

Chernukha and Russian Film

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-Мальчик, ты пописал?
-Покааакаал!!!

Утоли моя печали [*Assuage my Sorrows*, 1989]

The slang term *chernukha*¹—whose root (*chern-*, “black”) suggests its contemporary definition as representational art that emphasizes the darkest, bleakest aspects of human life—came into common usage during perestroika.² It was initially applied mostly to literature, in particular to the drama and prose of Liudmila Petrushevskia,³ but since 1988 cultural commentators have used the term primarily in reference to cinema, both feature and documentary. Lists of the customary devices of cinematic *chernukha* are not lacking, and generally concur on the basics.⁴ Typical settings are dirty and/or crowded apartments (often with pets depicted in proximity to exposed food),⁵ littered courtyards (populated by feral dogs or cats), urban streets at night, beer bars or liquor stores, police stations or prisons, and hospitals. Characters live either in urban isolation or with other members of a truncated (motherless, fatherless, or childless) family. Alcoholism and/or drug addiction is de rigueur, as is a general atmosphere of cruelty: physical violence and frequent, unpredictable shouting and arguments. Bodies are commonly deformed by injury or illness, either before the narrative begins or during it. Sex is represented most often as rape, though rarely acknowledged as such in the narrative. Female nudity is common, and often signals the imminence of a rape scene. Of central importance to all of these characteristics is an emphasis on physicality and “naturalism.”

Many cultural commentators of the perestroika period and beyond stated more or less explicitly that by 1989 or 1990 the *chernukha* mode (or “aesthetic”)⁶ had become dominant in Soviet film art.⁷ Film critic and Conflict Commission⁸ chairman Andrei Plakhov, for example, acknowledged in late 1990 the ubiquity of the *chernukha* influence, writing that “the screen has been taken over, in form and content, by a nightmare of communal squalor, curses of history, cruel and joyless sex, food line brutality, and the metallic scrape of barracks and prisons” [“кошмар коммунальных задворок, и проклятия истории, и жестокий, безрадостный секс, и агрессия очередей, и казарменно-тюремый скрежет стали фоном и смыслом всей экранной жизни”] (27). Another critic noted in early 1991 that *chernukha* imagery had become the artistic *idée fixe* of both mainstream and independent Soviet film makers, and described the trend as a “black wave” of contagion that had spread to all aspects of film making—plot, aesthetics,

character—and, in turn, was “infecting” film audiences (Lukshin 12). As late as 1997, Daniil Dondurei, editor of the leading Russian film journal, *Iskusstvo kino*, opened a roundtable on the problem of *chernukha* by noting the trend’s continued dominance in (and threat to) Russian film art: “in recent years we have seen the singular dominance of a worldview marked by catastrophe, rejection of the future, and negative interpretation of the present, a worldview that is essentially and functionally repressive towards all other value systems” [“Все последние годы властвует чуть ли не единая установка на катастрофизм, неприятие будущего, негативную интерпретацию настоящего — установка, по сути своей и функциям репрессивная по отношению ко всем другим ценностным системам”] (162).

Like the older, morphologically-related term *ochernitel'stvo* (“blackening”), which Soviet ideologues used as a rhetorical cudgel to denounce overly pessimistic representations of socialist reality,⁹ the word *chernukha* has figured in film writing almost exclusively as a smear. Some film historians, however, have discussed “the *chernukha* film” more objectively, as a latter-day genre that coexisted on the perestroika screen with other genres, such as the detective film and the melodrama.¹⁰ In other venues for broad-perspective film discourse, such as the 1997 roundtable mentioned above, *chernukha* has been discussed as a social and/or artistic scourge. The intimation within such discourse is that the Russian film community must collectively elaborate *chernukha*’s roots, implications, and possible antidotes.

The number (and generic variety) of perestroika-era titles to which the term *chernukha* was applied is large, and includes some of the best-known and most successful films of the period. Among documentaries commonly mentioned as reliant on *chernukha* imagery are Hertz Frank’s *Final Verdict* (*Высший суд*, 1987), Georgii Gavrilov’s *Confession: A Chronicle of Alienation* (*Исповедь. Хроника отчуждения*, 1988), and Stanislav Govorukhin’s *This is No Way to Live* (*Так жить нельзя*, 1990). Feature films that have been associated with the term include Vasilii Pichul’s *Little Vera* (*Маленькая Вера*, 1988), Igor’ and Dmitrii Talankins’ *Autumn, Chertanovo...* (*Осень, Чертаново...*, 1988), Iurii Kara’s *Kings of Crime* (*Воры в законе*, 1988), Aleksandr Aleksandrov and Vladimir Prokhorov’s *Assuage My Sorrows* (*Утоли моя печали*, 1989), Ol’ga Narutskaiia’s *Tamara Aleksandrovna’s Husband and Daughter* (*Муж и дочь Тамары Александровны*, 1989), Aleksandr Sokurov’s *Save and Protect* (*Спаси и сохрани*, 1989), Isaak Fridberg’s *Little Doll* (*Куколка*, 1989), Roman Balaian’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (*Леди Макбет мценского уезда*, 1989), Kira Muratova’s *The Aesthetic Syndrome* (*Астенический синдром*, 1990), Pavel Lungin’s *Taxi Blues* (*Такси-блюз*, 1990), Leonid

