

## *Chernukha* and Russian Film

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-Мальчик, ты пописал?  
-Покааааааал!!!

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

The slang term *chernukha*<sup>1</sup>—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.<sup>2</sup> It was initially applied mostly to literature, in particular to the drama and prose of Liudmila Petrushevskia,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Typical settings are dirty and/or crowded apartments (often with pets depicted in proximity to exposed food),<sup>5</sup> 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”)<sup>6</sup> had become dominant in Soviet film art.<sup>7</sup> Film critic and Conflict Commission<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 пир*, 1990), Sergei Bodrov's *Card Sharp* (*Катала*, 1990), and Rudolf Fruntov's *Fools Die on Fridays* (*Дураки умирают по пятницам*, 1991).<sup>11</sup>

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,<sup>12</sup> 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).<sup>13</sup>

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;<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> The characters' descent into complete chaos and violence occupies virtually the entire narrative, and is foreshadowed in an

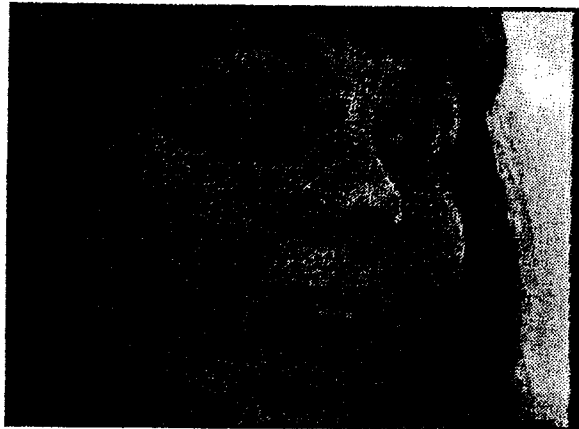


Figure 1.

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.<sup>16</sup> 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