

Metaphorical Functions of the Silent Film Body in Sergei Ovcharov's *Barabaniada*

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Sergei Ovcharov's film *Barabaniada* (1993) foregrounds the body of its unnamed protagonist in ways that have signifying links both to the historical narrative setting—the newly dissolved Soviet Union—and to the generic tradition of which the work is a rare contemporary example: silent film. As a resurrection of the wordless cinematic form, Ovcharov's film is marked by the necessary primacy of the body, which is the predominant narrative agent and focus throughout. The image of the central character's body fulfills two narrative functions: communicating and symbolizing the work's epic qualities; and explicating the protagonist's own personal story in a manner more characteristic of the narrative patterns of a genre Bakhtin directly contrasts with the epic: the novel. The co-presence of epic and novelistic elements in the film is related to its simultaneous attention to historical realia and to ahistorical, even archetypical, categories. Again, both the presence and the transcendence of history are depicted via the screen body.

Barabaniada (“A Drum Epic” or “The Drumiad” [same suffix as in *The Iliad*]) traces the adventures of a poor percussionist in post-Soviet Russia who leaves his dreary life as the lowliest member of a funeral orchestra after a magical bass drum marked “Stradivarius” mysteriously appears in his Raskolnikovian room. He finds himself involuntarily beating the drum, first with his finger, then his forearm, and eventually with a mallet that becomes an extension of his arm. The habit soon gets him chased out of his apartment building by irate neighbors (in a visual citation of Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops and Buster Keaton chase scenes). He then sets off on foot with his drum across the former USSR. The remainder of the film consists of episodic, mostly comedic adventures as he uses his drum to survive the daily challenges of post-Soviet life.

At times the camera's unwavering focus on the hero lends the film a lyrical feel reminiscent of Chaplin (more on this below), while the sheer sweep of the film's myriad settings and the palpable influence of the culture at large on the image of the hero's body, among

other features, often give the work a larger scope. Both of these readings may be supported by examining the movements, gestures, expressions, transformations, and migrations of the central figure of the drummer. In other words, his body tells two stories: that of the protagonist himself and that of the larger culture in which he moves.

The film's double perspective is in part a result of the fact that its creative history straddled two distinct sociopolitical periods. Ovcharov, who also wrote the film, conceived *Barabaniada* for years in terms of its universal (ahistorical) symbolism—the image of a man with a drum as a leitmotif across all cultures. Moreover, he saw it as a recurring, though usually fleeting and comic, cinematic image (Ovcharov 48). Once he was finally able to make the film, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting, multifarious social crises in Russia, the director found a more immediate—and not superficially comedic—metaphorical role for the image of the man with a drum (Ovcharov 50).

Before looking specifically at the narrative(s) of the film I want to discuss briefly the issue of the body as a legible cultural form, as a sign. A fair amount has been written about Delsarte's histrionic code for theater actors, which prescribes exact gestures with allegedly unambiguous emotional analogs in the perception of the spectator, and about the application of this code to silent film acting in the US (Naremore 34-67) and in Russia (Yampolsky, "Mask Face and Machine Face"). Delsarte himself, according to Naremore, used the term "semiotic function of gesture," and it is this sort of linguistic use of the body that appears occasionally in *Barabaniada*. The lexical fund from which the protagonist's gestures and physical attributes are drawn, however, is not a histrionic guide, but the Russo-Soviet lexicon of non-verbal communication (for example, when he sits thoughtfully on his suitcase for a moment before embarking on his journey), the history of filmic uses of the body as a sign, and even pre-cinematic character types identified by their behaviors, patterns of physical existence, and expressed emotions.

The film's title marks it, however ironically, as an epic, a genre Bakhtin describes as

characterized by three constitutive features: (1) a national epic past [...] serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance

separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives. (13)

Signs of all three of Bakhtin's criteria are to be found in *Barabaniada*. The "national epic past" of the Soviet Union is evident in the images of stereotypical border guards the drummer encounters every time he crosses into a different republic. Their exaggerated costumes and varied ethnicities—especially the Eastern nomadic guards at the border of a presumably central Asian republic—ironically manifest the myth of the USSR as a harmonious, multi-national state. That the drummer is treated exactly the same at each border (at each checkpoint several of his belongings are confiscated, resulting in a progressive, symbolic dismemberment) indicates a satirical view of the all-encompassing and (here) comically insidious influence of the imperial state on individual peoples.