Menaker's *A Feast for Dogs* (*Собачий суп*, 1990), Sergei Bodrov's *Card Sharp* (*Катала*, 1990), and Rudolf Fruntov's *Fools Die on Fridays* (*Дураки умирают по пятницам*, 1991).¹¹

While there was near-universal acknowledgment that *chernukha* was a prominent presence on the screen, the significance of its presence in the context of Soviet film history and of Soviet sociocultural life in general produced, of course, no such consensus. The polemics surrounding such films largely mirrored the major sociopolitical debates regarding perestroika itself: how much critical exposé is too much? What symbols and ideals, if any, should remain "untouchable?" How can (or, simply, can) the "diseased" parts of the social organism be identified and surgically removed without killing the organism?

Much of the debate surrounding *chernukha* centered on the question of how deeply the images and ideas associated with it lay beneath the complicated façade of false "values" and "ideals" of Soviet society, on the one hand, and to what extent the *chernukha* form was itself merely a façade, a superficial artistic device, on the other. In other words, was the newly emergent style an accurate, if exaggerated, expression of the essential, rotten core of the society, or mere bad-boy épatage? The latter argument understood *chernukha* as an exercise in compensatory excess designed to call attention to problems that were undeniably real, but hardly terminal, beneath which lay the true ideals of the society, ideals that, after an uncomfortable but necessary encounter with ugliness, would reemerge to redeem that society.

The notion of *chernukha*'s "excess" as an artistic strategy in a transitional social period has an analog in Peter Brooks's understanding of melodrama. Brooks discusses melodrama as a cultural "mode" that arose transgenerically in response to the perceived "social and ethical upheaval[s]" of the twentieth century (xiv). While melodramatic narrative is marked by a compensatory excess of emotional expressionism, by "ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements" (Brooks 4), *chernukha* is a sort of naturalistic inversion of the melodramatic impulse; it replaces concentrated emotionality with concentrated physicality.

Also useful for this reading of *chernukha* is Brooks's notion of the "moral occult," which he defines as "the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality. The moral occult is not a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth" (5). In the specific case of perestroika-era Russia, many viewed the recovery of pre-Soviet val-

and thus a menace. T. Khlopliankina voiced such a view, acknowledging that the flood of *chernukha* images was over-compensation for decades of official concealment of the negative aspects of social reality,¹² but then expressing a sentiment common during perestroika, warning that such uncontrolled excess will lead to the irrevocable loss of the positive, as well, that all life-giving ideals (“что дает нам силы жить”) will be crushed by the nihilistic snowball of *chernukha* images and ideas (50).

Another frequently voiced opinion conceived of *chernukha* as merely a fashion born of sudden and intoxicating artistic freedom, the latest rage, a primitive, socially irrelevant cultural anomaly that would simply die out once audiences grew bored with its initial, prurient appeal and realized that, as a productive artistic form (and not unlike many of its own protagonists), it had no future. Liudmila Budiak detected just such a public sentiment in 1990, suggestively connecting it to a similar impatience with the tempo of sociopolitical reforms: “it seems to most observers that, like the Soviet government, the cinema is tardy, failing to respond to society’s psychological mood, which is opposed not to the problematics confronting the cinema, but to that which leads society to an impasse” (33). Dmitrii Popov made a similar observation about the *chernukha* film’s inherent limitations that same year: “the explosive potential of these films ends right where it begins—on the level of anti-aesthetic explosion of Soviet reality itself” [“взрывной потенциал этих лент заканчивается там же, где и начинается,—на уровне взрывной антиэстетики самой ‘советской реальности’”] (37).¹³

In the context of cinema as an industry and as an art form, the questions surrounding *chernukha* were similarly numerous and divisive, but different in nature: quite aside from the philosophical or social implications of *chernukha*, what effect would the sustained bombardment of film audiences by images of bloody noses, screaming alcoholics, mangy dogs, murder-suicides and shattered families have on the status and popularity of cinema as an art and as a form of entertainment? To what extent did *chernukha* film signify not (or not only) the social status quo, but the state of film production values—that is, to what extent was it an illustration of and an extended metaphor for economic crisis in the film industry itself? And what were the implications of the rise of *chernukha* for the evolution of cinema art in the Soviet Union?

