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**Cinema of Crisis: Russian Chernukha Cinema, Its Cultural Context and
Cross-Cultural Connections**

by

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Abstract

The present work explores Russian cinema of perestroika, specifically the bleak trend known as *chernukha*. The project offers a comparative analysis of *chernukha* and film noir, looking into how these cinemas of crisis channel social anxieties in times of transition. It illuminates the significance of *chernukha* art for understanding the traumatic history of the perestroika and early post-Soviet years, its ties to Russian and international cultural context as well as the function of *chernukha*'s dark vision in Russian culture. The thesis traces the roots of *chernukha* cinema to the Russian 19th century natural school, and compares the cinematic trend with the neo-naturalist fiction of the perestroika era and the postmodernist prose of the time. The thesis argues that *chernukha* cinema relates directly to both representations of history and questions of ethics. *Chernukha*'s transgressive visceral visual style and pessimistic narratives function as an unmediated traumatic re-enactment of the collapse of the Soviet way of life, offering a nihilistic deconstruction of previous dominant narratives and articulating an ethical breach in cultural expectations and representations. Using the concept of film world I argue that, similar to film noir and neo noir, *chernukha* presents a film world that is a distinct universe, to which there seems to be no alternative or any counteractive sense of normalcy. To present a systemic study of *chernukha* cinema in addition to history, cultural context, visual style and narrative strategies, the thesis also examines the patterns of characterization in *chernukha* cinema and the representations of body, sexuality and gender.

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Introduction

The *chernukha* phenomenon appeared in public discourse during the late perestroika years as a derisive name for narrative bleakness coupled with shocking transgressive visuality characteristic of the Soviet cinema, as Glasnost reforms led to eased censorship and greater public scrutiny of Soviet history and ideology. Suddenly the viewer was exposed to a variety of transgressive phenomena previously barred from the screens by Soviet censorship: dysfunctional families, destitute alcoholics, prostitutes and street thugs, abusive husbands and perpetually victimized women, appalling living conditions, workplace harassment and date rape, army hazing and KGB torture practices - to name just a few. The precise birth of the term is hard to establish: however, a few things about its connotations are clear. The term “chernukha” is a colloquial Russian expression derived from the root “black” [chernyi] and could be roughly translated as blackness with an explicitly negative connotation. The Ozhegov Dictionary of the Russian Language offers the following definition of *chernukha*: “Exposure of the dark and gloomy sides of life and day-to-day existence (colloquial, disdainful).” *Chernukha* is primarily a term referring to films of the late perestroika era, which have garnered mostly negative acclaim from critics and audiences at the time.

Since the 1980s *chernukha* as a term acquired several discursive connotations within Russian culture. It is: (1) a colloquial expression referring to social taboo zones, marginal experiences connected with immorality and

obscurity, including “hardcore” pornography or violent crime; (2) unethical journalism and sensationalism in media; and finally, (3) a trend in Russian cinema (primarily) and literature that came into being in the late 1980s–early 1990s during the Glasnost era and addressed the negative aspects of Soviet (or early post-Soviet) society and history.

Chernukha is decisively a derogatory term, analogous to *pornukha* (porn) and *bytovukha* – a colloquial term for crimes that most commonly stem from domestic conflicts involving substance abuse or family violence. As Seth Graham (2000) notes, *chernukha* is connected with the ideologically charged verb of official Soviet discourse *ochernit'* (to blacken something – to cast in a negative light). The term also has criminal connections – *porot' chernukhu* – stands for “lying” in criminal jargon. Though no official statistics or list of films exist, most critics identify *chernukha* cinema within the same range of perestroika productions, characterized by a bleak, hopeless worldview, with a focus on contemporary realities of dysfunction, crime, violence and marginalization, and a pitch for gratuitous violence and sex.

Chernukha is a peculiar creation of the perestroika period. Perestroika [restructuring] was an umbrella term for the reforms launched by Mikhail Gorbachev when he assumed the post of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1985. Gorbachev inherited many problems: a limping economy that could not sustain itself much longer, cronyism and corruption in the ranks of the Party, a popular cynical and hostile sentiment towards the Party and

the governing policies, and the Cold War with the West. Gorbachev introduced a package of reforms that were labelled “restructuring” and that addressed a variety of political, economical and social goals. Politically, Gorbachev took aim at corruption and tried to reshuffle the old party ranks, bringing in younger and more liberal-minded members (like Boris Yeltsin – a future president of Russia). Economically he tried to balance the Socialist economy with more liberal and efficient market principles. However, Gorbachev was not necessarily a single-minded idealist, and his economic reform remained largely inefficient. His political steps were often contradictory, elevating different members of opposing factions within the Communist party, effectively stalling many of the political and economic reforms (Kenez 1999). Gorbachev’s indisputable achievement (in addition to warming relations with the West) was Glasnost.

A term that in the Soviet context was used during the first public street protest that demanded more openness and adherence to the Constitution – The Glasnost Meeting [Miting Glasnosti] took place in 1965. Glasnost as a reform called for more openness and transparency in all spheres of Soviet life. It was initiated in 1986 as possibilities for criticizing and understanding the shortcomings of Soviet public practices (such as criticizing practices in the workplace) in order to improve them. Soon enough Glasnost became a full-fledged civic movement for the freedom of information and speech, initially supported by the government, which soon became unable to contain Glasnost. Dissidents, such as Andrei Sakharov and Dmitry Likhachev, were given a pulpit;

previously censored works by dissident or censored Russian and Western writers were published; and the media focused its attention on all the things that were kept secret from the Soviet public. Among those things history and current events and practices were the chief concerns.

Many of the topics brought up during Glasnost revolved around the suppressed past (such as Stalinism, the famines of the 1930s) or the past that was distorted in Soviet history books. Life in the Soviet Union “here and now” constituted another block of concerns, and here, the marginalized and oppressed phenomena came to fore. In 1986 Moscow *Communist Youth Member* [Moskovsky Komsomolets], a popular newspaper, published an article by Evgeny Dodolev about the lives of prostitutes. The article put prostitution back on the public radar, and, ironically, motivated amendments to the Civil Code of the USSR, which henceforth, included a fine for prostitution. The power of Glasnost was clearly unstoppable.

Perestroika became a time of hope and change for some, and a time of rapid unravelling of the stable and sanctioned order into something that resembled a cognitive chaos and reevaluation of all values. A famous letter from a professor of Leningrad Technological Institute, Nina Andreeva, to *Soviet Russia* [Sovetskaia Rossiia] newspaper¹ represented the reactionary trend in perestroika, the one that would result in a 1991 coup. *Chernukha* became the perestroika poster child, at first. *Chernukha* films boldly addressed the sorest points of Soviet life and its

¹ Nina Andreeva's letter "I cannot give up my principles" [Ne mogu postupit'sia printsipami] was published on March 13, 1988 in *Soviet Russia* [Sovetskaia Rossiia].

past, their representation was unflinchingly graphic and the opposite of the "varnishing" representation that characterized Socialist Realism. Then, the trend met a significant backlash (too late, since it was already dominating the screens) from audiences and critics, who invented the name "chernukha" specifically for perestroika movies that displayed a bleak orientation towards the unimaginable horrors of Soviet life. Why this happens and what gives *chernukha* a bad and long-lasting name will be the subject of my thesis.

As government ability to censor and suppress information deteriorated and the public demanded more scrutiny and honesty, the numerous troubles of the Soviet Union became apparent to the Soviet people. Several trends emerged during perestroika that arguably were among many complex factors that led to the eventual dismantling of the Soviet Union. One tendency was the separatist nationalist movements that were gaining prominence in the republics as Glasnost unfolded. The other one was the inability of the government to maintain control in situations of emergency. And these emergencies kept coming. The first catastrophe was the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, which subsequently became the symbol of everything that was wrong with the Soviet system. The authorities tried to suppress the magnitude of the disaster and acted irresponsibly, to put it mildly, towards the rescue workers and the civilians in the affected areas. Gradually Chernobyl became not only an ecological catastrophe but also a vivid symbol that the Soviet government was negligent towards its own people. The Armenian earthquake of 1988 took thousands of lives and this time the whole

country followed the rescue effort via media.

By the end of perestroika all the things that were wrong with the Soviet system and way of life were glaring and apparent. Economic failure of the reforms and the reactionary sentiment within the Party contributed to the 1991 coup, after which the Soviet Union ceased to exist because all the republics defected from it. Although in a referendum on March 17, 1991 the majority of the Soviet people voted for preserving the USSR in the form of the "renewed federation of equal sovereign republics" [obnovlennaiia federatsiia ravnopravnykh suverennykh respublik], it was unclear how reliable those results were. What is clear is that the disintegration of the Soviet Union plunged the republics' economies into deep crisis that affected ordinary people the most, and political systems were thrown into disarray during what is known as the "wild 1990s" [likhie devianostye]. Culturally the late perestroika years and the 1990s are best described as an identity crisis, when the abrupt disintegration of the USSR aborted the process of uneasy soul-searching started by Glasnost. Not only did the Soviet Union not exist anymore, the frame of reference for Glasnost reforms ceased to exist. Perestroika in itself could be viewed as trauma – Glasnost made it apparent that Soviet reality was a heinous lie, that one could not go on without meaningfully re-evaluating the situation and still maintain the integrity of Soviet identity. The break-up of the Soviet Union did not seem to answer this — what kind of identity could be fashioned on the ruins of the Soviet one? In this thesis I will argue that the *chernukha* phenomenon can at least partially hold an answer to

this identity crisis.

In this thesis I will focus only on the *chernukha* films from the late perestroika era to provide an analysis of its historical and cultural context, analysis of *chernukha* aesthetics and *chernukha*'s function in Russian culture at the time and the historical backlash that the phenomenon experienced. In addition I will look into *chernukha* sensibility as comparable to that of film noir and neo noir of the 1970s. I will also explore *chernukha*'s origins in Russian literature of the 19th century and compare the films with perestroika neo-naturalist and postmodern fiction.

The film list that will be elaborated on in-depth in my thesis includes the following: *Assuage My Sorrows* (Utoli moii pechali, Prokhorov and Aleksandrov 1989), *Asthenic Syndrome* (Astenicheskii sindrom, Kira Muratova 1989), *Dogs' Feast* (Sobachii pir, Leonid Menaker 1990), *Freedom is Paradise* (SER, Sergei Bodrov Sr. 1989), *Emergency on the District Scale* (ChePe raionnogo masshtaba, 1988 Sergei Snezhkin), *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* (Zamri, Umri, Voskresni, Vitaly Kanevsky 1989), *God's Tramp* (Bich Bozhii, Oleg Fialko 1988), *The Guard* (Karaul, Aleksandr Rogozhkin 1989), *The Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksnadrovna* (Muzh i doch' Tamary Aleksandrovny Narutskaia, 1989), *Little Vera* (Malen'kaia Vera, Vasily Pichul 1988), *The KGB-Man* (Chekist, Aleksandr Rogozhkin 1992), *My Name is Harlequin* (Menia zovut Arlekino, Valery Rybarev 1988), *Satan* (Satana, Viktor Aristov 1990). I will also consider some other films that might be included in the *chernukha* pantheon such as *Bespredel* (Bespredel,

Igor Gostev 1989), *Dear Elena Sergeevna* (Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna, Eldar Riazanov 1988), *Taxi Blues* (Taksi Bliuz, Lungin 1990), documentary *Solovki Power* (Vlast' Solovetskaia, Marina Goldovskaya 1988), *This Is No Way to Live* (Tak zhit' nel'zia, Stanislav Govorukhin 1990) and others. This list could be expanded and varied based on the criteria one chooses to emphasize and, as in other diffuse film trends like film noir, there are no definite criteria but rather tendencies and patterns that unite these films. I will also be providing comparison of *chernukha* films with other perestroika productions, which existed despite public perception of a total *chernukha* “black out” of the Soviet screen.

1. Chernukha in Art

The name “*chernukha* art” was first established in film criticism indicating a tendency in the cinema of the perestroika period (1985–1991) to concentrate on the former taboo zones of Soviet ideology (prostitution, poverty, alcoholism, sex, violence, the criminal underworld, drugs) and on negative visions of the Soviet past (repression, corruption). Subsequently, *chernukha* in literature constituted a corpus of texts with similar intentions: leaning towards neo-naturalist depiction of the inequities of an unstable society and the misfortunes of its marginalized individuals. The pervasiveness of the *chernukha* mode in perestroika cinema is attested to by a statement from the *Soiuzkinorynok* (the Soviet Union Cinema Market) report for the USSR Cinema Collegiate: eighty-two percent of all the films shot in 1989 and 1990 in the USSR project a “negative attitude towards life,

reality and human relationships, promote escalation of fear, despair, and violence²” (my translation). Critics and film-makers alike responded quite negatively to the new perestroika cinema, drawing attention to its artistic incompetence, clichéd exploitation of hot social topics, sensation-mongering, and lack of message — the taste for “naked truth, naked bodies and naked violence” (Lawton 107).

Criticism of *chernukha* art was produced mainly by film scholars in Russia and in the West. It describes *chernukha* as a trend that is mostly reactive and is a response to the sudden lifting of the ideological constraints. Such descriptions imply that *chernukha* lacks formal innovation and indulges in the ugly and sick aspects of society in transition: decaying morals, marginal statuses, disintegration of the family and ubiquitous criminality. Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky in *The Zero Hour* (1992) write:

This is *chernukha*, a Soviet slang idiom meaning something like “pitch darkness” – the new semigenre, or even antigenre, zooming in on all the dark, nasty, clumsy, ugly, barbaric, immoral... (the list may be continued by the reader) sides of contemporary Soviet life and private life, in particular (163).

Anna Lawton (1992) describes *chernukha* as having “dark” and “obscene” content which strives to shock the public as a poorly made sensationalist cinema. A sentiment echoed by others:

2 Report from the Soiuzkinorynok to Goskino. Quoted in Art of Cinema Journal [Iskusstvo kino], Issue 3 (1991): 11. “Негативное отношение к жизни, действительности, человеческим взаимоотношениям, нагнетание страха, отчаяния, отражение насилия присутствуют в 82% советских фильмов.”

It is not a valuable genre, however, since its artistic language is still neglected...The generic formula is wholly based on the subject matter, which is “life itself,” “life in general,” the favorite Russian expression meaning formlessness... (Horton and Brashinsky “The Zero Hour” 163)

It is believed that new possibilities for artistic freedom – to uncover the “blank spots” – after the fall of Socialist Realist restrictions created difficulty in finding a new language for art. It was a certain “cultural paralysis” (a term coined by Valentin Tolstykh, quoted in Horton & Brashinsky), when having the freedom of speech does not mean the ability to use it. Thus Petr Shepotinnik, a Russian cinema critic, writes in 1990:

The impression is that “sound” has suddenly been turned on in our time, too. Everything has acquired a voice—our history with a mass of blank spots, some of which it would be more accurate to call red spots, our economy of long queues and dying villages, and our unstable practical position in the world—everything started suddenly becoming visible as in Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*, and it should be said that the resulting picture looks forbidding and awe inspiring, so much so that one feels like looking aside. But nevertheless there is a need to look and see. This need is felt by filmmakers more than by anyone else (Shepotinnik 1992, 331).

He notes later on that:

A somewhat morbid reorientation toward plots in which sensation is inherent—political, erotic or criminal—inevitably results in a crisis of purely cinematographic ideas and leads to a general impression of excessive voltage, not sufficiently clothed in good drama (Shepotinnik 1992, 333-334).

Indeed the critical and often public debates around *chernukha* as an art form or movement usually revolve around “excessive voltage” scenes of violence and

brutality, sexuality or exposition of corruption/social ills/unhealthy lifestyle that had no place in censored Soviet public discourse and arts.

The measure of *chernukha* offensiveness varies greatly along the lines of public taste. For liberal critics like Shepotinnik, the offensive element is excessive sensationalism which he thinks is “profit-mongering” that debases good cinema. One has to keep in mind that Soviet cinema never had to struggle for profits at the box-office. While for conservative critics the insulting aspect is the “paint-it-black” drive – when everything a Soviet citizen took pride in turned out to be the opposite of its promise, corrupt at best, evil incarnate at worst. Thus Sergei Snezhkin’s 1988 film, *The Emergency on the District Scale* [ChePe raionnogo masshtaba], which shows Komsomol (Communist Youth Union) leaders indulging in the steam bath orgies, caused a public outrage and some distribution bans in the provinces because of its sweeping negative portrayal of the political elite. The art film by Kira Muratova *The Asthenic Syndrome* [Asteicheskii sindrom] (1989) was banned for using expletives and frontal male nudity, both previously taboo in Soviet cinema.

Seth Graham (2000) argues that *chernukha* is the “inversion of the melodramatic impulse” (11) characterized by naturalist physicality. In his article “*Chernukha* and Russian Film,” he states that *chernukha* presents a “concentrated physicality” as an excessive artistic vision:

Two crucial elements of cinematic *chernukha*... are: 1) subordination of the verbal signifier... to the visual...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 (14).

Graham extends the understanding of *chernukha* art beyond the sensationally poor quality productions, acknowledging its own artistic language – grounded in the inversion of previous Soviet tradition and distrust towards any culturally inscribed “ideals.”

Eliot Borenstein (*Overkill* 2008) in his exploration of *chernukha* sees it as derivative of Glasnost reform that demanded the uncovering of truths. As such, *chernukha* is couched in the “existing cultural norms” (14), functioning in a moral context of right and wrong, in which “wrong” is firmly associated with the Soviet injustices. He writes:

Unintended consequence or not, *chernukha* was the apotheosis of Glasnost: the rejection of enforced optimism based on lies and an insistence on uncovering long-suppressed truths... *chernukha* skewered the old Soviet myths of cultural achievement and radiant future not through the pointed political satire..., but through preponderance of counter-evidence..., *chernukha* narratives functioned according to the logic of the inverted fairy tale... In *chernukha* everyone lives unhappily ever after (13-14).

Chernukha being the last breath of the Soviet cinema simultaneously became a call-to-arms that sought to actively destroy the ideological foundations of Soviet society and defy the Soviet cultural tradition as a continuous heinous lie.

Borenstein persuasively argues that we cannot really talk about the same *chernukha* cinema after the fall of the Soviet Union (19-20), since after perestroika, *chernukha* became an umbrella term that encompasses a vague field

of violence, obscenity and transgression of public taste. Russian critics of the time often vocalized a similar argument as evoked by Graham and Borenstein that *chernukha* is Socialist Realism in reverse – its rigidity manifested in the all-encompassing negative drive of perestroika “blackening” as opposed to Socialist “varnishing.”

Literary criticism on *chernukha* is much more scarce, relegating the phenomenon largely to cinema. Western criticism rarely acknowledges the concept of *chernukha* literature, which is replaced by different names circulating within critical circles. Most relevant studies concerning *chernukha* thematics and style are those of “tough and cruel prose” [*zhestkaia i zhestokaia*] (Brown 1993; Shneidman 1995).³ The emergence of “tough and cruel prose” is mainly attributed to the social conditions of perestroika, when the former taboos were lifted and writers could address topics concerning the problematic sides of Soviet life and denounce the crimes the Soviet regime committed. This included controversial texts that were created but could not be published during previous decades, such as Liudmila Petrushevskaya’s stories.

Among Russian critics a notable contribution is made by Andrei Zorin (1992), who discusses the grotesque and excessive element in *chernukha* literature as running contrary to the usual realist and naturalist treatment that these texts

3 An interesting development occurred in recent years when the term *chernukha* for literary (and often cinematic) texts was replaced by the term *zhest'* (literally “tin,” a word play on a short version of the adjective *zhestokii* — cruel and *zhestkii* — tough). The term is slang and denotes texts that deal with tabooed themes or are shockingly bleak. Just like *chernukha*, *zhest'* functions as an “umbrella term” that encompasses everything from popular gory crime novels to the conceptualist writings by Vladimir Sorokin.

receive. He is the first to point out the prominent conundrum in *chernukha* aesthetics in which it claims to be “real life” while indulging in transgressive aesthetics that support surreal and graphic transgressive material. Another prominent scholar, Mark Lipovetsky (1999), argues along more traditional lines that the *chernukha* art mode served as a means of legitimizing the muted discourse of phenomena that had been oppressed and ignored by Soviet ideology, such as drugs, criminality, domestic abuse, etc.

Literary criticism (and to lesser extent film criticism) also emphasizes *chernukha* art’s close ties with the aesthetics of physiological sketch of the 19th century natural school [natural’naia shkola]⁴. Mark Lipovetsky (1999) and Konstantin Kustanovich (1992) note similarities between *chernukha* and the Russian natural school and naturalism respectively. They discuss late perestroika fiction as neo-naturalist and point out the prevalence of a deterministic philosophy, interest in types and typologies, and an attention to everyday detail [byt]. The particular aesthetics of the natural school of the 1840s were championed by Vissarion Belinsky and claimed to be inspired by the literary legacy of Nikolai Gogol. Richard Peace writes in the *Cambridge History of Russian Literature* (2008):

Belinsky was at the philosophical and literary centre of the 1840s... Belinsky decided how literary works were to be viewed: it was he in particular who decreed that the multi-faceted Gogol should be interpreted as a writer whose works were models of social commitment...The adepts of the natural school displayed a keen interest in literary sociology,

4 The Cambridge History of Russian Literature (1992) translates the term as “natural school.” Natural’naia shkola could also be translated as “naturalist school.”

examining the hitherto neglected “little man” of urban society such as clerks and janitors... during the 1840s the focus shifted to the ordinary individual, or even the person who was rather less than ordinarily capable, like Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich from “The Overcoat” (189-190).

The natural school existed around the decade of the 1840-1850s as a precursor of the celebrated Russian Realism movement (Peace 2008). It united many Russian writers, who absorbed the ideology of Belinsky to different extents (Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Goncharov, early Fyodor Dostoevsky, Dmitry Grigorovich, Nikolai Nekrasov and others). It also served as a certain “launch pad” for the realism of the second half of the nineteenth century, propelling the literary dominance of prose and to be prevalent in the second half of the 19th century ideas of literature as a vehicle for social justice and enlightenment.

The most notable manifestation of the natural school became the collection *Physiology of Saint Petersburg* [Fiziologiiia Peterburga] (1845), which concentrated on depicting the daily grind of underprivileged social classes: street-sweepers, organ-grinders, following the tradition of French literary “physiologies.” The presentation of the “typical” individual in the midst of the daily (usually wretched) existence determined by rigid social stratification exposed social injustice similarly to the spirit of denunciation and criticism in the perestroika arts that aimed to facilitate the “restructuring” of society for the better.

2. *Chernukha Reception and Russian Cultural Context*

Reception of *chernukha* art in Russia was less than favourable. At first, *chernukha* was accepted as “the truth about our life,” then there was a backlash of

criticism at the incessant flow of *chernukha*'s gloomy and ugly discourse. In the late 1980s the production rates in the USSR soared to 400 films per year; however, the situation changed as the Soviet Union started experiencing economical disintegration and then collapsed. In 1995 the production rate for the Russian Federation dropped to 12-20 films per year (according to different sources). The economic changes brought by perestroika made it extremely difficult not only to make movies when the state production system collapsed, but also to distribute them; in 1991 there were 20 million fewer movie theatre tickets sold in Moscow. All parties – critics, distributors and filmmakers professional unions alike – partially blamed the bleak aesthetics of *chernukha* for such a strong decline in viewers' interest. It was pointed out that the viewers still preferred to watch foreign films and consequently made foreign screenings more profitable despite the 80% tax that the venues had to pay in 1990.⁵ *Chernukha* became an epitome of bad taste, unpopular discourse and poor filmmaking, as the following passage from Mikhail Levitin's article in *Soviet Screen* [Sovetskii Ekran] journal in 1989 asserts:

It is a really amazing thing this Glasnost in feature films...it boils down to active sexualization, partial narcotization, and formal anti-Stalinization of the screen... [Critic] Andrei Dementiev... [when] asked to describe contemporary Soviet cinema [said]: "A naked woman sits before a portrait of Stalin and smokes marijuana." It is as if the words: "You may!" were pronounced... Clichés, clichés, clichés... (quoted in Lawton 201)

5 This statistical information as well as a pronounced anti-*chernukha* judgement could be found in the articles on the distributors' union meetings and filmmakers' congresses from the early 1990s. See *Encyclopaedia of Russian Cinema* [Entsiklopediia otechestvennogo kino]. Volume 5: Cinema and Context [Kino i kontekst], Saint Petersburg: Seans, 2004. URL: www.russiancinema.ru

Henceforth, *chernukha* art acquired all the negative connotations in public discourse that remain to this day: namely sensationalism, unnecessary “blackening”, bleakness, obscenity.

Chernukha films caused such an outrage not only because of their focus on taboo zones (such as sex and drugs) or negative visions of the past. The latter tendency constitutes the core of Glasnost public discourse, which favoured the value of documentary truthfulness [istinnost’] over the aesthetic value of art; it was believed that the public craved the truth about the Soviet system. During perestroika exposing the atrocities and injustices of the past, as well as a focus on the current ills of Soviet society, were major trends in the media and the arts. This created a surge in *publitsistika* (non-fiction writing that focuses on social and political problems) that addressed various blank spots of Soviet history. Cinema, as much as literature, became one of the leading forces in these developments. The boom in releases of off-the-shelf films coincided with the publication of previously censored books, while the rise of non-fiction writing correlated with the rise in documentary film-making. The surge in documentary film-making resulted in a wide critical and public acclaim of grim films with denouncing tones, such as *Solovki Power* [Vlast’ Solovetskaia] (1988) by Marina Goldovskaya, dealing with the history of the labour camps; and Stanislav Govorukhin’s *This is No Way To Live* [Tak zhit nel’zia] (1990) about the present humiliation and hardship of the life of the average Soviet citizen.

While the journalistically oriented prose (*publitsistika*) that uncovered

various “blind spots” of Soviet history and engaged in social critique of Soviet lifestyle flourished as much as the expository documentary cinema, *chernukha* films were condemned as clichéd and sinister. One possible explanation is that *chernukha* art represented a contradiction to the traditional cultural inscription of the mission of art in Russian society, the noble mission of education and salvation; it refused to provide “the light at the end of the tunnel.” Birgit Beumers in an introductory essay to the volume *Russia on Reels* (1999) writes:

The mainstream of Russian cinema largely indulges in this bleakness, or blackness, and offers neither alternative nor perspective. Film-makers have rejected their “mission” to act as prophets...or to guide morally and aesthetically. The audience, in turn, rejects films, which offer no positive outlook or spiritual guidance amid the chaos, and have turned instead to Latin American soap operas... (1)

While publitsistika and the documentary genre were clearly eye-openers to the Soviet public, they also explicitly pursued an ideological agenda. *Chernukha* seems to shun explicit moral or ideological resolution and is, therefore, often characterized as excessively indulgent for the sake of being excessively indulgent.

Following documentary filmmaking, perestroika fiction cinema rushed to expose and portray social problems and past injustices, venturing into the formerly taboo zones of sexuality, marginality and crime. As Horton and Brashinsky effectively argue, the boundary between documentary and non-documentary became increasingly blurry, as both divisions of cinema claimed to describe and dissect reality and history. Thus, *chernukha* became associated with the “slice-of-life” genre [bytovoi zhanr] and the desire to document “life as it is.”

This tendency shaped the perception of *chernukha* films, first, as a “reactive” trend that exists only in response to the lifting of ideological constraints (see Lipovetsky 1999; Horton and Brashinsky 1992; Lawton 1992) and has no artistic value or voice on its own, its sole aim being to deconstruct, discredit and downgrade the Soviet lifestyle. In addition, *chernukha* art was also primarily visually abusive, describing grime and slime with all the power of the visual medium. It is not a coincidence that *chernukha* flourished in the visual arts before its literary counterpart. *Chernukha* in film also offered visual shock-value for the Soviet viewer in the form of violent scenes of crime, corruption, drug addiction, and sex. It was something the eye of a Soviet citizen had never witnessed before.

Irina Shilova (1995) aptly called this process a rapid “dehumanization” of the perestroika screen, lamenting both the loss of artistic innovation and humanistic message characteristic of the Soviet new wave and such revered figures in Soviet filmmaking as Andrei Tarkovsky. In a naturalist fashion the characters were routinely and deterministically crushed by circumstances and social conditions, and their horror stories became the staple language of conforming to the new ideas about life and reality, namely that “this is no way to live.” These ideas, Shilova argues, became as dogmatic and hollow as any of the “grey” [serye] films of the 1980s, only with a “minus” sign. The so-called “grey” films (productions of the late Brezhnev era) were those dogmatic and dull Socialist Realist texts that lacked the artistic innovation of art cinema, genre thrills of popular cinema and audience appeal. The grey films were bad ideological

product (unappealing), bad pop-culture product, and bad aesthetic product, universally derided by cultural elites. In the late 1980s and early 1990s “black” cinema faced the same conundrum – an ideological product in reverse, it seemed to fail both public and critical expectations. Or, as Eliot Borenstein argues: “despite the obvious anti-Soviet character of *chernukha*, it actually partook in the tried and true Soviet tradition of *razoblachenie* (exposure, unmasking)” (13).

Charged with a lack of artistic value, *chernukha* became an aberration to the popular taste. Initially popular, perestroika cinema quickly ceded the lead to endless Latin American soap operas and Hollywood productions pirated by video salons or emerging cable networks. *Chernukha*’s bold use of sexuality, nudity and other transgressions against the norms of Soviet cinema ceased to be a novelty fairly quickly. The integration of a gruelling and uncomfortable cinematic experience into a “slice-of-life” also killed the excitement that might have been generated by the breaking of taboos. Most critics agree that eventually the viewers developed an aversion to “more life” on the silver screen and turned to the soothing escapism of popular genres. According to Daniil Dondurei (1995) the cinema-going audiences declined tenfold between 1988 and 1994, while only one domestic picture, *Intergirl* (Interdevochka, Petr Todorovsky 1989), managed to match the blockbuster success of *Little Vera* from a year before, staying in the top ten, although domestic production increased to 180 from 140 (127).

Such drastic decline of interest for domestic productions was not solely the wrongdoing of *chernukha* obsessed filmmakers. The economic crisis and the

collapse of the unified Soviet production and distribution system affected the cinema industry, which also became a channel for money laundering (Dondurei 131). The rise of video salons dominated by American popular genres, and the expansion of cable television, both thriving on cheap pirated copies, as well as the increased popularity and diversity of television further contributed to the crisis in national cinema production (Condee 2009). One of the key questions of the present thesis is to understand why, despite clear economic and industrial factors, it is *chernukha* cinema that became the epitome of all things gone wrong during perestroika period.

From both the public and critical reception it is clear that *chernukha* is a polarizing as well as understudied phenomenon. *Chernukha*, despite its seemingly short life, came to bear many discursive connotations within Russian culture persisting to this day. Namely, *chernukha* could denote unethical journalism or shady business practices, especially those committed through violent or aggressive means, hence the expression “black PR” (public relations) – [chernyi] or [chernushnyi] PR. *Chernukha* also encompasses a vague field of violence, sex and other transgressions against public taste, especially by popular media (Borenstein 2008). Perestroika *chernukha* itself seems to be laden with contradictions: combining cheap sensationalism with the exposition of repressed truths; portraying “life as it is” but through a negative excess and visual abuse never imagined before by the Soviet viewer. While hardly anyone attributes any significance to the films that were the hallmark of the *chernukha* phenomenon

today, *chernukha* became a ubiquitous definition.

Understood as gratuitous sex and violence on-screen, *chernukha* is a target for censorship in contemporary media. Understood as a perpetually depressed and hopeless worldview that dwells on the negative aspects of life, it raises concerns about the adequacy of national self-expression and the educational role of cinema. A good example is a *Russian Newspaper* [Rossiiskaia Gazeta] article “Up the Ladder That Leads Down. Cannes Film Festival as a Mirror of Russian Revolution” [Vverkh po lestnitse, vedushchei vniz. Kanskii festival kak zerkalo russkoi revoliutsii]. The author Valerii Kichin accuses Russian cinema of being too dark and depressing, or being too *chernukha*, in other words, damaging the image of Russia abroad and alienating the home viewer. The critic also mentions the “magic” year of 1990, the year after which Russian cinema did not have any major success at Cannes, and the year, in his opinion, when Russia sealed its fate for being reservoir of *chernukha* for the world.⁶ It is clear that *chernukha* is a sore spot even in contemporary discourse, which is far removed from the films of the late 1980s and early 1990s that gave *chernukha* its bad reputation.

3. Methodology

The goals of the present thesis are two-fold: one is to provide a detailed account of *chernukha* as artistic phenomenon, examining its visual and narrative strategies, characterization and other conventions that define distinct *chernukha*

⁶ Rossiiskaia Gazeta, 23 May 2005, No. 3776

filmmaking. This has never been done in scholarship, which usually looks at *chernukha* in an introductory or survey manner: as part of larger perestroika cinema anthologies (Galichenko 1991, Horton and Brashinsky 1992, Lawton 1992); or as a historical overview and preamble to a study of another cultural phenomenon (Borenstein 2008, Condee 2009); or in a more focused piece of writing, such as an article (Graham 2000, Lipovetsky 1999, Zorin 1992). The second goal is to examine *chernukha* as a film trend that carries a significant historical and cultural impact – to explore the dynamics behind *chernukha*'s notoriety and its unique position vis-a-vis perestroika and post-Soviet cultural context, and Russian culture in general. One of the tasks of the present work is to determine to what extent *chernukha* fits or clashes with Russian and Soviet cultural tradition, particularly natural school poetics and neo-naturalism in literature and Socialist Realism. The thesis will consider both narrative and visual style, as well as film's impact on the viewer, or what constitutes "the world of the film" (Yacavone 2008) in order to understand what *chernukha* as an artistic sensibility implies historically, culturally and artistically.

I argue that *chernukha*'s cinematic language and the grounds for its reception stem from the perestroika period as a time of crisis and trauma. Perestroika could be defined as a period when the Soviet normative and ideological system collapsed while other value-based discourses of national appeal failed to emerge or did not have broad enough appeal broad, a condition aggravated by a poor economic situation. Perestroika and the post-Soviet years,

therefore, are often considered by scholars (Borenstein 2008; Kenez 1999; Oushakine 2009) as a state of chaos or limbo that resulted in a subsequent series of traumatic losses of national identity, a stable value system, and sense of direction. In addition to the loss of the country, hailed by some but mourned by others, people experienced bitter deprivations of social security and economic stability. It is argued in scholarship, including studies in post-Soviet film,⁷ that the problems posed by the radical historical shift of perestroika are still affecting politics and culture in the former Soviet Union. *Chernukha* art, especially cinema, which will be the main focus of my work, could, therefore, be seen as the embodiment of a transitional time of crisis, felt to this day, prolonging the existence of the phenomenon in public consciousness beyond the cinematic material of the perestroika era. I will limit myself to *chernukha* of the late 1980s–early 1990s, as I agree with Eliot Borenstein that the 1990s saw a transformation of *chernukha* into an umbrella term for popular culture that welcomes transgressions of public taste and is removed from both the concerns and the shocking quality of the original phenomenon of the perestroika era. However, the very fact that *chernukha* is so entrenched in the public consciousness begs the question as to why it became emblematic of the transitional times and co-opted by popular culture as well as political and national discourses.

The question of the historicity of *chernukha* is approached in my thesis from the standpoint of trauma theory and what I call “ethics of representation” — addressing the issue of *chernukha* transgressivity in relation to cultural norms and

⁷ See Susan Larsen’s analysis of the loss of cultural authority in post-Soviet film (2003)

discourses, and how it reflects the collapse of the Soviet value system and the credibility of its representations. In the thesis I extend the argument by Graham (2000) and Borenstein (2008) that *chernukha*'s transgressivity lies in its nihilistic drive to negate and invert all cultural representations and narratives rather than simple pandering to sensationalism. *Chernukha* achieves this end both through its transgressive dark subject matter and the visceral visual excess so common in these films. *Chernukha*'s bleakness stems from distrust towards the legitimate and legible cultural representations sanctioned by tradition. It also denies various discursive practices (such as Socialist Realism, or perestroika-driven "exposition of hidden truths") the power to narrativize the trauma of collapsing values and identities.

Utilizing the theories on trauma, melancholia and "working-through" [durcharbeiten] by Sigmund Freud, I argue that *chernukha* is the embodiment of the trauma of perestroika era. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that trauma becomes a muted discourse, an event that does not "leave traces" and requires a special inquiry to disclose it. She suggests that trauma constructs an alternative history, one that is not immediately available for cultural consumption and one that avoids established venues of representation. In short, traumatic history is difficult to read – its representation is obscure and runs against the grain of cultural norms and conventions. Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser (2001) states that:

What emerges is trauma's non-representability is both subjective (trauma makes failure of memory significant) and objective (trauma makes of representation a significant failure), confirming that the traumatic events for contemporary culture turn around the question of how to represent the

unrepresentable (195).

A trauma narrative is an absence of a story of victimization that still needs to be told, it is “a narration without narrativity...” (E. Ann Kaplan 2001, 204).

Therefore, I look at *chernukha* film as a traumatic trace or a symptom that reflects in a very immediate and desperate way the trauma of transition, rather than being a strategy of containment and cohesive representation of trauma. *Chernukha* is, in the words of Cathy Caruth, a “wound that speaks,” not a wound that heals. If the latter were the case, then *chernukha* would have been hailed as the cinema that reflected and contained the crisis of transition.

Hence, I believe that the traumatic discourse of *chernukha* is akin to the melancholic inability to surpass trauma and articulate it in a meaningful and culturally legitimate way (that is why *chernukha* has become an abjection in Russian culture). Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun* (1992) defines depression and melancholia in terms of asymbolia and “unorderable cognitive chaos.” Following Freud and Melanie Klein, Kristeva also suggests that melancholia is an “unhealthy” form of dealing with loss, one that perpetuates and fixates itself on the loss. Kristeva writes: “from the core of the melancholy/depression composite...what pertains to a common experience of object loss and of a modification of signifying bonds” (10). Language fails to invest the experience of loss with meaning, initiating the stupor of melancholia. Art (and religion) become the solution that according to Kristeva fights the “symbolic collapse.”

Melancholia unites the theory of trauma and *chernukha*'s transgression of cultural norms. Trauma is the absent discourse, the unarticulated story that needs to be told that emerges only through fragmenting, deviating and painful experiences. *Chernukha* constitutes that transgressive art that embodies rather than articulates trauma and is also, in a sense, a melancholy art. *Chernukha* overwhelms the language of cultural inscription and its raw immediate representation, defiant of culturally inscribed discourses, is the language of traumatic experience. In short it is bound with melancholic stupor rather than prudent attempt to work through – a situation that is acutely felt not only in the *chernukha* cinema of the 1980s but in the identity politics of Russian and the post-Soviet states today.

4. Chernukha and noir: cinemas of crisis and transgression.

The experience of perestroika and one of its predominant art modes, *chernukha* cinema, can be seen as illustrative of not only Russian history and culture, but also of similar traumatic transitional periods in world cinema. My thesis compares *chernukha* to film noir (in its classic and neo noir incarnations) as another example of the “dark” vision of the world expressed in art. I approach the two respective movements to illuminate the common strategies that art uses when it depicts society in crisis. My concentration will be on *chernukha* art, which, unlike film noir, is not as well explored in scholarship.

It is acknowledged in scholarship that film noir has the status of deviant

and transgressive art because its dark vision ran against the grain of mainstream cinematic representation – much like *chernukha* cinema runs against culturally inscribed and previously sanctioned cinematic and artistic forms. Both film noir and *chernukha* could be defined as cycles or trends: a common vision implemented by different directors through different genres in a given time period. And both trends are historically bound and embody collective traumatic anxieties (post-WWII for noir and perestroika for *chernukha*), and both claimed cultural relevance that surpassed their immediate historicity.

