

"I Need Some Life-Assertive Character" or How to Die in the Most Inspiring Pose: Bodies in The Stalinist Museum of *Hammer and Sickle*¹

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After all, two times two makes four is no longer life, gentlemen, but is the beginning of death.

—Fedor Dostoevskii, "Notes from Underground" (30)

The dolls are jerked by their long strings,
Smiles on their faces
And the clown plays a trumpet.
And during the performance
It seems as if

The dolls dance on their own.

—Andrei Makarevich, "Marionettes,"²
translated by Vladimir Padunov

The metaphor of Soviet Culture as a museum, where life is presented by its simulation, became one of the central tropes of both perestroika and post-perestroika films. In some of these films the museums of Soviet dreams are distanced in space and time from the everyday life of the protagonists. A character either goes on a business trip to a city in a surreal time and place, as in Karen Shakhnazarov's *City Zero* (1988), or works at a cemetery of mythology while spending the rest of her time in the comparably exciting world of Russian everyday life, as does the protagonist of Viacheslav Krishtofovich's *Adam's Rib* (1992), who is a guide at the Moscow Museum of the Revolution. Another group of mostly post-perestroika films broadened the limits of the Soviet museum, which now embraced both the diegesis—"the total world of the story action" (Bordwell 56)—and the extra-diegetic space and time of cinematic texts. Entire films now became the museum/mausoleums [m(a)us(ol)eums] of dead narratives and embalmed cultural icons. Within this group, the most-famous is Ivan Dychovichnyi's *Moscow Parade* (1992). Sergei Livnev's museum of hammers and sickles adds one more exhibit to this ironic exhibition hall.

Livnev's film about the creation of the "new Soviet man" through a sex-change operation provides a meta-commentary on Stalinist culture, and especially on one of its central tropes—the metaphor of the garden (Clark 106—113). The male lover of the protagonist (while the latter is still a woman) moans to her: "We'll make our dream come true. We'll plow the tundra, plant flowers and orchards . . . Have seven kids."³ This promise of abundance and fertility in the future becomes a recurring motif in Livnev's film. The major characteristic of this motif is that it always remains in the

protagonist's recollections about his past. Thus the film is an inversion of a promise, a "simulacrum,"⁴ i.e. "a false copy introducing difference" (Iampolskii 53).⁵

This strange inversion of the promise actually opens the film, when Stalin's aid, Aleksei,⁶ tells Amvrosii, the character responsible for the operation: "Look, Amvrosii, we're friends. Do you trust me?" Although Amvrosii shakes Aleksei's hand, he remains silent. Later he finds out that the promise to save his wife by orchestrating of the operation is a death-trap that will kill both of them. Aleksei's words mean the opposite of what they seem to mean. His handshake of life is a kiss of death. Instead of the garden that Stalinist culture created in its narratives, the implied author⁷ lays bare the inversion of the garden—the museum of a garden, in which life is imitated and eventually freezes in static replicas.⁸ The inversion of the trope of the garden into the trope of the museum is the *dominanta* of the film.⁹

The inversion of the promise of paradise into a museum motivates the *chronotope* of the film¹⁰: the new man is created in a Soviet version of Dr. Frankenstein's castle—a monastery transformed into a concentration camp.¹¹ The place where people have direct access to divine will becomes both a death camp and the place where people imitate divine creation.

The various domiciles in Moscow Evdokim, this "new Soviet man," takes also construct the space where the Stalinist myth of the transition from the world of spontaneity into the world of consciousness (Clark 15—24, 167) becomes a narrative about the transition of life into death. The first apartment that Evdokim receives in Moscow has all the basic household fixtures. Amvrosii even lists them: "Here's the stove and kitchen utensils. The bathroom is in the hallway." After the newsreel segment, in which the character both metamorphoses into a conscious Soviet man and becomes the model for a famous Soviet sculpture,¹² he gets a new temple-like apartment that is no longer furnished with creature comforts and basic household fixtures. Characters within it are almost motionless. Evdokim works at his desk in a pose that has been iconicized by official photographs of Lenin or Stalin.¹³ The whole setting increasingly evokes Lenin's "museum-office" in the Kremlin. Ceasing to be a living space, the apartment becomes a place where static figures imitate life. The living family in turn turns into a family of sculptures. Finally, at the film's end, Evdokim's apartment is literally transformed into his own m(a)us(ol)eum. Life makes the transition into its epic simulacrum.