One of the harshest contemporary skeptics of *chernukha*’s validity as a form of social commentary, cinematic production, or artistic practice was Sergei Dobrotvorskii, who in 1991 denied that the trend (of which he gave no specific textual examples) had any meaningful place in perestroika as a cultural moment. He dubbed *chernukha* one of two “pseudo-auteur” [псевдоавторские] tendencies in perestroika cinema (the other being “apoc-

alypse”), and concluded his dismissal of its artistic and social worth with a devastating comparison of the “*chernushniki*” with their pre-perestroika predecessors in disingenuous “realism”:

Chernukha is a pointless statement of the pointlessness of life, a voluptuous wallowing in the physiological realm. Prison yards, hide-outs, drunk tanks, barracks, and communal kitchens aspire to comprise the sorrowful symbolism of Soviet reality. Thus they allow a director to stay afloat without having to relinquish socialist realist slogans about “typical character in typical circumstances.” [Чернуха—это безысходная констатация безысходности общей жизни, сладострастное копошение в физиологическом слое. Зона, притон, вырезвитель, казарма и коммунальная кухня вместе с тем претендуют на печальную символику советской реальности. А значит, и позволяют режиссеру держаться на плаву, не выпуская из рук соцреалистических лозунгов о “типическом характере в типических обстоятельствах.”] (28-29)

The likening of *chernukha* film to socialist realist art is actually quite astute, although perhaps not in the way Dobrotvorskii intended. The comment, like Plakhov’s otherwise unremarkable description, cited above, alludes rather neatly to a central distinctive feature of hardcore *chernukha* cinema: a potent, distilled consistency of idea (what Plakhov called “смысл”) and image (Plakhov’s “фон”), of message and medium, of latent philosophical premise (radical fatalism) and manifest artistic representation (unremitting ugliness and violence). In this respect, the trend resurrects a familiar impulse: *chernukha* strives for a degree of complicity between the verbal and the visual that had not been seen in Soviet culture (official or unofficial) since high Stalinism. The fact that *chernukha* film inverts the relative importance of verbal and visual only strengthens this interpretation: that it represents an absolute, parodic (though rarely humorous) inversion of the classic socialist realist model of film narrative. In place of the latter’s pure idealism, logocentric optimism and “conflictlessness” (бесконфликтность), the former offers pure naturalism, mute pessimism and omnipresent conflict (всеконфликтность). I am by no means suggesting that the chief dialogue in which *chernukha* cinema engaged was with Stalinism;¹⁴ in fact, to read the *chernukha* impulse within the larger context of neo-destalinization, which informed so much of the perestroika Zeitgeist, runs counter to my understanding of *chernukha* film as a challenge to that Zeitgeist.

ence embedded within other texts (some of which are otherwise hostile to the *chernukha* impulse itself), but then shift focus to my real interest: the strategies or "escape routes" adopted by film makers that can be read as responses to the perceived artistic and commercial dead-end of *chernukha* film. Such strategies can also be seen as artistic analogs to the critical discourse around the problem of *chernukha*. The first step will be to define cinematic *chernukha* as an artistic mode by rehierarchicizing components within existing definitions and by relocating its polemical position vis-à-vis films contemporary to, subsequent to, and preceding its 1988-91 heyday.

I argue that the most productive way to read the *chernukha* film is not against the backdrop of Soviet sociopolitical history or Russian values, but in the more specific and immediate context of perestroika-era cinematic engagement of that history and those values. My discussion of the central formal strategies and philosophical premises of the *chernukha* film will show how it functioned in many ways as "antistroika," subverting the dominant aesthetic, thematic, philosophical and generic strategies of perestroika culture.

Two crucial elements of cinematic *chernukha* as I understand it are: 1) subordination of the verbal signifier (which is most commonly represented in film in the form of dialogue, voice-over monologue or song lyrics) to the visual (or non-verbal auditory) image (I read this element as part of the assertive physicality of the form); and 2) a radical, indiscriminate, and ostentatious rejection of all ideals, especially those that are culturally-marked, which signifies visually the trend's essential philosophical fatalism.

A film that exemplifies most of the qualities listed above is Ol'ga Narutskaiia's *Tamara Aleksandrovna's Husband and Daughter* (1989), which is often (and rightly) identified as one of the very darkest films in the *chernukha* canon (Horton and Brashinsky 164; Lawton 201; Plakhov 27). The first image of the film, however, does not suggest the horror to follow and, indeed, evokes both ideals (female beauty, motherhood, abundance) and the value of the verbal (folk song); we see the full, very Russian-looking face of the titular Tamara Aleksandrovna, softly singing to the camera (Figure 1). Soon, however, the song ends and the face becomes a mute, unsmiling mask. She walks off, apparently disoriented, and is soon removed permanently from the narrative by being taken off to the hospital with peritonitis. As the title suggests, the remainder of the film focuses on the other two-thirds of the family, Tamara Aleksandrovna's ex-husband and daughter. The family has already fractured by the time the narrative begins; the husband and wife are divorced, but they still live on different floors of the same apartment building.¹⁵ The characters' descent into complete chaos and violence occupies virtually the entire narrative, and is foreshadowed in an