Film noir refers to a corpus of films produced in Hollywood roughly between 1941 (*The Maltese Falcon*, dir. Howard Hawks) and 1958 (*Touch of Evil*, dir. Orson Welles), and is characterized by a common visual style and dark depressing narratives usually revolving around crime and failed romance. The term itself was first coined by French critic Nino Frank in 1946. He referred to “film noir” as a new detective film inspired by detective literature of the “serie noire,” which were mostly translations of American hard-boiled detective fiction and its British counterparts. The term received further attention from French critics and the concept was developed. Film noir later became an inspiration to New Wave filmmakers affiliated with *Cahiers du Cinema* before it became a topic of interest in the United States in the 1960s. None of the filmmakers engaged in creating the noir trend during 1940s were conscious that they were making “film noir,” in the way that a filmmaker might set out to shoot a Western or a musical or declare his/her affinity to a film movement such as Neorealism. The term,

therefore, is an invention of the critical apparatus and an *a posteriori* phenomenon.

In contrast *chernukha* is actively contemporaneous. Still it also shares with noir a non-deliberate unity. No director would set out to make a much derided *chernukha* film, nonetheless the directors who were working within the Soviet cinema tradition would turn to *chernukha* in the perestroika years. One such example is *Dear Elena Sergeevna* [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna] (1988) by Eldar Riazanov, a director whose films became widely popular in the Soviet Union for their fusion of melodrama and comedy of manners. Directors that debuted within the *chernukha* movement often moved to different genres and different styles later in their careers. Good examples are Pavel Lungin (*Taxi Blues* 1990) and Aleksandr Rogozhkin. Rogozhkin's signature style evolved into making popular slapstick comedies, but he started with grim *chernukha* dramas like *The KGB-Man* [Chekist] from 1992 and *The Guard* [Karaul] from 1989. Like film noir, *chernukha* can be described as a "mood and a tone" (Schrader 1972), a shared sensibility that traversed genres and individual filmmaking signatures.

If *chernukha* is said to have emerged from the literary natural school, noir stems from American hard-boiled detective fiction.⁸ Nino Frank and the authors of the first book-length study on the topic, *Panorama du Film Noir Americain* (1955), Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, first noted the direct influence of the hard-boiled American detective genre on film noir. David Bordwell (1986)

8 Hard-boiled detective fiction was developed in the 1930s and is characterized by the figure of a "tough" (hence the eggs metaphor) detective. The hard-boiled detective is an unsentimental protagonist who displays a cynical attitude and jaded worldview. His exploits are characterized by violence and confrontation with the criminal underworld, as opposed to traditional solving of mysteries.

mentions that twenty per cent of the films noirs produced in the early to mid 1940s were adaptations of “hard-boiled” fiction. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich and James M. Cain were the most popular authors and their adaptations include *Double Indemnity* (James M. Cain), *Phantom Lady* (Cornell Woolrich), *Murder My Sweet* and *The Big Sleep* (Raymond Chandler); *The Maltese Falcon* (Dashielle Hammett) to name but a few. Detective fiction became not only a source for noir but also a structuring influence. Thus, the first-person narration of the hard-boiled detective novel manifested itself in a proliferation of point-of-view shots, voice-over narration and flashback devices in the film tradition. The “hard-boiled school” also contributed to the generally depressing and violent sensibility of film noir.

Frank Krutnik (1991) points out that the hard-boiled detective story emphasized action over deduction and introduced the ambiguous view of the private investigator, positioned between the law and the criminal underworld and sharing the moral characteristics of both. This trend starts with the private investigators of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who establish their own chivalric code in order to bring some order to the chaos of the “mean streets” in films like *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston 1941), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks 1946). Noir’s cinematic precursor of ambivalence towards the divide between bad and good guys is found in the gangster movies of the 1930s, like *Scarface* (Howard Hawks 1932) or *Little Caesar* (Mervin LeRoy 1930). Similarly *chernukha* adopts narrative strategies and characterization familiar from the

natural school poetics, appropriating the tropes of the “little man” and attention to the daily grind. *Chernukha*, like film noir, often presents its heroes, the victimized little men in an ambivalent light, suggesting that they might be monsters in addition to being victims. It is unable, contrary to the natural school tradition of the 19th century, to make a pronounced ethical judgement, and, like noir, leans toward moral ambiguity.

Film noir’s is celebrated for its impressive visual style of chiaroscuro lighting, contrasting uneven compositions of shadow and light, and sharp angles unequivocally attributed to German expressionism as exemplified in the *Cabinet of Dr. Caligary* (Robert Wiene 1920). The sharp contrasts and distorted mise-en-scene of German expressionist films, aimed at relating subjective turmoil through objective means, found a counterpart in film noir. Film noir visual techniques complement the films’ paranoid ambience of fear and doom. Many German and Eastern European filmmakers (Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder) immigrated to the U.S. during the war and contributed to that artistic vision.

A concurrent influence could be attributed to the advent of psychoanalysis in the 1940s. The depiction of Freudian psychology in some films is often vulgar and overly simplified, but it remains a potential influence for the violent excess and uncontrollable desires that drive the noir characters. Such excess is exemplified not only in the expressionistic mise-en-scene but also subjective narration techniques, such as voice-over and point of view shot. Other visual influences on noir include French Poetic Realism, a trend that was characterized

by the naturalist attraction to marginal characters trapped within their social class and poeticization of quotidian life. Italian Neorealism and the familiarity of the audience with the newsreel and documentary during the years of war, according to critics like Mark Bould (2005) and J.P. Telotte (1989), affected the docu-noir, in such films as *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin 1948) or *The T-Men* (Anthony Mann 1948). The realist element in film noir was exemplified by shooting on location, providing a “slice of life,” and refusing to sugar-coat the harsh realities of post-war life. Most of the exterior scenes in film noir were shot on location at night on the dim-lit streets. Paul Schrader (1972) asserts that film noir displayed democratic tendencies by emphasizing location shooting and moving away from the conventions of Hollywood melodrama of the time (55).

Style and narrative mark the point of departure that distinguishes film noir from the classic Hollywood cinema of its time. Some scholars emphasize the unusual visual style or the unconventional hopeless and paranoid narratives as counter-culture strategies. Paul Schrader writes:

...film noir was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the material it reflected; it tried to make America accept a moral vision of life based on style. That very contradiction – promoting style in a culture which valued themes – forced film noir into artistically invigorating twists and turns... created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism... (63)

Robert G. Porfirio (1976) argues that the metaphysics of film noir make it an anti-Hollywood endeavour. He identifies noir metaphysics with existentialism. Other critics stress determinism (Mark Bould) or nihilism (Jon Tuska (1984)). The

choice between form and content, the way the films are shot and the message they embody is probably a false one. Film noir could be all of those things at once (existential, stylistically striking, and bound to criminal topics) and still retain its integrity.

While *chernukha* might share film noir's doomed sensibility and transgressive narratives, it most strikingly differs from it in style, even if ultimately both might be deemed excessive. While classic noir is unequivocally described as intricate and beautiful, *chernukha* cinema is often described as visually ugly, due to its unsavoury representation of unsavoury subject matter, and its deliberately raw and grainy, slice-of-life realism. Visually, however, *chernukha* style approximates neo noir of the 1970s and its unpolished aesthetics.

Like *chernukha*, film noir undoubtedly presents a gloomy vision of social order and the individual's position within it. The themes that constantly resurface in noir are fatalism and determinism, absurdity and chaos of the world, moral ambivalence and uncontrolled desire, alienation and distortion of subjectivity, violence, paranoia and anxiety. The reasons for its dark intensity are found both in the contradictions and embedded anxieties of the time (post-WWII), as well as contemporary (modernist, existentialist, nihilist) reconfigurations of the individual vis-a-vis society. Noir protagonists often vocalize their concern that some mysterious force works against them and the odds are not in their favour (see *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves 1947) or *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer 1945)). The noir heroes either make bad mistakes or have no impact on the nightmarish

developments whatsoever, becoming victimized by circumstances. The noir universe is that of anguish and terror. Critics noted that profound ambiguity characterizes noir and unsettles the spectator. Borde and Chaumeton (1955) write that it is "...the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradiction in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity..." (25).

The best example of such fundamental ambivalence is the figure of the femme fatale. The male protagonists of noir films are often deceived and victimized by especially manipulative, cold-blooded females, as in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder 1944), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak 1946), *The Lady From Shanghai* (Orson Welles 1947), *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak 1949) and others). Sexuality is firmly associated in noir with death and danger. Femmes fatales are also almost always punished for being transgressively powerful and they usually perish. The femme fatale is an ambiguous figure: she is condemned as a sinister, manipulative criminal and at the same time she is presented as a powerful character. Critics argue that this discrepancy lies in the visual power that the film gives to the femme fatale via camera work and mise-en-scene (Sylvia Harvey 1999; Karin Hollinger 1996; Janey Place 1999). She is granted the power of movement, in contrast to the static images of women as objects of the male gaze in classical Hollywood as theorized by Laura Mulvey (1986). Femme fatale is a dominant enigmatic visual presence. The femme fatale localizes many aspects important to noir: the ambivalent vision and unstable identities, transgressions

into dangerous grounds of desire.

Critics often read film noir as a social commentary and a catalogue of repressed anxieties of the time (Krutnik 199; Naremore 1998; Schrader 1972). Feminist critics point out that the figure of the femme fatale is cultivated in the atmosphere of the post-war anxiety about women usurping the role of men as a new work force during war. Similarly, the noir focus on crime and a hopeless worldview are shaped by post-war disillusionment and traumatic experiences.

Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward (1979) write that noir films:

...reflect a common ethos: they consistently evoke the dark side of the American persona. The central figures...caught in their double binds, filled with existential bitterness, drowning outside the social mainstream, are America's stylized vision of itself...a cultural reflection...of a nation in uncertain transition (6).

Both *chernukha* and film noir are cinemas of crisis that address the traumatic experiences of transition and shattered identities. In addition, both *chernukha* and film noir represent a transgression towards mainstream filmmaking, Soviet cinema in the case of *chernukha* and Hollywood in noir. Film noir's peculiarities and ambiguities of style, narrative, spectator positioning, characterization and pessimistic absurd vision of the individual and society are considered by critics as transgressive or resistant to Hollywood classical cinema.

Neither *chernukha*, nor noir are confined to the limited historic corpus of films, with which it originated. The term noir entered newspaper discourse and colloquial language. It became, as James Naremore (1998) suggested, a

“mediascape” – a construct grounded within the cultural imagination and recycled throughout different cultural venues. There are noir websites, noir festivals, noir internet groups and noir fan clubs. Naremore notes that such dissemination of noir makes it a “loose” combination of pop-culture motifs rather than a consistent category. The question of neo noir becomes a part of such a mediascape.

Chernukha also has become a ubiquitous colloquial expression and a functioning cultural concept, even if it is not actively celebrated and does not serve as a source of fascination as noir does.

There are, of course, marked differences between *chernukha* and noir. It is not likely that film noir had a significant impact on the development of Soviet cinema or, in particular, on the development of *chernukha* cinema during the perestroika era. In fact, the self-proclaimed film noir of the perestroika era – the criminal melodrama *Moscow Nights* [Podmoskovnye vechera] (Valery Todorovsky 1992) is not a *chernukha* at all, but a more melodramatic rendition of *Double Indemnity* mixed with an iconic Russian story by Nikolai Leskov *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* [Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda] from 1865. Noir was virtually unknown outside of film circles and to this day it fails to show on the Russian radar of public perception (unlike many American TV shows, or independent films that enjoyed unprecedented success – like Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, 1994). The emblematic themes of classic noir – the private detective, the femme fatale, the entangled criminal intrigue, obsession with sexuality – are also not characteristic of *chernukha* cinema or the Soviet tradition

that precedes it, and is still uncharacteristic for the new Russian cinema. The peculiar brand of PI invented by hard-boiled writers has not made a notable appearance in the Russian arts either. Elaborate crime narratives of heists, double crossings and other noir specialities are also not very common.

That being said, I see the affinities between noir and *chernukha* as structural. Both cinemas respond to times of transition with the language of transgression and dark visions of a world out of joint; both tackle traumatic anxieties that stem from changes in identity structures and credibility of cultural discourses. The specific ways with which the cinemas of crisis deal with traumas of history correspond or differ at various points (as this work will examine in detail). Most importantly both trends display an inherent suspicion towards cultural inscriptions and easily read representations and both aim to construct difficult, convoluted versions of history. If we agree that all history is a narrative (as argued by Paul Ricoeur or Hayden White), the representations of *chernukha* and noir provide an invaluable version of history that could have never otherwise been “narrativized,” or, more simply put, heard.

5. *Chapter Outline*

In Chapter One, I look at the correlation between *chernukha* cinema and literary tradition in Russia. While *chernukha* cinema is indebted to the Russian tradition of the nineteenth century natural school through the exploitation of the themes of “the little man,” social determinism, and social critique, it subverts natural school

critique through its excessively visceral visual aesthetics and absence of clear-cut morals. *Chernukha* has much in common with the neo-naturalist fiction of the late 1980s-early 1990s, such as an attention to the marginalized groups, as in the prose of Sergei Kaledin, the propensity for transgressive and brutal descriptions, as in the prose of Viktor Astaf'ev, and the presentation of the everyday as the source of mundane evil and the break-down in human relations, as in the prose of Liudmila Petrushevskaya. Finally, the chapter offers a comparison between postmodern fiction, namely the prose of Vladimir Sorokin, which is marked by similar excesses and shocking transgressions as *chernukha*. It is argued that *chernukha*, unlike postmodern fiction, does not operate on the concepts of irony and defamiliarization, deconstructing the very ideas of literary language or discourse of ideology, but rather takes itself seriously, claiming to be a real reflection of life rather than a postmodern deconstruction of it.

In Chapter Two, I examine *chernukha* through the prism of its claimed affinity to real life and its promise to faithfully impart that reality to the screen, as noted by many critics and viewers at the time. I argue that *chernukha* creates a historic authentic sensibility⁹ while engaging in a visceral and excessive representation that puts the spectator in the double bind of “this is our life” but “it is no way to live.” Functioning as an unmediated traumatic reenactment of the collapse of Soviet way of life and cultural values, *chernukha* cinema offers a nihilistic deconstruction of previously dominant narratives, defying both popular and high-brow expectations of the work of art. Introducing transgressive

⁹ I owe this observation and term to Dr. William Beard

shocking imagery, *chernukha* achieves what I call “unethical representation” — when the gap between spectator’s expectations and the excessive nature of the representation create a transgression leading to illegibility and the collapse of meanings. I conclude by comparing *chernukha*’s transgressive representation, its visual impact, and its ability to unsettle the spectator with American neo noir of the 1970s.

Chapter Three looks at *chernukha* from the point of view of the stories that *chernukha* tells, and the concept of the film world that constitutes a unique *chernukha* sensibility. Similar to film noir and neo noir, *chernukha* presents a distinct film universe to which there seems to be no alternative or a counteracting sense of normalcy. It is a world closed on itself. The *chernukha* world, however, is a more radical phenomenon than noir. Its self-sustaining quality bears similarities to the concept of torture as introduced by Elaine Scarry (1985). I am, however, of course, not claiming any approximation to the suffering of real victims of torture. The *chernukha* world usurps the power of speech and identity, presenting itself as an immediate and all-encompassing reality. This reality confronts the characters as an uncontrollable, malicious and inescapable force of violence, through which the characters are objectified and viewers are vicariously traumatized. The focus on society, its institutions and margins, is the ideal environment for such objectification and the usurpation of one’s voice. Finally, I discuss the concept of *nekommunikabelnost* [non-communicativeness] in the film *Asthenic Syndrome*, showing how torturous world of *chernukha* implodes

language and discursive practices from within the film to foster its nihilistic vision.

Chapter Four looks at characters in *chernukha*, examining in detail various patterns of characterization. The chapter considers the paramount focus on social life and environment as foundational for its characters, examining socially marginalized characters, and the relationship between characters and social institutions. I argue that *chernukha* cinema presents its characters as essentially ambivalent, oscillating between predatory and victimized behaviour, a strategy that is paralleled in the 19th century literature (as in texts by Chekhov and Leskov) that employed the portrayal of the “little men” as both victims of society and monsters perpetuating social dysfunction. In addition *chernukha* develops a sense of fatalism and failure akin to the character portrayal in classic film noir. Finally, the chapter considers children and youth as the Other of *chernukha*, or markers of impossible innocence and articulate difference, in violent world of *chernukha*.

Chapter Five focuses on the representations of gender, body and sexuality in *chernukha* cinema, which is notorious for victimizing female characters and its “indulgence” in bodily excess and violence. Drawing attention to the gender question in Soviet and perestroika history, the chapter looks at the portrayal of gender in *chernukha* as inverting the notions of both Soviet official discourse and traditional values, known as a “double burden.” Adopting the notion of the affective body derived from Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of affect, the analysis of body and sexuality in *chernukha* reveals patterns of traumatic repetition and

melancholic stupor rather than sexual liberation or a new configuration of gender identity, reflecting a traumatic reenactment rather than a working through of the trauma of perestroika. However, as a comparison with film noir's femme fatale shows, the gender representation in *chernukha* is also invested with power even if it subjects women to unprecedented violence. I conclude that women still hold both a sympathetic and commanding presence in *chernukha* films (similar to the imperfect community of Petrushevskaya's texts), calling the viewer to witness their plight. As such the gender question becomes the only "seed of counter-ideology" (Sylvia Harvey) in *chernukha* cinema that promotes viewer identification and understanding of the turbulent times of crisis.

Chapter 1. *Chernukha* and Russian Literary Tradition

In this chapter, I will look at *chernukha* origins in the Russian literary tradition and its role as an “enfant terrible” – a troubled child – of perestroika literature. My premise is that *chernukha* art embodies a paradox. It is a quintessential perestroika phenomenon – brought by the Glasnost reforms answering the public demand for more open society and freedom of speech. This is true not only of film and literature but also politics, media and the Soviet civil rights movement embodied by such figures as Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. *Chernukha* addresses the same issues and often in the same mode of exposition of injustices and corruption that made perestroika a time of great hopes and a positive embodiment of change. At the same time *chernukha* came to represent in the public consciousness a disturbing and transgressive trend that, while possibly doing justice to long-ignored problems, indulges in an excessively bleak worldview.

Most *chernukha* films and their legacy belong to the years right before or right after the break-up of the Soviet Union. By the mid-1990s *chernukha* did not maintain status as the dominant filmmaking style and became a self-conscious allusion or a point of stylistic and narrative appropriation. While the film trend seems to have been short-lived, its reputation as an enfant terrible lives to this day. Critics alternatively praise *chernukha* for its brave depiction of real social ills, and damn it as an abnormal or deviant representation, seek to view it as a new stage in the history of Soviet cinema, and dismiss it as a destructive anti-cinema and anti-

art (Horton and Brashinsky (1994) mention its “formlessness” and call it an “anti-genre”). Looking at the history of Russian literature, specifically the 19th century natural school, perestroika neo-naturalist prose, and experimental “cruel” prose, one can clearly see Glasnost impulses couched in a long tradition of Russian art. Themes of concern for the “little man” – marginalized by the system; portrayal of the everyday and the banal nature of evil; and art’s mission to seek social justice and uncover the truth are all part of perestroika art aspirations manifested most aptly in the documentary genre and *chernukha* cinema. How *chernukha* incorporates this long tradition and how this appropriation reflects the ambivalent standing of *chernukha* are my current topics.

1. Dark Corners of Petersburg: Chernukha and the Natural School

Chernukha as a term was applied to both cinema and literature and both tendencies in Glasnost culture were often labelled naturalist. Naturalism was understood in accordance with traditions of Russian literary criticism of the 19th century as “daguerreotypism” – direct and unmediated neither by artistic value nor by intellectual reflection, a faithful copy of *natura* – or reality. Thus, Mark Lipovetsky in his article on *chernukha* in Russian literature (“Strategies of Waste” [Rastratnye strategii] 1999) defines *chernukha* as neonaturalist art, aimed at legitimizing previously marginalized social and cultural phenomena:

...в постсоветское, в первые годы “гласности”, этот ярлык [чернухи] был наклеен на широкий фронт неонатуралистической прозы, раскрывшей читателю глаза на существование бомжей, проституток, лимиты, армейской дедовщины, тюремных ужасов и многих других

социальных явлений...

In post-Soviet times, in the first years of “glasnost,” this label [*chernukha*] was applied to a wide range of neo-naturalist prose, which opened the reader’s eyes to the existence of the homeless, prostitutes, transient workers, brutal hazing in the army, horrors in the prisons and many other social phenomena... (n. pag., web). My translation.

Lipovetsky analyzes *chernukha* in cinema and literature in connection to its emphasis on objective portrayal “real life:”

...читатель в общем-то знал о существовании явлений этого ряда, так как постоянно сталкивался с ними в своей социальной практике, но знание это было, так сказать, нелегитимным. “Чернуха” придавала ему легитимность уже самим фактом публикации... “Чернуха”... нужна была для того, чтобы ввести известные социальные феномены в культурный контекст.

...the reader generally knew about the existence of such manifestations, as s/he constantly encountered them in his/her daily life, but this knowledge was, so to say, illegitimate. “*Chernukha*” gave this knowledge legitimacy by the very fact of its publication... “*chernukha*”...was necessary in order to bring well-known social phenomena into the cultural context (n. pag., web). My translation.

This intellectual tradition of putting literature or art in general against the testing ground of reality has its roots in the development of Russian realism in the 19th century, and specifically with the tradition of the Russian natural school.

Galvanized by the influential intellectual presence of Vissarion Belinsky, the natural school is often viewed (see Peace 2008, Mann 1989) as a transitional stage between romanticism and realism in the 19th century Russian literary history. Natural school is an important milestone for several reasons. It heralded the age of prose (Peace 2008); promoted realism as a literary method, ushering forward the careers of prominent writers like Fedor Dostoevsky or Ivan Turgenev;

served as an important battleground for the intellectual debates of the 19th century that revolved around mission of art in society, ideas of social justice and Russian national identity. Its central themes and literary methods helped to form both the philosophical and artistic scope of Russian literary canon.

Some of the ideas developed and championed by natural school will firmly become a part of Russian cultural history. Such are the ideas about art as the herald of truth and social justice, art that both reflects and ameliorates reality through convictions to enlightenment and education of people, calling attention to the misery of the little man and inequities of social life. Natural school writers saw themselves indebted to Nikolai's Gogol aesthetic vision of "laughter through tears" or "showing good through evil." Following Gogol's influence their thematic focus became the true-to-life or "natural" life of a "little man" – an underprivileged individual, who represented a microcosm of society's troubles. Natural school texts aspired to serve as a blueprint for the social critique that could usher in real changes in Russian society and bring forth social justice.

One of the first obvious parallels between *chernukha* and the natural school is the nitty-gritty subject matter that shocked so many viewers and critics. *Physiology of Saint Petersburg* [Fiziologiiia Peterburga] (1845), perhaps, is the most prominent literary collection to come out of consorted effort of different writers of the natural school. It is a collection of literary texts that deals mostly with the daily routines of the underprivileged classes in the slums of Saint Petersburg. Like *chernukha* in the 1980s, the natural school "normalized" subject

matter previously tabooed by the literary canon. Yuri Mann writes:

Натуральная школа намного расширила сферу изображения, сняла ряд запретов, которые незримо тяготели над литературой. Мир ремесленников, нищих, воров, проституток, не говоря уже о мелких чиновниках и деревенской бедноте, утвердился в качестве полноправного художественного материала. Дело заключалось не столько в новизне типажа (хотя в некоторой мере и в ней тоже), сколько в общих акцентах и характере подачи материала. То, что было исключением и экзотикой, стало правилом.

Natural School broadened the field of literary subject matter and lifted several taboos that were burdening literature without being immediately apparent. The world of artisans, beggars, thieves, prostitutes, not to mention the lower ranks of civil servants and impoverished peasants, was established as literary material in its own right. The issue was not only in the novelty of such typologies (although it was also important), but rather in the general focus of the literary inquiry. What used to be an exception and exotic material, became commonplace (Mann 1989, 387). My translation.

In addition *Physiology* caused exactly the same outcry in 1845 as *chernukha* did in the 1980s-1990s. In fact, the term “natural school” was coined as a derogatory label by a conservative critic Faddei Bulgarin in protest against the lowly subject matter and literary language lacking embellishment (Mann 1989). The “dirt-lovers” [griazefily] of natural school has appropriated the negative term and made themselves champions of “natura” – or portrayal of reality in the unadorned and truthful manner. As the leader of the movement, critic Vissarion Belinsky asserted: “Reality is the key to and the motto of our century” [deistvitel’nost’ – parol’ i lozung nashego veka] (quoted in Mann 1989, 392). That representation of reality was always marked by concerns for social justice and the betterment of the lives of the underprivileged.

The Russian natural school, while giving the impression of a solidified movement to conservative critics like Bulgarin, had a diverse range of writers collaborating under Belinsky's intellectual and literary authority in the 1840s-1850s, and many of them went on to adopt opposite literary and political views. Examples include Vladimir Dal', a champion of conservative ideology and a future creator of the famous Russian language thesaurus, and Nikolai Nekrasov, a revolutionary poet, whose most famous line was "you might not be a poet but must be a citizen" [poetom mozhes ty ne byt' no grazhdaninom byt' obiazan] (from the poem *Poet and Citizen* [Poet i Grzhdanin], 1856). The prominence of the natural school is rather limited to the 1840s-1850s decade. The writers that started within the movement later on divided between themselves, evolving into the complex movement of Russian realism, its world reputation cemented by such writers as Leo Tolstoy, and Fedor Dostoevsky. The natural school, very much like *chernukha* cinema for many post-Soviet directors (such as Pavel Lungin or Aleksandr Rogozhkin), was a trend that jump-started the careers of many prominent Russian realist writers, like Fedor Dostoevsky, Ivan Goncharov and Ivan Turgenev. Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* [Bednye liudi] (1846), Goncharov's *An Ordinary Story* [Obyknovennaia istoriia] (1847) and Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* [Zapiski ohotnika] (1852) are all argued to be created within natural school aesthetics (see Peace and Mann). The two literary movements intersect and overlap in the Russian tradition, creating a fluid range of texts. The natural school could be better seen as an influence, or a formative literary movement,

whose defining features helped to shape both the attitudes towards the role of art and literature in society and the literary methods, including narrative and stylistic techniques, prominent in the Russian literary canon.

Physiology of Saint Petersburg is a natural school show-case collection.

The title shows the movement's debt to the physiological sketch tradition of the European literature of the time. Physiologies, particularly French ones, connected to Balzac's fiction, were frequently translated and popular in Russia (Mann 1989). The collection features eleven essays and a manifesto-like introduction by Belinsky. Most of the texts are feuilletons dealing with the minute detail of the ordinary day in the lives of underprivileged members of Saint Petersburg lower classes. Street organ-grinders, enserfed peasants, janitors, contract journalists and small bureaucrats are the "little men" whose lives are brought to the fore of public attention in the collection. The collection pays attention to the *typage* – or the type, and documents thoroughly the environment he lives in, dissecting the details of the daily life. Richard Peace writes:

A sober appraisal of the salient features of the natural school was given by Yury Samarin ...: "The characters are divided into two groups: those who beat and swear, and those who are beaten and sworn at. The nature of the furniture, the stains on the wall, tears in the wallpaper, all must be enumerated as in a model inventory. The titles they take are the simplest and as general as possible, for example: 'The Landowners,' 'The Mistress,' 'The Village,' 'Relatives,' etc" (204).

Vissarion Belinsky situated the natural school within specific cultural debates of the time and the emergent discussions on nationality (Westernizers vs.

Slavophiles) and the role of art in social change that would dominate intellectual life in 19th century Russia. In the introduction Belinsky emphasizes the urgent need to talk about Russian people, and Russia's affairs. He also advocates the creation of "light" literature that rests not only in the hands of geniuses, but demands a professional class of writers who will become keen observers of the Russian reality. Rejecting the Romantic ideal of a lone genius, Belinsky puts his faith into the hands of professional writers whose concerted effort can shape not only the literary landscape, but also create a nationally inspired and diverse literature, as well as become influential and far reaching endeavour to impact society and its ways. The natural school was envisioned as a broad base for cultivation of Russian literary audience and a foundation of national literature.

Русская литература представляет едва ли не более материалов для изучения исторического и нравственного быта чужих стран, нежели России. Мы разумеем здесь произведения беллетристические, то, что составляет так называемую легкую литературу, которой назначение состоит в том, чтоб занимать досуги большинства читающей публики и удовлетворять его потребности (Belinsky 32).

Russian literature hardly seemingly offers more on the historical and moral life of other countries than it does on Russia. We have in mind works that make up our light literature, so called because it occupies the spare time of most readers and satisfies their needs (Belinsky 3).

The stress on "light" literature seemed to produce a somewhat ironic effect given *Physiology's* dealings with unsightly subject matter and the depressing dark tone of the texts. But such literature could be popular, reach the masses and become useful to the prevailing view that granted art edifying and transformative powers over society.

The assertion that literature must bring change or herald a new better order of things is a strong undercurrent in *Physiology*. It is also a prominent cultural trope, evident in Wanderers [Peredvizhniki] movement in visual art¹⁰ or in the music of the Mighty Handful [Moguchaia kuchka]¹¹. It would also be an impulse behind the Socialist revolutionary movement that took off in the second half of the 19th century and is responsible for the political radicalization of Russia that would eventually lead to formation of Socialist and Marxist opposition to the tsarist regime and Bolshevik revolution. The Socialist revolutionary movement also produced the most popular novel of 19th century Russia – *What Is To Be Done* (1863) by Nikolai Chernyshevsky – a didactic and utopian vision of a better socialist future. *What Is To Be Done* was not very good literature (according to the literary assessment of contemporaries or scholars) but its message and promise of a social transformation were deemed more important and outshone the aesthetic criteria.

Natural writers draw their inspiration from the work of Nikolai Gogol, whose writing was marked by a satirical impulse and an attention to the grotesque and mystical. Gogol's principle that it is necessary to keep showing the reader "real life," something that can help her/him change fundamentally, had a great impact on both conservative and progressive writers. In his letter from 1845,

10 A movement from the second half of the 19th century that rejected the classical subjects and techniques of the official academic art and pursued both more realistic and lowly subjects, creating a celebrated realist movement in visual arts in Russia. Ilya Repin, Vasily Surikov, Isaac Levitan were among movement's most prominent artists.

11 A mid 19th century circle of like-minded composers that pioneered Russian classical music, combining classical musical aspiration with innovation and nationalist ideals. Most prominent composers were Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin.

Gogol writes that only by showing “horrors” as the results of unsightly and unjust actions one can move people and advocate social change.

Но если поднять перед ним завесу и показать ему хотя часть тех ужасов, которые он производит косвенно, а не прямо, тогда он заговорит другое... Жизнь нужно показать человеку, — жизнь, взятую под углом ее нынешних запутанностей, а не прежних, — жизнь, оглянутую не поверхностным взглядом светского человека, но взвешенную и оцененную таким оценщиком, который взглянул на нее высшим взглядом христианина

But if you would lift the veil and show him at least a part of all these horrors, that he produces unwillingly, not intentionally, then he will have other things to say... One has to show life to the man – life that is taken in its all present entanglements and not the past – life that is evaluated not by a superficial look of an aristocrat but is measured and judged by such an evaluator who would adopt a Christian point of view [Gogol implies forgiveness and mercy towards the sins of others] (“Complete Works” 306-308). My translation).

Gogol became a crucial figure in the development of Russian literature, but as Richard Peace notes, he was “invented” by Belinsky or by conservative writers, becoming a cultural and critical construct within various formulations of Russian literary canon. His literary legacy and controversial personality were interpreted for various ideological purposes by feuding factions of conservatives and liberals, Westernizers and Slavophiles. It is the satirical bent and the attention to the so-called “little man” that made his legacy important for the natural school movement.

Gogol’s story of Akaky Akakievich in the novella *The Overcoat* (1842), is a piece on a small functionary who goes insane after losing his hard-earned coat to robbers. Akaky’s final cry for compassion of being “your brother ” epitomized

the idea of a “little man” – not only a pawn in the hands of social forces but also someone whose suffering cries for social justice.

И долго потом, среди самых веселых минут, представлялся ему низенький чиновник с лысинкою на лбу, с своими проникающими словами: «Оставьте меня, зачем вы меня обижаете?» – и в этих проникающих словах звенели другие слова: «Я брат твой». И закрывал себя рукою бедный молодой человек, и много раз содрогался он потом на веку своем, видя, как много в человеке бесчеловечья [...]. (“The Overcoat” [Shinel] 144)

And long afterward, during moments of the greatest gaiety, the figure of the humble little clerk with a bald patch on his head appeared before him with his heart-rending words: “Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?” and within those moving words he heard others: “I am your brother.” And the poor young man hid his face in his hands, and many times afterward in his life he shuddered, seeing how much inhumanity there is in man [...]. (“The Overcoat” 307).

After Gogol the “little man” becomes prominent in the writings of natural school and Russian realist prose (a good example is the peasant figures in Leo Tolstoy novels), propelling the educational and enlightening agenda of Russian literature.

Dostoevsky in his later post-natural school period would interpret this impulse for social justice and human compassion as a return to the religious roots and Russia’s destiny of uniting humanity. Nikolai Nekrasov, who edited and is featured in *Physiology*, would phrase it as a call to arms and a revolutionary restructuring of society, fulfilling Russia’s destiny by leading the world to a better social order. Literature becomes closely tied not only to politics but also to the fate of Russian society historically speaking – a tendency that continues through perestroika literature and cinema. Perestroika arts too aimed at a broad audience seeking, a broad appeal through social and political relevance. The importance of

social change and the ability of art to bring it about defined perestroika as a historic period as well as a series of political and social reforms.

Some definitive characteristics of the natural school poetics are seen in Nikolai Nekrasov's *Petersburg Corners* [Peterburgskie ugly] published in *Physiology*. It is narrated from the point of view of its protagonist, Trostnikov, and has no definitive plot or story-line, serving as a sketch of the life in the Petersburg slime. We never know anything about Trostnikov's likes and dislikes, his character, but follow him on his search for a room for rent, a task he accomplishes within the first few pages. Then the text describes the apartment complex and its dwellers, culminating in the neighbourly welcome that brings to our attention the impoverishment and alcoholism of the slum dwellers. Such descriptive passages were common in the physiological sketch tradition and would be appropriated by naturalism of the late 19th century as the descriptive environment that uncovers the nature of the social class and individual fate within that class. Despite its bleak narrative *Petersburg Corners* is grotesque and humorous, like in this passage, when the protagonist is mistaken by the landlady for a thief:

...сапоги по ступеням лестницы застучали, как барабан. Я летел очень недолго; ударился обо что-то ногой; вскочил, осмотрелся: темно, пахнет гнилой водой и капустой; дело ясное: сени. Ищу двери. Наткнулся на лоханку – пролил; наткнулся на связку дров – чуть опять не упал. Что-то скрипнуло, чем-то ударило меня по лбу – ив сенях стало светлей. В полурастворившейся двери я увидел женскую фигуру. Кривая и старая баба гневно спросила, что я тут делаю, потом, не дождавшись ответа, объявила мне, что много видала таких мазуриков, да у ней нечего взять, и что она сама бы украла, если б не грех да не стыдно (94).

My shoes struck the steps of the stairs like a drum. I did not sail downward for long because I soon knocked up against something with my foot. I jumped up and took a good look around. It was dark, and the air smells of rancid water and cabbage... I looked for the door and stumbled against a washtub, spilling some water in the process. I then crashed into the pile of wood and almost fell. Something creaked. Something else bumped me on the forehead, but the foyer suddenly became lighter. A woman's figure appeared behind the half-opened door. An old, twisted hag asked me what I was doing. Then, without waiting for an answer, she announced that she had seen many rogues in her time, that she had nothing for anyone to steal, and that she herself would go and rob someone if it were not a sin and would cause her shame (132-133).

Another example is the ironic referral to the neighbourhood's drunk who shows up everywhere there is booze – as a “green man” [zelenyi gospodin]. A popular Russian saying goes that a drunk person sees “green devils” – an allusion that might suggest to the reader a possibility that the protagonist is hallucinating all his adventures. In addition the narrator often addresses the reader, also in a consciously ironic manner:

Вы меня покуда еще не знаете, но узнав хорошенько, увидите, что я человек щекотливый: принять меня за вора значило нанести смертельную обиду моему костюму и моей физиономии. Я не выдержал и назвал старуху дурой (94).

You do not yet know me, dear reader, but if you examine me thoroughly, you will see that I am a most refined man, and that to take me for a thief is a mortal insult to my dress and physiognomy. I, thus, could not restrain myself and called the old lady a fool (133).

This ironic self-reflective element combined with satire takes different shapes and forms in perestroika *chernukha*, where the grotesque is usually devoid of humour.

The central feature of Nekrasov's text is the descriptive nature of his

feuilleton that looks into environment and how it shapes the characters. Nekrasov describes the interior of the apartment, the smells, the sounds, the look on people's faces. Even their remarks are presented to us through the lens of Trostnikov's point of view, sometimes in a way that makes them grotesquely funny:

... вошел с собачонкой в руках рослый плечистый мужик лет пятидесяти, одетый в дубленый полушубок, с мрачным выражением лица, с окладистой бородой. Взгляд его, походка, телодвижения — все обличало в нем человека рассерженного или от природы сердитого. Он прошел прямо к своим нарам (вправо от двери), гневно бросил на них собачонку, которая тотчас начала выть... (98)

A tall strapping peasant walked in, carrying a little dog in his hands. His countenance, movements, and gait revealed that he was an angry man and highly irritable by nature. The peasant went straight to his corner (to the right of the door) and angrily threw down the dog, which had begun to howl (138).

Nekrasov's use of subjective narration gives his "lower depths" authenticity and eye-witness credibility. The piece includes several authentic urban folk songs as the best description of the unsophisticated tastes of the apartment dwellers. While the text steers to the comic side more often than not, it also meticulously describes the social status and plight of the "little people" in the apartment – for example, a former enservfed peasant, whose free status becomes a source of marginalization, and who is forced to move away from his rural lifestyle.

There are several important aspects in Nekrasov's text that are typical of *Physiology* and of Russian natural school. One of them is focus on the everyday, and unsightly *byt* [everyday life] – the text provides vivid descriptions of smells

and mud and dirt in the Trostnikov's dwelling. The focus of the collection is decisively on the underprivileged and the lower classes. While the implementation of humour and satire comes as comic relief and a Gogolian means of showing evil to point out the possibility of good. The deterministic view of the social environment is combined with a belief in the transformative and educational nature of art and its role in society. Yuri Mann ("Natural School" [Natural'naia shkola] 386) notes that the natural school develops the idea of a "human type" [chelovecheskii vid] associated with biological inevitability of behaviour transplanted onto social reality, which in turn becomes a deterministic and rigid framework that gives birth to types as opposed to individual. Such focus also exemplifies objective, or scientific, nature of the physiology as an impartial observation. Dal', for example, called his sketches a story in pictures as opposed to literature, underscoring the daguerreotypism or the precision of the writer's vision (Peace 206). Striving for scientific objectivity such literature still holds a strong authorial presence, a guiding narration that educates the reader (Mann 1969). Sympathy and attention to the plight of the "little man," crushed by his circumstances, is one such example of authorial intervention in order to captivate and influence the minds of Russian readers.

While natural school is a specific reference for *chernukha* origins within Russian literary tradition, *chernukha* is also indebted to naturalism as a literary movement of the end of the 19th century. Naturalism as a self-conscious movement never developed in the 19th century Russia. But its broad principles

could be seen in the aesthetics of natural school (naturalism appropriates physiological sketch), re-working of this tradition in the later Russian realist prose, the neo-naturalist fiction of the perestroika period and *chernukha* proper. Richard Lehan in *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (2005) takes a profound look at the historical and cultural origins of naturalism and realism, identifying naturalism as an offspring of realism. Naturalism as a literary movement is best exemplified by the French school of Emile Zola, who introduced the term.