Time in the narrative also imitates life. It is structured around the life of the protagonist (i.e., it seems to be biographical time) but the major characteristic of this life is that it exists in a fantastic time that is marked neither

by death nor life: Evdokim lives after the death of Evdokiia, whose supposedly entombed remains he discovers when he attends the funeral of one of his creators—Amvrosii. At the same time, the protagonist uses her body for his existence. Evdokim's existence in this fantastic time is made painful by his body's recollections of his life as a woman, especially during sexual intercourse.

The temptations of the body become unbearable when Evdokim runs into Vera at the doctor's office. Evdokim imagines that he will be able to return to his other life if he lives with Vera, the only character who has survived the transplantation from his previous life into fantastic time. The return, however, proves to be impossible, not only because the NKVD kills Vera. Apart from her death, there is a much more powerful force that does not allow Evdokim to escape the fantastic time—the power of discourse that promises paradise. During the sex act with Vera, he gasps out the words of "others"—the promises of paradise articulated both by his lover from his former female life and by Stalinist discourse: "We'll make our dream come true. We'll plow the tundra, plant flowers and orchards. Have seven kids." In despair Evdokim tells Vera—"You had another life, and I had another life"—implying that he is entrapped in this fantastic time, where life has turned into a fairy tale about life.

Similar to the chronotope of *Hammer and Sickle*—the museum in the twilight zone between life and death—the film's structure redefines the narrative of the positive hero who acquires new consciousness into a story of the gradual transformation of living bodies into their static imitations. This transition is performed four times in the film: first, the discourse of power transmogrifies the bodies of Evdokim's creators, Amvrosii and Maria, by killing them; second, the bodies of Evdokim and Elizaveta are transformed by using them as models for Mukhina's sculpture; third, the body of Vera is transformed into a corpse; and fourth, the body of Evdokim is transformed again by creating out of it a living death displayed in its own mausoleum.

Each of the four segments begins as an example of direct, unmediated, authorial discourse, aimed exclusively at its referential object, or as the objectified discourse of the characters. As it turns out, both of these forms of discourse echo someone else's words inside the cinematic text. In the first part, charting the operation, Amvrosii realizes that the whole project he undertook has nothing to do with his wish to save his wife, but is actually Aleksei's project to kill both him and his wife. In the newsreels the filmmaker turns out to be the creator of the presumably omnipotent voice-over. In the section about Vera and Evdokim, Stalin interferes to show who is the actual master of the narrative. And in the last segment of the film, each character echoes someone else: Aleksei echoes Stalin, German writers echo

Aleksei, Dolores echoes Aleksei, and Elizaveta echoes both the writers and Aleksei. Nobody's discourse is authentic; instead, each is a refraction of the master-voice that hovers over its bodies-subjects.

The protagonist is this master-voice's guinea-pig, on whom it tests the power of its discourse. Everything that Evdokim does, sees, or says belongs to the makers of the power discourse, whether they be film-maker, sculptress, Aleksei, or the major scientist and artist, comrade Stalin. This is the major subversive device that the implied author uses to expose the artifice of the Soviet master-voice. It lays bare the site of discourse production and shows that the protagonist, with whom the spectator usually identifies as the central consciousness of the film, is dispossessed within the narrative of any discursive power.¹⁴ The same dispossession comes to everyone—Vera, Amvrosii, Maria—who tries to deceive this voice of power. After focusing on the site of the master-voice's production, the narrative shifts into the final part, in which the kinetic energy of the human body reaches point zero in the pose that is most inspiring for Stalinist discourse.

The creators of Evdokim, for example, die after the successful completion of the operation. However, before joining the museum of life they pass through the narrative pattern described above. The film begins with a discussion of the operation, the goal of which, as Aleksei tells Amvrosii, is to create a new man out of a woman. In effect, this operation becomes the "Great Leap Forward," enacting the ritual that underlies all Soviet novels and films—the passage from the stage of individual spontaneity into collective consciousness. The leap ensures the transition from the elemental "natural" feminine condition into what Cixous and Clément call the masculine realm of History, Art, Mind, and Action (64).

The central signifier of this segment is Evdokiia's body, which undergoes multiple inversions. First, it goes through a forced transformation into a male form. The artificial womb into which she (now he) is placed after the operation evokes both a rocket and a phallus in an erect position. These inversions serve as foreshadowing devices anticipating the inversion of the ultimate goal of the operation: the birth of a new Soviet man turns out to be a death trap for his creators.

