep pleasure, enjoyment connected with the attainment of any desired condition or object. *Jouissance* should always be associated with some kind of a pain, discomfort, and that is why is necessarily located *beyond* the pleasure principle. For more on *jouissance* see, Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company. 1978: 183-184. Not to confuse *jouissance* with sexual satisfaction, sexual orgasm, which is also one of its meaning in French, in this thesis, I will be using the word "enjoyment" as a synonym for the Lacanian *jouissance*.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Hitchcock first mentioned the term "McGuffin" during his lecture at the Columbia University in 1939. McGuffin was used by him to explain some element, some device, around which the plot of the film is structured, and which is usually of concern for almost every character. In Hitchcock's films anything (even if it does not exist), which drives the plot of the movie and which is very important for the characters, can serve as a McGuffin (uranium, a tune, a non-existent spy and etc.). See, *Wikipedia*. On-line encyclopedia. Accessed June 22, 2005. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McGuffin>>.

<sup>11</sup> For detailed analysis of representations of the New Russians and the mafia in Russian popular culture see Lynne Attwood. (1995). "Men, Machine Guns, and the Mafia: Post-Soviet Cinema as a Discourse on Gender." *Women's Studies International Forum* 18, no. 5/6. 513-521; Harley Balzer. (2003). "Routinization of the New Russians?" *Russian Review* 62, January. 15-36; Seth Graham. (2003). "The Wages of Syncretism: Folkloric New Russians and Post-Soviet Popular Culture." *Russian Review* 62, January. 37-53; Mark Lipovetsky. (2003). "New Russians as a Cultural Myth." *Russian Review* 62, January. 54-71; Patricia Rawlinson. (1998). "Mafia, Media and Myth: Representations of Russian Organized Crime." *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, no. 4. November. 346-359.

<sup>11</sup> However, there are some exceptions to the traditional post-Soviet representations of femininity. Thus, the popular film of Tigran Keosayan, *Poor Sasha* (1997), portrays a new Russian woman, a banker, and her daughter who have to save themselves from the mafia and reunite as a family.



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<sup>12</sup> Similarly to the first scene, an ellipse conceals Sveta's (Danila's girlfriend) traumatic experience later in the film when she has been raped and beaten by the mafia members who want to find Danila's contact information. We first see the girl in her room with two gangsters trying to undress her; after the blackout we see her all bruised sitting alone in the kitchen, drinking vodka and singing songs. We never get to see the rape scene, but can only witness its consequences.

<sup>13</sup> In the film, Sveta claims to perform a belly-dance, however, it looks more like a traditional Indian, or Hindi, dance. When both girls dance at the end of the film, they wear traditional Indian costumes. It can serve as a reference to the Indian cinema, which was always popular among Russian audiences for having a lot of music and dancing and for its necessary happy end. And that is why everything related to the Indian cinema, music or dance would always mean for the Russian people something joyful, happy, pleasant, with evil being punished and true love being discovered.

<sup>14</sup> The Russian word "bratki" is slang for the word "brothers", usually used to define the post-Soviet Russian mafia members when mutual responsibility, trust and support become the most important characteristics of the relations between them.



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