Lehan points out several important aspects that distinguish naturalist writing: one of them is a consideration for scientific “objectivity.” Naturalism is influenced by Darwinian theories of heredity and natural selection, and envisions literature as a human science with nuances of human psychology explicable through social and biological determinism. Naturalist narrative is devoid of “sentiment” and grandeur, and instead focuses on the details, the routines of daily existence. Naturalist texts concentrate on the commonalities, the types, the patterns of behaviour rather than individual characters. The naturalist characters lack self-reflection; they are reluctant to exercise free will and do not display the rebellious nature of Romantic heroes. Usually things happen to them. Lehan writes:

The naturalistic novel often made use of a double perspective that resulted in narrative irony, the play between what characters anticipate and what the reader or narrator knows. The naturalist hero was usually inarticulate, lacking a deep inner life and the capacity for moral reflection or expression. He or she was the subject to poverty and suffering that stemmed from biological make-up and the workings of the environment,

culminating in an inevitable sequence of determined events, usually triggered by chance (215).

Characters' passions and desires, ingrained in them either by bad culture (bad social circumstances) or bad nature (Darwinist hereditary explanation) are set on a collision course with the outside reality that is either socially or naturally hostile and devastating.

Chernukha just like naturalism concentrates on the social malaise, introduces social types and showcases exemplary pessimism towards human potential for action or happiness in the harsh reality of Darwinian world. Naturalist writing focused on the “lower depths” – the underprivileged, strained individuals whose passions are low and strong (greed and lust are the most common), entangled in the social web of rules and restrictions, they perish failing often even to arouse sympathy. Naturalism points to the “inextricability of violence and the everyday” (Lehan 214) and provides a sombre look into the workings of early industrial and capitalist civilization, with its class divisions and urban mobility.

And yet – there is no good or evil per se – only power, an authority that either works for or against us. When that power is working for us, we consider it a good; when it is working against us, we consider it evil. Reality becomes contingent, defined in terms of them versus us, subject to personal observation and experience in a world where individual temperament predetermines choice (Lehan 253).

The Naturalist world is also a world of primitive passions – a zoo which exposes the uncivilized nature of human behaviour. Social and natural determinism makes

up a world which is equally indifferent and hostile to human plight, wrongdoing or nobility. *Chernukha* incorporates both some of the natural school aesthetics, as a part of a Russian tradition, and some general principles of naturalism as a broad movement.

Similar to *Petersburg Corners* with its emphasis on the social environment and the fate of a “little man,” the *chernukha* film *Assuage My Sorrows* [Utoli moia pechali] (Prokhorov and Aleksandrov 1989) portrays Moscow communal apartment dwellers. In general, *Assuage My Sorrows* could be described as bytovaia drama – or an everyday drama. It follows a journey through the midlife crisis and estrangement of a married couple, whose personal failures are juxtaposed with the miseries and absurdities of Soviet existence, including also a marginalized, squabbling and manipulative cast of characters inhabiting the communal apartment. In accordance with the naturalist tradition Boris (Sergei Koltakov), the hero of *Assuage My Sorrows*, exemplifies the worst qualities that the environment brings out in the “little man.” Confused and driven by violent impulses that he does not understand, he literally trashes the old woman’s room to drive her out, illustrating one of the sorest points of late Soviet culture.

Disputes over living arrangements were as notorious as customers waiting in interminable lines to obtain scarce items in grocery stores in the 1980s. The public awareness of the housing shortage and constraints was brought about before Glasnost (in literature both that was censored such as *Our Circle* [Svoi krug] (1979) by Liudmila Petrushevskaja or published – such as Yuri Trifonov’s

Exchange [Obmen] (1969)). *Assuage My Sorrows* does not bring a new angle to the social dilemma, but a harsh view that involves violence against an older female character – a socially unacceptable behaviour, in addition to a symptom of the desperation of the entire situation. That desperation of the little man, pressed under circumstances, goes back to the natural school's fascination with Gogol, and what unites characters as pitiful as Akaky Akakievich and Boris. However, Boris is not just pitiful, but is presented as a character who attempts to wield violent power over others. A good example of such power is when Boris takes his son to the barber to shave his head just to spite his wife, while the boy cries out against such a violation. The shaved head evokes associations with coercive military conscription, the penitentiary, and disease attributed to bad hygiene. Such an action by a parent suggests abuse and humiliation.

But the most controversial scene in the film almost got it shelved and also exemplifies a certain break between the *chernukha* tradition and natural school aesthetics or those of naturalism. According to the *Soviet Screen Journal* [Sovetskii Ekran] (Issue 7, 1989), the film fought an uphill battle with the censorship bureaucracy because the filmmakers stubbornly refused to cut out one scene. The scene in question drew attention from critics as well and was also used to exemplify *chernukha* in film (Graham 16-17). The sequence entails a sexual advance by Boris towards a young girl who winds up in the same hard-fought-over room. Boris essentially forces sex on her, though abstaining from violence, while she just keeps begging him to stop; afterwards we learn that they become a

couple. Despite the low-key violence, and the absence of an explicit depiction of the intercourse, the rape scene remains disturbing. Seth Graham mentions the sacrilegious overtones of the film – the intercourse takes place under an icon of the Mother of God with the same title from which the film takes its name (16).

However, what outraged the censorship committee was not the combination of religious symbol and sexual activity, but that before engaging in sex, the protagonist takes off his clothes in a strange strip tease dance and jumps on the bed with his socks on. It was the socks that drove the bureaucrats to the brink and they demanded it cut. The strip tease dance is neither particularly sexual nor directed at the young woman as foreplay. The dance is not the only provocative scene like this – an alcoholic in failed recovery dances on a dining table, returning to his habits with a vengeance. Boris also performs a drunken dance in a dance class earlier on. In each instance, the abrupt breaking into movement serves as a defiant gesture – a manifestation of despair that runs so deep only a self-mocking jerking around can express it. It is significant that the dance is followed by rape – an expression of the destructive impulse behind the dance. Half-dressed, half-sane the protagonist of *Assuage My Sorrows* crosses that final line, after which rape becomes a mundane event, which is then followed by a reconciliation of two strangers in bed and their subsequent cohabitation. The bewildered members of the censorship committee could not pin down the precise nature of the deviant scene and concentrated on the wretched socks, claiming that they degrade the humans about to engage in a sexual act and the seriousness of the

abuse committed in it.

The macabre combination of the grotesque and violence that seem to suggest both the personal humiliation of the “little man” and the terror that is born out of his impossible condition is explored by Gogol in *The Overcoat* – Akaky becomes a vengeful ghost in the end. It is also contemplated by Nekrasov when he describes the wretched existence of the dwellers of the Trostnikov’s apartment. The sequence in *Assuage My Sorrows* combines realist techniques that look into the mundane aspects of evil, suggesting a rather hopeless look at human nature as permanently corrupt and disfigured by the harsh conditions of existence. These conditions, prominent throughout *Assuage My Sorrows*, tell us about lost and abused young people, discarded and worthless middle-aged individuals, and in a single glimpse of hope – the wise old woman (Varvara Soshalskaya), whose life, however, is the epitome of totalitarian oppression. In the film, despite his violent character, Boris remains a social and sexual failure. Confused and unemployed, he oscillates between humiliating his estranged wife (Elena Safonova) and begging for her attention, seeking the older woman’s advice and frightening her with his violent behaviour, raping the young girl and becoming her boyfriend. The scene of the drunken dance at the dance studio, which Boris claims to be a reflection of his “Russianness,” is a thinly disguised social metaphor typical for natural school.

Assuage My Sorrows starts as a portrait of the middle-age crisis and family dysfunction and morphs into a canvas of the predatory behaviour that social

problems like alcoholism and a housing shortage can inspire (and Boris is only an occasional focal point in this broad picture). The “sociological critique” comes with sweeping generalizations and is in unison with a political and journalistic discourse of the time, fulfilling the moral duty that the time demanded of art as the herald of transformative changes. In this sense *Assuage My Sorrows* is an heir to the natural school pathos of social change and perestroika spirit of denunciation and uncovering of the hidden truths.

Chernukha picks up the rhetoric common in natural school and echoed in the perestroika public discourse. It presents the “human comedy” of Soviet life, investment in ordinary people, and an interest in the descriptive detail of daily routine. As the natural school did before, *chernukha* also uses grim and gritty narrative in combination with a pitch for social justice, and an exposition of Soviet state-wide dysfunction. In this sense, *chernukha* has a lot in common with those documentaries and non-fiction investigations into the ills of Soviet society that reached their peak of popularity in the 1980s. Documentaries such as *Is It Easy to Be Young?* [Vai viegli but jaunam?/Legko li byt’ molodym?] (Juris Podnieks 1987) and *This Is No Way To Live* [Tak zhit’ nel’zia] (Stanislav Govorukhin 1990) enjoyed an unprecedented success and viewership by mounting their unpleasant evidence in front of a shocked public. *This Is No Way To Live* starts with pictures from the rape and murder crime scene and ends with an observation of the debased alcoholic lifestyle, endless food line-ups, and generally degenerated condition of the Soviet citizens. Like physiological sketches from the

slums of 19th century Petersburg, the semi-documentary genres of perestroika, including non-fiction essays on politically and socially relevant topics [publitsistika], journalism and documentary filmmaking per se, display the quality of “j’accuse,” with the political agenda of the authors rarely disguised. *Is It Easy to Be Young?* offers a compassionate look at younger generation with all the diversity of youth subcultures and a subversive nationalist subtext. For example, the teenagers all talk Latvian in the film, while Russian is reserved for the official discourse of prosecution and bureaucracy. *This Is No Way To Live* clearly identifies the religious revival and conservative monarchist values as a possible solution to Russia’s social ills, as demonstrated amply in the film and its sequel *Russia That We Lost* [Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali] (1991).

In a certain sense *chernukha* is positioned in between the documentary and expository pathos of perestroika cinema vérité and the absurdist film allegories of Soviet existence that play out the tension between the grave and the humorous – a trend started by the ground-breaking *Repentance* [Monanieba/Pokaianie] (Tengiz Abuladze 1984, made in 1984, released 1987). *The Zero City* [Gorod zero] (Karen Shakhnazarov 1988) or *The Fountain* [Fontan] (Yuri Mamin 1989) are good examples of absurd or grotesque comedies that are fond of *chernukha*-like narrative strategies, but are still safely couched in the satirical genre. In these films, the critique of Soviet social rituals and ideology, as well as multiple problems of the late Soviet period, such as a deficit of consumer goods or poor infrastructure, become a source of humour. In *The Zero City* the protagonist visits

a city, where a local government office has a naked secretary, who otherwise acts perfectly normal, the rehabilitation of rock-n-roll is in its full swing in accord with the new party line, and the hero is forced to eat a cake in the shape of his own head. *The Zero City* is made in the genre of absurdist allegory, which happened to be a popular form in the 1980s. *Whit Monday* [Dukhov den'] (Sergei Sel'ianov 1990), *The Leg* [Noga] (Nikita Tiagunov 1991), *Kiks* (Sergei Livnev 1991) are just some films that are also part of this trend.

In *The Fountain* the inhabitants of the apartment building try to prevent the roof from collapsing by supporting it with their shoulders, a coveted job because it is rewarded with free vodka. Though much of the subject matter in the film is familiar *chernukha* material – difficult living conditions, family squabbles, drinking problem, deficit and small salaries – the presentation is largely different, as *The Fountain* employs all the devices of a screwball comedy. This remains true until a woman, who is arrested for selling flowers she grows in her apartment in order to supplement her salary, cries into a TV camera rushed to the scene of her crime by reporters seeking hot journalist content. In the sequence the woman's face occupies the whole screen, with the tears and smeared makeup, she laments and howls about the impossibility of living the way she does. This unsettling moment is framed simultaneously as voyeurism, the viewer being detached twice through the diegetic camera and the real frame – a screen within the screen – and a melodramatic exaggeration and exposure to intense emotions. The jarring effect produces a rare moment of gravity and intensity in the comedy. The *chernukha*-

like insertion comes with excessively unsettling visuals (*mis-en-abime*) and narration (emotional overexposure).

While *The Fountain* ultimately rejects “excessive voltage” to maintain its generic integrity, *chernukha* films consistently offer a certain viscerally unpleasant excess. In the case of *Assuage My Sorrows* it is the “outrageous socks” of a macabre dance – a surplus element that to a certain degree negates the tradition of realist social critique – it does not make sense, nor does it provide a plausible element of descriptive poetics of natural school. Seth Graham calls this impulse “antistroika” (14) – an antithetic nihilistic rejection of the perestroika reformist spirit. *Chernukha* portrays typical characters in typical circumstances, as sanctioned by cultural tradition, and exposing the plight of the underprivileged. But it never takes advantage of the satirical or ironic discourse prevalent in the Gogolian tradition and otherwise prominent in perestroika cinema. Neither does *chernukha* offer an overt lesson in social dogma. The absence of satire and an overarching didactic paradigm is what distinguishes *chernukha* films. Eliot Borenstein argues that:

[*Chernukha*’s] very role in ideological debates gave it a distinct moral character... it functioned as a satire without necessarily being satirical — that is, it exposed flaws and inspired outrage among readers/viewers who presumably would want to live in a different world. Hence violence and horror became tantamount to truth telling (13).

Chernukha is clearly indebted to the perestroika discourse of uncovering the “Truth” after years of suppression and varnishing. It also relies on the 19th

century tradition of art's transformative power to achieve social justice and art's affinity with an underprivileged and suffering individual. At the same time *chernukha* seems to relish the ambivalence of grotesque visceral aesthetics juxtaposed with an objective naturalist narration, the social exposition with absent "pointing to good through evil." Most perestroika productions or texts do not flaunt such ambivalence (like *This Is No Way To Live* or some of the perestroika neo-naturalist texts I will be looking at, like *The Humble Cemetery*). As I will try to show in this work, *chernukha* emphasizes transgression, excess, or what could be dubbed the "outrageous socks syndrome" that overshadow the moral context of Glasnost quest for truth or make it ambiguous.

Chernukha became a perplexing phenomenon in recent Russian history that calls upon itself consistent outrage and critical reassessment. As recently as last year *chernukha* resurfaced in the discussion around *The School* [Shkola] (dir. by Valeria Gai-Germanika), the television series from 2010. *Chernukha* seems to contain many elements specific and easily identifiable from the cultural history, but somehow it does not fit completely within these cultural frameworks, there is always an excessive element [izlishek] that defies the cultural norm. *Chernukha*, I argue, is primarily transgressive, and it often dismantles discursive constructions it deliberately evokes and mimics.

Michel Foucault (1977) argues that the nature of transgression is like a "lightning" that illuminates, and therefore, defines, the divides, the "darkness" around it. Similarly, *chernukha* illuminates other cultural discourses, but its

unique positions is not that of inheritance and compliance but that of transgression. And while all the other components that scholars point out are indisputably present in *chernukha* productions, I argue, they do not exclusively define *chernukha*. *Assuage My Sorrows* disturbs the viewer not with naturalist focus on the housing problem, or the shocking rape, or a morality critique of lost values (though it does make all these points too). It makes its point with a pair of socks, strange dances of rage, and a visceral quality of unsettling and senseless actions. These actions transgress the realm of cultural inscription or recognizable and comfortable cultural representations.

Another example of how *chernukha* combines alleged realism with an unsettling and excessive vision is exemplified in *A School of Violence and Evil* [Shkola zla i naziliia] – an article by Oleg Kovalov (1988). The article looks at a *chernukha* youth film *My Name Is Harlequin* [Menia zovut Arlekino] (Valery Rybarev 1988), which tells a narrative of gang violence among working class youth. Kovalov comes to the conclusion that the film’s greatest merit lies in the cold, matter-of-fact portrayal of urban youth as agents of senseless violence. Kovalov, a renowned Russian documentary director, disagrees with the usual criticism levied against *chernukha* films – the absence of the “guiding light” and “the moral of the story.” On the contrary, the sheer arbitrariness of violence and gratuitous sleaze (drinking, profanity, nudity) in the film suggests to him an important lesson on the nature of evil as a casual state of things with no justification and no meaning.

The teenage gangs engage in violence with ease and a scary arbitrariness – chasing a man with a dog on the street simply because they can, or vengefully fighting local skinheads. Naturally the violence escalates culminating in yet another rape scene, shot in a mundane and brutal manner. The protagonist – nicknamed Harlequin (Oleg Fomin) – is made to watch his girlfriend (Svetlana Kopylova) raped as we hear her muffled screams and see her legs thrashing helplessly in a long shot that pans across the green back yard of a collective farm. The casualness of the rape, meant as a “lesson” not to mess with a rival gang, is no different than the street fights, the foul mouthed exchanges and other unsightly deeds depicted previously in the film. Amazed at the swift transfer from the ranks of torturer to victim, the hero pleads for death, of all things, mumbling, through tears, “kill me, kill me.” The calamity of events is juxtaposed to the serenity and detachment of the green yard and the panning long shot camerawork. *Chernukha* is mostly an urban genre and the contrast of the countryside, which appears unexpectedly at the end of the film, also adds to the jarring effect of protagonist’s unusual reaction. Wouldn’t he be better off gathering his pals and avenging his girlfriend, than pathetically pleading for death?

Rape is notorious in *chernukha*, and another film that almost duplicates the Harlequin scene is *Taxi Blues* [Taksi bliuz] (Pavel Lungin 1990), in which a “semi-forceful” sexual encounter is shot in a medium shot. A distance makes the scene particularly poignant and ugly – we see the thrashing legs of the helpless woman and the brutality of a man in a trashed dirty apartment. Another sex scene

in *Taxi Blues* takes place in a meat processing facility, and, in *Harlequin*, a dingy storage room – both amidst trashy, filthy surroundings. The visceral reaction and horror the scene elicits in Harlequin himself points to *chernukha*'s ambiguous play between a “mean-street” narrative of gangster violence and a transgressive rendition of that violence. The critique of Socialism is obvious as the perestroika slogans in the film, but is also irreducible to the violent impulses that permeate it. The “school of violence and evil” acquires almost metaphysical meaning in Kovalov's interpretation. *Chernukha* thrives on the habitual and inescapable nature of evil and the absence of a counteractive force that would point to times and places beyond its bleak and hopeless worldview.

Extreme violence, physicality, and bleakness are not new to cinema. Film noir, for example, despite its bleak worldview, offers a juxtaposition of right and wrong, darkness and light. Films that critique the social contract under capitalism, like Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1971), or Lindsay Anderson's *Brittania Hospital* (1982), contain satirical absurdist elements. Works by directors like Lars von Trier and Michael Haneke offer an experimental auteurist approach to violence and the perils of individual and social existence. Similarly recent “new French extremity” (Quandt 2004) – brutally violent and physical, often borrowing from horror torture or torture porn genres, films by French art house directors like François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat or Bruno Dumont could be argued as couched in artistic experimentation. *Chernukha* is a representational misfit: ill-defined as a morality tale (evil and

bleakness overwhelm), a social critique (there is no clear lesson to be learnt) or exploitation genre (the violence or sexuality are not attractive).

2. Perestroika Literature, Neo-naturalism and Chernukha

In addition to the natural school of the 19th century, *chernukha* in cinema and literature has ties to 20th century Russian literary traditions. One of them is the dissident literature that exposed Soviet totalitarian politics – the GULAG narratives, such as prose by Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Varlaam Shalamov. These two men, though sharing similar subject matter, are very different authors in terms of vision and style. Solzhenitsyn is still a controversial figure in Russia today due to his outspoken conservative positions evident in his fiction and non-fiction. More like moralists of the 19th century, if not more forcefully, Solzhenitsyn is driven by the belief in the educational function of art and the necessity of art to uphold some ideological truth. This is hardly surprising taking into account his affiliation with the village prose movement – a 20th century Russian literary trend (it includes such novelists as Valentin Rasputin and Viktor Astaf'ev). Village prose is characterized by several aspects that tie it to the 19th century cultural tradition. One is a search for authenticity, usually found in the provincial and rural environment, similar to Tolstoy's teachings and general fascination with peasants at the end of the 19th century. Then, true to the revival of Slavophile ideology, the official culture is viewed as untrue and deeply alien to traditional Russian identity. As in the natural school, there is a strong didactic

authorial presence that shapes the narrative, in most cases unambiguously. The village prose writers can be described as new Slavophiles.

Unlike village prose Varlaam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* [Kolymskie rasskazy] (first publication in Russian 1978), set in the GULAGs, where the author spent twenty plus years, have a unique style that combines the matter-of-fact narration of atrocities with a passionate empathy for the victims of camps. Shalamov texts bear a poetic testimony to the suffering of the wrongly accused rather than engage in expository politics. What unites the GULAG authors, or village prose writers, with *chernukha* is the grave subject matter and the breaking of taboos of Soviet censorship. Still, *chernukha* films rarely display the measured and poetic attitude of Shalamov works or Solzhenitsyn's social didacticism.

Chernukha seems to have more in common with the context of other perestroika literature, such as a trend labelled neo-naturalism, and the *publitsistika* genre (non-fiction essays on politically and socially relevant topics). The late 1980s witnessed the rapid "un-shelving" of previously censored texts, classics, for instance, like *Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov (finished 1940; finalized edition 1990) or *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak (finished 1955; published in USSR in 1988) and the works by Soviet dissidents. The ambiguous, satirical and anti-Soviet literary texts have found new popularity. *Publitsistika* followed thematically in satirizing and exposing various facets of social and political life that were previously tabooed. In the late 1980s, literature would often merge with *publitsistika* as a channel for political and social investigation of

the Soviet past, combining political, social, and personal perspectives. *The White Garments* [Belye odezhdy] (1988) by Aleksandr Dudintsev, *The Bison* [Zubr] (1987) by Daniil Granin are novels that deal with complicated patches of Soviet history. They are good examples of fiction that take a *publitsistika* turn.

Predictably, perestroika's denunciatory literature had an emphasis on subject matter, previously censored topics, being fictional works that pursue the truth, defined as a social and political exposition of injustices. None of the texts I mentioned are "bad" literature – Solzhenitsyn is a Nobel Prize winner, *White Garments* won a prestigious State Literary Prize in 1988 – but their artistic reputation is overshadowed by the ideological implications of the texts. Unlike *chernukha* cinema, they were never condemned to be in bad taste or "too much to bear."

Contemporary writer, Victor Erofeev, in his influential essay *Soviet Literature: In Memoriam* [Pominki po sovetsoi literature] (1989), celebrated the end of the official mode of Socialist Realism with its schematic and ideological bent. For Erofeev the new literature returns to formalist ideas where the focus is aesthetics. However, nothing could be farther from the truth in mainstream perestroika literature. Kathleen Parthe (2004) writes:

Russian literature was described as a "map" on which the country's borders were being reconfigured, where previous errors were being corrected and blank spots filled in, as was in fact the case with maps of the USSR which had in the past been deliberately erroneous. A related image for these years was of an archeological dig, with layers upon layers of the past revealed (189).

Both literature and cinema in the perestroika era carried the idea of accountability of arts in the face of reality. They upheld the conviction that arts serve their country and their people as the pursuers and protectors of truth – a mission that was tainted by the Soviet years of conformity, censorship, and hypocrisy.

This desire to excavate, dissect, expose was not a new trend in Russian culture, but on the contrary, fit in quite well with the previous tradition of natural school and realism. Literature sought social justice in the revolutionary form of rejecting the social system or mystical ideas on Russia's destiny. Richard Peace writes that "... another aspect of the literary atmosphere of that time [was] the conviction that the genuine writer must almost invariably reject official government viewpoints" (190). Both village prose and publitsistika ally themselves with this view. The paradox in defining *chernukha* lies exactly in the fact that most of the perestroika arts were lauded and welcomed as a breath of fresh air, not the suffocating grip of an abject and objectionable worldview.

Chernukha literature as a part of perestroika literature is an ambiguous term. Other labels, close to *chernukha* literature, included "tough and cruel" prose [zhestkaia i zhestokaia proza] (Deming Brown 1993; N.N. Schneidman 1995):

The harsh or 'tough' prose... verges on naturalism and physiological sketch. It is close in tone and diction to the so-called... 'cruel prose', and to '*chernukha*,' the profane slang used to portray the seamy sides of Russian life. Harsh prose is close in spirit to the so-called... 'denunciatory prose,' the objective of which is to uncover the transgressions and abuse of power by the former Soviet regime (Schneidman 45).

However, no criteria have been defined that separates *chernukha* in terms of style and actual literary method. When one talks about *chernukha* – it almost always implies visual art – he or she is usually referring to film or television. *Chernukha* literature is discussed largely in terms of neo-naturalism (Lipovetsky 1999); denunciatory prose that shocks the public and aims at exposing previously taboo topics (Brown); and the fiction that indulges in negative and “seedy” aspects of life (as in the quote above). Konstantin Kustanovich (1992) argues that naturalism compares to perestroika neo-naturalist prose in terms of attention to the low life of the underprivileged from the perspective of social determinism and inherent pessimism:

... each of the writers [Kaledin, Popov, Petrushevskaya]... depicts a reality in which... such negative aspects of human experience as, for instance, cruelty, injustice, physical suffering and immorality are dominant and irremediable (87).

Neo-naturalism seems to inherit the elements of the natural school legacy, such as exposition of social ills, attention to the unattractive subject matter in attempt to create a “daguerreotype” of reality, and sympathy for the “little man.” It also makes use of naturalism of the late 19th century, and such naturalist staples as pessimistic outlook on human nature and relations and Darwinian social determinism.

In what follows, I will look at three writers who were identified as “chernukha” by various critics and who venture into the taboo topics (Viktor Astaf’ev), describe a “seedy” marginal lifestyle (Sergei Kaledin), and focus on the

everyday as a source of violence and suffering (Liudmila Petrushevskaya). All these writers were referred to as *chernukha*, sometimes broadly understood as neo-naturalism, signalling the return to topics and concerns of the natural school: the every day, the little man, the social ills and marginalized identities. They were also argued to be employing concepts of naturalist pessimism and determinism about social life and individual place in it. Since there are virtually no texts that deal straightforwardly with *chernukha* literature, with the exception of the articles by Lipovetsky (1999) and Andrei Zorin (1992), it is helpful that both these critics analyze the same authors. My goal, however, is to look at how these authors relate to *chernukha* in cinema and to natural school and naturalism as traditions that feed *chernukha*. My selection is motivated by the fact that all three authors have a distinct relationship with the contemporary perestroika culture of exposition and denunciation, and all three emphasize a different aspect of natural school poetics in their writings. Astaf'ev's village prose takes up the denunciatory moralistic tone, Kaledin explores the theme of the little man, and Petrushevskaya, the least conventional of all, looks into human relations and the everyday in correlation to impossible social conditions.

a) Case One: Viktor Astaf'ev

The film and literature of perestroika, and particularly *chernukha*, intersect in a number of ways: the shocking subject matter that aims to reveal and expose, the attention to ordinary people crushed by the system, and stories that do not shy away from previous taboos, but like *chernukha* visuals, indulge in prolonged

scenes of rape, violence, murder etc. A case in point is the texts by Viktor Astaf'ev. Originally a "village prose" writer, his perestroika works are brimming with didacticism and disgust at the state of affairs in the Soviet Union. Included in the ranks of *chernukha* literature by Mark Lipovetsky, Astaf'ev blends a conservative crusade against corrupt mores with the excessive brutality of his narratives. The short story *Lyudochka* (1989) lingers on descriptive details the reader wishes she did not know. The short story is about a dim-witted village girl that comes to the city, is raped, and then hangs herself. Her suicide is long and descriptive:

Людочка взобралась на клыком торчащий из ствола тополя окостенелый обломыш, ощупала его чуткой ступней, утвердилась, потянула петельку к себе, продела в нее голову, сказала шепотом: «Боже милостивый, Боже милосердный... Ну не достойна же... — и перескочила на тех, кто ближе: — Гавриловна! Мама! Отчим! Как тебя и зовут-то, не спросила. Люди добрые, простите! И ты Господи, прости меня, хоть я и недостойна, я даже не знаю, есть ли Ты?.. Если есть, прости, все равно я значок комсомольский потеряла, никто и не спрашивал про значок. Никто и ни про что не спрашивал — никому до меня нет дела...»

...

Людочка никогда не интересовалась удавленниками и не знала, что у них некрасиво выпяливается язык, непременно происходит мочеиспускание. Она успела лишь почувствовать, как стало горячо и больно в ее недре, она догадалась, где болит, попробовала схватиться за петлю, чтоб освободиться, цапнула по веревочке судорожными пальцами, но только поцарапала шею и успела еще услышать кожей струйку, начавшую течь и тут же иссякшую. Сердце начало увеличиваться, разбухать, ему сделалось тесно в сужающейся груди. Оно должно было проломить ребра, разорвать грудь — такое в нем напряжение получилось, такая рубка началась. Но сердце быстро устало, ослабло, давай свертываться, стихать, уменьшаться и, когда сделалось всего с орешек величиной, покатилося, покатилося вниз, выпало, унеслось без звука и следа куда-то в пустоту.

И тут же всякая боль и муки всякие оставили Людочку, отлетели от ее

тела. А душа? Да кому она нужна, та простенькая, в простенькой, в обыкновенной плоти ютившаяся душа? (106-107)

Lyudochka climbed up on to the ossified remains of a bough that jutted out from the trunk of the poplar like a tusk, tested this sliver gingerly, with the sensitive sole of her foot, steadied herself, pulled the noose towards her, put her head through it and said in a whisper: 'Kind God, Merciful God...but then, I'm not worthy...' And she switched to those who were closer to her: "Gavrilovna! Mama! Stepfather! I never even asked you what your name was. Good people, forgive me! And you, Lord, forgive me, even though I am unworthy, I don't even know whether you exist or not...If you exist, forgive me, in any case I lost my Komsomol badge long ago. No one even bothered to ask about that badge. No one asked me about anything — no one cares about me..."

Lyudochka had never taken any interest in what happens to people who hang themselves and didn't know that their tongues stick out horribly and that they invariably urinate. She had just about enough time to feel how everything had become painful and hot deep inside her, she guessed where the pain was, and tried to grab hold of the noose in order to free herself, snatched at the cord with frenzied fingers, but only succeeded in scratching her neck, and was also just able to sense a warm trickle which dried up almost as soon as it started to flow. Her heart began to expand, to swell up, there was no longer any room for it in her ever-tightening breast, the space available there was getting smaller and smaller. It seemed as if her heart was bound to break her ribs and tear open her chest: the pressure in it was so great, its blows, its strokes so powerful. But her heart soon got tired, it grew weak, started to contract, grow quiet, grow smaller, and when it had shrunk to the size of a walnut, it started to slow down, and then disappeared without a sound and without a trace, borne away somewhere into the emptiness.

And then all the pain and all the sufferings left Lyudochka, flying away from her body, and stopped for ever. And her soul? But who needs it, that simplest of souls, which had taken refuge in the simplest, most ordinary of bodies? (65–66)

This short story would make a very good *chernukha* film – the text itself provides a vivid description analogous to *chernukha's* shocking visual penchant for rape and brutality. Structurally, however, Astaf'ev's story is not like a *chernukha* film

at all with its indiscriminate palette of misery and violence. *Chernukha* film rarely presents a clear moral of the story – the bleakness and suffering in it perpetuate themselves usually without a lament for the better days or the hint of a better future.

Astaf'ev's story is framed as a first-person recollection of a "simple and banal story" that somehow touched the narrator. Such literary framing device was common in the natural school with Nekrasov's *Petersburg Corners* being one example. *Lyudochka* is divided into descriptive parts that are meant to exemplify life in the village, life in the small town, the digressions into different characters' circumstances that define them as types rather than individuals. The narrator laments the loss of authenticity of village life and the state of mores in the towns, juxtaposing these didactic passages with a negatively charged description of a discotheque, where men assault girls, brutal detailed description of Lyudochka's rape in the park, her suicide, and the revenge of her stepfather.

It might seem schizophrenic that the text oscillates between didactic preaching and sadistic description of the mechanics of suicide, it really is not. Astaf'ev's story is a text of wrath – it is driven by revulsion, it is charged ideologically and therefore charged emotionally. The moral revulsion that the author feels is mirrored by the revulsion a reader must feel, confronted with the brutal detail in the story. It is a perfect match between authorial intention and execution of text – and in this sense *Lyudochka* is half-pamphlet and half-literature: a nod to *publitsistika* and the denunciatory pathos of perestroika non-

fiction. Though the subject matter and shocking value of both Astaf'ev's text and *chernukha* films are the same – the underlying drive is different. *Chernukha* films are repulsive but not angry. The characters are suffering or demented but never raging. In fact, to express rage, Lyudochka needs its narrator – while Lyudochka's actual voice and plight, like that of so many *chernukha* characters, is never actually heard.

Lyudochka, however, is a good example of how description overwhelms the story-line – as seen in the physiological sketch back in the Nekrasov's era. The storyline, while simple, is constructed via digressions and lengthy descriptions that serve not to illuminate Lyudochka's individuality, but the environment she lives in, while the text builds up the anger and revulsion that culminate in her suicide. In many *chernukha* films descriptions are emphasized as well. In *Little Vera* [Malen'kaia Vera] (Vasily Pichul 1988), for example, the opening and closing shots pan across an industrial wasteland that surrounds the small town where Vera (Natalya Negoda) lives, highlighting the fact that the film takes place in a literal dump and no good can come of it. A similar effect is achieved in the repetitive shots of the dumpster with hungry homeless dogs rummaging around it in *Dogs' Feast* [Sobachii pir] (Leonid Menaker 1990). Long descriptive sequences inside shabby apartments or other unsightly locations exist in virtually every film, highlighting the impossible social milieus. They are analogous to the narrative description that natural school offered over a century ago.

Another good example is *God's Tramp* [Bich Bozhii] (Oleg Fialko 1988), a film of the corruption and class disparity between former classmates, one of whom is a marginalized ex-con (Viktor Proskurin) and the other a ruthless apparatchik (Aleksandr Martynov). The beginning of the film features a reportage-like sequence in a public toilet, achieving, in typical *chernukha* fashion, several things at once with a dark kind of “shock and awe” strategy. It shows the unbearable crowdedness of the space, when the hand-held camera carves its way, panning around the impoverished and unsightly interior. In addition, it obviously delights in the obscenity of showing urinating men on the big screen. As if that was not enough it also features a tired middle-aged cleaning lady who indifferently goes about her business amidst men pushing their way to the toilets and taking care of their needs, as other men document the spectacle on camera soliciting interviews at the urinals. The point of the sequence remains obscure since it does not serve any narrative function whatsoever, and the toilet is neither mentioned nor depicted again. Nor is it hardly an allegory, since most of the film deals with moral corruption among the privileged and the marginalization of ordinary honest folk. The only rationale behind the sequence is that it is a “descriptive provocation.”

In a sense it is a digression like in Astaf'ev's text. But unlike Astaf'ev's text, the sequence does not offer any insights into the regrettable or lamentable nature of its characters, nor even the environment they live in. Naturalist descriptive sequences could serve diegetic (shabby apartments) or allegoric

(industrial wasteland) purposes in *chernukha* film. But the beginning of *God's Tramp* creates a certain rupture – is it going to be a movie about the wretched condition of Soviet public bathrooms? The film also cuts from the previous introductory scene of the privileged hero at school to the underprivileged hero (the camera does not show him right away) in the public bathroom, suggesting a sad parallel between the two men and institutions. But mostly the sequence is an attention grabber and a provocation to the viewer on several levels. The beginning sequence disguises itself as a documentary. It disorients the viewer before it is clear that the camera is fictional or that there is a character whom it is following. Although description over story is an important part of both neo-naturalism and *chernukha* aesthetics, this sequence shows that *chernukha's* description does not necessarily follow the effect of digression into an environment. Digression in *chernukha* may also serve as a device of shocking alienation, creating a similar jarring and unsettling effect similar to *Assuage My Sorrows* and *My Name is Harlequin*. *Chernukha*, in other words, does have many tropes in common with natural school or neo-naturalist poetics of perestroika literature, but then it often exceeds and subverts them.

b) Case Two: Sergei Kaledin

Similarly naturalist, but not didactic and more removed from the publitsistika denunciatory discourse, is *The Humble Cemetery* [Smirennoe kladbishche] – the 1987 perestroika novella that brought Sergei Kaledin fame. The novella depicts the lives of cemetery workers. Unlike Astaf'ev who uses fictional narrator to

frame his text and give it a distinct opinion, Kaledin adopts a *skaz* narrative – duplicating the voice of its characters throughout the novella. *Skaz*, a term pioneered by Boris Eichenbaum (1918), refers to a device in which the literary narration adopts a particular discourse to immerse the reader in the linguistic authenticity of the characters and their world. And though the novella is written in third person, its specific language, filled with slang and colloquialisms, creates an atmosphere of a working-class destitute community. This third-person narration functions as if it belongs to the main character, a grave-digger named Sparrow, who is also an alcoholic ex-con with a severe mental disability. The lives of the members of the grave-digging team and their daily routines and concerns constitute the text.

Kaledin maintains the grave-diggers' language and attitudes but abstains from the value judgement on their less than lawful commonplace practices, like stealing a golden cap crown from the dead:

Рыжих — зубов золотых — он не искал. В бесхозе какие рыжие? Если родственники лет двадцать — тридцать на могилу не навещают, забыли или сами перемерли, то и покойник у них соответствующий — без золота. Рыжие — те в ухоженных, с памятниками (219).

He didn't bother looking for coppernobs — gold teeth. Why should you find them in an ownerless? If the relatives haven't visited the grave for twenty, thirty years, have forgotten it or are dead themselves, then the deceased'll be that kind too — no gold. You only get coppernobs in the well-looked-after graves — the ones with monuments on (18).

The imitation of the characters' speech achieves several effects that are important in neo-naturalist poetics. An element of empathy, recognition of the plight of the

“little man,” is brought about by the closeness of the character. Sparrow’s dubious actions (like selling the better grave spots) and good deeds (digging a nice grave for a dead priest) ring true and authentic for the character, whose mind the narrative inhabits for the larger part of the text. Similar eye-witness effect Nekrasov achieves in *Petersburg Corners*, when he narrates the story from Trostnikov’s point of view.

The text uses the same technique with the other grave-diggers, though to a lesser extent. The stylistic choices for each character are not significant, creating an illusion of uniformity of thought and attitude among them. That does not come as a surprise since all the grave-diggers are in the same social circumstance. It is the spirit of natural school inquiry – the 1980s grave-diggers are no different than Petersburg organ-grinders, street-sweepers or other types that the physiological sketch explored in the 1840s. Their lack of individuality – they all seem to be an extension of Sparrow – is also a naturalist proof that the environment creates and shapes the individual. Interestingly, all of the characters keep referring to themselves in third person, creating an interchangeable flow between the literary artifice and the “true-to-life” reality of the “lower depths.”

The text, therefore, achieves an empathetic personal narration while allowing room for the descriptive narration that traces the minute details and routines of the grave-diggers’:

Он разметил будущую могилу: четыре лопаты – в головах, три – в ногах, и так, чтобы в длину метра полтора, не более. Это окно, чтобы копать меньше. На всю длину гроба потом подбоем выбирать

надо. А раз гроб – колода – выше и шире обычного, варшавского, то и подбой чуть не с самой поверхности, вглубь удлиняя, выбирать придется. И стенки отвесно вести: заузишь, не дай Бог, колода застрянет в распор – назад не вытянешь. Летом, правда, еще полбеда: подтесать лопатами землю с боков – и залезет как миленький. А зимой — пиши пропало: земля каменная – лопатой не подтешешь. На крышку гроба приходится прыгать, ломami шерудить. Какое уж тут, на хрен, благоговение к ритуалу. Родичи выражаются, и на вознаграждении сказывается (216-217).

He measured it out: four spades at the head, three at the feet, and not more than five foot or so long. Open it up like that to give yourself less to dig. Then you had to dig down the whole coffin's length. And if it was one of them sarcophaguses it'd be longer and wider than usual, so you'd have to start breasting right from the top almost, lengthening the spade movements as you went. And be sure to make the walls good and sheer: if they funnelled in towards the bottom, God forbid, the coffin'd get wedged in — you'd never drag it out. In summer it mightn't be too bad: you could chip the earth away at the sides, and it'd slip down sweet as pie. But in winter, when the ground's hard as iron and you can hardly get a spade in — forget it. You'd have to jump up and down on the coffin lid, get out the crowbars. Very bleedin' respectful that'd look an' all! Then you'd have the relatives getting uppity, and do yourself out of a good tip (14–15).