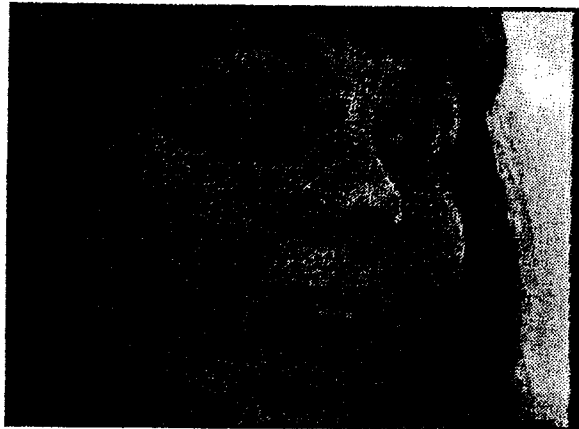


Figure 1.

exchange between father and daughter as they watch the ambulance pull away: the girl asks "Dad, she won't die, will she?" ["Папа, она не умрет?"], to which he replies, "Her? No." ["Она? Нет."]. Verbal communication breaks down from this point, a process that is highlighted by the film's score (a synthesized sampling of guttural vocal sounds, arranged in cacophonous melodies), as well as by the motif of pantomime (the father and daughter play a pantomime game at the breakfast table, and later use pantomime to communicate with Tamara Aleksandrovna while standing on the street in front of the hospital).

The verbal is almost entirely absent from the film during the last ten minutes, which are devoted to the spectacle of the father being savagely yet methodically beaten up by three teenage boys who are angry at the daughter for promising them sex, and then not following through. The beating scene is followed by a final shot of the father's mutilated face in the hospital, as, now separated from both daughter and wife, he sings his own song (through broken teeth) and accompanies himself with maniacal laughter (Figure 2).

Such utter pessimism, combined with the anti-verbal impulse and the complete fragmentation of the familial paradigm, all without any apparent authorial interpretation or clear motivation, indeed represents a rejection of the central perestroika-era strategy of presenting measured exposés of social problems, together with clearly implied or openly identified causes of those problems. The apparent refusal by *chernukha* film makers to motivate their use of such inflammatory imagery, verbally or otherwise, is one of the trend's main challenges to perestroika, both as an official socio-political policy and as that policy was expressed in the most prominent cultural genres



Figure 2.

Another film frequently discussed as one of the seminal texts of *chernukha*, and one that attacks discrete symbols of national ideals with particular vehemence and indiscriminateness, is Aleksandr Aleksandrov and Viktor Prokhorov's *Assuage My Sorrows* (1989). Although the narrative, settings, and language are impeccably *chernukha*, it is the film's infamous "sex under the icon" scene that is most often discussed and that resulted in its distribution being stopped by the very Mosfil'm artistic council that produced the film (a decision that was later overturned by the Conflict Commission) (Lawton 58).

The scene in question entails a series of visual desecrations of sacred images and social conventions. First, a nude young woman, Elli (who is spending the night on the floor of the room of the protagonist, Boris, owing to a rooming-exchange mix-up) hangs an icon of the Virgin on the wall over her mattress (Figures 3 and 4). Aroused by the sight, Boris folk-dances in his dingy underwear over to her (Figure 5) and jumps uninvited into her bed. They have what Plakhov probably meant by "cruel, joyless sex" directly under the icon.¹⁶ To complete the offensive spectacle, Boris does not remove his socks beforehand (Figure 6). This last outrage shows both the plodding, crude humor of extreme *chernukha* and the all-encompassing nature of its subversive urge; not only does the scene make the formerly forbidden sexual realm explicit, but, once within that realm, violates even the codes of conduct associated with it.

This one minute-long sequence manages to desecrate the symbols of at least three different value systems—Russian Orthodoxy, Russian folk ideals, and the sanctity of female virtue—all in a setting that itself represents a subversive exposé of the shabbiness of a fourth such system: Soviet society (the situation results from the housing shortage). Soon after the scene, the film ends, again in violence (Boris's ex-wife shows up the next day and attacks



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

Elli). In short, not one symbol of underlying cultural or moral values in the film is left "untouched," and so the text offers no hope for renewal, redemption, or atonement for the characters, and no catharsis for the viewers. To see just how radical a departure such films were, one need only go back a couple of years.

An early perestroika text that offers a useful model against which to read the *chernukha* film is Viacheslav Krishtofovich's *Lonely Woman Seeks Life Companion...* (1987). On cursory description, the narrative seems ripe for inclusion in the *chernukha* strain: the protagonist, Klava, is a lonely, forty-year-old spinster (almost literally; she works as a seamstress), who desperately "advertises" for a mate by posting five personal ads on buildings around Kiev.¹⁷ Predictably, she attracts a homeless alcoholic, Valentin, who during their first meeting not only offends Klava's sense of manners ("you don't shake a woman's hand," she tells him curtly), but tries to rob her, prompting her to hit him over the head. He lies unconscious on her floor. But here is where the similarities to *chernukha* end. Valentin gets up, unbloodied, apologizes for the little "joke," and begins to charm her with his child-like politeness and gradually revealed tragic past; he is a former circus performer who hit hard times after an injury. Now, he tells her, he lives a noble pauper's life and seeks nothing more than "understanding" and "sympathy," two values that, he says, are currently "in shortage" (в дефиците), a lightly ironic comment that is itself a meek allusion to a contemporary Soviet social problem.