The "national tradition" that informs the film is primarily literary; the drummer is an archetypal "little man," a figure present in Russian literature since at least the early nineteenth century. This figure serves as a locus illustrating the effects of the larger society on the individual, a topic that has as much to say about the former as it does about the latter. In *Barabaniada* the relationship between society and the individual is literalized bodily. In a cafeteria scene, for example, in which the drummer disguises his drum (and thus part of his body) as a table, at one point the number of plates piled on the table/drum/drummer's body by other diners becomes overwhelming, and the drummer sinks towards the floor under the weight (Fig. 1).

Although the film is strewn with clear markers of the former



Figure 1.

USSR—most notably in the costumes and behavior of supporting characters, almost all of whom are recognizable cultural types—the frequent anachronisms further contribute to its (however ironic) claim to epic status and produce the "epic distance" to which Bakhtin refers. In one

scene, for instance, the hero enters an empty town and is then almost trampled by a mob of people dressed in monastic garb who are inexplicably marching and intermittently opening their robes, revealing their naked bodies underneath. This bit of absurdity momentarily pulls the narrative from its contemporary moorings. True to the work's eclecticism, the mob is eventually attacked by Russian riot police, in a scene that mirrors events in real-life Moscow during the early 1990s.

Several elements of the film even broaden its scope to an international scale, especially the pre-credit scenes—apparently documentary and ethnographic footage—of drums and drumming from a variety of cultures, including Eastern and primitive societies. Thus the drum itself (which in the film becomes an extension of the protagonist's body) is the link that connects the diegetic universe to a larger, ahistorical tradition.

The film's soundtrack, which includes Mahler's First Symphony and Mozart's Fortieth, also transcends the borders of the former Soviet Union both spatially and temporally. One Russian critic views Ovcharov's use of such "big C" cultural products in conjunction with scenes of low culture as ironic: "A spark ignites from the combination of this mocking music with humorous everyday sketches" (Moskvina 78). The dissonance between visual and musical discourses in the film produces a parodic twist on Bakhtin's "epic distance"; the gap is not so much between the film and the cultural context of the film viewer but a comic tension within the work itself. Nevertheless the effect is affectionately comic rather than sharply satirical, and the hero's body manages to retain much of the grace and dignity implied by the score, despite its possible function as a "mocking" commentary on the visual narrative.

In the sparsely populated genre of latter-day silent film, as in contemporary black-and-white cinema, even unmistakably modern bodies acquire an antiquated or timeless quality. This conflict between diegetic and generic milieux in *Barabaniada* gives the figure of the poor drummer a necessarily visual, physical character—"dual citizenship" as both a post-Soviet culturo-historical subject and a walking homage to past cinematic characters, both Russian and Western. His allusive tendrils stretch back, of course, to film bodies of the pre-sound era, but also further, to pre-cinematic characters from drama and literature.

Before looking at purely cinematic bodies and their relationship to Ovcharov's film, it is worth briefly examining the work in a

different context—that of the picaresque, a genre which is relevant to the body in several ways. The obligatory geographical mobility of the picaro lends itself—especially in a cinematic picaresque narrative—to an emphasis on the body in motion. Travel—migration of the body—serves in *Barabaniada* as a major narrative impetus, and is responsible for the film’s “panoramic” view of the former Soviet Union. As he walks across the CIS the drummer’s body, which by virtue of his “silence” is the sole expressive medium for the character’s consciousness, becomes a cultural cursor, locating the spectator’s attention at various points on the cultural landscape. The nearly uninterrupted focus on the figure of the protagonist—another marker of the picaresque—creates the cursor effect.

At one point the drummer goes abroad to visit a Westerner he befriended during his travels. The camera does not follow him out of the country; we see the plane take off and then immediately land as he returns. His transversal of the national border is outside the film’s scope (and probably its budget). Significantly, upon returning, the drummer is robbed of the evidence of his journey abroad—Western clothing and other goods—and thus reshaped into the Russo-Soviet form he had before his European holiday. The theft of the drummer’s foreign accoutrements once again illustrates the effect of a culture on the shape of the body. This episode is also classically picaresque in that the protagonist’s movements are limited to, and thus closely tied to, the culturescape of a particular country.

The literary picaro’s mutations, usually necessitated by the unstable cultural context in which he moves, are often bodily. In “Povest’ o Frole Skobeeve” [The Tale of Frol Skobeev, early 18th c.] according to Mary Krawiec and others the earliest extant Russian example of picaresque elements in a literary work, the titular protagonist twice disguises himself by donning costumes that allow him to move vertically, up the social ladder. The disguises themselves (one a girl’s dress, the other a coachman’s uniform) represent, respectively, a horizontal transgression of the gender boundary and a vertical transgression of class boundaries. The *biological* body is thus molded to facilitate movement in the *cultural* realm. In *Barabaniada* the hero’s trek takes him across several literal boundaries—republic borders, which Soviet citizens needed permission to cross—and his poverty necessitates the kind of wily adaptability that is the bread and butter of the picaro. As a cinematic echo of that literary archetype, the hero of *Barabaniada* is even more reliant on his body as an agent of self-expression and self-

preservation.