In the quote above, death is, of course, trivialized by a juxtaposition with pragmatic and cynical concerns. While *Humble Cemetery* is sympathetic to the grave-diggers, it does not concern itself with respect for the dead or for their survivors. This gesture underscores an important quality that is visible in *chernukha* cinema as well – the grave-diggers' world is a closed environment that functions in its own way. It has no correlation to the outside world except as a generalized and weak allegory that a “yawning coffin awaits us all” [i vsekh nas grob, zevaia, zhdet], as Pushkin once put it. So if the cemetery is a microcosm it is a sealed one – that does not allow us to see beyond the point of view of the grave-diggers, creating a depressing and self-suffocating world of misfortune.

This insulated nature of the environment at the cemetery is especially evident when Sparrow undergoes a criminal trial. The trial itself is presented in a Kafkaesque manner. Sparrow clearly loses control and does not understand the laws of this other world:

Воробей вышел из прокуратуры. Дрожащими руками сунул сигарету в рот, затянулся... И еще, еще... И только когда все нутро заполнилось ядовитым, режущим дымом, опомнился: не тем концом сигарету закурил – фильтром. Он отдышался, вытер глаза. Пройдет!.. В шесть секунд!.. Главное, там — обошлось. И характеристику прочел, и ходатайство из треста. В суд передали, но обещали, что обойдется или дадут условно. Только чтоб документы все на суде были. Хорошо, если не сидеть. С такой башкой много не насидишь – до первой драки (231).

Sparrow came out of the public prosecutor's, put a cigarette in his mouth with trembling hands, took a drag...And another, and another...And only when his lungs were completely full of poisonous, acrid smoke did he twig: he'd lit the cigarette at the wrong end: he was smoking the filter. He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. It'd pass! Pass in a tick! The main thing was, it'd worked out all right in there. He'd read the character reference and the letter of support from head office. They'd instituted court proceedings, but they'd promised him he'd get off or get a suspended sentence. He was to make sure all the documents were there in time for the trial. The main thing was not to get sent down. Otherwise, with his head in the shape it was he wouldn't stand it long — the first fight'd finish him off (38–39).

Kaledin's text undoubtedly belongs to perestroika – devoting the novella to taboo subject matter, narrating about lives that were not part of Soviet public discourse. The text is ruthless enough to show its heroes the way they are – criminal, alcoholic, destitute, greedy, abusive and narrow-minded – a picture of a working man that is a far cry from Socialist Realist glorification of the proletariat. At the same time, the novella shows empathy towards these “little men,” who are forced to work in the system and are mutilated by it. Novella ends with the desperate

Sparrow having a drink – knowing that his disability will drive him to the grave if he drinks. This self-conscious gesture is akin to the plight of Akaky from Gogol's novella, whose only way to remind the reader that he is "your brother" is to become a vengeful ghost. Kaledin's text also aims at educational and transformative ends, vocalizing the repressed voice of legions of Soviet marginalized classes and appealing to the reader's conscience and compassion.

The question remains, however, how Kaledin's text compares to *chernukha* in cinema? One point is the grisly subject matter, whose shocking novelty marks both Kaledin's text and *chernukha* cinema. Interestingly, Kaledin's novella was adapted to the screen as a conventional drama, *Humble Cemetery* [Smirennoe kladbishche] by Aleksandr Itygilov in 1989. It lacks *chernukha*'s excessive visceral touch, over the top violence and despair. The film was a faithful adaptation of the neo-naturalist text, but nothing more. Metaphorically speaking there were no "outrageous socks" – as in the sex scene from *Assuage My Sorrows* – involved. To examine literature that pushes the envelope of the realist tradition in a way more similar to *chernukha* in film, I would like to look at the works of Liudmila Petrushevskaya.

c) Case Three: Ludmila Petrushevskaya

Ludmila Petrushevskaya's prose is the most removed from naturalist and realist conventions, or natural school aesthetics. It is also the "harshest" or the "cruellest" of all the texts I have discussed so far – depicting with an unflinching pace things that should never enter anyone's imagination, let alone life. Most of

Petrushevskaya's narratives centre around the monstrosities of human nature in a specific Soviet or post-Soviet context. A hippie girl who goes to the outhouse to pee in the morning has a miscarriage (*La Bohème*); a woman's eye falls out of its socket every time she is nervous (*Our Circle*); an alcoholic woman, thrown from the balcony by her lover, hangs to the rails for hours (*Ali Baba*). Petrushevskaya's grotesque is the almost unbearable juxtaposition of violent, obscene, catastrophic imagery with an eye for everyday detail. It is a far cry from Nekrasov's ironic gaze or Kaledin's methodic impersonation. This is not to say that Petrushevskaya's works are devoid of humour – in principle, an eye falling out of its socket in a most embarrassing moment could be a topic of funny, slapstick humour. But the humour is lost in the morbid plot and the intense narration, that flows incessantly, hammering home its message of pain and suffering.

Petrushevskaya is known for her unreliable first-person female narration and obscure plots that revolve around human relationships rather than a chain of events. Deming Brown writes:

Often, however, her stories seem uncoordinated, with facts presented in illogical sequence, many repetitions and digressions, and numerous random fragments. The apparently chaotic structure is fully intentional, for Petrushevskaya invests heavily in the personality and attitudes of her narrator, who, despite the rambling and loose-jointed quality of her monologue, manages to maintain a consistent point of view (153).

Petrushevskaya's prose satisfies many conventions of naturalism and natural school – such as the depiction of powerless people under the weight of circumstances. In the case of Petrushevskaya, these circumstances are often

extreme – death, sickness, abortion, mutilation. Or bringing *byt*, or everyday life at its ugliest, to the fore and focusing on the dark sides of human relations. In a way, Petrushevskaya takes the naturalist assumption that violence and the everyday go hand-in-hand to an extreme degree that transgresses the very conventions of realist narration. Andrei Zorin (1992), in an article discussing *chernukha* in literature, asks exactly that question. After enumerating the descriptions of physical and emotional suffering in Petrushevskaya's novella *Our Circle* [Svoi krug], Zorin points out that the excess and intensity of such descriptions is anything but realistic in the sense of both realist narration and true to life verisimilitude. The grotesque and disproportionate accumulation of horrific detail is also juxtaposed with the matter-of-fact narration, devoid of immediate emotionality. Such narration belongs exclusively to women in Petrushevskaya's prose, who talk in a very colloquial and conversational way about disloyalty, family tension or generational conflict.

Petrushevskaya's genre of the first-person female-centred short story is repetitive in the sense that the literary devices of narration and the outcomes of the stories are predictably and equally painful. Petrushevskaya is a versatile author who writes plays and children's stories, so creating a corpus of this "harsh" fiction is a device in itself, usually presented as a collection of short stories. Such collections suggest an intentional cumulative strategy that transports the reader into the world of excess and all-engulfing violence. A story *La Bohème* [Bogema] is included in a cycle of stories called *Requiems* [Rekviemy] (2001) and it starts

like this:

Из оперы «Богема» следует, что кто-то кого-то любил, чем-то жил, потом бросил или его бросили, а в случае Клавды все было гораздо проще... (114).

From the opera *La Bohème* we learn that once upon a time someone loved somebody, and lived somehow or other, and then chucked her in or was chucked in himself, but in Claudia's case it was all much simpler (120).

And ends:

Здесь ее нашла лежащей на участке у дома мать, здесь Клавдия перебралась на чистую постель после долгих странствий и здесь, выйдя за малой нуждой рано утром под куст шиповника, она внезапно выпустила из себя струю крови, и все сразу разъяснилось, ибо это был выкидыш, и довольно крупный. Мать, провожавшая под куст Клавдию, сказала, что был мальчик, и Клавдия потом многим рассказала, что у нее должен был родиться мальчик — через столько-то месяцев, потом столько-то месяцев назад... Поэтому и Клавдия со временем умолкла, и только мать ее, затратив много денег, зачем-то перенесла уборную на новое место, а на старом, засыпанном, посадила рябинку и березу (116)

Here in N she was discovered lying in the garden by her mother, and here in N she moved into a clean bed, into a clean bed at last after all her long travels; and here, going out one early morning to have a pee, she suddenly let forth a stream of blood beneath the sweetbriar, and everything then fell into place, for there was a foetus, already quite large. Her mother, who'd helped her into the garden, said the baby was a boy, and later on Claudia was wont to tell people how she'd been going to have a boy baby — how it was due in so many months, or, as time went by, so many months ago... And so after a while Claudia fell silent; and only her mother, spending a great deal of money, for some reason moved the privy to a new place in the garden, and in the old place, now filled up, she planted a birch and a rowan tree (122).

Or consider this passage from a novella *Our Circle*:

У меня в тот же период тихо догорела мать... и врачи под самый конец взялись найти у нее несуществующий гнойник, вскрыли ее, случайно пришили кишки к брюшине и оставили умирать с незакрывающейся язвой величиной с кулак, и когда нам ее выкатили умершую, вспоротую и кое-как зашитую до подбородка и с этой дырой в животе, я не представляла себе, что такое вообще может произойти с

человеком, и начала думать, что это не моя мама, а моя-то мама где-то в другом месте (290).

During that same period my mother quietly burned out...and right at the end the doctors took it upon themselves to find a non-existent abscess inside her, opened it up, accidentally sewed her intestine to her peritoneum and left her to die with an open wound the size of a fist, and when she was rolled out to us dead, disembowelled and sewn up any old how right up to her chin with a great hole in her belly, I couldn't believe such things can befall a human being, and for a moment imagined this wasn't my mother, and that my mother must be somewhere else (335-336).

Imagine reading ten stories like this in a row. The excessive quality of Petrushevskaya's collections is reinforced not only by the grim and depressing matter-of-fact narration but also by its sheer quantity. Each volume becoming akin to Freudian death-drive – a drive-to-silence, as her narrators exasperate themselves into silence after long and grievous narration.

This type of narration does not seem to be therapeutic, redeeming, or, sometimes, even comprehensible. An interesting example is a seemingly courageous if also horrifying act by the protagonist of *Our Circle*. The heroine beats her son, Alyosha, until he bleeds so that her friends and estranged husband take pity on the boy by demonizing her and later adopt him after her death (she loses all her immediate family to a genetic disease in the course of the story). Helena Goscilo (1995) writes that Petrushevskaya invites the reader to draw an analogy to the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* [Zapiski iz podpol'ia] (1864) and his "aggressive self-justification." She suggests that:

...reading against the trajectory of narrator's plot, the reader discovers in the gaps a more compelling counterversion of the events...By endowing

the narrator's progressive blindness as a premonitory symptom of her disease, Petrushevskaia metaphorically intimates that her melodramatic solution to the dilemma of Alesha's future semi-orphaned state may be myopic – a failure of perception ("Mother as Mothra" 55).

The identification with the narrator and her plight is often prevented by an unreliable narration that is deliberately one-sided and often malicious, particularly when the narrator adopts an aggressive and accusatory tone. The drive-to-silence storytelling is also achieved on the level of readership when the texts bombard the reader with an incessant depiction of suffering and atrocities – story after story, page after page – numbing the potential responses of sympathy, anger or disgust.

Sally Dalton-Brown in *Voices from the Void* (2000) writes:

[Petrushevskaia's texts] are based on the principles of negation, nullity, and negativity. Every romance is parodied, every success undermined, every character defeated..., in a series of mutually self-cancelling binary oppositions which present not a dialectic but a struggle to the reader. This struggle is that of narration that strangles itself...into silence (17).

Petrushevskaia's narratives of excess are different from the realist denunciatory pathos of Viktor Astaf'ev or the naturalist observant mode of Sergei Kaledin.

Petrushevskaia defies several core characteristics that are common in perestroika art: an ideological agenda (as in Astaf'ev's text); a reliable viewpoint that would generate sympathy and identification (as in Kaledin's text). Petrushevskaia's narrators are not loveable (like in *Our Circle*). They are very often outright malicious, and, sometimes, indifferent (as in *La Bohème*).

It is interesting that often the narrator is telling the story of someone else's suffering or misfortunes, and, therefore, the story is tainted by the narrator's

attitudes and judgements. Such narration does not provide a realist, psychologically nuanced story with elaborate characters, complex relationships, plot twists, and nuanced visions of history and society. Instead it acquires the quality of an oral history, stripped of mythical or epic potential, but becoming, nonetheless, a ritual of its kind. This narrative is passed on from narrator to reader – a ritual of sharing grief and misfortune through storytelling. Like in *chernukha*, in Petrushevskaya's stories there is no consequence, no sympathy between the reader and the narrator, only a more morbid "sensationalist" curiosity that "such horrible things happen," than concern for those people on whom these misfortunes befall. These morbid gossip-like structures provide a flawed bond and a flawed community. That is how women find their place in the world, according to Petrushevskaya – through narratives of grief and female suffering that they pass on to each other, and ultimately to the reader, who become a final witness to women's suffering. The continuity of different stories, even if it exposes the reader to the misery of its characters and narrators, is a continuity that ensures a flawed but true communal bond. In her stories women predominantly tell of other women and possibly to other women. Petrushevskaya was often identified as a representative of women's fiction, her preoccupations and themes commonly revolving around gender.

It might be the case that Petrushevskaya shows that Soviet and post-Soviet condition encourages and creates only a "negative" bond through suffering. A view supported by her fellow novelist Tatiana Tolstaya in her theory of the "little

terror” (essay “The Great Terror and the Little Terror” in the collection *Pushkin’s Children* (2002)). The argument goes that the terror instigated by the Soviet state permeates Soviet and post-Soviet everyday living, creating “little terror” of “little people” terrorizing each other. Or the creation of a negative bond could be Petrushevskaya’s take on the existential philosophy of alienation of the modern man (as theorized in works by Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse) and its parallel development in the theatre of absurd represented by Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Regardless of the larger cultural agenda in Petrushevskaya’s oeuvre, the negative bond of suffering is forged between readers and narrators and between the narrators and the silent victims in their stories. This bond represents the fragility of communication, the inverted meaning that the word and consequently the world take in such relationships, and a very pessimistic outlook on both human and gender relations. All these are core qualities of *chernukha* cinema as well, as I will show in more detail in the chapter on narrative patterns.

While the stories themselves, like those that appear in *chernukha* films, might be “over-the-top” – the identification they provide claims an authentic community even if it is a deeply distressed and flawed community. *Chernukha* films ambiguously implicate the viewer in the entanglement of the real and screen life (is *chernukha* an excessive transgression or a reflection of real life?). Petrushevskaya implicates the reader by blurring the boundary between the fictional narrator, character, and reader. The reader becomes the receptor and the

witness to all these women's stories of grief and suffering. The narrator just passes on the story. The bond between the reader and narrator is neither idealized nor politicized by Petrushevskaya. Creating a paradox similar to *chernukha*, the bond between heroines of Petrushevskaya's texts and its readers is seen as both painstakingly real and absolutely impossible to bear, being the work of fiction all the while.

In conclusion to the analysis of three authors the question remains: what is *chernukha* in perestroika literature? I believe there is no one definite answer and there is, perhaps, no need for rigid classifications. I do not think it is necessarily productive to seek direct parallels between perestroika literature and film in order to create a specific designated peg hole of *chernukha*. The flexibility and diversity of the *chernukha* as a discursive phenomenon in itself warrants caution in such endeavours. Like noir – *chernukha* is a versatile phenomenon. Perestroika *chernukha* cinema has a certain ethos that presents many points of intersection with neo-naturalist literature which too is often labelled *chernukha*. However, I believe *chernukha* cinema also shows a distinct difference from the perestroika prose.

Both Astaf'ev's and Kaledin's texts fit within the Russian natural school tradition very well – Astaf'ev is just as angry as revolutionary Nekrasov. While these works are exemplary and noteworthy, they do not entail a paradox, nor do they constitute a subject of public debate. Neo-naturalist fiction is not as transgressive as *chernukha* – it pushes boundaries in accordance with public

expectations, not against them. Often neither perestroika literature nor *chernukha* cinema is purely just conformist or transgressive. Some *chernukha* films were immensely popular with viewers. Various perestroika films, like Mamin's *Fountain*, can exhibit elements of *chernukha*, but nothing more. It is the general tendency that interests me here and also the historic evaluation that defines *chernukha* in a certain way – an *a posteriori* reflection is equally important to understanding *chernukha*. Like noir, *chernukha* became a full-fledged phenomenon of the great malaise only after its heyday. Like film noir *chernukha* is not a trend that can be easily classified. Its advantage lies in its ability to adopt a variety of influences and create a unique sensibility that endures to this day. That is why it might be more productive to talk about commonalities between the film and fiction traditions – such as their natural school poetics or the Glasnost imperative of uncovering the “hidden truth.” My literary analysis was also deliberately limited and selective – for example, I have not mentioned writers like Evgeny Popov or Viacheslav Pietsukh, who are sometimes analyzed in relation to *chernukha* or other “tough and cruel” prose.

In many respects *chernukha* cinema uses a story that provides a deterministic and pessimistic outlook on the individual trapped by reality. It is also a generic story, involving types rather than characters, privileging description over action; it has a strong focus on the everyday and a very bleak portrayal of it. It is a story that serves a social purpose – it exposes and denounces, either subtly or not. All these qualities are pronounced in natural school aesthetics and

naturalist aesthetics, which *chernukha* cinema clearly adopts. *Chernukha* differs in its force and resonance – to the extent that it became eponymous with things entirely unrelated to naturalism or social problems or perestroika (such are *chernukha*-pornukha and black PR connotations). *Chernukha* in the late 1980s became the epitome of chaos and disintegration – it was immoral, frightening, abjection – and it was everywhere. Andrei Plakhov (1991) characterized that quality as “Nevzorov aesthetics” – after a famous perestroika journalist whose TV show *600 Seconds* [600 sekund] was a blitzkrieg in its exposition of a variety of social problems of crime and corruption. The quote below epitomizes the supposed unhealthiness of *chernukha* and a ubiquitous and ingrained quality that fails to shock the “native” viewer, only the foreigner:

В наших фильмах и телепрограммах вы найдете “все, что вы хотите знать о...” Кризисе, Катастрофе, Конце Света. Смерти, Сатане, Сумасшедшем доме. Монстрах, Мракобесии, Маразме. И так на все буквы алфавита. Мудрено ли, что независимо от степени художественности общая картина, выписываемая нашим кинематографом, внушает его немногочисленным зрителям на Западе священный ужас...

In our films and television programmes you will find “everything you wanted to know about...”: Crisis, Catastrophe, End of the World, Death, Devil, Lunatic Asylum, Monsters, Bigotry, Dementia. And continue on with all the letters of the alphabet. It is obvious that regardless of the artistic quality of individual films the general picture that our cinema is painting inspires sacred terror in the very few of its viewers in the West... (“Skeleton in the Closet” 11), my translation.

The paradox is that *chernukha* was lamented as unhealthy but also perceived as larger than life – or rather life itself staring back from the movie screen in an uncanny way that inspired terror. In this sense, Ludmila Petrushevskaya’s works

come closest to *chernukha* films because her excessive discourse of misery and pain is almost impossible to contain. It spills over in the rambling ambiguous narration, and hammers its way home by repeating over and over again the story of female agony under one disguise or another. It also haunts the reader with its ambiguous representation – creating a bonding structure, an illusion of a real story told from one woman to another and then stuffing these stories with things that are hard to stomach. What effect Petrushevskaya's texts have in the end is less apocalyptic than *chernukha* – largely because they are anchored in a community, no matter how dysfunctional.

3. *Chernukha and Russian Postmodern Fiction*

The last literary trend that I want to discuss as relevant to *chernukha* is Russian underground experimental fiction which later became associated with Russian postmodernist literature. The reason for the comparison of the two phenomena is the focus on violence, obscenity and transgression of various social and cultural taboos (such as cannibalism, incest and others) and a deconstructive appropriation of Socialist Realism prominent in Russian conceptualism and *sots-art* similar to pop-art's appropriation of popular culture. It is also significant that *chernukha* art was born during the time when Russian underground literature was rediscovered along with the censored classics and then became one of the most prolific and viable literary trends throughout the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s. Both *chernukha* and postmodern/experimental fiction were cultural “buzzers.”

Chernukha has entered the public discourse and became the subject of heated debates. Russian postmodernism, enjoying mass popularity as well (books by Viktor Pelevin or Vladimir Sorokin were best-sellers), created mostly a “critical buzz.” According to Mikhail Epstein, the postmodern turn in Russian literature, after years of Socialist Realism and underground experimental art, has become the most widely discussed and almost the only viable part of Russian literature after 1991 (Epstein 54).

Russian postmodern fiction is a term that requires clarification and expectedly has been a subject of various scholarly definitions and debates. For the purposes of this work, I will limit myself to the definition of postmodern aesthetics (as opposed to the postmodern condition for example), or artistic devices that are usually identified with postmodern poetics. For the purpose of my comparison of Russian postmodern fiction to *chernukha*, I believe that the argument by Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) is very well-suited.

To summarize briefly postmodern art is considered self-referential and ironic; deliberately contradictory, since one of its chief premises is the rejection of binary oppositions (Jacques Derrida) and metanarratives (Jean-Francois Lyotard) as cultural meaning-making strategies. Postmodern poetics include transgression of the traditional norms and institutions governing art (performance art is one such example); and, a recycling of discourses and styles. The realization of historicity and relativity of the social, political and cultural phenomena is fundamental to the

postmodern condition and the grounds of postmodern poetics (a theoretical discovery associated most prominently with Michel Foucault's philosophy). Linda Hutcheon's argument presents the intriguing idea of postmodernism as being "challenging from within," or interrogating its own culture – the junction where Hutcheon advocates the "postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world" (11). Postmodernism operates through self-reflexivity that acknowledges the cultural and ideological inscription but problematizes it from within the culture.

Russian postmodernism is a problematic term. For one, Russian society, especially right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, cannot be compared, either socially or economically, to the advanced post-industrial capitalist societies of the West, so the question of postmodernity as historical, social and cultural paradigm in Russia is bound to be problematic. Different critics looked at the Russian postmodern condition from the perspective of "postmodernism without postmodernity" (Lipovetsky 2001), stressing the postmodern repertoire in arts as opposed to postmodern condition in society. Mikhail Epstein (1995) looks at Russian postmodernism through the lens of simulacra and simulation or the vanishing of true representation (developed in the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard) in relation to the socialist cultural paradigm. Epstein finds the two remarkably similar in their capacity of creating simulated realities, signs that refer to other

signs, but nothing in reality. That leads Epstein to think of Russia as the “motherland of postmodernism.” In terms of postmodern aesthetics, if one looks at the new Russian fiction of the 1990s, one could definitely catalogue numerous techniques and themes associated with postmodernism as an art form: deconstruction of meta-narratives, pastiche, ironic detachment, playfulness, focus on the nature of literature itself (as the last meta-discourse) and many others.

While the Soviet regime did impose significant restrictions and limitations on artistic practices, Russian art was not necessarily entirely cut off from the developments in Europe and North America. Russian underground conceptual art is one practice that is most often referred to when one talks about Russian postmodernism. It existed unofficially since the late 1960s as an artistic and literary movement, one of its branches being *sots-art* – analogous to pop-art only with a focus on Socialist Realist discourse rather than the consumerist culture of late capitalism. Mark Lipovetsky writes:

Russian postmodernism emerged, like its Western counterpart, in the second half of the 1960s-beginning of the 1970s. At this period of time such seminal texts as *Moskva-Petushki* (Moscow to the End of the Line or Moscow Circles, 1969) by Venedikt Erofeev and *Pushkinskii dom* (The Pushkin House, 1971) by Andrei Bitov were completed. During this period conceptualism was also evolving in Moscow (“Russian Literary Postmodernism” 31).

Russian postmodern art, therefore, was not so much an abrupt literary shift, but a practice cultivated over a couple of decades before it became part of the mainstream and a focus of critical attention. And as postmodern aesthetics are

marked by self-reflexivity, conceptual art is marked by its focus on the Soviet lifestyle as an internalized condition that, in the words of Hutcheon, it both interrogates and cannot escape.

Like *chernukha* Russian postmodern fiction is a literature self-conscious of previous tradition. Like *chernukha*, it functions through defiant, negating terms. What distinguished many Russian postmodern works, particularly underground conceptual art and sots-art, is their preoccupation with the Soviet way of life, Soviet literature, and “communist imagery and ideological clichés” (Epstein 55) as the starting point of their deconstructive effort. In a sense, both *chernukha* and Russian postmodern fiction, as it flourished in the 1990s, operate on the basis of defied continuity. Both trends reflect and appropriate Soviet discursive formation in terms of historical representation, ideological reflection, and language. Both end up deconstructing it from these different vantage points. For *chernukha*, the Soviet past and ideology become the showcase and very often clichéd scenarios of injustice, violence, and suffering. In Russian postmodern fiction Soviet ideology and art became the subject of subversive and ironic deconstruction, while its language is often stylized to the point of mimicry or “blank parody” (Fredric Jameson).

The most notable trend, illustrative of such subversion through mimicry, in literature and the visual arts was conceptual art (and its branch – sots-art), aimed to deconstruct Soviet realities and ideology through ironic re-appropriation. Critic Viacheslav Kuritsyn (1995) says of sots-art:

Soc art [sots-art] works with the manner of execution, devices and conceits of Soviet art – not deforming them, but on the contrary, reproducing them with an extremely serious appreciation for the requirements of the method and thereby revealing the ontological uselessness of those very demands...But for the soc artist, sincerity becomes an artistic device...the average reader also understands that such works are a mockery of both aesthetics and ideology (55).

To illustrate the Russian postmodern aesthetics and their correlation with *chernukha*, I will look at one of the most popular (and controversial) representative of conceptual art, Vladimir Sorokin.

Vladimir Sorokin became involved with Moscow underground art in the 1970s and became well-known to the general public with the arrival of perestroika. Sorokin is one of few postmodern authors who enjoys public success along with critical acclaim. He has also been the subject of controversy with conservative political groups due to the “pornographic” nature of his writings. Sorokin used to be categorized as a member of Moscow conceptual school – a Soviet underground art trend. Mark Lipovetsky defines Russian conceptual art in the Soviet Union as the following:

The artist Il’ia Kabakov has defined the specificity of Russian conceptualism... He has stated that while in Western conceptualism one “thing” is substituted with another “thing” or even with the verbal description of a “thing,” that is, its idea, in Russian conceptualism a “thing” is substituted not with another “thing” and not with its description (possessing some definite meaning), but with nothingness. Kabakov explains that this effect is a product of the total devalorization of reality generated by the Soviet overproduction of simulacra – that is, ideological images that replace reality and eventually lose any meaning... Soviet slogans had already become senseless; they refer to nothing real, and therefore they manifest metaphysical emptiness a negative reality (“Russian Literary Postmodernism” 33).

Sorokin's early works are mostly written while the writer was underground in the 1980s, like a collection of stories *First Subbotnik* [Pervyi Subbotnik] (published in 1998), *Marina's Thirtieth Love* [Tridsataia Liubov' Mariny] (published in 1995), and *The Norm* [Norma] (published in 1994). They explore the grounds for deconstructing the totalitarian canon of Soviet ideological discourse. In his other works, like *The Novel* [Roman] (written in late 1980s, published in 1994) Sorokin seems to be less preoccupied with the deconstruction of Soviet discourse than with the ideas on literary style and canon. *The Novel* is a deconstructive effort towards Russian literary canon, particularly much revered the 19th century realist novel. In his recent work, such as *A Day of the Oprichnik* [Den' oprichnika] from 2006, the writer parodies Putin's autocratic rule, envisioning Russia's dystopian future as a return to the middle ages. Regardless of the subject of deconstruction the formal component of his writings remains unchanged.

Sorokin's narratives usually begin with a manner of a sophisticated stylization, Sorokin's text systematically mimicking the discourse of Socialist Realist industrial novel (*The Norm*), for example, of 19th century Russian realist prose (*The Novel*). That stylization sometimes runs for hundreds of pages, making the reader almost numb with all its trivial plot twists and clichéd discourse. In the Moscow conceptual movement "diving into context" (Monastyrsky 1999) was a name for the mimicking strategy that faithfully replicates the discourse it aims to deconstruct, or replicates it with just a small but

significant deviation. Diving into context enables subversion through mimicry (similar to pop-art) and also significantly slows down the process of reader's perception, drawing attention to the "how" rather than the "what" of the text. Instead of following the hero Roman (in Russian his name is the same as the word for "novel"), we begin to wonder why Sorokin's text is doing what it is doing and what it could possibly mean beyond Roman's trivial exploits. It might not take twenty pages to notice that something is off in Sorokin's *The Novel*, but after hundreds of pages, the reader is bound to see the irony in such faithful repetition of generic discursive tropes.

Techniques that prolong and slow down reception and perception are prominent in conceptual and performance art. One might consider Marina Abramovich's "Sitting with the Artist" piece (presented at MoMA, New York, in spring 2010) where the artist and a random museum visitor, who chooses to occupy the empty chair, sit silently opposite of each other for an indefinite period of time. In both cases, I think defamiliarization is happening. In the case of Sorokin's narrative, the slowing down of reading, as the reader begins to realize that what she is reading is a senseless repetition of literary clichés, achieves a deconstructive defamiliarization. A familiar, typical, and clichéd discourse is repeated over and over so that its artificiality and contrived nature become apparent. Sometimes Sorokin reverses this narrative technique by suddenly changing styles and genres, achieving again defamiliarization when the reader realizes the deliberate switch between styles. For example, *Marina's Thirtieth*

Love starts as soft-porn fiction, then it turns into a dissidence/prosecution novel, and finally becomes a Soviet “industrial” novel.

Usually after pages of “slow” stylization, Sorokin suddenly introduces into the narrative elements of shock, violence, obscenity, or the destruction of language into nonsense right on the very same page. For example, the short story *The Tobacco Pouch* [Kiset] (1986) ends with an abracadabra-mixture of syllables resembling words. He does the same in the ending of *The Norm*. It seems like a discourse that was developing throughout many pages is rapidly shrinking, finally disappearing into the emptiness of non-meaning. Consider this passage from *Next Item on the Agenda* [Zasedanie savkoma] (published in 1995), a short story that deals with “tovarishcheskii sud” – a Soviet ritual of “comrade trial” – used as a way to reprimand an employee or member of the community without criminal charges. After a lengthy “diving into context” that consists of boring deliberations, chastising and speeches, the characters out of the blue perform the ritualistic murder of the cleaning lady, engaging in self-mutilation along the way:

Звягинцева медленно поднялась со стула, руки ее затряслись, пальцы с ярко накрашенными ногтями согнулись. Она вцепилась себе ногтями в лицо и потянула руки вниз, разрывая лицо до крови... Старухин резко встал со стула, оперся руками о стол и со всего маха ударился лицом о стол... Симакова крепко обхватила его за плечи. Ее вырвало на затылок Хохлова (Russia’s *Fleurs du Mal* [Russkie tsvety zla] 375).

Zvyagintseva rose slowly from her chair, her hands started shaking, and her fingers with their brightly painted nails became bent. She dug her nails into her face and scraped her hands downwards, leaving bloody furrows the whole length of her face ... Starukhin stood up sharply in his chair, placed his hands on the table and then smashed his face against the table

with all his might Simakova grabbed him firmly from behind by the shoulders. She vomited over the back of Khokhlov's head. (Translated by Andrew Reynolds. In *The Penguin Book of New Russian Writing*. Russia's *Fleurs du Mal*, 338-339)

Some of Sorokin's deconstructive strategies are evident: the comrade trial as a ritual corresponds to a murder ritual. An ambiguous narration at first deceives the reader with a familiar discourse (this is going to be a Socialist Realist story), then plunges into an excess not dissimilar from *chernukha's* visceral aesthetics.

Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол. Пискунов взял вторую трубу и приставил к спине уборщицы. Черногаев ударил по торцу трубы кувалдой. Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол...[далее повторение] Пискунов взял пятую трубу и приставил ее к спине уборщицы. Черногаев ударил кувалдой по торцу трубы. Труба прошла сквозь тело уборщицы и ударила в стол. -Вытягоно...Вытягоно...- забормотал Хохлов в кучку сгребенных им рвотных масс. (Cited from *Русские Цветы Зла*, 377)

Piskunov wrapped both his hands around the pipe to hold it steady. Chernogaev started hitting the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. The pipe went clean through the cleaner's body and came to rest in the table with a thud. Piskunov took the second pipe and positioned it on the cleaner's back. Chernogaev hit the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. [further – repetition]. Piskunov took the fifth pipe and positioned it on the cleaner's back. Chernogaev hit the butt of the pipe with the sledgehammer. The pipe went clean through the cleaner's body and came to rest in the table with a thud. 'Pulleat...Pulleat...' muttered Khokhlov into the pile of vomited bits he had scraped together. (Russia's *Fleurs du Mal*, 341-342)

However, unlike *chernukha* Sorokin's excess is always deliberately ironic and self-conscious, a device underscored by detachment and repetition, that slows our perception of the plot and makes us question the legitimacy of the the story as in the passage above. *Chernukha's* excessive vision puts the viewer in the "thick" of it – asserting the "reality" of its on-screen violence. Sorokin's fiction is

reminscent of the 1920s-1930s OBERIU texts by Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky. This avant-garde absurdist school also treated violence and death as grotesque narrative devices that call attention to literary artifice rather than real life horrors – something that *chernukha* art lacks. Mikhail Epstein writes of Sorokin's prose:

Here, linguistic signs do not strive for fullness of meaning; on the contrary, they reveal the vacuousness of their essence, their freedom from the signified... What is the point of such an obviously derivative production of texts, based upon already-known linguistic models? This is, in fact, the point: Sorokin's novel is read like a work about language: language that exists by itself, independently of the reality it describes. The reader's consciousness glides over a number of signifiers... (77)

Symptomatically the editor of the collection *Russia's Fleurs du Mal*, in which Sorokin's story appears, and himself a prominent Russian postmodernist writer, Viktor Erofeev, refers to *chernukha* in his introduction. His interpretation puts *chernukha* in the realm of a postmodern play, which, in my opinion, is not true of this phenomenon:

Возникает вторичный стиль, чернуха, жизненные ужасы и патология воспринимаются скорее как забава, литературный прием, как уже проверенная возможность поиграть в острые ощущения (29).

A secondary style arises, *chernukha*, 'black stuff', a 'slandorous' and sensationalist 'dirty art' in which the horrors of life and pathological behaviour are treated as more of an amusement, a literary device, a tried and tested way of playing with extremes of feeling (Russia's Fleurs du Mal. Introduction by Viktor Erofeev, xxix).

Chernukha films do take their violence, obscenity and excess seriously, as if it was real-life excess, while Sorokin and other postmodern writers inherently do

not. For them *chernukha* content is a subject of play and detachment, bringing our attention to the fact that literature is “just words on the page” in Sorokin’s opinion and nothing more. Sorokin’s project questions literature’s origin and its power from within literature itself. His interview in *Contextualizing Transition: Interviews with Contemporary Russian Writers and Critics* (edited by Serafima Roll 1998) is symptomatically called “Literature as a Cemetery of Stylistic Finds.”

For Sorokin and other writers of his generation postmodernism is exactly what Linda Hutchen describes – a questioning and challenging of literature as a metanarrative or dominant discourse from within and through a system of simulated representations, which are, of course, literature. Unlike their avant-garde counterparts of the beginning of the 20th century who defied the old definitions of art and sought new forms of expression, Russian postmodernists are sceptical about the possibilities of breaking the cultural norms or creating literature from a place outside of literature, so to speak. Instead they opt for a cold reflective gaze that is aptly described by the metaphor of the cemetery. For Sorokin literature is dead but only insofar as it keeps producing literature on the death of literature – a self-perpetuating gesture that questions both the deconstruction of the old tradition and the tradition itself.

I give Vladimir Sorokin as an example, not only because he is one of the most prominent, but also because he is a representative writer of Russian postmodernism. Similar thematic and stylistic preoccupations are abundant in

Russian fiction of the 1990s, whether it has its origins in *sots-art* or not (see Helena Goscilo's "Body Talk in Current Fiction" (1993) for a wide range of examples). Some other writers that also use extensive bodily imagery, descriptions of violence, brutality and unsightly deeds like incest or cannibalism are Iurii Mamleev, Egor Radov, and Viktor Erofeev. Notably taboos such as incest or cannibalism, or sexual nature of sadism are not usually touched by *chernukha* since they were, I think, judged not realistic enough and would not be as believable as the everyday horrors *chernukha* usually concerns itself with. Viktor Erofeev's story *The Parakeet* [Popugaichik] is framed as a letter by a government official that describes, in detail, the torture and mutilation of the addressee's son, written in the pseudo-folk style of Russian legends. N.N.

Schneidman writes about Erofeev:

Erofeev is a sophisticated and skilled artist who refuses to adhere to conventional Russian artistic norms. His prose in 1980s and early 1990s, in which reality and fantasy intermingle freely, is grotesque, absurd, full of explicit physiological and sexual detail and displays of sadistic cruelty (58-59).

All of these writers differ from *chernukha* film in the respect that the *chernukha-like* material they present points decisively to the nature of the literary artifice and, therefore, problematizes the nature of that artifice. Russian literary postmodernism, in the words of Ilya Kabakov, strives for emptiness, to put all meaning-making strategies under scrutiny. *Chernukha* also propagates a certain emptiness – but it's world of collapsed or inverted meanings, in which meaning-making strategies are not questioned from within, but simply do not function.

Russian postmodern fiction problematizes its very medium – *chernukha* exists as if it is outside its medium. It should be noted that today it really does, in a way, exist outside its medium – having become more of a myth of perestroika than an actual cinema of perestroika. It is not that *chernukha* is not at all self-conscious. For example, the blending of documentary and fictional techniques is common in perestroika and it requires reflectivity and stylization (in films like *Freeze Die Come to Life*, *God's Tramp* and *Asthenic Syndrome*). More than ability to self-conscious reflection what matters for *chernukha* is the incongruence of narrative and visual style, the realist pitch and excessive drive, the claim to reality and its delivery in an overwhelming pathology. This incongruence created a representation that can not be stomached, instead becoming a fantasy of national doom and downfall – the “descent into the abyss.”¹²

Chernukha actively destroys the only community it has – the Soviet identity and the tradition of Soviet cinema. It also transgresses and transforms the other traditions it borrows from, such as natural school, Glasnost inspired denunciatory literature, neo-naturalist and publitsistika discourses. *Chernukha* is both – a destructive, transgressive vision and a natural school-like narrative, an old story told again. It exists on the margins of something recognizable and familiar, and at the same time defying that recognition. This ambivalence also becomes the peril of the *chernukha* phenomenon and attests to its reputation: the incongruence of expectations and representations – something in bad taste,

12 This is a title of a history book on perestroika and turbulent 1990s by Anatoly Froaynov, a professor in Saint Petersburg. *The Descent into Abyss: Russia at the End of the 20th century* [Pogruzhenie v bezdnu: Rossiia na iskhode dvadtsatogo veka]. Saint Petersburg UP, 1999.

something deviant, something dangerous, something hard to watch.

Postmodern literature, on the other hand, in its *chernukha-like* experimentation successfully meets its readers' expectations, since it puts the text and the reader on the same page; at least the sort of reader who does not see postmodern literature through the prism of the realist tradition as being the only acceptable literary endeavour. The postmodernist set of self-referential discourse seeks to problematize the nature of literary artifice, rather than attempt at real-life mimicry. It is not, of course, that postmodern literature is absolutely devoid of any connection to reality. On the contrary, it puts the discourses that often manage or embed reality under scrutiny. Linda Hutcheon says that her interest in postmodernism is to see "...what happens when culture is challenged from within: challenged or questioned or contested but not imploded." (Hutcheon xiii).

The difference between *chernukha* and postmodernism is the "implosion factor." *Chernukha* implodes the discourse it adopts – and it does not survive the implosion. Russian postmodern art dismantles and deconstructs the very discourses that ground its existence. Such deconstruction is both propelled and compromised by the nature of the artifice – it is a discourse that transcends itself but remains intact, because it is, in fact, literature. *Chernukha* aims beyond the screen (or seen as doing so in the public imagination) and does not survive as an artistic trend, instead becoming a diffused field of cultural anxiety whose presence is felt to this day.