Amvrosii overhears the whisper of power discourse—Aleksei dictates to his secretary the article about the conspiracy of doctors who decided to confuse the clear-cut gender division of Soviet society—and understands the larger meaning of what he (Amvrosii) has been doing and saying. This unveiling of Amvrosii's discursive dispossession leaves him with two choices: either to commit suicide or to let himself be butchered by the silent agents of the NKVD. In the latter case he would move into that niche of the Stalinist museum devoted to anti-socialist demons and mad scientists; in the

former—he turns into an obituary in *Pravda* (*Truth*), with a gravestone at the cemetery of revolutionary martyrs and heroes. The creation of a new man is accompanied by three corpses: the two key figures responsible for the operation—Amvrosii and his wife Maria—and Evdokiia Kuznetsova. For the first time, bodies in the narrative reach the zero point of their kinetic energy and are installed into the museum of Stalinist sculpture in one of its gardens—the cemetery.

This segment of creation is followed by two newsreels in which the master-plot of the Soviet novel is reenacted in its most explicit form.¹⁵ In the first newsreel, the positive hero acquires a new consciousness in the course of constructing the Moscow metro. His major obstacle is, unsurprisingly, the underground waters, a symbol of elemental nature and “femininity,” as opposed to civilization. He and his friends tame the fluids and overfulfill the plan, finishing the construction of “the most beautiful metro in the world” two days ahead of schedule. In the second newsreel, Evdokim and Elizaveta, the bride Stalin has chosen for him, create a new family with a child conceived outside of Elizaveta’s uterus. This procreation is made possible by the death and destruction of the Spanish Civil War, from the bloody foam of which Dolores comes to her new parents.

Both newsreels are interrupted to show the site of their production. In the first, the film-maker and the sculptress stop to discuss Evdokim’s and Elizaveta’s lives, the poses of their body. The epic dimension of the newsreel narratives is deconstructed by the focus on their artificiality. In the second newsreel, the authenticity and authority of the discourse is again challenged by the interpolating shots of the sculptress and the film-maker, who manipulate the supposedly authentic images in order to create both the story about the new Soviet people and their new steel bodies. The visual narrative stops, shifts back and forth, or freezes according to the artists’ whims.

The display of the production site is followed by images of static bodies. In the first newsreel, the film-maker freezes the frame with Elizaveta. Then both characters freeze on the stage in a long kiss. Finally, the filmmaker stops the reel with Evdokim and Elizaveta in the frozen frame and says: “How about the title ‘Transforming Life into a Fairy Tale’?” The Stalinist garden/museum has received another sculpture to display “Stakhanovites in Love.”¹⁶

The second newsreel focuses on the construction of the sculpture *Worker and Collective Farm Woman*. The new Soviet family is solidified by the double-figured sculpture. Evdokim and Elizaveta acquire a new common body—they are transformed from flesh-and-blood human beings into a larger-than-life statue made of stainless steel.¹⁷ Within the second newsreel this evolution is depicted as the gradual immobilization of Evdokim’s and

Elizaveta's bodies in the process of their aesthetization. In the newsreel clip, Elizaveta invites Evdokim to dance and, after Stalin's approval, he starts to waltz with her. The motion of the bodies becomes patterned, hence less spontaneous. As Sally Peters notes about dancers: "[They] approximate living pieces of sculpture" (151). The sculptress Mukhina, who watches this newsreel on the moviola, asks its director to freeze the frame when she finally finds the inspiring shot. The motion picture turns into a still. The following segment shows the series of transformations distancing life from its various imitations: the still becomes a sculpture, and the sculpture in turn becomes a gigantic epic figure, as workers assemble the 24-meter stainless steel replica of the prototype created by Mukhina.

The stasis of the gigantic sculpture symbolically alludes to the movement forward and upward toward the ultimate goal of communist utopia. The living, moving bodies of Evdokim and Elizaveta have been replaced by artistic representations, metaphorically anticipating the Great Future. The war on living human bodies is on the way to ultimate success. In the last long shot of the newsreel, the spectator simultaneously sees two sculptures of two families—the family with its new child that has been saved from the horrors of war¹⁸ and Mukhina's statue. The bodies of the characters exist hereafter both in the present of the narrative and in a fantastic time—in the museum of Communist Eden, which is inhabited by colossi made of stainless steel and stone.

The narrative segment about Evdokim's love for Vera tests the power of Stalinist discourse over their bodies. Evdokim, who meets Vera again by chance, decides to change his existence and create his own paradise for two, an alternative to the paradise of sculptures and museums. This alternative paradise motif is constructed around the dream images of the field of daisies in Evdokim's mind and a painting in Vera's apartment of a mountain wilderness. It represents one more imaginary Garden of Eden to which, Evdokim promises Vera, they will go the next morning.

