

# The Chronotope of the Maternity Home

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My paper focuses on the specific features that define the microcosm of the maternity home as represented in Larisa Sadilova's film *S dnem rozhdeniia!* [*Happy Birthday!*, 1998]. Works of contemporary Russian women's fiction will provide a contextual background for my argument. Although the chronotope of the maternity home emerges from the hospital chronotope, the two must be distinguished, "for by definition the assumptions, expectations, and norms of the two diverge" (Goscilo 123). The main difference can be defined in terms of the concept of the body. In the hospital the body is supposed to be "repaired," delivered from disease, while in the maternity home, it is "emptied," relieved of a second form, and thus doubled. The former body-hostage is directed toward the future (after surgery), while the post-delivery body is, in a sense, returned to its past.

While the representation of the maternity home in Sadilova's film is limited to the actual delivery ward, the maternity homes described in literature feature wards for women who will have or have had abortions, for those who have given birth, and for those who are hospitalized before the delivery as a precautionary measure against miscarriage. This compartmentalization highlights the carnivalesque nature of the setting, which brings together diametrically opposed experiences and meanings: reproduction and its rejection, the creation of life and its elimination.

In contemporary Russian women's fiction, the theme of death, while retaining its existential seriousness, is included in the narrative as an intrinsic moment of life itself: "Here death does not interfere with the interrupted series comprising the struggling human life; rather, it appears as merely one aspect of this life; it does not violate the logic of this life, and is made out of the same stuff as life itself" (Bakhtin, "Forms" 195). In Elena Makarova's novella "Na so-khraneniі" [To Be Brought to Term; 1976], the life/death (womb/tomb) analogy within the maternity home is strengthened by the location of a morgue directly below the windows of the maternity home, as well as by the fact that the hospital stands on the former site of a cemetery. ("Дьявольское место"<sup>1</sup>—concludes one of the patients

[Makarova 110]). In Marina Palei's novella "Otdelenie propashchikh" [Losers' Division; 1980], death spreads just beyond the boundaries of the maternity ward: "За окном отделения, во всю ширь бесприютного берега *распята мертвая земля*" (163; emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> Death surrounds the hospital and gradually devours it. Infection caused by unhygienic conditions (quite common in Soviet maternity homes) provides the perfect setting for the verbal "feast in the time of plague" in Iuliia Voznesenskaia's novel *Zhenskii dekameron* [Women's Decameron; 1987]. The unsanitary environment influences the decision temporarily to close the maternity home in Liudmila Petrushevskaia's story "Bednoe serdtse Pani" [Poor Pania's Heart; 1988]. The shortage of such essential medicines as penicillin and the doctor's indifference to this fact causes the death of one of the characters in "Otdelenie propashchikh." This event receives no emphasis in the text, as if it were a common occurrence for the gynecological ward. The mistake of a doctor's assistant leads to a baby's death in Natal'ia Sukhanova's "Delos" (1988).

While these literary texts, by juxtaposing life and death within the same locale, evoke the chronotope of the "carnival square," the film *S dnem rozhdeniia!* underscores the maternity home's carnivalesque nature by the inclusion of the holy-fool (*durochka*) figure of Liuda in its narrative. Her appearance introduces a fascinating inversion: *roddom/durdom* (delivery home/insane asylum). Liuda's permanent residence is the psychiatric hospital, but she perpetually finds herself in the maternity ward. She constantly moves between these two places, conceiving in one and delivering in the other. The transition has only one purpose—to leave one home and return to the other. Consistent with the cultural meaning of *iurodstvo*, Liuda's role in the film is to strip life's facade and to expose, beneath it, life's naked essentials. We see her publicizing traditionally tabooed sexual intimacies when she brags to the nurse about the size of her husband's penis. Liuda's obscene language seamlessly merges with the language of heartfelt confession, as she praises the penis's ability to erase any bitterness and malice from the female body/soul. A silent ethical cursor, Liuda comes face to face with life's ugliness (i.e., when she witnesses the male doctor's<sup>3</sup> lewd advances) and, from it, tries to extract the key to happiness.