Chapter 2. Picturing History in *Chernukha*

“If you noticed, we barely talk about cinema.” (Vladimir Dmitriev, discussion “End of Century – End of *Chernukha*?”)

In the previous chapter, I pointed out that *chernukha* often creates a paradox. It negotiates its language with previous tradition, borrowing from it and subverting it to ends that could be described as nihilistic – *chernukha* seems to have no agenda of its own apart from inversion of all previous cultural norms. The important junction that emerged in the course of comparison of *chernukha* to the natural school or perestroika neo-naturalist fiction is the relation to “real life” - or how *chernukha* reflects and processes the life on the other side of the movie screen. This point in itself embeds a paradox, since *chernukha* is sometimes judged as something integral to real life, faithfully reflecting times of transition, and sometimes as a repugnant aberration that usurps “real life” - hence the term *chernukha* means to “blacken” [ochernit’] - to make something intentionally and maliciously darker, more hopeless and appalling than it is.

Many of perestroika films considered *chernukha* were popular, and many were critically acclaimed, such are *Asthenic Syndrome* [Astenicheskii sindrom] (Kira Muratova 1989) or *Second Circle* [Kryg vtoroi] (Aleksandr Sokurov 1990). There were some very good popular films, such as *Little Vera*, which still rates among the most popular Soviet films, and some popular films of less artistic merit like *My Name Is Harlequin*, and even rampant exploitation films, such as *Have a Merry Christmas in Paris or the Gang of Lesbians* [Schastlivogo rozhdestva v

Parizhe ili banda lesbiianok] (Olga Zhukova 1989), and, of course, everything in between. *Chernukha* seems to be a flexible phenomenon, transcending genres and styles. However, it also seems to have a core sensibility that despite the critical reaction (*Asthenic Syndrome* and *Little Vera* received generally favourable reviews) or generic nature of the film (such as family drama in *Little Vera* or buddy film in *Taxi Blues*) proves that *chernukha* holds at its core some transgression of public taste and expectations. *Chernukha*, thus, becomes the epitome of cinema somehow unsuitable for digestion by audiences, even if it was a necessary part of the perestroika truth seeking “diet.” Whatever the critical judgement of the artistic quality of the film, the discussion of *chernukha* revolves around questions of social reality and the real world that cinema reflects. Thus, Neia Zorkaia (1989) talking about *Little Vera* notes:

“*Chernukha*”? “Naturalism”? “Mudslinging”? Well, then we have to admit, no matter how sad it is but that our life and our daily existence... are exactly that (10).

Chernukha appears to portray Soviet reality as absolutely monstrous. *Chernukha* is most often referred to as “damned,” [trekliataia], “gloating” [zloradnaia], “tiresome” [opostylevshaia], “loathsome” [toshnotvornaia] when it is mentioned in film reviews or discussions. At the same time, it is considered to be faithfully imparting this vision to the screen “on the scale one-to-one” (Sirivlya 1992), containing a strange blend of the brutal grotesque and the sensibility that it is “real life.”

The portrayal of the monstrous reality often seems to be a counterproductive strategy for filmmakers as it alienates both the audience and critics. Filmmakers in the late 1980s struggled for funding amidst a collapsing state sponsored system, so the opposite of commercial and critical success was definitely not what they had in mind. The answer to prevalence of *chernukha* at least partially lies in the junction of reality and art that has a long history in Russian culture. In Russia, art was traditionally intertwined with social, political and cultural life in ways that shaped the attitudes of both artists and critics. The cultural elites often embraced a messianic ideology that art needs to transform reality rather than entertain the public. With its roots in Nikolai Gogol's literary vision, this tendency continues throughout the 19th century with both revolutionary writers, like Chernyshevsky and Nekrasov, and conservative writers, like Fedor Dostoevsky, sharing the same vision of art's transformative power. That vision of art that finds its inspiration in real life and aims to improve it is also present in the dissident literature of the Soviet Union. Dissident writers like Solzhenitsyn are the precursors to the "hungry for truth" *publitsistika* of the perestroika period. This impulse continues to be prevalent even during the shift away from psychological realism during the Russian Silver Age (1900-1910s). The Russian avant-garde also embraced the idea of transformation of reality through various amalgamated ventures of science and art (analytical realism, suprematism), art and technology (constructivism, futurism), and art and religious mysticism (symbolism).

The blurry lines between truth, reality and art, are also evident in the doctrine of Socialist Realism that paradoxically demanded that artists portray reality in its “revolutionary development.” While Socialist Realism rejected formalist experimentation in favour of a realist narration, Socialist Realist principles demanded a utopian “varnished” vision of Soviet farmers and workers. In an article on the All-Union Agricultural Accomplishments Exhibit (VDNKh), Evgeny Dobrenko (2009) points out that Stalinist grandiose architectural style served as a fantasy construction that essentially usurped reality. The viewer, writes Dobrenko, was supposed to believe that the Soviet Union did indeed produce all the glorious and excessive “accomplishments” (such as fur coats, gigantic pigs, enormous fruit, etc.). The excessive nature of these accomplishments was evident in the eclectic architecture and golden decor of the exhibit itself. A belief in this excess and abundance would be, of course, contrary to the daily conditions of poverty and food shortage in the 1930s. Dobrenko argues, that Socialist Realist art, in a sense, was constructing reality, propelling a utopian view as the only credible representation of real life. It is the Socialist Realist usurpation and simulacrum of reality that underground art, such as conceptualism and sots-art, parodied.

Chernukha, ironically, continues that legacy – perceived not as a utopian vision of “revolutionary development,” but a dystopian paradigm that usurps reality via its equally excessive vision. Furthermore, *chernukha*’s adherence to “tarnishing” instead of “varnishing” is viewed as the other side of the same coin

of Socialist Realism (Borenstein 2008). Many Russian critics at the time viewed this *chernukha* quality as an example of *kon'iunktura*. This term is best described by the Socialist Realist staple of “party-mindedness,” when the work of art attunes to all the nuances and ideological tweaks of the party agenda. *Kon'iunktura* also serves as a synonym of compliance and conformity. In a Socialist state, conformism in arts required more than just doing what one is told, but creating a product that would please the regime and therefore enhance the status of the artist. This combination of ideological correctness, eagerness to please, and careerism became known as *kon'iunktura* in the cinema industry. During the discussions around perestroika cinema in *Art of Cinema Journal* [Iskusstvo Kino], *chernukha* is often referred to as *kon'iunktura* (for example, in Elena Stishova’s review of the film *SE* from 1990). Only this time the party-mindedness or “ideological request” [ideologicheskii zakaz] requires exposure and criticism; “blackening” instead of “varnishing.” Thus, Petr Shepotinnik (1990) notes that *chernukha*’s “black stuff” is just like “white stuff” [belukha], or the ideologically correct but artistically incompetent films of the late late 1970s and early 1980s, only this time around the party wants reforms rather than happy socialism.¹³

However, unlike the realist art of the 19th century, or Socialist Realism, mentioned above, *chernukha* refuses to elevate its representation of reality to the level of articulate ideas. Its nihilism and refusal to stand in for any positive values runs against the Socialist Realist legacy and the canonized tradition of the messianic purpose of art. Contrary to hopes of critics like Erofeev and his project

13 *Art of Cinema Journal* [Iskusstvo kino], Issue 5, 1990, “Round Table: Cinema of the 1990”

to “bury” Soviet literature, perestroika debates show that the purpose of art, its educational function was still a hot topic in the 1980s, as it was in the 1930s or 1860s. A long tradition of art that is “larger than life,” art that articulates ethical, political and social norms becomes *chernukha*’s point of contention with the history of Russian culture which inevitably led magnification of *chernukha*’s significance as an aberration and a transgression.

Several questions emerge from these deliberations, which I will address in this chapter. The first is whether *chernukha* is entertaining – could all its taboo-breaking and transgressions amount to exploitation and sensationalism? If Socialist Realism invented Red Hollywood to enthrall the masses with ideological messages in the 1930s, could *chernukha* be the Soviet Black Hollywood, trying to enthrall the masses with sex and violence? The second is how and why *chernukha* becomes an imitation of real life and a troubled history of the transition? And the third one concerns the ethical dimensions of *chernukha*, not whether it is a truly “evil” cinema, but rather what has given it such a bad name. As a cinema that both reflects and articulates historical anxieties and subverts dominant cultural discourses, I will compare *chernukha* to the neo noir cinema of the 1970s, paying particular attention to its deconstructive stand towards Hollywood genre formulas and pessimistic vision of society and culture.

1. Chernukha is Not Fun.

After watching literally several dozens of these films, I can attest to that

personally. *Chernukha* made its reputation by addressing taboo subject matter and bravely exposing different transgressive phenomena (mostly social). As Eliot Borenstein notes, *chernukha* is famous for its sexually explicit and violent content, while sex and violence have always been the staples of popular culture. In terms of its sensationalist subject matter, *chernukha* seems to approximate exploitation films, like torture horror, popular genres that are deliberately repulsive and at the same time entertaining. Eliot Borenstein argues that the persistence of *chernukha* and its presence in public discourse after perestroika is that of something that is controversial but “widely enjoyed as it was derided” (19). He asserts that in the 1990s *chernukha* as a term became a vague field of indecency and brutality, sex and violence, combined with a sense of “cultural pessimism” reflective of the national anxieties of a transitional time. The sensationalist excess, associated with *chernukha*, permeated virtually all spheres of popular entertainment (Borenstein 19-20).

I agree that the term has mutated after perestroika, becoming more conveniently vague, so it could serve as a scapegoat for various parties. While the popular culture of the 1990s is outside of the scope of this investigation, the *chernukha* of perestroika lacked entertainment value, as I hope to show through my analysis of violence and sexuality in this work. *Chernukha* bears distinctive negative connotations that refute the very idea of mainstream pop culture pleasure, conveyed, instead, for example, by the term “klubnichka” [strawberry] – a slang term for pornography and erotica. Most importantly, I think, the pleasure

of excess (violent or sexual), associated with popular culture, is born from what could be called a cinematic agreement. The spectator's expectations and film's generic conventions ground this agreement. I argue that the specificity of perestroika *chernukha* lies in the fact that this agreement was broken, and the films have failed to meet the spectator's expectations or produce recognizable conventions. It is a violation of spectator ethics - or ethics of representation. That is why many components of *chernukha* discourse are so commonplace and could be defined as neo-naturalist, sensationalist, exploitative, or "real life" but they do not seem to add up and produce a jarring effect of transgression. This effect misplaces the spectator's position. The viewer does not know how to read *chernukha* cinema and that is why the trend is given so many contradictory responses, the universal one being that of rejection, the viewer is turned off by what he or she sees on the screen. This transgressive effect misplaces the phenomenon itself, and it is easier for the phenomenon to mutate in cultural discourse. What is *chernukha*? - everyone seems to know, but they have a variety of differing opinions on the matter and about what should be classified as "true art" or "true fun" as opposed to *chernukha* that is always in bad taste.¹⁴

Linda Williams (1991), in her classic analysis of excessively "gross" genres of melodrama, porn and horror, notes that what makes the excessively "gross" genres fun is a "physical jolt" given to our bodies as spectators, evoking sensations that are borderline "respectable," or appropriate – and that what

¹⁴ Umberto Eco in *Open Work* (1989) says the same thing about *kitsch* - everyone knows what it is, and that what makes it so hard to define.

constitutes the excitement. Although *chernukha* could be argued to have all these qualities of excess and physicality (sex, violence, extreme emotions) it is still separate from the entertainment enjoyed through these popular genres. That is why so often *chernukha* is judged as an “inadequate” attempt to apply genre formula or representations of violence and sex common to action and erotic films. For example, Petr Shepotinnik (1989) in a discussion on perestroika cinema in *Art of Cinema Journal* states that “life triumphs over genre” [zhizn’ pobezhdaet zhanr] (Shepotinnik et al. “Discussion: Perestroika and Glasnost on Screen” [Diskussii: ekran vremen perestroiki i glasnosti] 11). Williams examines how the conventions of horror, porn, and melodrama have functions of fantasy (which Williams understands in Freudian terms), and, in this way, fulfill a certain cultural prescription. For example, pornography is argued to renegotiate gender roles. *Chernukha*’s affinity to real life, the impulse to provide “truth” about reality, rather than construct a culturally useful or plausible fantasy – a function of genre formulas – one that could help the audience cope with reality, prevents *chernukha* from being entertaining. *Chernukha*, in my opinion, is decidedly repulsive and is meant to be so in very plain terms – it is meant to turn you off of the screen.

The pleasure of “gross” genres not only lies in the transgressive indulgence but also in the expectations and the recognition of film conventions. If the horror target audience – adolescent males – were to see a spectacle of murder and cannibalism in an art film by Peter Greenway *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), they would unlikely benefit from the pleasure of

recognition. That genre disturbance might spoil the physical thrill as well. The visceral thrill of zombies eating brains, or the provocative and intricate language of art cinema, is something the viewer agrees to when they enter the movie theatre. Mistaken expectations, similar to the conservative reactions to Sorokin's prose, can ruin the spectator's experience if she does not keep an open mind.¹⁵ One can definitely find people that would never watch torture porn or art cinema because they would not consent to the conventions of the movie experience whether they enter the theatre to watch *The Human Centipede* (Tom Six 2010) or *Dogville* (Lars Von Trier 2003).

The correlation between expectations and representations might provide a stronger pleasure than content and visual style combined. I think that *chernukha* is profoundly ambiguous about this correlation. *Chernukha* fails to cater to conventions of mass entertainment and to produce a recognition effect. The extreme reactions it causes point exactly to the fact that viewers and/or critics do not know how to read *chernukha*. There is no cognitive map that would place these films within the familiar registers of cinematic pleasures. If genre is well-charted territory, when even detours from the major routes are included as a part of the safe terrain, *chernukha* is a territory which one enters at one's own peril, with both expectations of serious realist cinema or grisly exploitation genre equally thwarted in the end.

A telling example of *chernukha's* inability to fit into categories of

15 A point argued by Manohla Dargis of New York Times in a recent polemical article about "difficult films." "What You See Is What You Get." New York Times, July 8, 2011.

entertainment is its use of graphic violence and sexuality (sexuality and gender will be the subject of last chapter). *Chernukha* adds a dimension to the violence that makes it unsettling and transgressive, and that is not necessarily achieved through the shock value of excessive gore familiar in the horror, thriller and exploitation genres. One example is the 1988 film by Aleksandr Rogozhkin, *The Guard* [Karaul], which addresses army bullying and hazing, known in Russian as *dedovshchina*. Shot in grainy black and white, the film takes place entirely on a train that hosts a moving prison and the conscript soldiers who guard the convicts. There is a scene in which a convict is discovered in possession of some illegal substance (we never know what it is, possibly drugs). The convict is brought to the officers in a small closet type space on the train, and while he insists on his innocence, one of the officers takes him by surprise, grabs and bends him over to pull a plastic package out of his anus. The scene is not at all graphic, as we do not see the actual act; but we do witness the humiliation and pain on the prisoner's face, and the composed attitude of the officer, who takes the package out and then discards his rubber gloves like a cool-headed torturer.

The scene shows the particular take *chernukha* films have on violence as a transgressive topic. Violence is not only mundane and institutionalized in the scene; it is also stripped of its explosive potential – the one that was a staple of the criminal journalism during perestroika and 1990s. There are no mutilated bodies, no close-ups of injuries and wounds, no blood, no screaming and raging; there is no real gore, in short. *Chernukha* presents violence as a chain of mundane events

permeating and imploding the social fabric from within. That does not mean that violence is always underplayed. It can be visceral and graphic in a hysterical and hopeless way, but not engaging (as in good guys vs. bad guys) or aesthetically dazzling (as in contemporary Hollywood thrillers).

Another interesting and more graphic scene comes from *Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksandrovna* [Muzh i doch' Tamary Aleksandrovny], directed by Olga Narutskaya in 1988, in which the husband of the eponymous Tamara Aleksandrovna (Aleksandr Galibin) is beaten up by a group of thugs because their daughter has promised sex and not delivered. The narrative premise in itself is appalling, but the way the sequence addresses the violent beating is typical for *chernukha*. The scene takes place on a winter evening in a park with just a few passers-by, too frightened to lend the victim a hand. There are no brutal close-ups of beatings, mostly just medium-shots of thugs surrounding the victim and kicking him, then making him get up and run before they get him again. In the end we see a close-up of his bruised face: he is on his knees, crawling on all fours from pain and what saves him is a desperate cry for help – “Team Spartak’s fan is battered!”

The graphic violence of the scene is obscured by darkness and heavy winter clothing, while the humiliating torturous nature of the beating comes to the fore as the victim is made to get up and run again and again. Seth Graham notes that in the *chernukha* world everyone is so jaded that one has to claim a soccer affiliation to get a helping hand from a fellow citizen (15). While I agree with

Graham, I think this desperate attempt to seek help also underscores the transgressive nature of *chernukha* violence – the grave and truly cynical reason for the beating is replaced by a street brawl over soccer fandom. The cause and effect relationship is obscured, while the suffering of the protagonist is judged as less relevant than the outcome of a soccer match (of which we know nothing in the first place). In addition, the husband of Tamara Aleksandrovna never learns the true cause of the attack – its sexual context.

The last scene in the film shows us the victim in hospital, badly bruised and positively delirious. We see him ask a nurse to make a strange ballet pirouette, which she actually does in the impoverished hospital surroundings, accompanied by ear-grating electronic music composed exclusively for the film by Oleg Karavaichuk. The maimed face of the protagonist in close-up, laughing hysterically, captures the nature of *chernukha*'s unsettling excess better than any scene of violence ever could. Seth Graham introduces the interesting metaphor of “bleeding noses and screaming alcoholics” (12) for *chernukha*'s agonizing hysterical world. The shocking effect that *chernukha* produces in the final scenes of *Tamara Aleksandrovna* is its refusal to comply with the principles of violence as entertainment, fast-paced, and visually appealing, romanticized and aestheticized.¹⁶ It equally rejects rationalized violence objectified in a larger narrative of purpose, cause and effect.

16 Margaret Bruder (2003) in *Aestheticizing Violence, or How To Do Things with Style* argues that aestheticization of violence in contemporary Hollywood films occurs when violence and gory imagery become a stylistic goal in themselves rather than a vehicle for narrative action or character development.

The *chernukha* sequence I described above obscures violence quite literally: by obscuring our vision with its dark surroundings, winter clothing, and by framing the beating from afar, sometimes from behind the assaulters' backs. The scene refuses to use a shot-reverse technique that might establish the unity of space and also a certain reciprocity of action – making the perpetrators accountable for the victim's suffering. When we do see the bleeding victim in close-up, he screams only of the soccer fandom, which confuses the viewer and thwarts any resolution of the violent scene – why was he attacked, what happened to his daughter? The hero never learns the reason behind the attack or the fate of his daughter (neither do we). Just as we never learn what exactly happened to Tamara Aleksandrovna after she was swallowed by the Soviet medical system, for unknown reasons at the very beginning of the film. The shocking *chernukha* quality lies in the metonymic transfer of the violent action to the hospital room where it is represented through delirium (nurse as a ballerina, the maimed face, the hysterical laughter) underscored by a macabre soundtrack that sounds like a cross between a broken organ and amplified sounds of indigestion. Both the conventions of causality and clarity, as well as aestheticization of violence, are absent.

Those who look for gore and blood in *chernukha* will be disappointed, as will be those who seek a genre spectacle. The most obvious sources of public and critical outcry against *chernukha* – too much violence, or too much sex – are not necessarily the most important impression that the films are after. *Chernukha*

does offer an unprecedented attention to sex and violence, but not necessarily as a simplified exploitation or sensationalist discourse, as is evident in its portrayal of violence. “Bleeding noses and screaming alcoholics” are the symbol of *chernukha*’s deviant adoption of genre formula. It takes the pleasure, visual appeal, and the element of fantasy out of the genre; and it replaces them with incoherency and obscurity. *Chernukha* visual presentation integrates unsettling matters into the fabric of every day life, rather than making them the groundwork for a fantasy to be enjoyed from the safe distance of a movie theatre seat.

In *Assuage My Sorrows*, the banality of evil culminates in a point that tips over to an excess that is neither plausible nor enjoyable, something that is neither a violent rape scene nor a romantic love scene. The “outrageous socks” moment in *Assuage My Sorrows* is the point of a certain slippage and an excess that removes the film from the territory of gratuitous sleaze, clear-cut moral parable, or even a gesture of cultural symbolism. The problem with *chernukha* is that it escapes both conventions of mass entertainment and what one might call “serious art.” It is hard to qualify. Gilles Deleuze, in defiance of structures (and structuralism), gives the example of a Platonic dialogue in which Socrates is asked whether the dirt under a man’s nails also has an eternal idea (*Logic of Sense* 1969). The answer is “no” – there is no eternal idea for dirt under your nails. Deleuze’s question is how one classifies the dirt under nails then; a singularity that does not exactly fit into our cultural cognitive maps. I argue that *chernukha*’s problem is exactly that it consciously aims to remain in the “dirt under nails”

category – unwilling to fit into any of the existing cultural discourses of what the movies are supposed to be. The hospital nurse's strange ballet at the end of *Tamara Aleksandrovna*, the much maligned sex-in-socks scene from *Assuage My Sorrows*, the ending of *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* [Zamri-umri-voskresni] (Vitaly Kanevsky 1989) with a mad naked woman running and spewing curses, the rape scene in *Harlequin*, all constitute a transgressive “dirt under nails” moment, as do many other unsettling excessive moments in *chernukha* films.

Chernukha is hard to fit into the structures of existing conventions of entertainment or serious art, art as allegory or art as education. In a sense, Horton and Brashinsky are right in declaring *chernukha* “formless,” since most previous categories of making sense out of films do not entirely apply to *chernukha's* vision. *Chernukha*, while deriving much of its discourse from natural school, or Socialist Realism, or sensationalist exploitation, ultimately has no affinity but a “real life” sensibility that at once shapes and mars the viewer's experience. On one hand, it seizes on the true-to-life discourse, on the other hand, as “dirt under nails,” it denies the “digestion” and cultural integration of that discourse.

2. “Desert of the Real” in *Chernukha*.

Russian critic Natalya Sirivlia (1991) describes *chernukha* as films that epitomize the collapse of identification, compassion, or pleasure. She writes that the dismemberment of the Soviet value system resulted in a nightmarish vision that is absurd and real at the same time:

Это было кино, абсолютно не способное считаться со зрителем, производящее фильмы невероятной длины, лишенный какого бы то ни было связного сюжета и доступной сознанию логической обусловленности событий. Здесь отсутствовал действующий герой, а персонаж, стоящий в центре повествования, с которым нам предложено идентифицировать себя, тонул на наших глазах в волнах социального абсурда, а фильм превращался в бредовое обозрение хаотически-непостижимого мира, в котором мы с ужасом опознавали окружающую нас действительность... Уже сама радикальность, с какой это кино отказывалось от следования традиционным эстетическим канонам, свидетельствует о том, что его принципы не могли быть использованы для развития кинематографа, рассчитанного на то, чтобы его смотрели, смотрели все-таки с некоторым удовольствием.

It was the cinema that absolutely lacked capacity to account for the viewer, it produced films of extraordinary length, that lacked any coherent storyline and causal chain of events that could be grasped by logic. There was no place for the active hero, but the character, who was the centre of the story, and who we were offered to identify with, was drowning in front of us in the sea of the socially absurd, while the film was turning into the delirious panorama of the chaotic impenetrable world, in which we horrifyingly recognized the reality around us... The very radicalism demonstrated by these films as they refused to follow traditional principles of cinema aesthetics proved that it could not be used for the development of cinema [in Russia] that wanted to be watched and at least watched with some pleasure ("The Dark Forces Oppress Us" [Temnye sily nas zlobno gnetut] 39). My translation.

The excessive transgression of *chernukha* points to a world that is simultaneously surreal in its brutality and real as it is interwoven into the very fabric of Soviet reality. No wonder the early post-Soviet viewers received the Latin American soap operas with such amazing enthusiasm, despite the wholesome preposterousness of a series like *Rich People Cry Too* [Bogatye tozhe plachut], or

The Slavemaid Isaura [Rabynia Izaura]¹⁷ A common assumption was (as I cited

¹⁷ *Chernukha*-like domestic productions are not solely to blame. The Soviet viewer always flocked to the extreme end of the melodrama scope – the most exaggerated and sentimental plots (a conviction that goes back to early cinema as well). Widely discussed examples are the

before from the proceedings of the Distributors' Union Congress) that it was *chernukha's* bleakness that drove viewers away from the theatres and accelerated the collapse of the Soviet cinema industry. *Chernukha* was believed not only to *portray* chaos but also to *cause* it, in real life.

Nancy Condee, in her recent book on contemporary Russian cinema *The Imperial Trace* (2009), debunks the myth that *chernukha's* dark content and bad reception was the cause for the plummeting numbers of movie-goers and the dwindling numbers of films produced. Condee argues persuasively, backing up her claims with statistical data, that in fact theatre-going was in steady decline throughout the 1980s. Then the emergence of "videosalons," which played pirated foreign films for cheap, the expansion of television, and the homeownership of VCRs contributed to the loss of interest in movie-going. Finally, the unsustainable economy of the centralized film industry failed to be reformed quickly and efficiently, also contributing to the sharp decline in productions, screenings and ticket sales. By the mid-1990s, major Russian studios such as Mosfilm (Moscow studio) and Lenfilm (Saint Petersburg studio) practically stopped functioning, and productions declined to the double digits.

I believe Condee is correct in her observations that economics, the expansion of video-renting, pirating and television all negatively impacted the

popularity of Bollywood in the Soviet Union and the phenomenon of *Yesenia* from 1974 – a Mexican melodrama about an orphaned gypsy girl who predictably turns out to be a rich heiress. The film became the biggest blockbuster in the history of Soviet cinema, outshining not only the art cinema and early montage movement (to be expected) but also the iconic Russian comedies from the 1960s and 1970s. *Yesenia* stirred a debate among cinema critics as to what exactly viewers see in this remarkable hodgepodge of magic and heroism. The film is so obscure that the only references I could find to it are in Russian.

statistics of movie-going and interest in domestic productions. The question remains, however, why *chernukha* became the “falsely accused” and a convenient scapegoat for various professionals, politicians and ordinary viewers?

Chernukha, in other words, was blamed for a reason – it came to symbolize the chaos, misery and failure of the perestroika reforms. The reforms failed to provide people with a safe transition, living up to the promise of perestroika’s early years of free speech, democracy, and change, and failed to preserve the sense of continuity and identity. Instead, Russia plunged into an economic catastrophe, identity crisis, and devaluation (as opposed to re-evaluation) of all values. The reception of *chernukha* cinema is grounded in the fact that it graphically represents transitional angst on the cultural, social, and individual scale. It is a “life is life” feeling that echoes “this is no way to live.” “Crisis” and “chaos” are the primary terms used to describe both the reality of perestroika and the early post-Soviet years, and *chernukha* films.

It is not necessarily economic woes that account for *chernukha*’s darkness, but the collapse of the Soviet value system and its credibility. *Chernukha* channels a Glasnost vision that imagines the Soviet reality as real and monstrous at the same time. It is not a coincidence that delirium, the absurd, the grotesque are all staples of most *chernukha* productions. In *Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksandrovna*, the nurse lands a pirouette while a mutilated man laughs; in *Assuage My Sorrows* the hero engages in a grotesque dance; *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* ends with a naked mad woman running around with a broom between her

thighs screaming at the top of her lungs; *Little Vera* shows a suicide accompanied by the violent destruction of a home. Indeed the grotesque, absurd, abuse of both logic and sanity constitutes the very core of *chernukha* cinema. This excess also brands itself as an exclusive representation of reality, to which there is no alternative. There *chernukha* differs from other Glasnost public activity, whose underlying impetus was change. Both Glasnost inspired journalism or *publitsistika* and *chernukha* aimed, to a certain extent, to conform with the public mainstream of perestroika period. However, *chernukha*'s cinematic language combines the eager Glasnost-conforming truisms ("naked woman under the portrait of Stalin smoking marijuana") with visceral aesthetics.

Interestingly, one of the viewers at the time wrote to *The Soviet Screen* [Sovetskii ekran] journal in 1990 that she did not watch Soviet movies anymore because she considered it "not normal to constantly live on the verge of a hysterical breakdown" [zhit' postoianno na grani isterii – eto nenormal'no] ("To Live On the Verge..." 29). The viewer identifies *chernukha* as life on the edge of a nervous break down and something opposite to what her life should be like, however, she remains ambiguous on what her real life is like. *Chernukha*'s prominence could also be caused by the fact that the mechanisms of meaning making in real life have been altered or are not easily accessible, and *chernukha* with its visceral response channels that anxiety. The feeling of emptiness and loss of cultural and social stability is engendered by *chernukha*. At the same time if nobody is sure what "real life" is like anymore, then *chernukha*, which has

persuasively insisted that “this is what life is like,” might be the only cohesive though destructive model around.

Andrei Plakhov (1990) commenting on the positive reception of the film by Pavel Lungin *Taxi Blues* at Cannes, notes that the word “chernukha” within the film is translated as “black hole.” Plakhov then notes that “black hole” is a term that implies danger and menace, while *chernukha*, in addition to that, implies the habituality and fatalism with which chaos is perceived and has become the integral part of perestroika living and filmmaking. Effectively, *chernukha* is as common and inescapable as every day life – a “projection on screen of the chaos that is raging around and inside us” (“Chernukha and Black Hole” [Chernukha i chernaia dyra] 27). Plakhov is one of the few critics who comes to the realization that it does not really matter whether a particular *chernukha* movie is good or bad, since the “broad canvas” is the same. His views seem to be shared by Natalia Sirivlia (1992), whose sentiment about domestic cinema, has not changed even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She writes about a film by Olga Zhukova *Merry Christmas in Paris or the Gang of Lesbians* in connection to the concept of *chernukha*:

... он есть непосредственное обнаружение чудовищного душевного хаоса, которым сопровождается наше вращение в новую жизнь, неотрафлексированное и выраженное с прямотой истерического припадка кризсное состояние духа, обреченного на скитания в преиподней.

... [it is] immediate uncovering of the monstrous spiritual chaos, which accompanies our adaptation to the new life, unreflected and expressed with the direct impact of a hysterical fit, it is a critical condition of the human spirit that is doomed to the wanderings in hell (“Such is Love”

[Takaia liubov'] 37). My translation.

Chernukha is bound historically to a unfortunate here and now that seems to last forever, with no foreseeable future, no plan, and, at best, an obscure logic. Elena Stishova (1989) emphasizes three principles that govern *chernukha* cinema:

Первое - отталкивание от нормативов и стереотипов, прежде всего социальных. Второе - апокалиптизм. Это сознание как бы не видит будущего, на месте будущего - чёрная дыра, провал. Третье - своя шкала ценностей, не совпадающая ни с какой другой. известной доньше.

... First is the rejection of all norms and stereotypes, social in the first place. The second is apocalypticism. This consciousness does not see the future, instead of the future there is a black hole, and abyss. Third is its own system of values that does not overlap with any other known system. (Shepotinnik et al. "Discussion: Perestroika and Glasnost on Screen" [Diskussii: ekran vremen perestroiki i glasnosti] 8). My translation.

All of the critics I cited seem to contend that *chernukha* is unique and that its uniqueness rings in highly negative terms – a system that offers no consolation in chaos, no solution in crisis and no future. I argue that these qualities of *chernukha* reflect the historical immediacy of crisis that befell the Soviet people. *Chernukha* is the embodiment of trauma that resulted in disappearance of cultural and social ways of coping with crisis of economical sustainability, social security and cultural identity characteristic of late 1980s and early 1990s.

Chernukha's transgressive aesthetics are grounded in the reflection of the shattering of Soviet identity. Like any other culturally constructed identification mechanism, the Soviet identity was a complex entity. It included hybridized

forms, incorporating various forms of resistance, and everyday practices that could be tinted ideologically, or self-censoring, or subversive, in other words it was a complex culturally inscribed form of belonging that functioned for many years.¹⁸ It would be an exaggeration to say that an average Russian person was an ideological drone – but the dismantling of the Soviet identity seems to have led to a crisis that is still felt in Russia today.

The resurgence of national identities in the former Soviet republics, Russian Orthodox traditions, and pre-revolutionary organizations like Cossack brotherhoods, attest to the fact that there was a need to find a narrative of belonging and community in the early post-Soviet years. Conspiracy theories, beliefs in the supernatural, astrology and obscure cults flourished after years of vulgar materialism. In the 1990s, several individuals, who claimed to be psychics, sold out packed stadiums, where they put participants into a hypnotic trance and claimed to cure their illnesses; or participated in the talk shows through which they claimed to “energize” the water in the homes across the land. The crumbling of Soviet identity and way of life had produced a glaring gap. Judging by the reaction from the critics at the time it seems that *chernukha*’s grim and grotesque vision of the world was not that far fetched given the economic devastation and cultural disarray of society.

Serguei Oushakine in *Patriotism of Despair* (2009) describes the post-Soviet search for belonging as the identity of “grief” or “despair” when the only

¹⁸ Alexei Yurchak’s excellent study *Everything was Forever Until It Was No More* (2005) discusses these points

thing that united the former Soviet people, unable to find solace in nation-building, religion, conspiracy, or supernatural, is the sense of bereavement of the Soviet identity. Elsewhere Oushakine (“Second Hand” [Byvshee b upotreblenii] 2009) argues that the crisis of the collapse of the Soviet Union created cultural “aphasia” - when the collapse of a symbolic order is articulated as the inability to form speech. Post-Soviet aphasia corresponds to the general feeling of a “dead-end” – a spatial and temporal catastrophe that followed perestroika’s radical changes and aspirations. While perestroika highlighted everything that was wrong with the Soviet system, its essential drive was to reform not to dismantle. In addition, not many members of cultural elite who rallied against the multiple evils of the Soviet regime could foresee how the end of the USSR would also shatter the collective identity of its people, leaving them with a void of cultural values and representations. There is nowhere to go, there is nothing ahead, and there is no way to put that into words.

In my opinion, *chernukha* certainly succeeded in conveying just that in images. *Chernukha* is the tipping point of the post-Soviet identity crisis – when the anguish that the situation created could not be conveyed in a regular language, one that was familiar with the Socialist Realism or the Russian literary canon or long-standing tradition of messianic purpose of art. Instead it was a fantastical radical language of excessive and grotesque images that claimed reality, while reality disintegrated. I argue that *chernukha* in cinema conveys the sense of crisis to a great degree through an intricate visual style that simultaneously reflects and

defines the Soviet reality and ultimately molds it into the nightmare of “bleeding noses and screaming alcoholics.” This radical visual style also posited *chernukha* representation as resisting cultural assimilation, positioning *chernukha* outside both cultural conventions and public taste.

3. *Ethics of Representation and Chernukha Visual Style*

Chernukha is Russia’s most controversial cinema – its definition is often a conveniently vague label for any film that goes against the grain politically, socially, or aesthetically and causes public outrage. *Chernukha* is still a hot topic to this day; almost as incendiary as it was twenty years ago. However, the assaults on *chernukha* are multiple but not innumerable. Even from a contemporary standpoint, the pessimistic view of human relations and social systems, the closed claustrophobic world of no right and wrong, coupled with its claim to reality beyond the screen usually inspires a heated reaction. Thus, a postmodern film of doppelgangers in the form of nude and drunk old ladies is ostracized as *chernukha* because it is perceived by a conservative elite as a blackening of Russian reality, while the drunk nude old ladies are most definitely not the norm (4, Ilya Khrzhanovsky 2004). The film is accused of presenting its story as the real life in Russia to gloating Western audiences. 4, adapted from Vladimir Sorokin’s play, and following his style quite well, is labelled as *chernukha* due to its transgressive topics. The film has little in common with perestroika aesthetics and is simply a *chernukha* scapegoat.

Another illustrative example of the revival of debates around *chernukha* is the recent Russian television series *The School* [Shkola] (Valeriia Gai Germanika 2010). There was a public outcry on behalf of the teachers' union (who wrote to Putin in protest) and the calls to ban the series from politicians. The series allegedly depicted the contemporary Russian school environment in an unflattering manner and portrayed teachers as "half-apes" as the letter from the union claims. It is not surprising that the series used documentary techniques like hand-held camera and non-professional acting to achieve an additional sense of reality. The series is removed in many respects from the *chernukha* of the perestroika period (not the least by the nature of the television genre). Its content is tamer. But the series is very bleak and offers a cynical portrayal of young students and just like perestroika *chernukha* it taps into an authentic sensibility. The series jumped the barrier from being just a television entertainment to being a reflection on real schools, real Russian children, and real teachers. An *Art Cinema Journal* [Iskusstvo kino] discussion in January 2010 is very telling. Iurii Bogomolov in an essay entitled *Love Them in Black* [Poliubite ikh chernen'kimi]¹⁹ writes:

...За спорами о правдивости того, что показывается в «Школе», об уровне ее художественности мы упускаем из виду ее историчность. Я имею в виду следующее. По этому сериалу дети детей сегодняшних детей будут судить не только о нравах, царивших в российской школе в начале XXI века, но и об умонастроениях в российском обществе, о моральном его климате, о прочих вещах, что невещественны, неосвязаемы. И вместе с тем они необычайно важны для понимания — откуда и куда мы идем.

19 The expression "love us in black, anyone can love us in white" comes from Gogol's *Dead Souls* [Mertvye dushi] (1842).

...Because of the debates around whether what *The School* shows is true, or if it has artistic merit, we do not consider its historicity. What I mean is that based on this series the children of today's children will judge not only the atmosphere prevalent in Russian schools of the 21st century but also the attitudes and values of Russian society, its morals and other things that are not material and could not be touched. And still they are very important in order to understand from where and to where we are going. (n. pag., web). My translation.

What Bogomolov seems to suggest is that the series is an important cultural phenomenon because it touches on the sense of identity that belongs to a certain time and place. The series is in “your face” about the historical and social context it addresses. The paradox here is the same as in early *chernukha* films – its the recognition of “reality” that causes an outrage.

Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky in their book on the Russian contemporary theatre movement known as New Drama (*Performing Violence* 2009) mention a cultural phenomenon called “negative identity” (a term coined by E.H. Erikson in 1970). They also suggest it is related to the concept of “little terror” by Tatiana Tolstaya. Negative identity is an identification of oneself via the other that usually entails defining the other as threatening, violent, uncultured etc. Both the director of *The School*, Valeria Gai Germanika, and the writer Vladimir Sorokin, have contributed to New Drama that examines the notion of violence and aggression towards the other and both are often accused of *chernukha* pandering. It is a plausible assumption that *chernukha*'s fusion of a real life sensibility and the excessively grotesque makes the public see itself as the other, recognizing and defying the notion of reality presented by *chernukha* in one

gesture. It is “our life” but it is “no way to live.” *Chernukha* fosters a kind of split personality that is characteristic of the identity crisis. The characters in *School* are seen as the abominable other, but they are also intimately and shamefully “us.”

The problem of *chernukha* is in its immediacy; it is too close and too painful - it lacks both a critical and culturally mediated distance. Elena Siemens (2007) analyzes WWII Russian photography in terms of how the spectacle of suffering is mediated by cultural institutions (such as the museum). She argues that such venues could provide the mediating cultural presence and create a necessary distance that allows for inclusion of counter-ideologies as well as cultural acceptance of traumatic history. Siemens writes:

In the specific case of Russia, a country that sacrificed millions to World War II, and where until recently few people were aware of the Soviet liberation’s darker side, a museum environment might actually succeed rather than fail, in providing “favourable referential conditions” in which to look at enemy’s sufferings. Because it allows the Russian viewers to perceive those sufferings at a remove, that is as works of art, and not only as historical documents, a museum or an art gallery serves as a site of reconciliation... (182)

The problem with *chernukha* is that culturally these films refused to be a mediated experience – despite the fact that they belonged to predominantly movie theatre culture. Hence, the Distributors’ Union position that *chernukha* drives viewers away. *Chernukha* defied the collective moviegoing experience and left viewers dissatisfied as a community that comes together for a particular art experience (not an actual nervous breakdown, obviously). And *chernukha* defied

expectations as a cultural institution (as Russian tradition expects of art) that could have performed a cultural mediation of the traumatic history that unfolds outside the movie theatre. On the contrary, *chernukha* presented viewers with a schizophrenic split of “this is our life, but it is no way to live” and “this is us but its cannot be about us” – unmediated by either conventional or cultural representations. This tension seems to be at the very core of *chernukha* and even today the question is still the same: is *chernukha* our life or the loathsome lie imposed on it? I believe that *chernukha*’s paradox of the confusion of reality and art, however, can be explained through a consideration of the ethics of representation.