Krishtofovich's film represents a middle ground between *skazka* and Kafka, a transitional phase instantly identifiable with early perestroika "temperance." It is a classic example of what one might call perestroika *lakirovka* ("varnishing of reality," a term used to describe late Stalinist official art), a kind of *chernukha* "lite" that superficially contains all of the categories of the trend with none of the ugliness or excess: a drunk whom we never see drinking; two brief scuffles in which nobody is hurt; characters living in isolation, but whose neighbors are either invisible or polite, and whose loneliness is more wistful than desperate; large, clean apartments, with no more than two inhabitants each; classical music instead of rock; no teenagers or senior citizens (as if a midway point in the transition from Stagnation gerontophilia to the perestroika emphasis on youth); no sex, death, bodily functions, or animals (pets or strays); and a pessimistic ending (Klava learns to trust and appreciate Valentin too late, after he removes himself from the narrative) that nevertheless manages to reek of sentiment and promise. One of the closing images is of her door, left ajar, and of Klava and her neighbor declaring their newfound friendship, a happy by-product of their similarly failed searches for male companionship. The only "social problem" recog-

nized as such in the film is spinsterhood; besides Valentin, Klava's ad attracts a trio of pioneers intent on "sponsoring" her as an emotional charity case, and a journalist (never seen on camera) who is writing an article about the phenomenon of lonely women.

Still, the film's open-endedness, along with its evocation of a "chronic" social problem that is too complex and deeply rooted to be solved within the confines of a fictional narrative, mark it as a perestroika film. This is especially clear when it is contrasted to one of the signal texts of high Stagnation, Vladimir Men'shov's *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears* (1979), the second half of which clearly influenced Krishtofovich's film. Like Klava, Men'shov's lonely, forty-year-old Katia meets a suitor who, on first impression, is unsuitable: he wears dirty boots. While Katia quickly overcomes her mistrust of Gosha after being thoroughly charmed, and lives happily ever after, Klava does not believe Valentin when he "opens up like a flower after the rain" and reveals his gentlemanliness and his glorious past as a trapeze artist. She allows her cynicism to fester long enough for Valentin to be driven away by it. Nevertheless, the film concludes with an affirmation not only of the ever-present possibility of romantic love (Klava's neighbor composes her own ad), but of another eternal value: the emotional bond between all women.

In his 1991 film, *Adam's Rib*, which is located on the "other side" of the wall separating the pre-*chernukha* from the *chernukha* period of Soviet cinema, Krishtofovich again includes many *chernukha* images and situations. The apartment this time is (more realistically) populated by four women, rather than one, including a paralyzed, incontinent grandmother, her twice-divorced daughter, and two granddaughters. The main heroine, the mother, is allowed a carnal life, as are both her daughters, and the youngest gets pregnant. Again, however, ideals are reaffirmed at the end of the film; not only does the girl decide not to abort the pregnancy, a decision that results in a closer bond among the mother and the daughters as they plan to add a fourth generation to the household, but the grandmother experiences an unexplained recovery at the end of the film. The final image is of her, standing triumphantly in the middle of the apartment, singing.¹⁸

While *Lonely Woman* offers more social criticism and less lip service to Soviet ideology, of course, than any Stagnation text could have, it seems positively archaic compared to films released just two or three years later. Leonid Menaker's *A Feast for Dogs* (1990), when juxtaposed to Men'shov's and Krishtofovich's films, completes a tidy trio of very similar narratives grounded in three profoundly different cultural contexts. Menaker's gloomy tale also centers on a single woman approaching middle age, Zhanna, who differs from Katia and Klava in almost every other respect; she is an unat-

tractive, overweight alcoholic who works as a cleaning woman (apparently specializing in hosing down men's toilets) at a filthy train station. Her potential Prince Charming, Arkadii, is an ex-convict, whom she brings home from the station one night. He comes with her essentially out of boredom, and makes no attempt to charm or even to have much of a conversation with her. Nor is he interested in sleeping with her. When he attempts to leave, however, she initially locks him in the apartment while she goes to work. After he nevertheless finds a way out (by taking an ax to the door frame)—and escapes just long enough to seduce/rape Zhanna's bored, married neighbor—Zhanna eventually kills him, and herself, by turning on the gas as he lies drunk in her bed. She crawls in next to him, he slurs, "You're a real good person, Zhanna," they fall asleep, and the credits roll.