She establishes a connection with the chronotope of the public square (see the dancing scene in Fig. 1). Like Rabelaisian laughter, which overthrows death (Bakhtin, "Forms" 193-97), Liuda's "blessed innocence" displaces death in the maternity home; death is completely



Figure 1

banished from Sadilova's film. The possibility of abortion is mentioned only once, and immediately rejected with indignation by the fourteen-year-old mother. Not accidentally, Liuda's mother, despite her deplorable material situation, continues to take care of her grandchildren and refuses to send them to an orphanage. A fleeting mention of an abandoned child is almost drowned out by the noise coming from the boiler room downstairs, for such information does not belong in the "sacred" space where life is being born. Significantly, Liuda is allowed to spend time in the garden surrounding the maternity home, a symbolic Garden of Eden to which the other patients have no access.

Unlike in many literary texts, in Sadilova's film the maternity home is a distinctly "healthy" architectural structure, resembling the architectonics of a life-giving woman's body. Liuda occupies the attic. Of all the home's inmates, she is the closest to God. Women about to deliver and the new mothers inhabit the building's main floor. On the floor below, a small window offers the outside world limited access to the maternity home: the hands of happy fathers try to push through it flowers and packages for their wives (Fig. 2). The basement ensures the proper functioning of the hospital; the eternal cycle of cleaning and recycling takes place there—the dispensing of linen, as well as the dispensing of information. The maternity home in the film would be a perfectly self-contained organism, were it not for the chain of exchange that passes through it. At the center of the chain is the newborn baby: fathers pay the hospital staff with champagne, the bottles are exchanged for money at a local store, and the money is divided among the personnel to enable them to stay at their poorly paying jobs; at the store, the champagne bottles will be sold to the next group of happy fathers, and the cycle of exchange will begin anew—following and drawing on the cycle of life.



Figure 2

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follows a man walking through the enfilade of empty rooms in the maternity home. The man's route "draws" a circular line inside the building, as if spatially framing the flashback to follow: one day in the life of the old maternity home (which now has been moved into the new building).

The provincial maternity home in the small town of Kashira is much more than a stage for the film's action; it becomes its protagonist and the main object of the camera's close investigation. The use of professional and non-professional actors, documentary and fictional footage, and hand-held camera techniques creates a sense of *cinéma vérité*. Kirill Razlogov wittily notes, "это игровое кино вышло из документальной шинели" (*Kritiki o fil'me* 41).<sup>4</sup> The film's opening shot shows the building from above (Fig. 3), after which the camera gradually enters the maternity house, explores it, and soon begins to "fill" its empty rooms with the characters who once inhabited them. The camera's storytelling functions substantially add to the authenticity of the filmmakers' documentary exploration. Such a technique subverts the conventions of Soviet and Russian cinema, which has assiduously avoided the maternity home as a cultural topos.



Figure 3

Socio-political and cultural reasons account for the elimination of this particular space from public view and its suppression in collective, as well as individual, memory. Soviet men's eternal inclination to avoid "women's affairs" and Soviet women's continual mistrust of the opposite sex as potential supporters contributed to the perception of the maternity home as a restricted zone deprived of any internal life. Its cultural functioning was thus reduced to that of a signifier robbed of its signified. Male-dominant society's hypocritical desire to keep the "mystery of labor" untouchable dovetailed with women's longing to forget the painful and humiliating experience of their stay in maternity hospitals. For the first time, the 1990 issue of *Zbenschchiny v SSSR* [Women in the USSR] addressed the deplorable conditions inside maternity homes, on which no information existed within the country, and which remained a closed sphere for the foreign press.<sup>5</sup> Long before the deficiencies of maternity homes were officially documented, they were reflected in literary texts. These texts strove to articulate women's 'bitter truth.' By contrast, Soviet viewers

and filmmakers seem to have signed a contract to treat the maternity home as an opaque structure that devours pregnant women and later releases them with babies in their arms (c.f., the well-known scene from Vladimir Men'shov's *Moskva slezian ne verit* in Fig. 4). Like men, the cameras were not allowed inside the home; their function did not extend beyond the male role of greeting the mother outside the building.