The conjunction of ethics and cinema is a relatively recent scholarly topic. How cinematic representations should be discussed in relation to ethics is a tricky question in itself. Should one look into the faithfulness of the representation to certain ethical principles, political and social justice? For example, what is the impact of cinema on social change? Another criterion could be the faithfulness to aesthetic standards – what makes a good or bad cinema – a question that is obviously riddled with contradictions. Finally, there is also faithfulness to the reality that the film portrays, especially if the film depicts historic events. And there is rarely grounds for agreement – one might think of Vietnam war films in the U.S., WWII, and Holocaust films. Faithfulness to a certain vision of reality is important mostly in films that make claims to a representation of history, especially a traumatic or painful history. A common example is the portrayal of

the Holocaust in movies. The issues debated touch on whether movies trivialize the Holocaust, or provide a homage, and most importantly a witness; whether they subject an incredibly traumatic event to visual beautification, or focus on the graphic description of atrocities alienating the viewer from the message. And, finally, whether it is possible for a cinematic representation even to begin to approach the real experiences of Holocaust survivors. These questions are subject to a scholarly discussion that tries to settle the question of whether cinema can provide an adequate representation of something that is a breach in ethics. It is not the ethics that come under scrutiny – there is no confusion about the ethical underpinnings of the Holocaust tragedy. It is the ethics of representation – what is the right way to represent events pertaining to Holocaust survivors and the Holocaust as a historic experience. And here, again, no easy solutions could be found.

The debate around cinematic representations is nothing new. Its scope ranges from popular debates on violence in media to auteurist provocations of popular taste by directors like Peter Greenway (for example, *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*), Lars von Trier (for example *Dogville*) and Michael Haneke (for example, *Funny Games* (1997)) who specialize in uncomfortable, often horrifying subject matter. However, these auteurs draw on individual style and the strength of a more formal approach to cinema – their self-reflectivity about the medium is evident every step of the way. One can think of the elaborate theatricality of *The Cook*, the minimalist stage design of *Dogville*, and obsession

with videotape in Haneke's oeuvre. What is peculiar to *chernukha* is that it is serious and unmediated in its impact, improbably combining a visceral visual style and a realist representation that claims truthfulness about social conditions. *Chernukha's* claim to real life from the ethical standpoint begs the question of what exactly makes these representations offensive and socially unacceptable? *Chernukha's* artistic language is like a mirror held to Caliban's face, indicative of both the identity split ("us as others," "our lives as an impossible way to live") and a radical inaccessibility of meaning-making (who are we?). Whether Caliban sees himself or not in the *chernukha* mirror, the outcome is infinitely dissatisfying. The fact that *chernukha* just held the mirror rather than re-constructing or even questioning a workable identity – functions fulfilled by fantasy, genre filmmaking or high-brow art mediated by cultural institutions – proves the lingering hostility towards the phenomenon and indicates the lack of structures that would support *chernukha's* legitimate or legible representation. I argue that *chernukha's* visual language was obscure to the public and that is why it was perceived as deeply offensive.

One example is Aleksandr Rogozhkin's 1992 feature film *The KGB-Man* [Chekist]. In the film the CheKa [future KGB] members decide the fates of hundreds of prisoners whether they are guilty of political treason or not. Inevitably judging everyone guilty in the name of the revolution, the CheKa executes prisoners day and night, turning the basement of its headquarters in an unnamed Russian city into a slaughter house in the style of Hieronimus Bosch's

depictions of hell. The relationship between the executioners and prisoners do not develop, nor do we see any particular depth of the executioners' mentality. Most of the film time is devoted to the scenes of actual execution which all look remarkably alike and are repeated over and over again. The prisoners are stripped naked, lined up in a filthy basement stained with blood, asked to stand against the wall with numerous holes, then shot. Then their bodies are piled onto a dolly and they are lifted one by one with a rope tied to their feet out of the basement, put on a truck, and carried away.

The variations on that scenario include some outside the basement, which show citizens in despair, and feature a vulgar background psychoanalytic explanation about the sexual issues behind the main executioner's cruelty. Different batches of prisoners are introduced quickly and efficiently – with minimalistic strokes – here is the mother and her daughter, a newly wed couple, a former communist, a family with a child. In the end the chief executioner goes mad, the prisoners continue to perish, the guards keep on sniffing cocaine. The plot developments are only vaguely discernible because the narrative is overpowered with the excessive physicality. Rogozhkin has a degree in art history and the film's style is definitely reminiscent of Bosch's paintings. But its horrifying excessive quality is characteristic of *chernukha* representation in general. The historical reality of the CheKa executions might have been very similar, and Rogozhkin claims that he was inspired by a White Army officer memoirs. The exposition of the red terror as part of newly discovered Russian

history is also typical for perestroika political discourse. It is this unstoppable conveyer belt of violent death that makes the film *chernukha*.

The famous debate in *Cahiers du Cinema* about “the tracking shot in *Kapo*,” a film about a concentration camp by Gillo Pontecorvo (1960), centres on the fact that the film beautifies the death in the concentration camp. That constitutes an unethical representation according to the critic Jacques Rivette who addresses in his article *Of Abjection* (1961) the issue of the “morality of the tracking shot:”

Look however in *Kapo*, the shot where Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on electric barbwire: the man who decides at this moment to make a forward tracking shot to reframe the dead body – carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the final framing – this man is worthy of the most profound contempt (n. pag., web).

In *chernukha* it is the visual “uglification” that becomes the ground for unethical representation – a film unbearable to watch, an abjection. The *Kapo* debate is about containment – a contempt for the safety-nets of beautiful images, stereotypical stories that obscure the intensity and horror of the original traumatic events. The *chernukha* debate is about the lack of boundaries – not only in terms of a bleak narrative populated by victimized characters, but mostly because of the visual technique – which is much uglier than the plots themselves. The visualization in *chernukha* is the root of its “questionable morality,” even if the vilifying the Soviet past or way of life is its Glasnost moral context. *Chernukha* just like any other controversial film trend is complex and multi-faceted and can

not be reduced to just visual or narrative techniques, but I believe that the ethical dimensions of the *chernukha* phenomenon are rooted in the “morality of technique” rather than “morality of the story.”

What we encounter here is also the problem of unrepresentability. Does *chernukha* convey the trauma of the transition as an unrepresentable collapse of values and attitudes? There are several ways to define unrepresentability and to approach it. For example, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s categories of “sublime” and “differend” approach unrepresentability as a given (*The Differend* 1988; “What is Postmodernism?” 1984). The Holocaust can never be adequately represented, its victims heard. Unrepresentability can be channelled through sublime art as a paradox of rationality, when we face in stupor or awe something that defies our ability to reason, something unspeakable, unthinkable (this theorization has its roots in the Kantian definition of sublime). Contrary to that theory Jacques Rancière (“Are Some Things Unrepresentable?” 2007) argues that Lyotard’s conceptualization of the sublime is, in effect, a rationalization in itself, since we can discuss and agree on the unrepresentable experiences and debate the sublime nature of their representation.

What I think is relevant in this debate for *chernukha's* case is the historicity and Marxist bent of Rancière’s position. For Rancière the unrepresentability is the issue between language and experience in a certain regime of art. Something can be unrepresentable if there is no way to express the junction between language and experience, allowed by the artistic means

acceptable at a given historic moment. Rancière asserts that contemporary art is defined by absence of such constraints (unlike classic art for example) and therefore the question of unrepresentability is a false one. In fact, modern art provides diverse and various ways of correlation between language and experience (or provides contesting representations). It is these diverse means and cultural disagreements about them that lead us to the debate of morality of the technique and the ethical dimensions of representation, not the inherent unrepresentability of some phenomena.

Chernukha was quite often discussed in terms of the absence of a defined cinematic language. There was a view that perestroika's freedom of speech brought on an unexpected paralysis for filmmakers, since the ability to say everything effectively became an inability to say anything (Tolstykh, quoted in Horton and Brashinsky 1992). *Chernukha* is often viewed as a vacuous discourse, hence the accusation of sensationalism or formlessness. Poor quality is not a persuasive issue in *chernukha*. Too many *chernukha* films won top international festival awards and became representative of the new Russian cinema. The problem is the coherence of representation – in *chernukha* there is a clash between language and experience. The films narrate contemporary experiences, staking a claim to representing reality, but their language is somehow inadequate and rejected by the viewer. That case of inadequacy is not about the unrepresentable horrors, or poorly forged portrayals – it is about a radical language. That radical language seems to defy representational expectations of the audience, causing

mass revulsion. I argue that it is grounded in the visual excess of *chernukha* films and their defiant nihilistic sensibility that rejects all norms and inverts all representations.

A good example is the Palm D'Or winning film *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* directed by Vitaly Kanevsky, which follows the friendship of a boy and a girl in a post-WWII impoverished Soviet town adjacent to some Far Eastern labour camp. The conditions of the town and the characters that inhabit it are framed well within a historical context, but, at the same time, the film shuns historical judgement. Instead, it focuses its story on children who display the inhumanity of the system most vividly, but are also most oblivious to it, changing a film from a story of first love to a *chernukha-like* world. Featuring an urban criminal ballad as its privileged soundtrack, it communicates the habituality of terror and the monstrosities the characters experience, but it also creates a strong case for what Elena Stishova (1990), reviewing the film in *Art of Cinema Journal* [Iskusstvo kino], called “life is life” [zhizn’ est’ zhizn’] (60).

The film keeps its focus on the children, but often, in a natural school vein, it digresses into the life and pursuits of the townspeople. We see Japanese prisoners being exploited by the camp guards; the local dance party that goes violent; the rude flirting and fleeting intimacy in the communal apartment. Shot in black and white, the film immerses the viewer in the authenticity of a chronicle. The signs of poverty and oppression are everywhere but they are not noticed – nobody talks of Stalin or speculates on fates of those affected by the times. This

stands in sharp contrast to films that address similar subject matter but not in the *chernukha* vein. A good example is the Oscar winning drama from 1992 *Burnt by the Sun* [Utomlennye solntsem] by Nikita Mikhalkov, in which all the relations between lovers, former lovers, and rivals are filtered through the fear and antagonism with the state power, epitomized by a balloon with a gigantic portrait of Stalin sprawled out across the sky at the film's conclusion. In *Freeze-Die-Come to Life*, the characters experience the immediacy of the Stalinist terror, but for them, like in most other *chernukha* films (regardless of historical allusions), it simply becomes an integral part of an existence that is closed on itself, with no reflection and no future, just a continuous present. *Chernukha* films capture the sensibility of the everlasting night – the life that is unfair and cruel and does not have a beginning or an end, but is just “how things are.”

Freeze-Die-Come to Life ends with one of the protagonists, the sensible girl Galia (Dinara Durkarova), perishing at the hands of gangsters, with which the main character, Valerka (Pavel Nazarov), a trouble-making adolescent, happens to get involved. Galia's body is wheeled on a cart towards the barracks that the families inhabit, when a naked woman runs out of the building riding a broom, laughing and yelling uncontrollably. The ending also becomes a pseudo-documentary shot, with the camera suddenly appearing to be hand-held, and a voice from behind the camera giving instructions to shoot the crazy lady, not the toddlers on whom the camera has been fixated. The sudden shift to the documentary implicates the viewer in an unusual way. Rapidly, the viewer's

distance is undermined by the abrupt inclusion of the director and camera in the world of the film – a direct implication of the spectator into *chernukha's* unmediated immediacy. In the final scene, the viewer assumes the point of view of the moving camera which literally comes to life in the film world.

On one hand, the ending is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the stereotype of *chernukha* as a sensationalist discourse when the invisible director orders to shoot the naked woman. On the other, the film simultaneously undermines this sensationalist drive by endowing the camera with a life of its own. The camera proceeds to disobey the director's orders and shows reluctance in turning away from its previous subject (two toddlers), as if it sympathizes with the town's inhabitants and the fate of the children, who might grow and perish like Sashka and Galia, the characters we have followed. The viewer, in effect, becomes twice traumatized, first by being witness to the atrocities of the film from the viewer's position, and then by an identification with the camera's gaze. The viewer is forcefully put in a voyeuristic position inside the film. The film consciously plays on the real/unreal, documentary/fictional past tension to highlight *chernukha's* representation of "life as it is."

The ending of the film is what tips the balance of these deliberate tensions into the territory of *chernukha*, producing an excessively transgressive effect. In the end, we do not see the actual murder of the little girl, but we see her carried on a cart not designed for human bodies in dignity or in construction. We learn that the boy survived and is in the hospital. Then the mad woman starts her run and

the documentary finale implies that the mad woman is just as real as the little children; the fixated object of the camera and the only source of sympathy and identification for the viewer. The mad woman figures very little previously in the film, giving her presence the shocking effect of unpreparedness and a *diabolus ex machina* effect. Her excessive presence destroys the bare threads of hope and normalcy the film might have produced through its sympathy with children.

Freeze Die Come-to-Life is shot in beautiful black and white, reminiscent of 1960s neorealist thaw films like *Cranes are Flying* [Letiai zhiravli] (Mikhail Kalozov 1957) and *Ballad of a Soldier* [Ballada o soldate] (Grigory Chukhrai 1959). In contrast to the beautiful cinematography, the soundtrack consists of very low-brow semi-urban crime ballads, undermining the loftiness associated with the visual style. These songs, usually a combination of criminal and popular ballads, were common place during the Stalin era and were one of the few forms of popular expression not supervised by the state. Considered a low and marginal art form they did not address politics but instead relied heavily on melodramatic emotions, criminal misadventures, and traditional folk tunes. The cultural clash of cinematography and the soundtrack is one of the assaults on cultural conventions undertaken by the film.

Another one concerns the portrayal of the mad woman. The most prominent witch riding her broom naked in the Russian cultural tradition is a character in the celebrated dissident novel *Master and Margarita*, by Mikhail Bulgakov. The novel is a satirical phantasmagoria that tells the story of the

devil's visit to Moscow in the 1930s. It is explicitly critical of the Soviet regime and mystical in its philosophical underpinnings, incorporating a retelling of a Gospel story as a part of its narrative. *Freeze-Die-Come-to-Life* seems to make a joke of both the beautiful visual style of the “humanist” and hopeful 1960s cinema and one of the most revered works of Russian literature of the 20th century. The beautiful visual style aims to describe the miserable depressing life, and the fact that the timeline of the story in the film and the time of the 1950s-60s style roughly correspond only makes it more poignant. Margarita, one of the most attractive heroines of Russian modernist novels, becomes an insane local woman, whose fate is not only non-consequential, but also the subject of morbid curiosity.

The cherished dissident culture of refinement and resistance to the hegemonic state is effectively reduced and mocked. Such a sweeping negative inversion is typical of *chernukha* cinema and constitutes its negative excessive style which clashes with the natural school enlightenment impulse and the expository Glasnost context behind film's narrative of the hardships of 1950s Russia. The film systematically rejects any explanations or culturally constructed interpretations of suffering and misery of Soviet life – scornfully dismissing the humanist message of the 1960s cinema and the dissident resistance of the underground subcultures. Instead the film emphasizes the soundtrack which features either criminal ballads, often sung by innocent children, or Japanese songs - in the context of the film we see Japanese prisoners but never actually hear them sing in the film. The world is inverted: children sing adult songs. Or

the world does not make sense: Japanese singing is understandably obscure to Russian audiences and is never subtitled. Both points are underscored in the final scene, when the woman begins her running escapade, she is a picture of irredeemable, irrevocable suffering, that no beautiful camera work or great dissident art can cure.

The film goes as far as to subvert and mock itself as a part of *chernukha* discourse, referencing the sensationalism as the director hurriedly coaches the camera to tape the naked woman. It denies the beauty of the visuals to address the woes of the film's subjects. The film scorns the dissident ideals of resistance to the regime, implicitly suggesting that art is really powerless. The film's subversive connection to *Master and Margarita* can be extended to the famous quote from the book that "manuscripts do not burn" - a credo for all dissident art in Russia. Art will survive because it speaks the Truth. *Master and Margarita* is just the most iconic example; Solzhenitsyn vocalizes the same views in his Nobel speech. The film seems to dismantle both the hope for the humanist ideals of the 1960s and the resistance ideals of the counterculture. Maybe manuscripts do burn, and films do not show the light through the pervasive darkness as the Gogol followers of natural school hoped. The sheer physicality of the last scene coupled with all the dismantled layers of meaning that the film takes on forces it to explode in a sheer *chernukha* effect of "I don't want to look anymore." The ending sequence turns the film into an uncanny exposition of *chernukha's* vicarious mode. The tables are turned on the viewer who is not only made to

witness but also inhabit the world of the film as one's own reality. Like other *chernukha* films that deal with "our life exactly as it is," here the viewer again occupies a precarious position – experiencing both the visceral drive of the *chernukha* visual style and the identification with the reality inherent in that style as her own.

A similar tour-de-force of visual abuse happens in many *chernukha* films. Like the scene in the public co-op toilet from *God's Tramp* discussed above, or the suicide scene in *Little Vera*. Interestingly *Freeze-Die-Come-to-Life* and *God's Tramp* both simulate the documentary technique when they present their darkest moments. *Little Vera's* finale, just like numerous scenes in *The KGB-Man*, strives for a de facto casual description of unbearable experiences. At the end of *KGB-Man*, there is a ten minute sequence of pretty much the same execution sequence, only stripped of any soundtrack, both diegetic and non-diegetic. The music made the film more bearable, since it added emotional cues, and verbal interaction between victims and torturers served as a distractor from the brutal visuals. The execution scenes performed in complete silence have a transgressive *chernukha* effect. The de facto, stripped of any cinematic embellishment (such as sound) and narrative power (dialogue) visual narration clashes with the excessive nature of the material presented. Unethical representation in *chernukha* stems from this clash of means and ends, visual abjection and minimalist narration that amplifies the transgressive uncanny nature of visuality. It is similar to how visual beautification clashes with the material presented in *Kapo*. That is not to say that

the juxtaposition of narrative and visual style is not common. What I think becomes an ethically problematic point of broken expectations is the context of this juxtaposition. Technique has to, simply speaking, make sense, just as the story has – it has to be integrated into a regime of representations, in words of Rancière. It is the coherence of the world presented in the film that becomes the subject of ethical debate. In *Kapo*, the Holocaust is presumably trivialized, because the representation chosen in the film does not do justice to the experience. In *chernukha* the representation overpowers history in a sense that the language of the cinematic representation does not illuminate the historic experience for the viewer – be it the Stalinist era or the contemporary perestroika society – but instead overpowers her experience, creating a closed abusive world in which every meaning is negated and every path is blocked.

Chernukha's radical language is a visual style that seems to be divorced from the didactic natural school or naturalism inspired story or perestroika pathos of denunciation. The *chernukha* style is necessarily combined with dark narratives but these narratives do not exclusively depend on *chernukha's* visual style. Most *chernukha* narratives are stories that could be traced back to 19th century literature or answer the Glasnost call of exposition of hidden truths, and generally focus on social critique. In short the stories are old; the representation is new. *Chernukha* showed viewers something they had never seen before. The radical language of suffering, excess, physicality, abjection – trapped in a slice-of-life narrative, suggesting that this abyss is one's life. This does not mean that

chernukha is “unethical” from some universal standpoint, but that it is treated as a breach in ethics because of the incongruence of its representation. This representation is a reflection of the historical trauma of the perestroika era and the collapse of values and attitudes, but this reflection comes in a raw unmediated form. *Chernukha* came to embody or reenact traumatic anxieties rather than sublimate and reflect on them, and in a sense it became the story that takes the place of history rather than the story that explains history. As such it warrants comparison with other cinemas that embody historical traumas through transgressive and bleak filmmaking – such as film noir.

4. Transgressive Representation and Spectatorship in Noir

Despite the gulf of time and culture that separates 1980s Russian cinema and noir cinema in North America, it could also be said that film noir is another cinema of crisis that has become a story that represents a history of transition and collective anxieties. There is no doubt that noir femmes fatales and PIs, glistening night streets, and chiaroscuro lit venetian blinds, perpetually doomed heroes, and a world filled with anguish, do not present a historically accurate picture (which would really be an impossible task). However, it is widely acknowledged in scholarship that noir is a reflection and sublimation of post-WWII anxieties (such as the changing position of women in society, exposure to war atrocities, the changing dynamics of labour, and the “red scare,” among others). Paul Schrader (1972) asserts that noir succeeded in implementing sociological critique through a

visual style that marks its transgressivity – it casts doubt on the American dream mythology of individual merit and open possibilities, presenting instead a world that is predetermined; a world that is often confusing and predatory to the individual. The dark vision of film noir is often discussed as a sensibility or a “mood and a tone” (Schrader) that stresses a pessimistic stance on both human nature (overpowered with lust and greed) and social structure (appearing as rigged and manipulative criminal underworld or predetermined fate “that trips you everywhere you go” (a quote from the protagonist of *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer 1945))).

Classic film noir has been frequently explored along the axis of its transgressive representational strategies. Critics position noir in opposition to classical Hollywood cinema: in terms of style, for instance – the chiaroscuro visual aesthetic of noir as opposed to the even lighting of mainstream films. The distorted framework, the excessive employment of a subjective camera, the proliferation of point of view, and the different first-person narration devices, such as flash-back and voice-over, counteract seamless editing and objective linear narration of the Hollywood classical style. It is also argued that the viewer experiences the deprivation of the enjoyable sense of omniscience and control over the narrative. The extremely convoluted plot structures often simply make no sense when compared with the causally driven narratives and the clean denouements of traditional Hollywood. The exploration of the “dark side” of the American dream – the concentration on the grit and grime, hopelessness and fate

– bestows a rather pessimistic outlook of the world outside of the movie theatre on the viewer, also contributing the distinct quality of noir. Andrew Spicer (2002) in his overview of film noir writes:

film noir... was deemed to unsettle spectators, forming a disruptive component of an American cinema that had habitually sought to reassure and comfort its audience...film noir embodied a critical stand in popular cinema (2).

Film noir's visual techniques, its construction of the mise-en-scene and lighting, contribute significantly to the sense of menace, chaos and, paranoia that fill the noir sensibility. Noir, as Robert G. Porfirio (1996) suggests in an essay on sound and image in *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak 1946), is operating between a realist setting and the realist story, and the expressionistic artistry, creating an unusual amalgam. Noir employs location shooting of city streets (usually glistening wet under street lamps), and dark alleys, often shot night-for-night (as opposed to artificial enhanced lighting to avoid excessive darkness in night scenes). It often includes other realistic markers of the city, such as neon lights. The selective street lighting illuminates small areas, leaving dark caverns, where danger usually lurks. Similar chiaroscuro lighting is employed throughout interior settings, with low-key lighting emphasizing shadows and creating a contrasting composition. Film noir is also famous for its deep focus (objects distanced from camera remain distinct and visible), as if immersing the viewer in the world of the film. These stylistic devices contribute to the noir sensibility. Janey Place and Lowell Peterson (1974) write:

Complementary to noir photographic style...is a mise-en-scene designed

to unsettle, jar, and disorient the viewer in correlation with the disorientation felt by noir heroes. In particular compositional balance within the frame is often disruptive and unnerving...bizarre, off-angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame, which create a world that is never stable or safe...Claustrophobic framing devices such as doors, windows, stairways, metal bed frames, or simply shadows separate the character from other characters...And objects seem to push their way into the foreground of the frame to assume more power than people (68).

Film noir, therefore, is marked both by transgressivity towards the conventional cinematic forms of the time. Noir also exhibits a certain reflexivity of visual technique that effectively transcribes both noir's tone of hopelessness (Schrader) and an underlying social condition through means of style. The noir visual style amplifies the mood of paranoia and anguish, reflecting both the narratives of the films and the real post-WWII history.

Some similarities with noir could be noted about *chernukha* cinema, which also is a transgressive and "dark" trend, whose excessive visual style has served to both unsettle the spectator and reflect the historical anxieties of the time. *Chernukha*, like noir, runs against the conventions of the dominant cinema of its time – the Soviet cinema tradition. Similar to *chernukha*, the transgressive representation of noir is embedded in both narrative strategies and visual style, with the visual representation carrying a particular weight in both cinemas for achieving unsettling effects. The transgressive representation in *chernukha*, however, proved to be counterintuitive for the audience. Furthermore, the differences between the visual representations of noir and *chernukha* could not be more far apart. Classic film noir is heralded for its visual beauty and unique

visual solutions. In addition, classic film noir became a source of public fascination rather than rejection. Noir did not face the same crisis of public reception grounded in issues of representability and legitimacy as *chernukha* did. On the contrary the historicity of noir – a critical consensus that noir emerged as a cinema reflective or sublimating the post-WWII anxieties – was no deterrent to the source of its fascination. The film trend was re-interpreted throughout the coming decades culminating in what James Naremore (1998) calls a “mediascape” of noir as an integral part of contemporary popular culture. The noir sensibility has been explored across transnational lines with scholarly investigations of British noir, French noir, Italian noir and most recently Nordic noir – as in the adaptation of Stieg Larsson’s novels and the Danish procedural series *Forbrydelsen* (2007). In short, noir is fascinating while *chernukha* is repulsive.

Oliver Harris (2003) exploring the concept of “fascination” in noir, points out that the fascination with film noir seems to defy historical boundaries and limitations of the film movement and has turned it into “critical and cultural fantasy” (4). Harris argues that noir becomes a source of critical “fascination” through a variety of media and cross-cultural connections (such as French *Cahiers du Cinema*). Noir, therefore, becomes a cultural sensibility that, in a sense, is “larger than life” – or it elicits a cultural response and investment on a scale that exceeds its “material base” (Harris), namely the limited corpus of films that were created in the 1940s and 1950s. Both noir and *chernukha* are

sensibilities, both are a source of fascination (negative one for *chernukha*), and both continue to exert cultural influence outside their immediate historical context. While the stylized expressionist visual style of the classic noir is an unlikely ground for comparison with *chernukha*'s raw visceral representations, noir as a sensibility is a larger phenomenon than that. For a more productive exploration, I would like to look into the phenomenon of neo noir and its aesthetics in comparison to *chernukha*'s excessive representation.

Neo noir is just as murky territory as classic noir, including a large corpus of films from the early 1960s to the present day, that are not subject to easy cataloguing. Some critics include anything that speaks of crime and betrayal as neo noir (Ronald Schwartz's *Neo-Noir: The New Film Noir Style from Psycho to Collateral*, 2005), and some single out individual films (Andrew Dickos 2002). In the development of noir sensibility after the classic period of the 1940s and 1950s one can distinguish two periods.²⁰ One could be classified as the neo noir of the late 1960s and 1970s. It coincides with the profound political, cultural and social changes of the Vietnam War era and is a distinctly unique period in the history of American cinema (Beard 1998). While removed from the original film noir in visual style and many staple elements of the story (such as the private detective), neo noir of the 1970s is an update in noir sensibility. Its pessimistic narratives and unpolished raw visual style present a fruitful ground for comparison with *chernukha*. Post-1970s neo noir could be seen as a nostalgic or retro noir (an *homage* to noir in the words of Frank Krutnik) and a stylized noir

²⁰ I am indebted to Dr. William Beard for the original idea of this periodization.

(or “pastiche” noir in the words of James Naremore). An exemplary film is *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan 1981), which replicates the *Double Indemnity* story, and self-consciously recreates the stylistic highlights of noir. The film’s strength is exactly in its power of recognition and mimicry. The post-1970s neo noir could be described as the cinema of allusion as theorized by Noel Carroll (1982). He writes:

...allusion, specifically allusion to film history, has become a major expressive device, that is, a means that directors use to make comments on the fictional worlds of their films. Allusion...is an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of practices including quotations, the memorialization of past genres, the reworking of past genres, homages, and the recreation of “classic” scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes gestures, and so forth from film history, especially as that history was crystallized and codified in the sixties and early seventies (52).

Neo noir of the 1970s, however, could be described as a cinema that attempts to position itself as a contemporary noir movement and in a way “updates” the noir sensibility. These films are of a particular interest to me because many of them have a decisively contemporary setting and usually have very little to do with noir’s prominent visual style, but they foster a similar noir sensibility and achieve a similar unsettling effect for spectatorship, as well as present a sociological critique similar to original noir. The 1970s neo noir will be the focus of my comparison with *chernukha* transgressive representation.

Andrew Dickos points out the acute contemporariness, increased violence, sexuality, and diversified race in neo noir; the films often project the image of society as violent, corrupt, and crippling to the individual. Neo noir in the 1970s

includes diverse genres: crime thrillers, like *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (Peter Yates 1973) and *Point Blank* (John Boorman 1967); detective films like *The French Connection* (William Friedkin 1971); conspiracy thrillers like *Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula 1974), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola 1974). Only a few films like *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman 1973) or *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski 1974) directly reference classic noir per se. The neo noir of 1970s exemplifies a re-enactment of the noir sensibility couched in the social crisis of faith in American society and its “grand narrative,” accompanied by the deconstruction of the Hollywood classical narrative of positive resolution and individual triumph (Beard 1998).

Similar to the *chernukha* of the 1980s-early 1990s, it is argued that the decade of the late 1960s-1970s characterized by the Vietnam war, a polarization of American society, the emergence of various counter-cultures, the lost faith in the political establishment (assassinations of Martin Luther King and John Kenendy, Watergate) created a traumatic situation that was reflected in the films of the period. William Beard writes:

These events render especially the period 1967-1978 the most traumatic in American history since the end of the Civil War. The death of liberalism, of the social idealism which had characterized the earlier 1960s, of any communal trust in American institutions, and finally of the bedrock of belief in the American narrative itself, were the results of this process (n.pag., web).

The narrative structure of classical Hollywood story-telling went to the opposite end of the spectrum, as censorship lifted, exposing American viewer to an

unprecedented amount of graphic violence²¹ as well as explicit sexuality. Beard states that:

For the first time in history, Hollywood movies are overrun by central characters who are losers and bad examples, by laborious undertakings which miscarry messily, by an ugly violence with, actual and unpleasant consequences, by a social environment ruled by predators and beyond the control of institutions which are in any case corrupt and ineffective, by a moral landscape so desolate that there is no hope of transcendence or rescue. The dominant narrative pattern now starts to resemble its opposite, not a success story but a catalogue of failures... (n.pag., web)

Similar to the *chernukha* cinema of the perestroika era, 1970s cinema challenged and inverted many principles of the dominant cinematic culture (i.e. Hollywood), as well as challenged the predominant cultural narratives. Similar to the film noir of the 1940s, the films of the 1970s pushed the boundaries of cinematic experience, but, as Beard argues, they also presented a much more radical departure than noir's transgressive, but still in many respects contained, movement. If classic film noir constituted only small portion of total film production, the 1970s saw a much wider spread of nihilistic and dark subject matter, even in genres traditionally unsuited to that type of material (like the musical). In the 1970s the tentative resolutions of classic noir, where good could triumph or there could be a sense of morality that prevails over circumstances, became submerged in the negation of positive denouements and characters.

The 1970s neo noir is not necessarily devoid of classic film noir references, but its paramount concern remains the sensibility characteristic of the

²¹ Exemplified by the ending sequence of *Bonny and Clyde* (Arthur Penn 1967), for example, which became known as a "ballet of death" for its slow motion sequence depicting the gruesome death of the protagonists from gun fire.

decade of the 1970s rather than a recreation that becomes more prominent after the 1970s. An excellent example is *The Long Goodbye*, a Philip Marlowe detective story, adopted from Chandler's novel, and set in 1970s Los Angeles. The story carries significant elements of the quintessential noir plot: mystery genre, investigated murder, uncovered corruption/betrayal, enigmatic female characters with hidden agendas, twists of the plot that take effort to untangle, ambivalent or tragic ending. It could be argued *The Long Goodbye* is a deconstructive effort – it is a “goodbye” to noir and the private detective genre. The film features a detective, Philip Marlowe (Elliott Gould) who reverses many of the qualities of the hard-boiled “tough guy.” he is weary, indifferent and out of place. James Naremore (1998) writes:

In place of witty dialogue and wry offscreen narration it gives us inarticulate characters and a mumbling private eye who incessantly talks to himself; in place of carefully framed angular compositions, it uses a roving, almost arbitrary series of panning and zooming shots that continually flatten perspective; and in place of romantic music, it employs a 1940s-style theme...that undergoes countless rearrangements – including versions for door chimes, a sitar, and a mariachi band (204).

Instead of the master-voice of voice-over, we have Marlowe talking to himself and sometimes his cat, who replaces the femme fatale or any other alluring female in his life. His constant motto “it's OK with me” narrates the indifference that the 1970s world displays to the outmoded private detective. The only thing that he finally cares to do is to kill his friend, whose name he set out to clear and who, it turns out, had set him up. The film speaks of alienation and indifference as modern conditions, exemplified by Marlowe's drugged-out neighbours, hippie

girls constantly stoned, while the next-door detective gets abused, beaten, abducted etc. In the classic noir *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang 1953), the gangster's girlfriend, played by Gloria Graham, seeks revenge when her face is mutilated by her boyfriend. The girlfriend of the gangster in the *Long Goodbye*, who smashes a coke bottle across her face, stays with him, silent and obedient, at times appearing even nonchalant, sporting a bandage across her face.

At the same time, *The Long Goodbye* is not just a deconstruction. Elizabeth Ward (1996) suggests that the weariness and disillusionment in the film is "society's self conscious indifference [that Altman adds] to the long list of alienating elements that comprise film noir" (241). *The Long Goodbye*, as a "goodbye" to noir, opens a new perspective for neo-noir, extending the paradigm of chaos and alienation of modernity, expressed in the paranoid fragmented world of classic noir. The film has an ironic awareness of the uncontrollability and ugliness of the modern world, where the only real control is entertainment, Hollywood's illusory grip on reality. Such a view is a reflection on the angst of the film noir. Garrett Stewart (1975) writes:

Suddenly, in the hands of Robert Altman..., the essential narrative fabric of physical action and concrete mystery in these fictions has been partly discarded, partly rewoven, and the genre turns introspective and allegorical, tacitly renaming itself in the process as the metaphysical "private I" film: a study in the lost and homeless modern soul, pitted against a corruption it can barely fend off, let alone cure (32).

In addition, the film intensifies the pessimistic mood via a dull washed-out colour palette (the film stock was deliberately overexposed). In effect, *The Long*

Goodbye engages noir's dark worldview while remaining both self-conscious and contemporary, that is faithful to the social issues and anxieties of its time, the 1970s.

As noir consciously defied Hollywood conventions, *chernukha* positioned itself as the opposite of Soviet cinema, defying the conventions of Socialist Realism, and Soviet cinema in particular, such as the need to “varnish,” didacticism, or taboos on sexuality. Furthermore, *chernukha* debunked the cultural expectations of the mission of art and the traditions of Russian realism – the humanistic discourse of a reformation of society by art. Instead, it envisioned a corrupt and doomed reality beyond salvation either by art or political will. Both 1970s American cinema and *chernukha* share a deep pessimism about social structures and human relations, a nihilistic vision of traditional narratives and representations, and engage in a subversion of previous traditions, reflecting a traumatic point of transition and crisis. Both readily indulge in excesses previously unattainable due to Hays code in Hollywood and censorship in the Soviet Union. Robin Wood (1986) in his analysis of 1970s horror films states that horror experiments with intense graphic violence and shocking sexuality, while maintaining an “incoherent” narrative and unpolished, raw, low-budget look, as in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974). The transgressive discourse of horror in the 1970s exposes a cultural (namely capitalist) veneer disguising the abyss of the politically and socially repressed, reconstructing the other as a monster and American life as hell. He writes:

...with unique force and intensity, at least one important aspect of what the horror film has come to signify – the sense of a civilization condemning itself, through its popular culture, to ultimate disintegration, and ambivalently (with the simultaneous horror/wish-fulfillment of nightmare) celebrating the fact (95).

Chernukha, as I argued previously, lacks entertainment value and especially the cult status that 1970s horror films achieved when audiences found the amateur production value of the genre all the more attractive. The indulgence in the nihilistic bonfire of all cultural values is common to both *chernukha* and the horror of the 1970s, especially those horror films that border on exploitation, like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven 1972). Still, horror might be the epitome of excessive representation in the American films of the 1970s, but it, by definition, eschews the “daily grind” and the truthful representation of reality at which *chernukha* excels. Neo noir, which mostly features criminal thrillers or dramas, also tends to avoid the naturalist, descriptive storytelling towards which *chernukha* leans. It does, however, come close to both a *chernukha* sensibility and aesthetics.

Neo noir bears a powerful message of transgression that is grounded in both a reflection of the crisis of cultural metanarratives (similar to *chernukha* reflecting the crisis of perestroika) and the subversion of dominant artistic codes. Such subversion supports a self-reflective emphasis that starts with classic noir, where unsettling spectator and debunking genre conventions also served to amplify for the cultural discontent and pessimistic worldview common to both versions of noir. Neo noir in the 1970s borrows the dark mood of classic noir,

stressing its pessimism about society. Ubiquitous portrayal of crime and corruption, sense of paranoia and fatalism produce a jaded worldview of “all things gone wrong,” as individuals drown in their own ill-conceived plans, or are cornered by forces outside their control.

Todd Berliner (2001), in his analysis of *French Connection* (William Friedkin 1971), notes the difference between the genre-breaking and genre-bending films of the 1970s. *The Long Goodbye* represents a self-aware mockery of genre, deconstructing both Hollywood conventions and the detective genre. The film suggests that both the rogue chivalric code of the PI and a sense of justice are unrealistic and unattainable in the indifferent and cynical cultural landscape of the 1970s. Genre-breaking implies a radical departure from the mainstream, whose success often depends on an auteur figure (like Altman). In *chernukha*, such a gesture would be possible for an art house films like *Asthenic Syndrome*, whose radical approach to the language of cinema will be discussed in the next chapter. Mainstream *chernukha* films, as we have seen, often blend various traditions and conventions. Genre-bending productions, on the other hand, as Berliner argues, do not deconstruct the genre entirely, but seek to create a discrepancy between viewers’ expectations and genre conventions, calling into question the validity of genre and its cultural implications. Discussing *The French Connection* as a genre-bending film might provide a useful comparison to *chernukha* with regards to the qualities of its visual style and relationship to the viewer.

The French Connection is considered an exemplary neo noir from the 1970s. A cop movie, it is a procedural that follows detectives Doyle (Gene Hackman) and Russo (Roy Scheider) as they try to catch a drug trafficker, Charnier (Fernando Rey). During their investigation, the detectives follow various leads, shoot and hustle some suspects (including an entire bar full of African American patrons), come into conflict with the FBI and, generally, behave as “rogue” cops – putting “results” over procedure. In the neo noir anticlimactic ending, the trigger-happy Doyle, whose ruthlessness and obsession with the case has been accentuated throughout the film, shoots a fellow officer, while the intertitles inform us that most of the suspects in the case walked, while the principal villain, Charnier, was never caught.

As in many other productions of the 1970s the film offers an extremely bleak picture of New York as a living space and the police as an institution. Similar to *chernukha* productions, the critical stance towards society in *The French Connection* is channelled through its take on institution – which is presented as flawed and corrupt. This is a recurrent theme in 1970s neo noir, represented in other films like *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet 1973) or *The Parallax View*. The protagonist detective, Doyle, is portrayed as a brutal obsessive character with clearly racist views and a disregard for both rules and individual dignity. Throughout the film Doyle consistently detains, beats up, and harasses various characters, obsessed with capturing the drug dealers. The irony is, of course, that he does not capture the suspects, just as most film noir protagonists

“don’t get the money,” or “don’t get the woman” (a quote from *Double Indemnity*). Doyle kills at least two men in cold blood, one of which is a police officer, and another is shot in the back (as depicted in film’s famous poster).