By 1991, the relentless negativity of the *chernukha* film had clearly begun to tax the patience and indulgence of the Soviet film audience,¹⁹ and had already begun to give way to other dominant trends, most notably the genre film,²⁰ but also to more "artistic" films often categorized broadly under the rubric of "postmodernism." Both of these trends represent responses to, and show the clear influence of, the *chernukha* impulse, and have been analyzed as "correctives" to the excesses and/or artistic shortcomings of that impulse.

The emergent prominence of the Western-style genre film, which in fact began in earnest during perestroika (note the popularity of Iurii Kara's *Kings of Crime* [1988], and of Pavel Lungin's *Taxi Blues* [1990]),²¹ if not earlier, represented a clear alternative to the unclear (or non-existent) motivations underlying the shocking imagery of *chernukha*. That such imagery appears in almost exactly the same intensity and form in genre film is not paradoxical if one understands as central features of genre an unambiguous acknowledgment of a system of eternal values or ideals (can there be a more anti-*chernukha* impulse?), which are communicated via an equally simple system of "shorthand" or formulae. Genres thus serve as an efficient "delivery mechanism" of values into the consumer's consciousness.²²

The heightened prominence of a well-defined system of genres in a society's culture industry is often characteristic of a crisis in that society's current ideological or political underpinnings. In eighteenth-century Russia, for example, the numerous attempts to compose and impose a rigorous *ars poetica* in Russian letters must be read against the backdrop of the disruptive influence of the Petrine reforms and concomitant secularization of culture. In perestroika-era Soviet culture, of course, the crisis was political/ideological, and eventually subsumed the very values espoused by the official proponents of that cultural model. The conspicuously non-political nature of any of the genre films produced in later perestroika attests to this process.

In contrast to the comforting simplicity of the genre film we have the "sophisticated" complexity of the "art" film. I want to examine briefly one such film, usually labeled "postmodernist," Kira Muratova's *The Aesthetic Syndrome* (1990), which, like genre film, also took much from *chernukha*, and which also rejected one of its central qualities: its unified purpose (see my discussion of Dobrotvorskii's comment, above). Specifically, I want to look at two significant ruptures in Muratova's film, which is largely constructed on ruptures (and which as a cultural text engendered crucial extra-textual breaks that affected the trajectory of Soviet film history).²³ Both of these moments of discontinuity represent important implicit metacommentaries on cinema, and on *chernukha* film in particular. The first is a break in narrative continuity that occurs just under forty minutes into the film. Up to this point, the black-and-white camera has been following a widowed doctor, Natasha, after she flees her husband's funeral and wanders the dirty, dilapidated streets of a contemporary Soviet city. The entire sequence is impeccably *chernukha*. Natasha has a series of encounters with strangers, relatives, friends and work acquaintances, most of which end with her erupting into physical and verbal violence. Natasha's narrative ends with one last encounter, with a woman who notices dust patches on the back of Natasha's black blouse and wipes them off for her.

Here, the narrative ends abruptly, and is revealed as a film-within-the-film. We see the audience of this new, outer narrative "shell" filing out of the auditorium en masse, ignoring the entreaties of a (presumably) film scholar to stay and have a discussion about "serious cinema" with the actress who played Natasha (the real-life actress Ol'ga Antonova, who "plays" herself in this second narrative shell). One man in the disgruntled crowd says as he leaves that all he expects from the movies is "to be entertained, to hear a little music" ("развлечься, музыку послушать").²⁴ This moment of self-mockery by Muratova (the film scholar specifically mentions her name, along with that of Aleksei German and Aleksandr Sokurov, as he tries in vain to spark a discussion about "serious" cinema) evokes the issue of art's impotence as a form of serious social commentary, and brings us back to the question of *chernukha*'s long-term (or even short-term) prospects in the Soviet/Russian cultural marketplace. The specific comment of the man alludes to the growing rift in Soviet cinema itself at the time between popular genre film and "art" film.

The second break in the film is a visual, generic one: the much-discussed "dog pound" scene near the end of the film, in which four women visit a horrific warehouse to save the life of a pet one of them has lost. They move through a recognizably *chernukha*-esque landscape until they reach the final, inner building where the dogs are kept before being destroyed. As they

open the door, we first see the women break into wailing, mournful tears. Then, the camera leaves the women for good, moving to the dogs themselves. It lingers for several minutes on the caged, starving, fly-ridden animals (Figure 7) before cutting to a white-on-black intertitle that reads: "PEOPLE DON'T LIKE TO LOOK AT THIS. PEOPLE DON'T LIKE TO THINK ABOUT THIS. THIS SHOULDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH DISCUSSIONS OF GOOD AND EVIL" ["НА ЭТО НЕ ЛЮБЯТ СМОТРЕТЬ. ОБ ЭТОМ НЕ ЛЮБЯТ ДУМАТЬ. ЭТО НЕ ДОЛЖНО ИМЕТЬ ОТНОШЕНИЯ К РАЗГОВОРАМ О ДОБРЕ И ЗЛЕ"].



Figure 7.