Figure 4

Sadilova's film crew (camera operators: Irina Ural'skaia and Aleksandr Kazarenskov) crosses the threshold of this previously tabooed zone.<sup>6</sup> For the first time on the Russian screen, the camera dares not only to peer into the maternity home's community, but also to emphasize "shamelessly" and meticulously the procedure of delivery (Figs. 5, 6). Taboos in literature and cinema are different. Within certain parameters, the Soviet establishment permitted the verbal representation of birthing in literary texts (e.g., the pro-natalist "Delos" 323). Nevertheless, their impact on the reader hardly compares to the impact of visual images. The delivery scene in Sadilova's film evokes an almost cathartic sensation of complicity on the part of the viewers. Maia Turovskaia, referring to the 1998 Sochi film festival, calls this episode "самый мощный аттракцион всего фестиваля—рождение ребенка из утробы матери"(86).<sup>7</sup>



Figure 5



Figure 6

In Sadilova's film, time loses its progressive dimension inasmuch as it acquires the stagnating quality of doom and predetermination. Time is suspended and flows "according to its own special carnival laws and [finds] room in itself for an unlimited number of radical shifts and metamorphoses" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 176). Present and future disappear into the past, which becomes the only temporal reality for the women in the maternity home. *Zhenskii dekameron*, in which ten hospitalized women tell a hundred stories from their past lives, may

be the best illustration of this phenomenon. Narrated in this moment outside of time, the past loses its personal attachment to the narrator, becoming an objectified, distanced block of temporality (history). The patients' temporary exclusion from the external world transforms them into outsiders, puppets plunged into being (*être*). They approach the existential threshold where the fabric of being opens onto *existence*, and this threshold state brings with it a feeling of entrapment and doom. On the screen, this sensation is communicated through an extensive use of window shots, from both outside and inside the building (Figs. 7, 8, and 9). Sadilova metaphorically equates the women's seclusion in the maternity home with the condition of a child injured during labor. The film shows us this child preserved, enclosed in a special incubator, as if waiting for that moment when the curtains of



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

being will open and let him in. Helena Goscilo justly states that “the hospital chronotope structures an existentialist condition along domestic lines” (120).

The process of labor (both giving birth and being born) reinforces the condensation of time; caught in this process, time stills in the face of *existence*. The scene of Sveta's delivery (Figs. 4, 5) emphasizes this existential moment of decelerated, stagnant temporality: the few (tellingly, twilight) hours during which the delivery takes place are transformed into an endless stream of events through masterful juxtaposition and editing. The moments of Sveta's labor are intercut with several other sequences: a new pregnant woman is accepted into the maternity home; women talk in their room; Irina, a single mother, visits her baby, calls her lover; a male doctor seduces a nurse as they eat and drink on the beds in an empty delivery room; Liuda watches them have sex and later lies in the attic, enveloped by shadows (Fig. 10). Replacing linear, horizontal temporality with simultaneity, Sadilova "stacks" the characters in carnivalized time along the vertical axis (materialized in the high-angle shots of the building, which itself func-



Figure 10

tions as a supra-uterus). To a certain extent, such a geographical/temporal layout conjures up the internally (spiritually) grounded vertical chronotope of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as described by Bakhtin ("Forms" 156-58). The director spatially binds the characters within that vertical and posits the resolution of life's contradictions through the simultaneous coexistence of chance multiplicity, united in a

centripetal space. In the morning, the maternity home releases its captives of yesterday, and they disperse in different directions; their carnival is over.