In addition to its less than sympathetic hero and a bleak narrative of total failure, the film uses visual techniques that underscore its dark mood. If classic noir offered a unique visual style to narrate of social failures and individual anxieties, neo noir of the 1970s, offers us something very different. The horror raw, amateurish and unpolished visual style was hailed as an effective visual amplification of the genre (Wood). Similarly the atmosphere of cultural disappointment and despair of the 1970s corresponds to the unrefined visuals in *French Connection* (Beard). If *The Long Goodbye* chose a washed-out drab palette to convey visually its indifferent and bleak sensibility, *The French Connection* chooses visuals reminiscent of those found in *chernukha*. For instance, it uses extensive shots of littered, messy streets and shabby interiors. Both inside and outside of the neo noir landscape is dirty, unglamorous, and chaotic.

There are several scenes in the *French Connection* that exemplify this bleak visual style. Early in the film, the cops beat a suspect up in a back alley that is shot as a desolate space between two decaying empty buildings, a trash heap burning in between. The chase between the suspect and cops happens along deserted semi-industrial spaces. The best example is the famous end sequence, in which the detectives hunt for drug dealers inside an abandoned building with the

final action taking place just outside a dilapidated bathroom. It is here that Doyle appropriately makes a final mistake or intentional breach of law by shooting a colleague. *The French Connection*, like *chernukha*, favours urban shots, always devoid of greenery or other lively colours, and human presence, with mostly the black or grey facades of buildings. If a human presence is detected in these spaces it is usually to that human's peril – as in the shoot-out scene, when a lone mother with a baby carriage is shot down by a sniper aiming at Doyle. The shots have a distancing angular geometry to them, coupled with a bleak monochromatic palette. New York is not at all a liveable space in *The French Connection*, and by extension it is also made sinister (this portrayal of New York will be echoed in the *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976)).

Chernukha offers a very similar depiction of its also almost exclusively urban environment, privileging a kind of raw, almost documentary-like, mise-en-scene of littered streets and yards and impoverished shabby interiors. The famous panning shot of industrial wasteland that starts and ends *Little Vera*, with its smoking chimneys and empty desolate industrial landscape, is a case in point. The interiors and exteriors of *Dogs' Feast* or the opening sequence of *God's Tramp* are similar environments. Not only are the visuals not pleasant to look at in both neo noir and *chernukha*, but they are also shot in a realist manner where the camerawork underscores the surroundings as the integral and natural part of the film environment. This approach contrasts, for example, the art house *Stalker* (1979) directed by iconic Russian auteur, Andrei Tarkovsky, where a desolate

trashed landscape is shot as an apocalyptic and metaphysical space.

While there is a crucial difference between the excessive visceral representation of *chernukha* and its habitual realist slice-of-life cinematography, both are unable to function without each other. The suicidal excess of *Little Vera* is built upon the many sequences of unsavoury situations and unliveable spaces that culminate in excessive rupture of the suicide scene. Similarly the horrific grotesque of the *KGB-Man* is conditioned by the mundane realist representation throughout the film. The *chernukha* ending of *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* is an abrupt but effective culmination of the film's narrative gloom and representational nihilism.²² However, the tipping point that takes *chernukha* into the territory that resists interpretation and representation does not happen through the descriptive discourse of the physiological sketch, as Nikolai Nekrasov, or, a century later, Sergei Kaledin used it. It is *chernukha's* visceral excess that creates an unethical representation. For neo noir the excessive and shocking violence is a part of its transgressive nature, while raw, ugly visuals precipitate and amplify the dark neo noir world, culminating in an unabashed portrayal of violence as the logical extension of its doomed sensibility.

Both neo noir and *chernukha* also influence the spectator's experience,

²² In the Russian cultural tradition, the term "nihilism" first appears in Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* [Ottsy i deti] (1862). Turgenev's term denotes the revolutionary younger generation, characterized by scepticism towards cultural values (such as religion, traditional morality or family), an ardent adherence to positivism and the elevation of a collective purpose - revolutionary activity and social change - above all else. This last point was true of real life Socialist revolutionaries, such as Sergei Nechaev, and later became the subject of critique by Dostoevsky in *Demons* [Besy] (1872). While this interpretation of nihilism rejects the "old" world and order, it still advocates revolutionary change as a positive counter-ideology. For my purposes, I use nihilism as theorized in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, as a concept that describes the failure to find meaning, value and purpose in human existence.

presenting a transgression of conventional representations and the viewer's expectations. Todd Berliner argues that genre-bending films engage in traditional narrative strategies (a cop thriller in the case of *The French Connection*) but they amplify ambiguities that bust the genre from within, or as Berliner calls it "booby-trap" the generic codes. Berliner argues that *The French Connection* maintains a lot of the conventions of a cop thriller, including the ones concerning "tough cops" that do not abide by conventional rules, insisting instead on a righteous vigilante mindset, a tradition that starts with Westerns. However, while the camera often assumes Doyle's point of view in his pursuit of criminals, suggesting that the viewer should identify with the rogue detective, the film intentionally amplifies both the degenerate character of Doyle, as well as picks up on several moments that unsettle the traditional scenarios of the genre.

Berliner cites several scenes that emphasize the brutality and indifference of Doyle as a character: the scenes that show a close-up of teenagers who dies in an accident, and the one in which the mother with a baby-carriage is shot. We are confronted with brutal violence which is then immediately dropped from the narrative strand and we never learn anymore about the victims – as if the film assumes the complete indifference of Doyle on the matter. This unsettling experience culminates in the ending sequence which dismantles the stereotypes of the rogue cop – the villains escape and another cop is shot either by an unacceptable mistake or possibly through a sinister plot on Doyle's part. The spectator, Berliner argues, experiences a cognitive dissonance, when the shift of

conventions makes the viewer doubt her own experiences as a movie goer. He writes:

A genre bender like *The French Connection* impels us to watch uneasily, unsure of its meaning, which helps account for some viewers' urgent denunciations of the film and its hero... Whereas genre films, as Braudy writes, generally "make us one with a large mass audience, often despite our more articulate and elitist views," genre benders, because of their ambiguity, can make us question whether our experience is at least somewhat idiosyncratic. Indeed, *The French Connection* panders to our sense that we are more astute, more sensitive, and more moral than the mass of viewers around us (40).

The genre-bending *French Connection* creates a certain gap between the morality that the audience expects to feel and the one it does feel. It is conditioned by genre to sympathize with the hero, but cannot quite accomplish that with Doyle, resulting in the frustration that the film might somehow advocate amorality or has been poorly done so it denies viewer identification.

This is very close to *chernukha's* dilemma of the unlawful representation. Similar to *chernukha* neo-naturalist narratives, genre-bending films also operate on familiar ground, which ensures a subversion from within, just as *chernukha* successfully buried Soviet cinema while remaining a part of Soviet cinema. However, in the case of neo noir, the ethical dilemma is more connected to the viewer's experience – the conventions of cinema. In the case of *chernukha*, it is connected to the viewer's experience outside the movie theatre – the claim to real life. Both trends create a gap between the viewer's expectations and cinematic representations as a strategy to channel historical wounds and construct a dark and pessimistic vision of society, but neo noir did not seem to suffer the same level of

public disdain as *chernukha*. Although the 1970s films did not necessarily enjoy a glut of moviegoers, I think industry changes during the time and a rogue sensibility that defied conventional cultural representations ultimately laid the foundation for a successful independent cinema movement in the United States today.

Chernukha, it seems, unlike film noir or neo noir, managed to move beyond the allegorical – where a film represents history and its traumatic impact all the while maintaining a fictional distance (again, the horror film is the best example of such sublimation). *Chernukha* effectively became history in a way that made fiction and fact indistinguishable to the viewer. *Chernukha* is acutely historical – it does not just latently reflect the values and attitudes of the time, but makes the reflection of social conditions its conscious prerogative. *Chernukha*'s world is closed, its boundaries deceptively positioned as the limits of life itself. It becomes increasingly difficult to say whether it is the real life perils that shaped *chernukha*'s perspective, or if it is *chernukha*'s totalizing narrative that shaped our perception of perestroika. *Chernukha*, in this sense holds true not to realist traditions that faithfully mimic reality, but true to history that, as Paul Ricoeur points out, does not exist outside the narrative. *Chernukha* effectively became the narrative of transition, the narrative of crisis – a story that becomes history.

Chapter 3. How To Paint It Black: The *Chernukha* Film World

In addition to its excessive visceral style and its claims to a truthful representation of reality, one of the obvious markers of *chernukha* films are the bleak depressing stories of dysfunction, marginalization and social malaise. *Chernukha* is known for its grim subject matter. Several important factors emerge in describing *chernukha* narratives. Firstly, the penchant for shocking, inappropriate and taboo subject matter that still dwells mostly on social behaviour such as alcoholism. There is not a single picture about incest, for example, in *chernukha* corpus. Many *chernukha* films focus on the social environment, be it an institution or a working class family, claiming to speak the truth about social reality. *Chernukha* is characterized by a deep cynicism reflecting a collapse of ideologies and social contracts; and, finally, these narratives are characterized by an overpowering bleakness. The narrative source of *chernukha*'s negativity, bleakness, and despair will be my focus in this chapter.

Chernukha, akin to noir, has no strictly demarcated boundaries. There are many serious films that address grim subject matter and often graphically, like the celebrated art film *Andrei Rublev* (1966) by Tarkovsky, which was censored for graphic violence. There are many films that look into the daily grind of people on the margins of society. A prominent example is a tendency in Soviet cinema during the 1970s-1980s to explore the ill fit of the individual within the Soviet system, returning to the theme of a superfluous man of the 19th century Russian literature (as in *Flying in the Dreams and Reality* [Polety vo sne i naiavu] (Roman

Balaian 1982). There are films that take a thoughtful look at topics made taboo by official ideology such as criminality, for example, *Snowball Berry Red* [Kalina krasnaia] from the 1973, directed by Vasily Shukshin. There are decisively controversial and banned productions like the satirical *Repentance* [Monanieba/Pokaianie] (Tengiz Abuladze 1984) or *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* [Moi drug Ivan Lapshin] (Aleksei German 1984) that are not *chernukha*, and were never placed in that category. The thematic focus of *chernukha* films remains vague – how do you define the “dark stuff?” I suggest a concept of the film world to analyze the specific means through which *chernukha* films express their dark and pessimistic sensibility.

When we talk about the concept of film world, it is most commonly understood as the world of the film story that the characters inhabit. As well, it is common to discuss the film world as a singular world of a work of art (one film). However, in the case of *chernukha* or film noir, we can talk about a film world within the entire movement, usually denoted by such terms as sensibility, atmosphere, or “mood and tone” (Schrader). Undoubtedly each of the *chernukha* films creates its own particular world that its characters inhabit and the storyline unfolds in. It is also possible to say that many *chernukha* films share suppositions about the world they construct, as well as the atmosphere, the characters and the narrative developments.

Like noir, *chernukha* is a trend or a cycle, since it includes a variety of films across genres and engages different directors in a limited time period,

although it falls short of being a movement made consciously by like-minded authors. What unites *chernukha* films is not a pronounced ideology, but a timeframe and a distinct sensibility. As is the case with noir, *chernukha* films often share choices of mise-en-scene (such as urban settings) and visual style solutions, in additions to thematical patterns. Daniel Yacavone (2008) writes on the film world concept:

... a film world intuited by the viewer is not a purely formal property of a work, but is partly articulated through and by its represented characters and situations, the affective relation between them and the viewer is something deeper and broader than a specific identification (emotional or otherwise) with a character's thoughts, feelings, or actions. It is instead a consequence of a shared world-feeling that the film world expresses and which, with respect to representation, may be seen to provide the intuited "existential" context within which the characters think, feel, and act. In sum, as the result of an affective connection between the viewer and its expressed spatial-temporal structure... a film conveys a unique world-feeling, recognized by the viewer as such (98).

Chernukha films give us a certain vision of the world they construct and their characters inhabit and to which the viewers reacts. In what follows, I will look at various cinematic solutions that *chernukha* offers to inscribe its film world with a dark sensibility and how it compares with *noir* and its own Russian tradition. I will illuminate the typical choices that epitomize *chernukha* discourse of hopelessness, devastation and totality – or what does it take for a movie on the criminal underworld/substance abuse/family dysfunction to be classified as *chernukha*.

1. Chernukha and the Social Milieu: The Institution.

There is a general consensus among historians that by the end of the 1980s the Soviet system was dysfunctional politically, socially and economically (Kenez 1999). After the advent of the Thaw and the development of the dissident culture in the Soviet Union, the dissidents pointed out many of these dysfunctions, such as the fundamental lack of freedoms, rampant corruption and inequality within Soviet society, or the lack of a consumer oriented economy. The wide-spread countercultural movements like *samizdat* (underground publishing) and the rock youth subculture suggest that ideology in the late Brezhnev era had become nothing but a “simulacrum” in the words of Mikhail Epstein (1995). Soviet ideology was cynically seen as a collective lie; it had no supporters only benefactors, and no correspondence to reality – it became the “emperor’s new clothes.” That does not mean, of course, that there were no real persecutions and censorship. While cinema was still censored in the Brezhnev era, it reflected the fatigue and disillusionment of the period. What changed radically in the time of perestroika is (at first only partially) the easing of censorship and the active pursuit of hidden truths about the system that were withheld from the people.

Hence the emergence of certain “hot” topics: both sensationalist and moralistic narratives of the Soviet way of life that reflected one or another facet of the disintegrating system. Often social institutions presented a particularly apt picture of Soviet corruption and inhumanity, whether in the past (repressions, labour camps) or in the present (penitentiaries, schools, workplace, collective

farms, the political establishment). In accordance with the natural school tradition, social ills, the political system inevitably translated into everyday misery, a generic “way of life.” If natural school writers focused on class and social status, perestroika arts focused on marginalization by the oppressive regime. The journalistic, public and artistic attention was on the illegal dwellers of metropolises, the homeless, the prison convicts, the cookie-cutter brainwashed or deeply cynical adolescents, the inhuman bureaucracy, the apparatchiks with their privileged lifestyles, the impoverished peasants, the alcoholic working class, the prostitutes and drug-addicts – the list goes on. Glasnost winds brought these topics to the forefront virtually in all public media and in all the genres and forms in cinema.

Yuri Mamin’s acclaimed comedies like *Window to Paris* [Okno v Parizh] (1993), *Sideburns* [Bakenbardy] (1990), and *Fountain* [Fontan] (1988) address the failures of the Soviet system and the way of life in a grotesque comic fashion. Serious art productions like *The Second Circle* by Aleksandr Sokurov (1990) take on the grim subject of death and bereavement through the lens of bureaucracy of funeral arrangements, during which the protagonist of the film is forced to spend a few days in the same room as his father’s corpse. Bitingly satirical films like *Whit Monday* [Dukhov den’] (Sergei Sel’ianov 1990), or the war film *The Leg* [Noga] (Nikita Tiagunov 1991), look at Soviet life as a kafkaesque web of unknown rules and power arrangements. The protagonist of *Whit Monday* (played by a cult rock musician, Yuri Shevchuk), upon discovering he has superpowers, is

confined to a peculiar mental institution for exceptional people. The Afghan war veteran in *The Leg* discovers that his amputated leg leads a separate life, embroiled in crime and vulgar thrills, the life he has been deprived of through disability and the miserable living conditions of veterans. Many of these productions tackle *chernukha* themes, especially if one looks at the broad range of marginalized and silenced people and situations as *chernukha*'s prerogative. *Chernukha*, however, had its own peculiar imprint on the issues that concerned everyone in the times of perestroika.

Chernukha understandably offers no "happy endings." Whenever a perestroika film looks into social failure across the board in Soviet society, it finds little to cheer about. What I believe distinguishes *chernukha*'s handling of the topic is the fine line that separates a moralist physiological sketch from the doomed sensibility akin to film noir, when the system failure becomes not only a source of social criticism but also a source of a worldview. *Chernukha* incorporates strong neo-naturalist elements, but it also offers something beyond that. To illustrate my point, I will compare two films of the perestroika era. One, typically in the *chernukha* vein, is called *Bespredel* (Igor Gostev 1989) and ironically presents a tamer picture than the usual *chernukha* fare despite its challenging title.²³

"Bespredel" is a word that, like "chernukha," is used to describe a vague

²³ It is quite common in perestroika cinema to exaggerate the controversial content of the film via its title, thus, the film ambitiously entitled *The Bum* [Bomzh] (Nikolai Skuibin 1988) is a regular family melodrama that has nothing to say about the social tribulations of homeless people and does not feature a single "bum."

field of widespread crime, and lack of law enforcement and protection from the government in the 1990s. Like the term “chernukha,” *bespredel* came from criminal slang where it stands as the opposite concept to “*vorovskoi zakon*” (the law of crime) or “*zhizn’ po poniatiiam*” (life by the criminal rules) – the two essentially meaning the structure of subordination and privilege in organized crime that continues to thrive in prison. *Bespredel* is the “state of lawlessness,” applied to individuals who fail or refuse to abide by the “law of crime” and are, therefore, punished. The punishment involves physical brutality and inhuman treatment like torture, rape and murder. *Bespredel* as a concept aims at the humiliation and destruction of the individual who violates the law of crime. *Bespredel*, in other words, is a law in itself – a sanction to lawlessness or the absence of rules. It seems that Russians, confronted with the post-Soviet crises of their economic, social and political systems, perceived it as a *bespredel* – a state of lawlessness unleashed by the state on its own citizens. This is exactly the word that Eliot Borenstein (2008), Birgit Beumers & Mark Lipovetsky (2009) and Serguei Oushakine (2009) use to describe the rampant crime, economic hardship and social insecurity of the 1990s (in *Overkill*, *Performing Violence* and *The Patriotism of Despair*, respectively).

The film *Bespredel* follows a set of characters in the state penitentiary, featuring some admirable performances by a set of future Russian stars, like Sergei Garmash, who plays the criminal boss, Mogul, running a particular division of the prison. The two protagonists which the film follows closely are

Kalgan (Andrei Tashkov) – a rough suburban kid who got a short term for defending his girlfriend in a bar fight; and Vitek (Anton Androsov) – a young intelligentsia member, who received a year in prison for selling his own stamp collection on the black market.²⁴ The narrative of *Bespredel* develops in a neo-naturalist pattern, reminiscent of Kaledin’s prose. The first half of the film sets the stage of prison mores, good guys in bad circumstances, criminal lords, the elaborate relationship between different criminal castes within the prison community, and the prison authorities concerned with “joking” the stats. The narrative pace is slow; the plot developments are largely descriptive. For example, Kalgan refuses to work, gets beaten up, and ends up in a penalty cell with some criminal bosses. The lengthy sequence in the penalty cell continues with dialogue, mild drug use, and other details of interaction between Kalgan and the bosses that give the viewer a sense of the prison’s hierarchical environment.

The second half of the film focuses more closely on Kalgan and Vitek specifically, who are trying to overthrow the “law of crime” and return “power to the people,” to the inmates, to be precise, who slave for the criminal bosses and are forced to abide by the law of crime. To stage such a revolution, they rally some support from an honest prison guard and Vitek engages in several inflaming speeches about the slave mentality in ancient Egypt to illustrate the point to the

²⁴ Selling goods outside the supervision of the state was illegal and black market the only venue for the Soviet citizens to acquire Western products. “Fartsa” – illegal re-selling – became both a channel for resistance and a subject of contempt. In a sense, it was a mirror of the Soviet state itself, offering an appealing ideology on the surface (all things Western), but being a manipulative and corrupt invention in essence. Goods were sold at quadruple prices and often people who smuggled them were connected to the Communist party elite who could travel abroad. Black market is a subject of the famous perestroika documentary *The Highest Trial* (Herz Frank 1987).

prisoners (and to anyone else for whom the vivid analogy between the prison and the Soviet Union was not quite clear enough). Then, Vitek is double-crossed and is subject to *bespredel* treatment: brutally raped in a graphic scene that contains mostly close-ups of the faces of the torturers and the victim. Vitek subsequently hangs himself which inspires a prison riot by the convicts who overpower the mafia bosses and avenge their revolutionary leader. Kalgan is sent to a different prison and we last see him clutching the enormous reading glasses of Vitek – a symbol of their friendship and a nod towards the torch of enlightenment carried by Russian intelligentsia.

The most visible irony, and a certain narrative helplessness of the film, lie in its rendering of the rape scene, which, while being graphic, ends with Vitek shouting from behind the closed door to his comrades: “long live the revolution,” right before he hangs himself. This naive and hopeful ending might not be in good taste, but it is very consistent with the natural school humanist agenda and the perestroika discourse of change and how to bring it about. In this instance, one needs to inspire the convicts with high ideals. The film makes a plea to recognize the dignity in all human beings, even in criminals, an idea that has been around since Gogol’s *Overcoat*, and is elaborated in the famous novel *Notes from the House of the Dead* [Zapiski iz mertvogo doma] (1861) by Fedor Dostoevsky.

The sensibility of the intelligentsia hero reflects the history of ideas in Russian culture, giving *Bespredel*, however awkward a film, a certain cultural context. In *Solovki Power* [Vlast’ Solovetskaia], an influential and lauded

documentary by Marina Goldovskaia (1988), one of the witnesses to the political repressions of the early 1930s, narrates how her brother was arrested. When she asked him what for, his answer was – for “Lenin’s hard line.” The perception that the arrests have some high-minded ideological purpose, and seeing one’s own unjust arrest in terms of political idealism, seemed very common. The idealistic stance towards pragmatic and often horrifying political and social realities stretches back to the ideological debates of the 19th century, namely the Slavophile and Westernizers’ debates that found its pinnacle in both Socialist revolutionary activities and Dostoevsky’s mysticism.

The same moralistic and idealistic sensibility is very discernible in perestroika as a time of great change and hope. Such an anti-Machiavellian basis for politics was also a staple of Socialist Realism, chiefly on paper, exemplified by Aleksandr Fadeev’s *The Rout* [Razgrom] (1926). In *The Rout*, the Red Army commander Levinson weeps for the death of most of his battalion, but pulls himself together because after all “he had to go on living and doing his duty” [...нужно было жить и исполнять свои обязанности] (275, my translation). The high-minded ideals of change and the common good were the subjects of most of the 19th century debates, and are implied in the Socialist Realist texts. They also shaped the real attitudes of cultural elite, when individuals insisted that their incarceration at, say, Solovki, was the consequence for upholding Leninist ideals.

Bespredel implies and builds on this idealist tradition. Unlike the zeal of

the commander in *The Rout*, or the ideals of the student who perished in Solovki camp, *Bespredel* is not a very convincing narrative, but the impulse is very important to understand the film in the context of *chernukha*. The narrative of *Bespredel* fits very well with *chernukha* thematics, but it introduces a positive resolution and an idealistic affirmation or hope that is usually absent from *chernukha* productions that are exclusively hopeless, dark, and without any positive conviction. The caveat is that many films that might be identified as *chernukha* can move back and forth between conventional genres, perestroika inspired educational impulses, and graphically exploitative scenes of sadism. As I mentioned before, *The God's Tramp* is mostly a drama about childhood friendship, however, the provocative beginning of the film suggests *chernukha* excess. A comedy like *The Fountain*, has true *chernukha* moments, mostly achieved through its visuals – or stylistic injections – when it introduces a weeping woman in close-up in a mise-en-abime sequence. *Chernukha* shows fluidity not only in its definition, but also in the context of its narrative application. However, the positive, if naive, inspiration felt in *Bespredel* is counterintuitive of *chernukha*, because its all-enveloping negative drive usually does not allow for hopeful resolution or a positive denouement.

The other production I want to talk about is an acclaimed film by a Soviet-Russian veteran of filmmaking – Sergei Bodrov Sr.'s *Freedom is Paradise* [SER - svoboda eto rai] (1989). The title of the film refers to a prison tattoo. Tattoos are prominent channels of criminal hierarchy, gang affiliation, and self-expression at

large in Russian criminal culture. But in Bodrov's film that tattoo belongs to a teenage boy (he is thirteen, but looks around ten). The boy Sasha (Vladimir Kozyrev) is a student in a state supervised school for "criminally inclined" children; his mother is dead, his father is in prison. In a documentary touch, the film's lead actor is himself a troubled teenager with a criminal past. The film starts with a lustful brawl between two women over a guy, a scene that ends with the sexual molestation of our protagonist, Sasha, the morning after. Sasha politely asks the woman Klavdia (Svetlana Gaitan) if she has any pictures left of his mom and dad together, before he climbs into her bed where she covers him with caresses. This scene, without any specific graphic impact, is the most disturbing, and is an apt *chernukha* start for the film, introducing the routine, everyday notion of child abuse that Sasha himself seems to take as a quotidian experience.

The repulsion of the scene rests not in the graphic details (there are none, really) or in the implication of transgression of the social norm and the law. In *chernukha* the scene is treated in a casual way, showing the integrated nature of abuse in the daily lives of its characters. We see the boy washing his face in the morning and then going into the bedroom. The caretaker, Klavdia, covers him with methodic and emotionless kisses, as if performing a compulsive ritual, while he just lies there, looking as if he is bored, or as if he has to do a chore, waiting for her to be finished. *Chernukha* suggests the normalcy, the realism and casualness of despicable things that engulf both the victim and the perpetrator in a world that offers no alternatives or venues of escape. Klavdia is neither punished

nor gets away, she simply vanishes out of sight, as Sasha moves on with his life from one misfortune to the next. The causality is broken and the narrative explanation of violent acts withheld as in the examples from the *The Guard* or *Tamara Aleksandrovna* I used before. The act of molestation and possibly rape (we never know) becomes a part of “life as it is,” rather than an event to be reflected or acted upon, as it happens, for example, in the film and the novel *Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (film from 2007, directed by Marc Foster, and novel is from 2003).

Sasha’s exposure to sexuality is not limited to the molestation scene, as he visits another friend of his, a prostitute, who is kind to Sasha, but does not feel like covering herself in front of him, suggesting that in the eyes of the adult world (or the larger social order) he is neither a man nor a child. We soon find out that Sasha is no angel himself as we follow him around the school in a naturalist descriptive exposition – witnessing bullying, appalling living conditions, and indifferent staff members, one of whom at some point throws the child on the floor and kicks him in the stomach. The jarring contrast here is how Sasha looks and how he is treated. His looks suggest a young kid, but he is treated as a dangerous adult, albeit not grown enough to stand up for himself or to be feared. The vulnerability of this position is apparent from the start when the woman who abuses Sasha sexually delivers him straight to the police to get rid of him. In the police station, Sasha realizes that his father, serving a prison term in Northern Russia, has made an inquiry about his son but his inquiry was declined. Thus,

begins Sasha's journey across the country to meet his father.

For the most part the film is a road movie, with Sasha encountering a variety of people, some of which are accidentally kind, some accidentally cruel, and so is he. A sentimental touch is added by the director when a girl asks Sasha to kiss her and the awkwardness with which he plants a kiss on her cheek drives the film's main point home – Sasha is a child. Very often the film slips into melodrama with appropriate violin-induced emotional music and slow-motion scenes that are supposed to underscore the struggle and determination of the protagonist. The last minutes of the film are similar to the setting of *Bespredel*, when Sasha finally reaches the penitentiary and gets an overnight visit with his father in a special visiting cell. The father (Aleksandr Bureev), a bitter and broken man, does not spare Sasha any of the details of his criminal career, and then breaks into tears, overpowered by the emotions of someone actually caring for him. The grim irony is that Sasha came so far to find someone to take care of him, but he quickly concedes to do whatever is necessary just to have a parent – to work, to make money illegally, or to lie. The film ends melodramatically as Sasha pounds his fists against the ground fiercely and is taken away by local police officers, presumably back to the much hated school.

SER is not an exceptional film; it is melodramatic and populist, with a weepy instrumental soundtrack and slow-motion cinematography meant to emphasize the despair of Sasha's situation. It emphasizes tender moments of kindness with cliché, like audacious, particularly for 1988, religiosity – a nun

helps Sasha. Like many other perestroika filmmakers, Bodrov Sr. paid a brief homage to *chernukha* aesthetics but his most celebrated films (such as *Prisoner of the Caucasus* [Kavkazskii plennik] from 1995) are detached from the *chernukha* narrative altogether. Although *SER* incorporates all these diverse elements, it presents an important point of comparison to *Bespredel*. The most obvious one is the lack of a positive resolution in *SER*. Although the boy finds his father, the encounter, to which the film's narrative leads, does not offer a catharsis and is downplayed. Primarily, the encounter is institutionalized: the film meticulously documents, how Sasha's father is asked to stand up and turn round, while he is escorted, and Sasha being searched and escorted by the prison guards in a similar fashion. Their conversation revolves not around parenthood but the father's criminal misadventures, re-emphasizing the prison environment that is already everywhere. While in the visitors' cell, both the father and Sasha are transfixed by cartoons, reversing the roles of these two characters again: the parent who watches cartoons and needs the care of a child, and the child who is confined within the prison walls, searched and stripped bare in a premonition of his adult fate.

The institution, the penitentiary in its child-oriented and adult-oriented incarnations, becomes the neo-naturalist environment that contains and successfully supports these inversions. One of the differences between *Bespredel* and *SER* is that in *Bespredel* the environment becomes the ground for didactic exposition and social preaching. In *SER* the institution, the social environment,

becomes the world, the way of life. The world of the institution is shown also as a world turned upside down, in which we rarely have a glimpse of what the “normal” world should look like. This is why Sasha’s character is subject to so many inversions, most of them unsettling. Sasha is a child, who is treated like an adult and is expected to be a caretaker, or a lover, or a dangerous criminal. As a child, who has nobody to stand up for him, he is abused, manipulated, or neglected – a fate that is also the melodramatic staple of orphaned characters since Charles Dickens. The gulf between these two identities is what makes *SER* an interesting film, a combination of *chernukha* and melodrama, of the dark ruthless world from which there is no escape and the high-pitched emotions of the melodrama genre. We as viewers expect melodrama to be resolved in a compassionate way – but a turn to *David Copperfield* or *Oliver Twist* never happens in *SER*, underscoring its unsettling qualities and making it a more ambivalent film than *Bespredel*.

The totality of the institution in *SER* does not have the overtly condemning overtones one would expect and actually finds in various perestroika texts (Astaf’ev’s *Lyudochka* comes to mind). The film ends with the prison warden (Vitas Tomkus), who permitted an unlawful visit, walking away from the protesting Sasha. The film suggests that he is a man who is sympathetic but bound by the very same system that abuses Sasha. The ubiquitous institution metonymically linked to prison is present even in the parts of the film that form a kind of road-movie. For example, Sasha is consistently shown in a confined

capacity – whether in a train cart or on the ship’s lower decks. I do not think, that the film only creates an allegory that “life is a prison” (suggested by some film critics, such as Anna Kagarlitskaia (1989)), though it does suggest that “freedom is paradise.” Nor does it present only a critique of the institution, a moralistic highlight of “good through evil.” Though both the allegory and the social critique are present in the film, what makes the film’s *chernukha* aesthetics is the negative totality and inversion that constitutes Sasha’s life. The institution in *SER* has effectively become the horizon similar to the world constructed in film noir.

2. *Chernukha, Noir and the World of Torture*

In classic film noir, the underworld, the dark realm of crime and passion, is the world whose grip is impossible to escape. The underworld is portrayed as dark and dangerous, while noir’s signature chiaroscuro lighting underscores the duplicity and ever-lasting night on the “mean streets.” In *chernukha*, the institution, the dysfunctional family or social circumstances create the underworld from which there is no escape. Both film worlds create a claustrophobic sense of doom and paranoia via specific visual and narrative solutions. Both *chernukha* and film noir are a case in point of testing the boundaries and expectations of the spectators. I argue that noir and *chernukha* not only achieve a certain effect on the viewer, but their distinct engagement with the viewer contributes to a creation of a specific world of the films. Noir’s complexity and obstruction of the viewer’s experience, and *chernukha*’s “unethical” representation, foster the sense of

isolation of the world that the films envision, creating a sense of menacing, self-sustained and uncontrollable environments. Through these environments the viewer's experience mimics that of the characters, who are trapped in the dark world of noir or are vicariously traumatized in *chernukha*.

Classic noir relies heavily on flashback, voiceover, and the subjective camera. J.P. Telotte (1989) argues that subjective techniques in noir engage the dialectics of effacement and identification that the spectator undergoes when s/he is subjected to the vision of the films' protagonists. He writes:

The various effects that here accompany our visual identification – looks of outward regard, partial glimpses of our “inhabited” body – thus reaffirm the identity and our involvement in the world of the narrative. However, the subjective vantage also looks false... the visual absence of the character whose point of view we share adds a further effacement, akin to that which marks our seeing... what we can see becomes defined by a correlative sense of what we cannot see, adequately understand or even control... The result is a tension between presence and absence, between effacement and seeing, that stubbornly resist the resolution we desire... (91)

Voice-over, flashback, and the subjective camera (in films like *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk 1944), or *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves 1947)) support the dialectics of presence and absence, which create narrative tension, and a sense of lack of “control” and cohesion. The viewer's precarious involvement in noir narrative becomes akin to the anxiety and confusion of the characters.

These devices also contribute to the perception of the noir world as an isolated, “no-way-out” dark universe that is ruled by misfortune and cruel chance. The structure of the flashback obfuscates the narrative, disrupting the causal chain

of events. Noir narratives are often deliberately confusing, especially in the PI trend, like in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks 1946) or *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich 1955). The subjective camera and voiceover provide a powerful personified and often unreliable narration. In *Laura* (Otto Preminger 1944), the voice-over narrator is like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert from *Lolita* (1955) – self-loathing and egocentric, sexually obsessed and lying, in the end he is also revealed to be the murderer. In films by Billy Wilder, in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the narration comes from beyond the grave, and in *Double Indemnity* (1944) the voice-over tells the story as the protagonist is slowly dying.

The wise-cracking hard-boiled tone of the voiceovers is intimate and deliberately subjective, often stripping the story of the objective reasonable explanations that allow for viewer detachment and the vantage point from which the viewer can see the larger picture of the characters' predicament. Such is the narration in *Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles 1947), *The Killers*, *Laura*, *Gilda* (Charles Vidor 1946) and many other films. Todd Erickson (1996) states that noir:

...distorted the viewer's psychological reference points by establishing the new generic codes...[that] incorporated iconography from detective and gangster genres, the distinctive narrative voice...of the hard-boiled writers, and the first-person sensibility of the expressionistic subjective camera...(308).

Unlike the police procedural genre that has suspended pleasure and expectations attached to a postponed resolution, noir shuns clear adherence to rules and

expectations of the genre. Noir criminal genre is often an incoherent puzzle, and a resolution that provides little relief. On the contrary, the resolution in noir could be even more devastating than the narrative that preceded it. For example in the apocalyptic noir *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich 1955), the object of the criminal pursuit is revealed to be a hellish substance that wipes out all around it. In *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer 1945), the protagonist through the series of unfortunate accidents, becomes a destitute fugitive as we leave him to rot in fear on the “mean streets.” Similarly, *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Mate 1950) ends with the avenger’s success, who nonetheless dies in pain on the street, his vengeance complemented with an outspoken remorse. Among other things, *D.O.A.* has the dying protagonist’s girlfriend come to see him in his last minutes to serve as a live example of futility and fatalism that characterizes the film.

Classic noir introduces a complex, elaborate storyline that, infused with flashbacks, voice-overs and unreliable characters, creates a narrative nightmare. In *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks 1946) it is almost impossible to know who has killed whom and why. Noir films often create a hallucinatory atmosphere filled with anguish as in *The Lady from Shanghai* or *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk 1947). In *Crossfire* a drugged soldier encounters a strange assortment of characters, all the while under a murder investigation. *Chernukha* engages similar mechanisms to baffle its spectator: a lack of denouement, an obfuscated cause and effect, withheld information, and unclear motivations, are all among *chernukha*’s narrative devices. Causality and narrative plausibility in noir are downplayed in

both noir and *chernukha*, while qualities of fatalism and a sense of menace and narrative absurdity are brought to the fore. *Chernukha*, however, unlike classic noir, gravitates either towards neo-naturalist or visceral disruptions of narrative coherency, prioritizing a broad social scope over the story, or its excessively shocking visuals over causality. Classic film noir relies on the means of visual style and subjective narrative techniques.

Classic noir often offers a glimpse of the “real, happy” world which usually becomes an unattainable goal for the noir hero. For example, in *The Pitfall* (Andre de Toth 1948) the protagonist, bored with his suburban life, is sidetracked by a romantic interest only to descend into the abyss of obsession and murder. Films like *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur 1947) and *The Killers* juxtapose the “sunny” side of things (usually literally) with the noir side of the world. Film noir marked by elaborate visual style presents these visions stylistically as well, contrasting them with the dark wet streets, the shady environment of clubs and criminal layers. In *Out of the Past*, the “good” girlfriend of the respectable present is associated with daylight and nature and small town America; we see her for the first time sitting in the daylit forest. The “out of the past” femme fatale is associated with night, the big city, and a foreign Mexican exotic landscape. The contrast of the day and night worlds amplifies how the characters experience the “noir” world as a “no-way out” world of anxiety, confusion and agony. The “lighter” side does show itself, but it is usually overpowered by the darker noir “world-feeling.”

In this respect neo noir comes closer to the *chernukha* film world. Like *chernukha* neo noir does not as much show contrasting realms (the dark underworld vs. the “sunlit regular” world), as it takes a sceptical glance at the existence of that contrast in the first place. In the indifferent washed-out landscape of *The Long Goodbye*, where “everything is alright with me,” or the littered trashy New York of *French Connection*, neo noir portrays its dark world as a mundane inescapable reality, slyly subverting the classic noir “mystique” (Krutnik) and its beauty.

Neo noir creates a world that is sinister but not necessarily visually expressive. At the end of the neo noir *No Mercy* (Richard Pearce 1986) the villain, reminiscent of James Cagney’s gangster in *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh 1949), is vanquished by the hero (Richard Gere). The finale is as spectacular as the explosion of the chemical plant at the end of *White Heat*. But after it is all over and good has seemingly triumphed, the characters walk away into the rainy early morning street. The landscape presents an unglamorous contrast to the spectacular hellfire unleashed during the struggle in the night. The street has a washed-out grey palette, and overcrowded with early morning pedestrians and ambulances. The victorious landscape is drab and unpromising.

Neo noir creates a world that is distrustful of the illusion of “sunlit normalcy,” and its visual impact is reflective of its sensibility of cultural disillusionment (Beard 1998) in the mythology of the American dream. Characters in most 1970s neo noir encounter a world that is sinister and

destructive, just like in classic noir. But neo noir world is not dangerous and alluring (implied in the quote “down these mean streets a man must go”) but, rather like the *chernukha* world, it is a world enclosed on itself, lacking visible alternatives. The neo-noir world is sometimes as convoluted and hallucinatory as classic noir. Conspiracy thrillers like *Parallax View* or *The Conversation* and double-cross dramas like *Point Blank* engage unreliable characters, intricate storylines, hallucinatory or dreamy sequences, digressions (a good example is the hash-pie girls in *The Long Goodbye*). Neo noir engages various narrative means to deprive the viewer of omniscience and foster a feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity. But unlike classic noir, neo noir also shows its world as drab and mundane, lacking in allure and fascination that propels characters in classic noir forsaken the life of normalcy and pursue dangers of mean streets. The example cop drama *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet 1973) is telling. In *Serpico* the rogue eponymous protagonist (Al Pacino) goes to extraordinary lengths to seek justice, set things right, and expose police corruption only to end up in a perpetual limbo of an indefinite resolution (he never sees justice done in a satisfying way); broke and ostracized, abandoned by his family who could not handle his obsession. If a classic noir hero might experience terror in the face of the perverted world that took over his fate, as in *The Killers* or *D.O.A* or *Detour*, neo noir turns that terror into the everyday, and subjective anguish into objective cultural disillusionment.