The scene is significant for the sudden, jarring intrusion of an undeniably "documentary" image in the middle of a fictional narrative (albeit an atomistic, elusive "narrative" in terms of underlying fabula and temporal/spatial continuity). In this respect the scene is a second "film within a film." Muratova's generic eclecticism (not to mention the explicit combination of the purely visual and the purely verbal) represents a moment of "making strange" [остранение] at a cultural moment (mid-late perestroika), when all the individual components of such a sequence, in isolation (or at least in their expected places), would be familiar to the viewer: the desolate setting, the crying women, the on-camera representation of actual suffering, and seemingly unambiguous, verbal authorial commentary on the non-fiction image.²⁵ Together, these devices serve both to arrest the attention of the viewer and to resonate within the entire film itself as a text, generating questions as it does so, not the least significant of which is: does the intertitle ("это" ["this"]) refer just to the image of the dogs, or to the entire film to that point? *Chernukha* cinema asked no such questions and admitted no such eclecticism of vision.

The unified pull of the "black hole," the relentless sucking drain of the tendentiously pessimistic, indiscriminately irreverent *chernukha* aesthetic, represented a terminal, inversive parody of the entire teleological trajectory of Soviet ideology and culture from its beginnings until its last moments at the twilight of perestroika. By the time Stalin and his more vegetarian epigones, culminating with Gorbachev himself, had been soundly and publicly discredited, Russian cinema in many respects had already begun to resemble the Western model. On the one hand, it responded to the increasing demand for popular genre films, a response that continues vigorously to this day. On the other, it began to reflect the demand in the cinema world itself for artistic innovation and new forms of cinema language and expression, a demand that an ephemeral, intense, historically-determined (if one is to define it in terms of the socio-political structures against which it arose) phenomenon like *chernukha* could not continue to meet (if it ever could, its critics would add). *Chernukha* film itself began to "circle the drain." The year 1991 in many ways was indeed the year of the resounding flush, but not without subsequent *vsplyvanie*; *chernukha*'s legacy continues to assert itself, both in popular and in "art" film.

Notes

¹ Suggested English translations of the word include "painted in dark colors" (Lawton 206), "pitch darkness" (Horton and Brashinsky 163), and "black hole," which is how the term is rendered in the subtitles to Pavel Lungin's *Taksi-Bliuz* (1990) (a translation discussed by Plakhov [27]). I will use the (transliterated) original throughout, however, since none of the English renderings preserve the important cacophonous contribution of the Russian ironic diminutive suffix *-ukha*, which indicates the term's pejorative connotation. Other slang terms that use the suffix are *pornukha* ("porno"), *pokazukha* ("showing off" or "putting on a false front"), and *grup-povukha* ("group sex").

² The word has several other older connotations, most notably from Soviet prison camp slang (*fenia*), in which *chernukha* referred to lying, cheating, or slander (see entries in Bykov, Khomenko). One Russian-English dictionary of gulag speech adds "low quality gulag bread" to the list of *chernukha*'s camp slang meanings (Galler), and a 1991 dictionary of Russian "thieves' language" (*Словарь воровского языка*) lists three meanings of the word: "deceit; crime; radio." Standard non-specialized Russian dictionaries of the Soviet period and beyond typically list the following non-camp-slang meanings: a type of mushroom (Dal', Ozhegov, Kuznetsov); an edible, herb-like plant (Kuznetsov); a swarthy woman or girl (Kuznetsov, Ozhegov); and "a nickname for a black cow or chicken" (Dal').

³ See, for example: Zorin; Goscilo.

⁴ The most explicit and methodical definition of the *chernukha* film in its "canonical" form is that by Horton and Brashinsky, who even provide a numbered list of its "necessary ingredients":

1. The family, agonizing or already collapsed;
2. Average Soviet citizens unmasking their animalistic natures, ultimate immorality, and unmotivated cruelty...;
3. The death of all former ideals, leaving no hope for the future after the closing credits;
4. Packed everyday conditions in "communal apartments"...with the attendant "communal" psychology and forms of communication;