The carnival in Sadilova's film is played out under her palpable direction, which is distinct from the women writers' style. The film focuses on actual birthgiving, while literary texts concentrate on concomitant moments. Giving birth rarely appears as a redemptive experience for the protagonists in women's fiction, who continue their life struggles even in the maternity home. Russian women writers tend to judge and punish. The socially privileged women always lose: the wife of a store director (*zavmag*, one of the most hateful figures in Soviet society) dies in "Otdelenie propashchikh," and Zina, who bribes everyone, and whose husband can obtain any item inaccessible to the average Soviet citizen, is not granted a child in "Na sokhraneniï." Sadilova, whose goal is celebration rather than moralization, seems more generous toward the upper-middle-class representatives: the businessman's wife is granted a baby, albeit after two days of uncertainty. For Sadilova, all women are equal in the face of birth. Women's fiction sooner desacralizes what Russian tradition has labeled women's "sacred mission," and does so in terms of biological predetermination, abetted by social conditions:

Бабыя доля, заданная, как смена дня и ночи,  
географией проступает на распаренных телах:  
шрамы после грудницы на обвислых грудях,  
шрамы на животах после кесарева, дряблые  
веревки вен на разбитых ногах, набрякшие  
полосы беременности на опавших боках,  
фартуками, кошелями—сырые многорожавшие  
животы. . . . (Palei 164)<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, Sadilova "covers" the exposed female body. There is a



Figure 11

marked affection in the way she films the awkward, lumbering bodies of the pregnant women in their clownish white robes (Fig. 11).

The director's nostalgic backward glance transforms the elements of the chronotope of the maternity home described in unsparing terms in women's fiction. Sadilova's final touch leaves no doubts as to her glorification of women's capacity to give life. In the film's closing sequence, while searching for something useful in the abandoned maternity ward, a man finds a bitch with puppies; the same nurse who took care of the *durochka* Liuda, now takes the canine family to the new building of the maternity home. The scene inverts Sergei Esenin's famous dark image of maternity in his poem "Pesn' o sobake" ["Song About a Dog"; 1915], leaving an impression of hope and life that corresponds to the celebratory tone and title of the film: *S dnem rozhdeniia!*

### Notes

1. "A devilish place!"
2. "Outside, all the way across the barren shore, the dead earth was crucified" (*Lives in Transit* 197).
3. He may be recognized as a descendant of Palei's unscrupulous doctor Evgenii Igorevich: ". . . а сзади медички вороватым *демонам* припулился Женька, одной рукой кругообразно водая в кровавой дыре ее беспомощной кистью (сжимающей длинную акушерскую ложечку), а другой—мерно, сильно, не спеша, словно проводя дойку, тискал ее большую грудь" (162; emphasis added). ("Zhenka positioned himself like a furtive demon in back of her and with one arm guiding her hand in circular motions in the bloody hole, while she helplessly gripped the long obstetrical curette, with his other hand he squeezed her large breast rhythmically, firmly, leisurely, just as if he were milking her" [*Lives in Transit* 196].)
4. "This fictional film came out from under the documentary overcoat."
5. For instance, Ivan Kurganov's study *Zhenshchiny i kommunizm* [*Women and Communism*], published in New York in 1968, investigated all public and private areas of women's activity under communism in order to illustrate the author's point—the totalitarian regime's neglect of women's rights; but the volume made no mention of women's experiences in maternity homes while giving birth or having abortions.
6. The gender position from which the film speaks certainly facilitates this transgression. Nataliia Basina contends, "Если бы мужчины умели рожать, таких дебиотов, как у Ларисы Садилловой, было бы не счесть" (*Kritiki o fil'me* 41). [If men gave birth, first films like Larisa Sadilova's would be numerous]. One of the characters in Makarova's "Na sokhraneniï" gives a similar explanation for the lack of descriptions of maternity homes in literature: "Сюда бы Льва Толстого. . . Пусть бы написал.

- Женщин-то писателей нет, а мужчине откуда знать?” (82). [If Lev Tolsoy was here, he would write. There are no women writers, and how would man know?]
7. “The most powerful attraction of the whole festival—the child’s birth from the mother’s womb.”
8. “A woman’s lot is given, like the alternation of day and night, and can be seen in the geography of their well-scrubbed bodies: the scars on their drooping breasts after mastitis, the scars on their stomachs after Caesareans, the flaccid strings of veins on their beaten-up legs, the stretch marks from pregnancy on their sides, and their lumpy stomachs, which had given birth many times, weighed down by aprons and bags. . . .” (*Lives in Transit* 197).

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