Anthony Vanchu, writing about perestroika-era Soviet prose and drama, dubs a similar phenomenon in contemporary Russian culture a “crisis of category.” Such crises are experienced by individual subjects in time of cultural uncertainty and shifting values. During such periods, says Vanchu, “[s]urvival might mean being able to assume, at least provisionally, an acceptable identity” (116). An extended episode of such body-masking occurs in the film when the drummer, destitute, starving, and left with only his drum, wanders into a typical urban cafeteria. Rather than scavenge for leftover food on the plates left behind by patrons, the drummer puts a tablecloth over the drum, which hovers horizontally in front of him, as if an extension of his body and, as such, subject to his will. Thus disguised as a paying customer standing at



Figure 2.

arrival of the drum, in which the members of the funeral band use the drummer’s worn, non-magical bass drum as a table as they sit in the snow and drink vodka (Fig. 2). The drummer in this early scene is seated farther away from the drum than the other musicians. If the drum is to be seen as a humanizing influence on the hero, then at this early stage in the narrative he is incomplete, something less than human, a preemptive amputee.

The transformation of the protagonist from a pale, immobile figure into a picaresque wanderer with new-found bodily appetites (his apartment in the early scenes is apparently without even a kitchen) is the essence of the second, more personal narrative thread. Despite the film’s title, and the above-mentioned elements of epic discourse, it is

customer standing at one of the communal tables, he both conceals his bodily difference—as represented by the ubiquitous drum/appendage—and enables himself nonchalantly to eat from plates left by other customers. This scene contrasts with an earlier one, before the

on a “novelistic” level that the film’s reliance on the body as narrative agent, and its focus on issues of the body, is most pronounced.

Our first glimpse of the drummer is during a funeral at which the band is playing. We do not hear the dirge they are performing; the scene is accompanied by Mahler’s First Symphony. Nor do we hear the sound of the hero’s slow, mechanical drumbeating. He stands perfectly rigid, staring ahead blankly, holding his mallet limply at his side between beats. He strikes the instrument with jerky motions, the stiff, motionless posture of his body mirrored aurally by the lifelessness of the mute drum. His drumming style in this early scene is in contrast to the introductory sequence, with its wild images of tribal drumming from around the world. It can also be contrasted to a later scene in which the drummer, with his new companion/appendage, is playing for spare change in an underground crosswalk. He puts Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” on his record player and drums along in time. Although the tempo is just as slow as in the dirge scene, his movements in the latter episode are fluid, dynamic, and passionate; he has become a living person. The fact that the spectator can now hear not only the same piece that is playing in the narrative world of the protagonist, but also the sound of the drum, indicates the emergence of the formerly stunted hero into the realm of the fully human. While he plays, his face shows a kind of ecstasy, one of many indications that the transformation he has experienced is partly sexual (Fig. 3).



Figure 3.

The relative expressiveness of his face in the latter scene, compared with his dull, stony stare in the earlier one, is a contrast reminiscent of what Mikhail Yampolsky calls “mask face and machine face”:

The unexpressive face is a mask that has not yet become a face in the true sense of the word because the generic characteristic of the face as such is precisely its ability to be expressive. In order to materi-

alize, the expression face must first go through the mask face. ("Mask Face" 65)

In *Barabaniada*, the hero's "materialization" may also be viewed as a transition from a Keatonesque "stone face" to the emotional, innocently expressive face of Chaplin. Indeed, the early scene in which the drummer is chased from his apartment building after waking his neighbors, filmed in long shots and fast motion, is a clear homage to Keaton and his trademark chase scenes. Later, after the magical drum has become an inseparable part of the drummer, the film comes to rely almost exclusively on a Chaplinesque relationship between camera and actor, with medium shots and close-ups. Chaplin's cane, like the drum, seemed an extension of his body. Other parallels between the drummer and the Little Tramp are their status as impoverished itinerants, their hats (the drummer wears a beret), and their meek dispositions. Finally, both characters find a certain dignity in their accoutrements. The Little Tramp's cane and bowler hat lend him a certain aristocratic air (Naremore 16). In regard to the drummer, the newfound dignity that comes with the drum is manifested in the extreme upright posture with which he must walk while supporting the heavy instrument strapped to his torso. This is one way in which the cumbersome drum, with the potential to make any body it is attached to troublesome (the essential quality of many comedic bodies), becomes for the drummer a source of previously unknown self-worth and power. In this sense the drum can be seen as an acquired phallus.