5. Senseless hysterics and fights arising from nowhere and dying down in the middle of a scream;
6. Usually, a few "adult" scenes. (163-64)
- 5 Tropical birds seem to appear with particular frequency, for example in *Tamara Aleksandrovna's Husband and Daughter*; *Assuage My Sorrows*, and *The Aesthetic Syndrome*. Domestic animals are especially significant in the last film, as I shall discuss in the concluding section of the article.
- 6 Drozdova uses the provocative term "the aesthetics of ugliness" (38).
- 7 For general discussions of cinematic *chernukha* see especially Horton and Brashinsky 163-68, Lawton 200-207, Dobrotvorskii, Levitin, Popov, Lukshin, and Plakhov.
- 8 The Conflict Commission, created by the Soviet Film Makers' Union in 1986 under the leadership of its new head, Elem Klimov, was given the task of reviewing the 100+ films that had been banned during the Soviet period. The Commission's work resulted in the release of all the previously shelved films by the end of the decade (Lawton 57). It was also authorized to review new Soviet films, which led to the controversy over Kira Muratova's 1990 film, *The Aesthetic Syndrome*. I shall discuss both the film and the scandal later in this article.
- 9 On this, see Evgenii Barabanov's comments in Dondurei et al. (4; 164)
- 10 Horton and Brashinsky call cinematic *chernukha* a "semigenre, or even antigenre" and "a canon" (163).
- 11 The present article, of course, will not examine most of the films listed, and moreover will focus on the feature films. Also, I exclude the many "low culture" films made in the USSR and Russia that are part of *chernukha* because, in the first place, the debates in the film world focused primarily on the relatively "high culture" texts I list and, in the second place, many of the "B movie" *chernukha* films of the period were, like Western B movies, genre films.
- 12 Goscilo (147) discusses the compensatory function of the explicit representations of the human body and its various emissions in new (and newly published) fiction during perestroika.
- 13 At the conclusion to this paper I discuss briefly the connection between the pessimistic dead-end philosophy that informed *chernukha* films, and the artistic impasse that the form itself reached in 1991.
- 14 Lukshin traces the "mythology" of *chernukha* back to the camps, specifically to the trope of the *zek* returning to society from the camps (and the related image of the criminal returning from the *zona*) and thus indelibly marking social life with prison imagery and language. Lukshin sees Vasilii Shukshin's film *Snowball Berry Red* (1973) as a key proto-text in this regard, although he also cites several Thaw films in his discussion. Lukshin makes a fascinating case, although the films he places in the *chernukha* canon (mostly what he calls "мужские фильмы," i.e. crime thrillers) strikes me as limiting. One camp image that is repeated again and again in *chernukha* film is the shaved head, often accompanied by facial deformity of some sort. The image was visible in Stagnation texts, as well, where it fulfilled various functions, including serving as a marker for alienation (as in Shukshin's film, and later, in a rather different way, in Bykov's *Scarecrow*). In perestroika culture it was, of course, a highly polysemous image, signifying various subcultures (most notably the Liubery, but also the Hare Krishnas and other groups with no other apparent links) and appearing on the screen in expected places (prison documentaries) and unexpected places (fiction films such as *Assuage My Sorrows* and *Tamara Aleksandrovna's Husband and Daughter*).
- 15 Belopolskaya examines the film in terms of its use of the image of the apartment building staircase.
- 16 Domestic icons are traditionally covered during sex in Orthodox homes.
- 17 Kiev has symbolic value for its connection to cultural ideals (Holy Rus'), although the Kiev depicted here is marked almost exclusively as Soviet (for example, there are no Ukrainian accents).
- 18 Krushchov's most recent film, *Friend of the Deceased* (*Приятель покойника*, 1997), plays more directly with *chernukha* conventions.
- 19 Lawton read the waning of *chernukha* film's popularity as part of a larger cultural process associated with late perestroika:
as the mass media acquired an objective voice, the need for information through art

became less pressing. Having satisfied their hunger for truth, the audiences found it to be too depressing, unless combined with some entertaining features. Revealing of the popular mood are the box-office hits of the past three years [i.e. 1989-91. -SG] which conquered the masses." (206-7)

In a recent article about current Russian cinema, Susan Larsen characterizes the move away from *chernukha*-type films as a shift from "the cinema of little faith" to the beginnings of a "cinema of reconciliation" that is exhibiting a subtlety, lyricism, and sense of humor that were absent from hardcore *chernukha* (198).

20 For a discussion of the genre film's continued prominence in Russian cinema today, see Condee.

21 Plakhov reads Lungin's film precisely in terms of how it represents a conscious break from the *tupik* of *chernukha* via genre conventions.

22 Dobrotvorskii offers a useful definition of film genres: "механизм обратной связи между кино и жизнью" [feedback mechanism between cinema and life"] (25).

23 The film was shelved for three months by the Conflict Commission in December 1989 for images of male frontal nudity and profanity by a female character (see the latter scene in Figure 8). The only dissenting vote was that of commission chairman Plakhov, who resigned in protest.



Figure 8. A woman cursing in controversial scene from *Aesthetic Syndrome*.

24 Immediate Post-Soviet Russian cinema seemed to respond to such sentiments, as reported by Moira Ratchford in 1992: "[a]fter a period of dark, depressing themes, comedies and light musicals are finally pecking through the screen, producing a sigh of relief in some quarters" (112).

25 On preliminary consideration, the documentary film as a genre seemingly blocks one path out of the *tupik*, namely, catharsis. Since the images in documentary film are "real," the argument goes, they do not offer a safe emotional outlet for the viewer. Thus, for example, the graphic police crime scene photos or the interview with two destitute peasant women in Stanislav Govorukhin's *This is No Way to Live* (1990) do not reproduce human tragedy in fictional form; they represent it as it exists, in the same "universe" as the spectator. On film and catharsis, see Gans.

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