The scene of their love-making becomes the real trial for the discourse of power. When Evdokim has sex with Vera, he is twice entrapped in Stalinist discourse: first, his penis is literally given to him by the power against which he rebels and, second, his discourse, i.e., his phallus, reiterates his former husband's words simply by repeating Stalin's slogans of the time: "We'll plow the tundra. Plant flowers and orchards." This discourse deprives Evdokim of the paradise he dreams about, and forcibly returns him to the world of the museum: Vera is shot. When he continues to resist, he is taken to Stalin, where he finally sees his ultimate creator—"the engineer of

human souls" who screwed him up to screw him together both as a social and biological entity: his words, his appearance, the story of his life.

In Stalin's office, Evdokim's body decelerates again to the point of stasis. The first sculptural composition into which his body is incorporated may be called "The Guard of the Discourse with his Dog,"¹⁹ and in the second it becomes a mummy for a mausoleum. The border-guard or sentinel with a guard dog is one of the fundamental visual and verbal signifiers of the Soviet lexicon of power. In the film, the image of "man's best friend" together with a guard appears three times. First, an NKVD guard with a German shepherd is seen in the background when Aleksei presents Evdokim with a car. Second, when the child Dolores²⁰ plays a game with Evdokim, enacting a scenario based on the Stalinist spy-film, she plays the border guard and Evdokim plays his dog, Dzhul'bars. Dolores reproaches Evdokim for not sounding like a real, faithful dog: "Make it sound real."²¹

The third time the image of a guard with his dog appears in the film is in Stalin's office. After Stalin explains to Evdokim who has created him, both men are petrified into a living sculpture: Stalin as the guard of the discourse and Evdokim on all fours as his speechless friend, who understands everything but cannot speak.²² When Evdokim loses control after this shot and attacks Stalin, Evdokim's "rabies" are cured with a bullet, and he joins the museum of Stalinist sculptures now as the living dead—the immobile and speechless display in his own museum (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Living Dead. *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1995): 53.

The transition to the last narrative part—Evdokim's m(a)us(ol)eum—is the most striking ironic inversion of the Stalinist promise of a garden. The protagonist's attempt to kill Stalin is reiterated in the painting hanging in the museum that depicts Evdokim's attempt to protect the Great Leader by covering him with his own body. In this image, the production site of the discourse is co-present with the body it controls. Aleksei works as a guide at the museum, while Elizaveta writes books that her husband supposedly transmits to her through impulses of his paralyzed hand. In this final museum all elements of the narrative pattern coexist simultaneously: the production site of discourse and its object of control—Evdokim's body is both living and static.

This is the body that the power discourse was seeking throughout the film. Unlike Evdokim's mobile body, it cannot move or escape control. The imitation of life and life itself collapse into the living dead displayed in the museum. Aleksei calls this condition "immortality." The only escape from the omnipotence of this discourse is the moment when the discourse itself stutters in one of its numerous inversions and kills Evdokim. Evdokim's daughter, dressed as a boy, plays with a pistol and shoots her father. The smile on the face of the corpse signals relief at the release from the power of the museum: the body attains death, the only possible paradise according to the film.²³

On the level of *mise-en-scène*, the narrative structure of the film—in its inversion of the Stalinist garden into a museum—relies on the depiction of human bodies as its central signifiers. They are the major objects of discursive aggression. When bodies become immobilized by Stalinist narratives, they join the museum as displays. The ways in which bodies are immobilized vary. They may be killed, as in the introductory story of genesis or in the segment devoted to the love of Vera and Evdokim. Another way to achieve stasis is through the body's aestheticization. Every newsreel is interrupted by stills. Indeed, the statue of the *Worker and the Collective Farm Woman* is created on the basis of a still from a newsreel. Finally, as suggested earlier, the most harmonious form of discursive control over the body in the film is its metamorphosis into a living corpse that cannot move or speak, does not decompose, and can even be utilized as a dildo. If one looks for a happy ending in *Hammer and Sickle*, Elizaveta's orgasm on top of Evdokim's paralyzed body provides an ideal closure.

Apart from the two ultimate incarnations of Soviet Power in the film—Stalin and Aleksei—the monumental family of Evdokim and Elizaveta is surrounded mostly by female characters: the film-maker, the sculptress, Maria (who oversees the operation), and Vera (Evdokim's nurse and lover). With the exception of Vera, all these characters represent, in a weaker form,