Such a Freudian analysis has been applied to a work of Russian literature to which *Barabaniada* pays obvious homage: Gogol's "Shinel" [The Overcoat]. Once Akakii Akakievich has acquired the eponymous garment, it becomes a metaphor for his newly emergent personality, and takes on a sexual significance, as well, awakening in him previously unimagined bodily urges. In *Out from Gogol's Overcoat*, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere reads the acquisition of the coat as both phallicization and "maternalization" of Akakii. In Ovcharov's film, too, both elements are present in the image of the drum and the drummer's interactions with it.

One of the first things the drummer does upon the arrival of the drum is open the top and stick his finger into it. The penetration ends abruptly when he is pricked/bitten by the instrument. The camera then lingers on the bleeding finger, which evokes the hero's newfound phallus, bloodied in a symbolic deflowering. The scarlet wound is also a humanizing contrast to the drab milieu of dirt and snow that frames

the (equally drab and pale) protagonist before his first encounter with the drum.

Once the drum becomes an extension of the hero's body it serves as a phallic image several times, most notably in the cafeteria scene. At one point a young woman standing at the table seductively eats a frankfurter, the sight of which causes the drum/table/phallus to stand erect. The low camera angle during the scene causes the rising drum to obscure the drummer entirely, underscoring the fact that his entire sexuality, and humanity, resides in the drum.

The mallet, too, which quickly becomes an extension of the drummer's body, serves a phallic function. In one scene the drummer is shot at by a group of bandits as he walks through a forest. After unsuccessfully trying to take cover behind his maternal drum, he brandishes the mallet threateningly, sending his attackers running. Later he takes the mallet to bed with him when seduced by a woman.

Rancour-Laferriere characterizes Akakii's pre-overcoated state as "zero-phallus," that is, not de- but pre-phallicized, unaware of the lack. The drummer's zombie-like existence before acquisition of the magical drum may also be dubbed "zero-phallus." With the instrument, he acquires awareness of his libido. This awakened sexual appetite is associated directly with his literal appetite in a scene in which a woman uses a cake attached to a string to lure the starving drummer into her apartment, where a feast—and seduction—await. Again, as in the cafeteria scene, the drummer binges and the film speed increases. The extreme contrast between the deprivation the hero experiences before the appearance of the drum and the bounty and frenetic gorging that characterize his food experiences after he acquires the drum exemplifies the radical change effected by the instrument, a change visible almost entirely in the hero's bodily shape and function. In Gogol's story, too, the acquisition of the new phallus emboldens Akakii Akakievich to such a point that he goes to a party, drinks champagne, and notices women for the first time.

The maternalizing influence of the drum is made explicit in a scene in which the drummer, freezing, crawls inside the instrument to keep warm, a symbolic return to the womb that is symbolized in "Shinel" by Akakii's wearing of the coat. The protagonist/mother relationship in both works is strongly Oedipal; the drummer's sexual relationship with the drum is suggested in the manner in which he applies his mallet to it, and Akakii's "entry" into the coat, inherently sexual, is further sexualized by Gogol's emphasis on the fur collar.

The climax of both narratives involves the loss of the phallus/mother, an event that, according to Rancour-Laferriere, thrusts Akakii into a “minus-phallus” state and ultimately results in his death. In *Barabaniada*, however, it is the drummer himself who destroys the drum in a fit of rage at the end of the film. The main narrative ends at this point, leaving open the question of whether the de-phallicization/de-mothering will destroy the hero or force him into true self-reliance without the artificial appendage. The film ends with a black-and-white sequence of Neanderthals killing a mammoth and making an enormous drum/shelter from the hide, again emphasizing the universal nature of the drum as a pre-verbal, unifying force. Despite the phallic associations, the drum is—on a different narrative level—also a metaphor for the heart. Ovcharov himself writes: “The film was for me... an attempt to restart my heart, which in recent years, from this whole awful life of ours, had stopped” (46). This is the likely source of the film’s sentimental, “quiet” elements, which serve not only to symbolize the survival, despite everything, of the “little man,” but also to re-define the cinematic function of the man-with-a-drum, traditionally relegated to slapstick. Here again, Ovcharov’s film produces yet another dual effect that is achieved primarily via the agency of the silent film body.

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