Chernukha constructs its “dark” world in many respects like noir and neo noir – emphasizing its isolation, self-sustainability and mundane ubiquity. The

deliberate narrative confusion that shuns clear-cut and plausible resolution is typical of most films. Narrative omissions and inversions thwart the viewer's expectations, like in *Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksandrovna* or *SER. Chernukha* emphasizes social milieus and naturalist determinism, but the mundane nature of evil in chernukha, similar to noir, acquires a fatalistic and illogical perspective. Evil bears a sense of the metaphysical anxiety of a world out of joint, aptly described in noir by the quote from the character in the *Dark Corner* (Henry Hathaway 1946): "I am backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me."

A telling example is *Assuage My Sorrows*, which has an ensemble cast that enacts a loosely connected narrative of dysfunction, betrayal, and brutality, with no obvious narrative intrigue except for the apartment exchange. This apartment exchange is far from the central clash of interests and personalities which is based on generational, gender, and relationship conflict. The exchange in *Assuage My Sorrows* is a back-burner of misery that adds to the brutality and self-destruction in which the characters engage. When Boris comes to trash the old lady's room to force her to leave – it comes as a surprise. The trashing sequence acquires the form of metaphysical terror – that arbitrary and random violence that has no motivation and no explanation. Is Boris a calculating extortionist, or an angry monster? In effect, the film often eschews the social problem it addresses, namely the apartment shortage, the compulsive restriction of individuals to certain locations, known as *propiska*, in the Soviet Union. The film makes the social ill

look like a metaphysical malaise – the evil that spreads around randomly and uncontrollably, creating a world of no redemption and no narrative logic.

The film, inspiringly entitled, *Satan* [Satana] (Viktor Aristov, 1990), like *The Guard*, was a recipient of the Berlin festival's Silver Bear. Its young protagonist Vitaly (Sergei Kupriyanov) kidnaps and murders the daughter of his former lover – a disabled woman who is a powerful functionary (Svetlana Bragarnik). Then he blackmails her family for ransom, revealing in the end that he has done it all out of spite because his lover abandoned him without providing him with a secure privileged party job. The story is a spin-off on Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* [Prestuplenie i nakazanie] (1866), in which Vitaly aims to prove to himself that he can kill an innocent child, extort money, and punish his lover. The film inspired a bitter copyright conflict with the author of the original literary text on which it is based, Arkady Vainer. He tried to sue the director and the Ladoga Studio and ended up making his own film based on the same script released in the same year (*Non-Human* [Neliud'] 1990). The prominent detective writer cited specifically the *chernukha*-like elements as the reason for his objection – the absence of the original detective plot and the “indulgence” in the monstrosity of the principal character.²⁵

The film indeed has none of the suspense of a police procedural and stages its brutal murder at the very beginning, so we know both the perpetrator and the victim, and, moreover, it only sporadically returns to the original detective twist of

²⁵ The polemic was published in *Soviet Screen* [Sovetskii ekran], Issue 8, 1991.

blackmailing the family. The film alternates between the agony of the family trying to scrounge the money for the ransom and the wanderings of the killer, who indulges in further transgressive behaviour, stalking a woman, attending a wedding and raping the bride, and bonding with neo-nazis. The sheer arbitrariness of the main character's violence is a far cry from the agonizing philosophy of Raskolnikov, as Vitaly completely lacks reflection, or even self-justification, not to mention the emotional turmoil and redemption characteristic of Dostoevsky's text. *Satan* unfolds as a natural course of events. In the final scene, Vitaly talks about revenge, his desire to stand up for himself and not to be just a boy-toy, but his speeches pale in comparison with the visually exerting and unsettling sequences, that mostly have nothing to do with his injured pride. As usual *chernukha* renders narrative logic and causality almost entirely ineffective, focusing on the viscerally excessive sequences.

One of the most unsettling examples occurs early in the film when Vitaly kills the girl with a glass bottle of milk, and her face streams with a mixture of milk and blood. Another is a sequence of forced sex in a trashy backyard with a sobbing woman in a wedding dress; or a hysterical fit of the mother when she realizes her child is dead. The film does not work as a text that contemplates the boundaries of morality and psychology of a killer; neither does it work as a police procedural, detective story, or even naturalist exposition, since it is unmotivated and often plainly sick, but it does work as an overwhelming *chernukha* film. Its vacuous character and story are stripped of any overarching narratives, leaving

only an extreme visuality and refusal to explain its world – an inexplicable and habitual dark place, from which there is no escape. The *chernukha* world is closed in on itself, whether it is a world of an institution, or marginal identity (like that of a killer), or a dysfunctional family.

Chernukha's powerful portrayal of its dark world, in addition to its visual excess discussed previously, rests at least partially on the fact that *chernukha* films produce totalizing visions. That is why often scholars reviewing the *chernukha* films look for an overarching meaning, something that points to a plausible interpretation – to a “positive” totality of metanarrative, in short. Mark Lipovetsky (1999) claims that Petrushevskiaia is not *chernukha* because “she does not avoid generalizations” [obobshchenii ne izbegaet] – meaning that her stories offer more than just a compilation of horrific events and naturalistic details, that there is a meaning implied or sought after in her works. Similarly, Anna Kagarlitskaia (1989) notes that it does not have the “bitter *chernukha* tone” (10), and because it offers an allegory of an institution, the penitentiary, as a model for the Soviet regime, which regulates and metaphorically “imprisons” life. In my opinion, *SER* definitely displays a certain narrative and generic hybridity. However, its vision of institution as an all-encompassing living condition imparts a sense of a “negative” totality – claustrophobic, “no-way-out” universe. The characters in power in *SER* are just as trapped by the system. It is a brutal and self-sustained world.

Another example of *chernukha's* negative totality is the film *The Guard*

[Karaul] (Rogozhkin 1988). The film is about yet another institution, that of the Soviet army, and namely the infamous phenomenon of *dedovshchina*. The term is most often translated as hazing, but it has more of the quality of ongoing abuse akin to teenage school bullying. It is also formalized into a widely accepted and unchallenged method of disciplining new conscripts by older ones.

Dedovshchina means literally “power of the grandfathers” and provides a venue for abuse and humiliation just for the sake of it.²⁶ *The Guard*, consequently, is an extremely dark and visually haunting film, shot in black and white, with a grainy unpolished texture, telling the story of a group of soldiers escorting a train full of criminals. The soldiers are managed by one commander, and the hazing of younger conscripts, as well as the occasional interaction between soldiers and criminals constitutes the plot of the film. One of the abused conscripts, named Andrei (Sergei Kupriianov, the same actor as in *Satan*), eventually takes up a gun and shoots everybody, including (accidentally) his friend. Like in *SER* or *Tamara Aleksandrovna*, the content of the film is not necessarily graphic, and the utter humiliation that the conscripts suffer does not necessarily involve direct violence but mockery, mindless repetitive tasks, or exercising to exhaustion.

Obvious parallels are made between conscripts, who are made to do push-ups, and convicts who have to squat with their hands behind their heads as they

26 A *New York Times* article on *dedovshchina* explains the term below while covering a story on how a young conscript suffered injuries that resulted in the amputation of both his legs. “*Dedovshchina* is often translated as hazing, evoking a ritualized indoctrination, but it has evolved into more. It is a system of rank and discipline where older conscripts exert unquestioned authority over newer ones. The system has become so formalized that there are four levels that each draftee passes through. Those once subservient later become masters over those who follow.” Steven Lee Myers, *New York Times*, August 13, 2006.

are handled outside the prison-train. The relationship of power is mostly represented in physical terms – an excessive attention to physicality being a trademark of *chernukha* films. The film is structured as a series of disjointed sketches of the daily activities of the characters, the interaction between military subordinates and superiors, the military and the convicts. The constant presence of bullying is pretty much the only thing that unites the sketches, escalating to the final stage of deadly violence. The film uses sophisticated camerawork and visual techniques, the film received a FIPRESCI prize in Berlin.

The film almost exclusively confines its characters to the inside the train—a claustrophobic and limited space. The film’s treatment of the events and relationships between its characters is like a hall of mirrors – with the confined quarters of abused soldiers acting as a mirror-image of the even more restrictive confinement of the convicts. The abuse of junior soldiers mirrors the abuse of prisoners, and the final act of violence is the intensification of the numerous smaller acts of violence perpetrated by everyone towards everyone else. The film is closed in on itself spatially – everything takes place in the confined narrow halls and compartments of a train. It is this “horror” train that is a constant presence, while the world outside is a passing and fleeting reality. This spatial metaphor reflects the closed suffocating world visually and narratively, when the characters’ personal stories and plot developments are reduced to mirror-images of abuse.

The film underscores this vision with camerawork that utilizes different angles within a frame and a compartmentalized mise-en-scene – a reflection of the

space inside the train that emphasizes its confinement and limitations. Another important feature of the visualization of the totality and abusive nature of the space and narrative on the film is its colour solutions. The film is shot predominantly with black-and-white film stock that emphasizes a dark, unpolished look rather than stylized chiaroscuro. This colour scheme ends when the fatal shooting occurs and the guilty soldier flees the train. The film immediately switches to colour stock depicting soldier's misadventures in the world outside the train. If the black-and-white portion of the film felt painstakingly realistic, if excessively brutal and bleak, the ending shot in colour introduces a deliberate hallucinatory aspect to the sequences. In one of them, the soldier encounters Napoleon training a small regiment of soldiers in the empty, snow-filled yard of a typical Soviet high-rise. The soldier hides in the attic of an abandoned building and is discovered by a blind man who then proceeds to assault him with a martial arts routine. Nothing makes sense for the conscript outside the torturous world of the train. This alienation effect accompanies the most mundane actions of the fugitive. When he has to steal civilian clothes we are unexpectedly confronted with a group of naked men thoughtfully pouring water on themselves amidst an impoverished urban landscape that looks like a trash yard. Only later do we find out that it was the public steam bath, which provided the soldier with an opportunity to procure clothes.

At the very end of the film, when the fugitive is shot by the police, the film returns to the inside the train in a black-and-white sequence, as we see the dying

fugitive soldier amidst his own victims back in the cart. The film points out, with the help of its mise-en-scene and colour stock solutions that the nature of abuse, that the relationship between the tortured and the torturer is that of mutual dependency which creates a self-perpetuating violent world. The film also exemplifies one of the paramount qualities of *chernukha* – a negative and overbearing totality, one that we also find in *SER* portrayal of the institution. In *The Guard* the institution is that of the army and the violence associated with it. Predictably in *chernukha*, and perestroika cinema, in general, the institution, sanctioned by the state, cannot possibly be a positive force. *The Guard* emphasizes both narratively and visually a *chernukha* film world that is both violent and manipulative; a world of torture sanctioned as a social norm—a self-enclosed inescapable reality.

Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (1985), notes that torture leads to the “ultimate dissolution of prisoner’s world” (38) by depriving the victim of agency and consciousness via the extreme infliction of physical pain. She states that the “larger the prisoner’s pain the larger the torturer’s world” (37). In other words, the torturer’s world gains legitimacy and power by invading and objectifying the tortured body. Scarry connects the inflicting of physical pain, the objectification of the body in face of the torturers, with the relationship to power – manifested in interrogation. The verbal mastery, or the owning of language so to speak, becomes the legitimization of the torturer and the usurpation of the identity of the tortured to the extremes of deprivation of self; one’s voice and what we

experience most intimately – one’s body. Torture is a negative totality, its task is the usurpation of the victim’s world.

Similarly *chernukha* gives us a reality of usurpation that becomes the world of torture – which explains the abundance of both bodily suffering and violence in all physical, emotional, and verbal forms. The *chernukha* world presented in both *SER* and *The Guard* is a world enveloped by an institution as a force of torture and deprivation of one’s self and voice. *The Guard* provides a particularly vivid description of it, marking the world dominated by torture logic and the world outside with different colour schemes. The film also makes the chilling suggestion that the world outside is a hallucination that does not make sense to the victim anymore. Obviously *chernukha* does not address the actual subject of torture as a crime, nor do I want to equate the actual physical pain and suffering of torture as it is known in the real world with Russian perestroika feature films.

The film noir universe is modelled on the dichotomy of the underworld and “sunshine America,” calling into question the American foundational mythology of individual success and open opportunities, or enacting what Paul Schrader calls “sociological critique.” *Chernukha* films model their claustrophobic universe on the torture dynamics of deprivation and objectification, where the noir dichotomy is effectively erased via forceful deprivation of one’s voice and body. Institutions as forms of collective control lend themselves well to channelling these dynamics both as the agencies of

objectification and as the political culprits that Glasnost reforms and dissident culture before them exposed as abusing individual rights.

Unlike Glasnost or dissident accusatory pathos, *chernukha* places the paradigm of societal abuse everywhere and nowhere in particular. The concept of “interrogation” or the discourse legitimizing the torturer’s world in *chernukha* is not demarcated clearly – who benefits from the torture, who owns that discourse? Another groundbreaking perestroika film, *Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze 1984), addressed exactly that problem, personifying the discourse of torture in the figure of Varlam, a self-fashioned benefactor of the people and brutal tyrant. But *chernukha* shuns those conclusions. Being a nihilist discourse that refuses to provide a clear-cut solutions, *chernukha* presents the torture world in the form of Kafka’s absurd *Trial* (1925) or *In the Penal Colony* (1919) – horrible things happen because they do. The institution acquires the macabre quality of the “way of life,” the one and only reality.

Chernukha engulfs the world of its characters in torture but shuts out the power-play; nobody benefits or acquires power from torturing another, nobody is punished in the end. The black hole swallows the good doers and evil doers alike in a whirlwind of suffering and humiliation that take different incarnations – the institution, “hell is other people” (Jean-Paul Sartre), or the marginal identity. These narrative incarnations often intersect. *SER*, for example, is about institutions, marginalized children, and dysfunctional relationships between adults and their off-spring. *Little Vera* tackles family dysfunction, youth in revolt,

working-class alcoholism, and domestic abuse. *Assuage My Sorrows* looks at marginalized individuals and family dysfunction. With their blending of other genres and traditions, *chernukha* films feel at liberty with a variety of negative and negated phenomena ranging from a hotbed of political and social topics to existential angst.

3. *Chernukha* Dysfunction: *Nekommunikabelnost*

Considering the world of torture in *chernukha* films, there remains the question of language – the power over discourse, which Scarry emphasizes, that is denied or abused. What happens to language, the ability to convey meaning and communicate within the negative totality of *chernukha* world is what interests me. Similar to the metaphor of the black hole (Plakhov 1990), *chernukha* cinema has a concept that reflects particularly well the communicative and discursive void that rules in the *chernukha* world. *Nekommunikabelnost* - literally “non-communicativeness” is a term used by the protagonist in Kira Muratova’s *Asthenic Syndrome* [*Astenicheskii sindrom*] (1989) – an art film widely hailed by critics as a brilliant portrayal of a transitional time and collapsing identities; the chaos “without and within.”

The metaphoric title of the film was interpreted at the time as a symbol of the destruction of identity, human relationships and the disintegration of the familiar world. In what follows, I will examine, focusing chiefly on *Asthenic Syndrome*, the break down in communication and destruction of human bonds,

such as familial and generational conflicts, the disintegration of friendship and collegiality as they are shown in *chernukha*. The narrative of family and generational conflict, or rather “non-communicativeness” within those structures, is ubiquitous in *chernukha*. There is, in fact, hardly any film not about one or the other. Virtually all films the I have discussed focus on either a dysfunctional family or a generational conflict, or both – like *Little Vera* or *SER*. An important question to answer is what happens to the language itself, when these bonds fail.

The culture of support associated with friendship and collegiality comes under scrutiny in *chernukha* as much as do family relationships. Friendship, better understood as camaraderie, is a phenomenon that is steeped in the traditions of 19th century intelligentsia, whose intellectual life revolved around small circles of like-minded intellectuals. The best known fusion of friendship, politics and intellectual endeavour is probably the Decembrists movement of the early 19th century. Orlando Figes in the cultural history of Russia *Natasha's Dance* (2002) writes that personal friendship played a big role in the intellectual circles, providing a personal basis for ideological camaraderie. It is not incidental that the 19th century intellectuals saw themselves not just as saviours but brothers to the underprivileged, since personal relationships and personal responsibility were very important to them. The 1960s “humanist” Thaw culture saw the rebirth of the theme of friendship and collegiality for the urban intelligentsia as the symbol of like-mindedness, morality, brotherhood, and often shared cultural dissent. One of the cult novels by Vasily Aksenov from this era is called *Colleagues* [Kollegi]

(1969), while the cult film by Georgy Danelia, *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* [Ia shagaiu po Moskve] (1963), features the optimistic contemplation of friendship and romance. The 1970s and 1980s, the so-called Stagnation era, associated with the rule of Leonid Brezhnev, saw a more critical view of the “brotherhood of men.” The Stagnation era could be looked at in many different ways through the lens of politics, social stability, economic affluence and political dissidence. For my purposes here, I will limit myself to the cultural tendency of this period to emphasize the frustration and apathy that characterized the public mood in light of the impossibility of political and social change and the clear simulacrum nature of the ideological and political rhetoric during the period (Epstein 1995). It is not coincidental that the discourse around Gorbachev's reforms was framed as a return to Leninist ideals as opposed to cronyism and corruption of the Brezhnev era.

Stagnation cinema starts featuring characters who are out of sync with the people around them and at odds with family and friends, following the 19th century tradition of the alienated, unfulfilled “superfluous man.” The superfluous man represents a narrative exploration of personal anxiety under social pressure, and personal disillusionment with high-minded ideas that come to contradict the reality. The term was invented by Ivan Turgenev in his novella *Diary of a Superfluous Man* [Dnevnik lishnego cheloveka] (1850). The theme itself seems to be prominent since the early 19th century, building on the identity friction between “Europeanness” and “Russianness” experienced by most members of the nobility since the reforms of Peter the Great in the early 18th century. The

superfluous fate of the intelligentsia as exercising no real influence on the country and fate of its people is famously explored in the works of Anton Chekhov.

The bitter protagonist of the iconic 1970s film *Flights in Dreams and in Reality* offers a sombre look at a new Soviet superfluous man, who does not know what to do with himself anymore, causing pain all around him, searching in vain for meaning in the vacuous existence of late Stagnation. The film's emblematic ending features the protagonist (Oleg Yankovsky) curling into a fetus position inside a hay stack, sobbing. It reflects both a desire for a rebirth and a certain sympathy towards the vulnerability of the disillusioned superfluous man. Nikita Mikhalkov's adaptation of several Chekhov stories into a film *The Unfinished Piece for a Mechanical Piano* [Neokonchennaia p'iesa dlia mekhanicheskogo pianino] (1977) is a telling example of the return of the theme. A group of intelligentsia friends gathers at a dacha (country house) to unravel their complex relationships, hidden anxieties, and the bitterness of age that comes with the crushing of the youthful ideals. The group of people, no matter how battered by years of daily grind, is portrayed as dysfunctional but inherently decent; good people that yearn for each other's love and understanding.

Chernukha picks up on this tradition and inverts it – there is hardly any friendship in *chernukha* films, let alone collegiality. And any sense of community and belonging is targeted as a false haven, unravelled in the *chernukha* world of torture. Individuals are still dissatisfied misfits, but instead of being defined by the existential angst of the intellectual, they rely on their primary instincts for

survival, which nonetheless fail them. In the film *Dogs' Feast* [Sobachii pir] (Leonid Menaker 1990), a principal character – an “ugly cleaning lady,” (in the words of Horton and Brashinsky), Zhanna (Natalia Gundareva) – is struggling with alcoholism. She meets a kindred soul – another alcoholic (Sergei Shakurov). No matter how wretched this bonding is, Zhanna still longs for it. It is a way of belonging and finding compassion in another human being. The film does not moralize about the kind of community and identity alcoholics might have, it simply denies even that to Zhanna. Her new found buddy soundly despises her and finally cheats on her with a bourgeois neighbour, a stark contrast to the dishevelled, addicted, and unattractive Zhanna.

In *chernukha* any familial connection is mocked or disgraced. Films like *Little Vera* or *Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksandrovna* or *Assuage My Sorrows* display a cruelty, lack of compassion and understanding between family members and estranged generations. Tamara Aleksandrovna mysteriously disappears after being admitted to a hospital and it is implied that she does not want to return to her family. Her husband and daughter reciprocate these emotions, celebrating their hatred for her with loud music and festive lights. Vera's parents are not only disapproving of their daughter's teenage rebellion but show their indifference to her fate by soundly sleeping through her suicide despite the loud music and violent ruckus. *Assuage My Sorrows* creates a family triangle so dysfunctional, that anybody who comes in touch with the family seeks refuge elsewhere. The son is humiliated by his own father, while both domestic partners

exhibit hateful, destructive behaviour towards each other, manifested in various forms of physical and psychological abuse. The family is broken in *chernukha*, and there is no refuge in any community.

I argue that both the disintegration of the family and community is mirrored in the destruction of language. As in the concept of torture, theorized by Scarry, those that inhabit the *chernukha* world have their identity, community and ability to speak usurped. No other film gives us a better picture of that state of *nekommunikabelnost* – a vision of broken community and broken language – than *Asthenic Syndrome*. The film has an unusual narrative structure and visual technique, placing it into the art cinema category. The narrative is decidedly non-linear, only loosely following some lead characters. The portrayal of violence, the use of documentary and pseudo-documentary techniques, and the pronounced self-referentiality are some of the film's most prominent aspects.

The film starts with a black and white forty minute sequence (out of about two hour film) that narrates the situation of a woman, Natalia (Olga Antonova), raging with grief and anger after her husband's death. This narrative of immediate suffering and pain ends abruptly when we realize that the sequence was only a film shown in a theatre filled with a bored audience. The viewers promptly leave, ignoring the pleas of the host of the screening to stay for a discussion of the thoughtful art of Kira Muratova, the director, and contemplate the great works of other auteurs (names of the real directors are mentioned) and chat with the lead actress. Shortly after, we are introduced to the hero of the second part, Nikolai

(Sergei Popov), who suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome and keeps falling asleep in different circumstances. The film follows Nikolai only loosely, presenting a number of vignettes with different people, sometimes connected by a narrative string and sometimes not connected at all. In the end Nikolai falls asleep for good in the subway train, drifting away into darkness, stretched out on the floor.

One thing that strikes the viewer from the start of the *Asthenic Syndrome* is the abundance of senseless and vicious violence that ranges from verbal abuse, animal torture, street brawls, to the bereaved Natalia's assaults on strangers. The film's multiple vignettes provide a portrait gallery of the Soviet people that is very unflattering. The violence is all the more frightening as it is always unmotivated, sadistic and sporadic, its absurdist quality underscored by the dialogue. The characters' ability to rage alternate with a lethargic stupor. In one scene, a man comes home and is greeted by his adolescent daughter, who is dancing to some unnamed tune all the while. He feeds his many birds in their cages and discovers that a cat has tried to kill one of them. The man goes into a sudden rage, first directed at the cat, then at his daughter. Screaming, struggling, and hitting ensue, after which the man cries haplessly. The characters begin hitting, screaming, verbally abusing each other, in an instant, and then, just as suddenly, they break out in hysterical, uncontrollable laughter. Nikolai simply falls asleep on the spot.

The famous ending of the film was the reason the censors banned its release. It is a lengthy sequence in which a woman, who does not look destitute,

just slightly crazy, like most of the film's characters, spits out hardcore obscenities into the camera, recounting some inflamed incident with her husband. The swearing is emotional, but, at the same time, the woman is not really hysterical, just very angry. In the midst of her cursing spree, she pauses and then asks herself: "There are such things in my brain... why? Everything is so well... why?" Contrary to some critical observations, made, for example, by Jane Taubman (2005) in her excellent book on Kira Muratova, the lady from this sequence never actually directly address to the camera. The woman seems to be infatuated with her anger; she makes faces and gestures, but is clearly talking to herself, her gaze directed sideways.

The internalized compulsive rage, the violence that implodes the subject, is prominent in the film. Most of its dialogue is really nonsensical monologues that bear witness to internal struggle and anger, rather than communicate any of these emotions to the other characters or to the viewer. The woman's story does not make any sense; cleverly disguised behind insults and the sound of a moving subway train. During the censorship hearings, Muratova repeatedly refused to increase the train noise for the film to pass the censors. The sound balance of the scene fails to muffle the obscenities, but drowns out key parts of her story with external noise – so we do not know why she is so angry. In addition, the woman has a contradictory visual image: she wears two headdresses – a traditional Russian kerchief topped by a man's fedora. Her appearance is a clash of feminine and masculine attire. Obscene language coming from a woman in 1989

was both a cultural and cinematic taboo. As Mikhail Yampolsky points out, the shocking quality of the film also lies in the deliberate reversal of the gender roles that topple Soviet cultural conventions – women curse, pick up men, or act violently, while men behave meekly, are inactive and lethargic (quoted in Taubman).

The costume design in the film deserves special consideration for its unique blend of impoverishment, bad taste, and pitiful chic. The characters wear a combination of old rugged, baggy Soviet clothes, some tacky accessories (like a rose in their hair) and sparse western markers of fashion. The effect is startling – the people of *Asthenic Syndrome* are ugly – they are shot as such and they behave that way. One scene shows women eating fish with their fingers ripping apart the flesh in an extreme close-up of the fish internal organs and its dead eye staring into the camera. This scene is a mirror image of the cult perestroika film by Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance* (1984). In *Repentance*, the narrative is structured around themes of totalitarianism, memory, and faith. In one scene, a deceased tyrant appears to his son, devouring a fish in the dark shadows, which obscure his face. When his son complains to him that he has lost his faith, the ghost laughs and suggests that his son better turn to the devil. The obvious parallel between the symbolism of fish and Christianity is re-interpreted by Muratova. The evil becomes an every day act perpetrated not by an arch-villain, or the devil, but anonymous regular women. The scene ends with a cut to women's hands handling pearls, suggesting a relation between tearing flesh apart and handling

jewelry, emphasizing the aloofness with which violence is treated in the film and its irreverence to gender conventions.

The abrupt, violent or shocking vignettes rarely find a cohesive outlet. Instead, they just happen, then fade out. Besides being very angry and abusive with each other, the characters do not communicate, living in the closed worlds of their anger and misery like the woman on the train. They are not developed and often, like in the scene with the fish, are not full-fledged human beings at all, but an anonymous succession of unhappy, vicious beings metonymically represented by their body parts. The film deliberately maintains a distance from its characters, allowing no sympathy or identification. At the same time, *Syndrome's* characters are too aggressive and their suffering is too real to be considered allegorical. The absence of narrative explanation, the high degree of incoherence, and the disjointed narration adds to the discomfiting and shocking quality of the film. For example, in the beginning of the film, we see a construction worker laughing as his buddies torture a cat, while in the background a passer-by tells him a story of his obsessive sausage eating.

The film portrays various groups of people, bringing them together under loosely defined categories like class, work place, love of pets or torture of pets, but these people all fail not only to support one another, but mostly to listen and understand. Effectively, the interacting characters do not even look at each other, while the camera work deliberately shuns the shot-reverse shot technique, usually maintaining a certain distance from the characters. A trademark of Muratova's

subsequent filmmaking is to make all the dialogue in film essentially a monologue, usually absurd and repetitive (like the obsessive sausage eating or the story of a snake living inside one's body). Most dialogues are simply repetitions of the same phrase, as if no one can hear the speaker, or the characters speak all at once, creating a cacophonic inarticulate discourse.

Asthenic Syndrome displays a certain cerebral quality, a detachment in its relentless portrayal of monstrous people that walk amidst the littered decaying streets and live in shabby apartments. Muratova's cinema, in general, strays from sympathy as it does from a realistic portrayal of its characters. In the black-and-white portion of the film, there seems to be a possibility of sympathizing with the heroine, as we follow her to the cemetery, then to an empty apartment. However, the viewer's identification and sympathy are dismantled, as the sequence is revealed to be a fictional narrative, a move underscored by the change from black-and-white stock to colour. I argue that the film's self-referentiality is a mirror-image of the destructive violence and the collapse of all communal bonds, similar to how noir's engagement with spectator intended to unsettle and defamiliarize the viewer's experience. Violence towards other human beings, towards the discourse of community and identity, culminates in *Asthenic Syndrome* in an assault on our assumptions of filmmaking – violence permeates the film's narrative and the visual strategies to the point that the film unravels its own making in a final defiant gesture of imploded language.

The film within a film device is one facet of this transformation, when a

film made by Muratova is succeeded by another film made by Muratova and we are made explicitly aware of this. *Asthenic Syndrome* like all *chernukha* feels real at the level of chaos raging “outside and inside,” but it also reminds the viewer quite literally that “you are watching a film by Muratova” – reducing both the safe distance and pleasure of the voyeuristic gaze. Another aspect of the film’s extreme self-awareness is the cultural trope of Russian intelligentsia – a recurrent venue of *chernukha* subversion. If anything, the discourse of the cultural elite (dissidents included) is as dominant and important for Russian culture as the discourse of Socialist Realism was for the Soviet arts. Inversion of cultural metanarratives is a part of *chernukha* “anti-stroika” (Graham 14) and it is logical that it extends itself to the foundations of Russian cultural identity and the role of the Russian cultural elite.

Intelligentsia not only dominated cultural production since the 19th century, it also established the terms for debates on national identity, role of art and social justice. This role of the “conscience of the nation” was eagerly picked up in perestroika with Andrei Sakharov, Dmitry Likhachev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn as iconic figures of the time. The intelligentsia of the time saw the return to prominence of the exiled Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, as well as previously incarcerated literary scholar, Likhachev, as a return to the humanist values that would support the positive changes in society heralded by Glasnost. The critics pointed out intelligentsia’s perennial failure to connect to other people (who are not intelligentsia). To be fair, this is not solely a perestroika issue, but a cultural

tendency that starts with the idealization and emulation of the peasantry in the 19th century, and continues well into the revolutionary movement, and is also reflected in the tenets of Socialist Realism.

I have discussed previously how *Freeze-Die-Come-to-Life* dismantles the elevated humanist discourse of the dissident intelligentsia. A similarly cynical attitude is reflected metaphorically and literally in *Asthenic Syndrome* where spectators run away from the films of “Muratova, German, Sokurov” – the art house directors who are supposed to educate and ameliorate the average Soviet citizen. The pathetic Nikolai, who dozes off uncontrollably throughout the film, is one such failed “intelligent” – a school teacher he is at a loss as to what exactly he can teach to his students. Intelligentsia’s dream of the transformation of reality and the ideal social life is not only an illusion (recognized well before perestroika) but is also a numbing slumber.

In the very beginning of the film, three old ladies recite lines, in Muratova’s signature dissonance, about a youthful belief of theirs that “if everyone read Tolstoy the world would be different.” Like the three parcas or three harpies, whichever view of the role of Russian intelligentsia one adopts, they, as Jane Taubman points out, reflect Kira Muratova’s life-long fascination with Leo Tolstoy. Nikolai also engages in lengthy monologues that contemplate the fate of humanity, the brotherhood of man, alienation in modern society, etc. Nikolai, however, narrates them monotonously, with howling sounds, as if casting a spell, making them sound preposterous – a clichéd collection of the canonical

“what is to be done and who is to blame.” In addition, Nikolai, with the same pitch and howl, delivers tedious monologues to his students about the glorious life in the USSR, rendering all his speeches meaningless, especially in the face of rampant physicality and brutality of the film. The film seems to equate the language of Soviet ideology and the language of the great Russian cultural tradition, rendering both meaningless.

Asthenic Syndrome asserts the powerlessness of Logos and its standard bearer, the intelligentsia. No cultural discourse can adequately cover or uncover the nature of the Soviet apocalypse, which, like “dirt under fingernails,” defies rationalization or discursive assimilation. Even more intriguing is the fact that Nikolai’s musings on the nature of the human condition are taken from Muratova’s own diary. Once again, albeit more obliquely, the film deconstructs and mocks its own creator – as a member of the intelligentsia and the art house tradition, professing, exposing and inverting these identities. It is hard to speculate the degree of exposure Muratova had in mind with regards to the intimate nature of Nikolai’s monologues. What seems important is that the film displays a certain radical drive for destruction on all levels, including that of authorial presence. The film performs an act of violence against the director, dismantling her authoritative presence, and denigrating her cultural stature, just as it violates every character it introduces, and unsettles the viewer. Violence, therefore, is sustained throughout the film via various on-screen and off-screen techniques that are not even immediately apparent to the average viewer. The

film effectively usurps the power of speech from all the agents that partake in its film world, driving the idea of torture world of *chernukha* to its extreme realization.

Chernukha is the drive to grapple with history and channel its aphasic crisis into transgressive images. This transgression is interpreted in Muratova's film as a whole new level of violence and, as Jane Taubman puts it, a "Soviet apocalypse." The film unravels as the succession of violent traumatizing moments that put the viewer in a spotlight of discomfort. And on the level of film production, the film exposes and deposes the auteur behind the scenes as a vulnerable, laughable figure who is washed away by the same imminent catastrophe as everyone else. The film not only excels at usurping discursive power and dismantling any notion of community and identity, it also objectifies its characters, completing *chernukha's* vision of a totalizing torture world. Portraying various people mostly in dreadful circumstances, the film juxtaposes these portrayals with static images of objects and photographs. Jump-cuts are very common in the film, introducing objects and photographs as an uncanny counterpart of the people; their context is usually morbid.

We first see this juxtaposition when a distraught Natalia wanders off from the cemetery, lost amidst the tomb stones with photographs of the deceased. The cemetery looks populated by a silent crowd of dead people, whose etched photos confront the camera as if they were living people. The silent soundtrack underscores the eerie community of the dead, perhaps the only community to be

found in the film. The scene at the cemetery directly cuts to Natalia standing passively by a photography studio window as the camera pans across the displayed pictures. The pictures both in the cemetery and at the photoshop are not disguised as something else, but through the panning camera technique and close-up shots, they appear as real people staring back at the viewer. However, the film deliberately brings our awareness to the fact that these are just pictures, not real people. In the cemetery scene it is done by frequent including the dates and names beneath the portraits and the metal fences around the graves. At the photography studio it is done by displaying the many passport size photos in long printed sheets, turned sideways or upside down. The pictures simultaneously objectify and substitute real people. In contrast to the squabbling, fighting, hysterical living beings, the photographs are silent and serious, watching the characters and the viewer.

The photograph is a convenient means of conveying this ambiguous message, since both cinema and photography are technologies that capture objects and people in a way that is perceived as truthful (what Andre Bazin called a “natural gaze” in his seminal *Ontology of Photographic Image* (1958)). At the same time, the captured moments have literally passed away, belonging to a past that cannot be replicated. The artificiality of cinema (projected images) along with its realism (images we see as real and moving) is highlighted through the use of photographs. The film continues the parallel of the photographs as a substitute for people with several other sequences. In one sequence, the camera pans slowly

with close-ups of the interior of the rather bourgeois apartment, filled with memorabilia of what Jane Taubman calls “Soviet kitsch.” The camera silently examines this jungle of bric-a-bracs before it stops, contemplating a figure of a silent man, lying motionlessly on the sofa, decorated somewhat like a corpse in a lavish coffin, drowning in a sea of inane objects.

This passive contemplation is repeated later on in a sequence that shows naked figures of men standing motionless against the backdrop of what is revealed to be not a bourgeois, but impoverished and decaying interior. The figures mirror the pose of Renaissance sculptures, suggestive of the beauty of a human body. However, they are uncannily juxtaposed with the unsightly surroundings. As in the previous sequence, objects eclipse people and the static image is a replacement for the moving human being. The film is not able to resist the beauty and solemn seriousness of both the static images of the dead and the passive beauty of the human body. Compared to the loud, foulmouthed and abusive characters of the film, the silent static imagery is, on the one hand, a plausible contrast. On the other hand, it condemns the people of the film, or possibly Soviet people in particular, or possibly people in general. It shows a certain existential pessimism about the ugly nature of humanity that is bearable only if silenced and preferably dead.

People drowning in objects or objectified as photographs, in a sense, stop being people, becoming fetishes of art (and here Renaissance classical beauty is subverted just as the Russian cultural tradition was). Or they become passive

objects – bodies that contracted asthenic syndrome. Paradoxically, it seems that *Asthenic Syndrome's* greatest violence is not in the brutish treatment dealt by characters to each other, but in these silent scenes, in which mortality and immobility stares back at the viewer. At the end of a sequence that starts with the meticulous observation of bric-a-brac, the camera closes up on a rug pattern, then on another pattern to the soundtrack of *Strangers in the Night*. In the film objects and people, and people's pictures, or their ghostly traces, become one continuous stretch of patterns, ornaments that slide into one another without consequence or connection. *Nekommunikabelnost* is not just a lack of understanding, a broken language; it is the idea that the only language available for the objectified or hysterical people of the film is one of a catalogue. The Soviet apocalypse comes and quietly enumerates its victims, and no amount of violent resistance or amnesiac sleep will change the abyss that these people (and possibly the Soviet people and possibly just people in general) are facing.

Muratova stated that she did not believe in the improving power of art, that her task was to reflect not to explain. The catalogue of everyday violence is the same as a catalogue of objects, a catalogue of wallpaper patterns, or porcelain elephants. This is also why many of the episodes, sequences, images and symbols structurally mirror each other, creating a web of repetitions. For example, the portraits of dead “big people” – prominent figures of history and culture at school, mirror the photographs of the enumerable dead “little people.” Different characters repeat similar lines and similar objects re-appear throughout the film.

Everything is catalogued and it turns out that everything is the same. The film not only sabotages its own language, but also creates a circular structure that presents no resolution, no hope and no outside – a perfect agonizing *chernukha* world closed in on itself.

That world, however, like in most *chernukha* films, feels painstakingly and unbearably real. I have mentioned how the film dismantles all the discursive structures that support it including, quite boldly, the idea of an author of a film. *Asthenic Syndrome* depicts the void of communication and identity as a glaring abyss. But the film does not stop at that, introducing a documentary rupture that implodes the film not only on the levels of narrative, visual form, and structures of cinema (like that of author and spectator), but attempts a certain cross-over to implode the reality outside its own realm. The famous, much discussed scene, which I, following Seth Graham, call a “rupture” (22), is the documentary footage in the dog compound, when the camera slowly pans across the caged dogs to the piano score of Schubert. Using Schubert as the background to a kind of Dostoevskian narrative of human cruelty and perversion is not unique to Muratova. Michael Haneke’s *The Piano Teacher* (2001) is a good contemporary example. The dogs are pitiful to the extreme, shockingly helpless and sick. The women who come to look for a lost dog start to weep uncontrollably before we even get a chance to see what moves them to tears.

Animals regularly appear in the film, creating a helpless, victimized contrast to the human violence. What makes this scene especially unique is the

fact that it fades to a black screen on which the words appear: “this is not what one likes to look at or think about, this should have nothing to do with the talk on good and evil” [на это не любят смотреть, об этом не любят думать, это не должно иметь отношения к разговорам о добре и зле]. The real rupture in the scene is not the astonishing suffering of the real animals waiting to be slaughtered, but the fact that the film is seemingly at a loss for words or images, and resorts to an intertitle as the only possible way to relate to the event. The intertitle denies the power of language to describe this event: it is not something that one can look at, think of, or relate to on a moral scale – importantly – in discourse. The cultural discourse, meaning-making strategies, and the language itself collapse together and the film literally blacks out, communicating this black-out by refusing to put it into images or words or anything else apart from a strange intertitle which is neither explanatory nor instructive.

Asthenic Syndrome reaches its peak when there is no venue for expression, there is no way to channel or comprehend the event. The “rupture” comes not at the very end of the film, but in the middle of the second part, and all that happens afterwards is our heightened awareness of the impossibility of language and cultural incscription to describe the Soviet apocalypse. Muratova used to say that she was haunted for months by the images of those dogs that were sent to be butchered, unable to shake off their gruesome death. *Asthenic Syndrome* is a brilliant film whose sensibility channelled the crisis of identity and community during perestroika as a crisis of language that not only collapses at the notion that

this is “no way to live,” but is also shattered to the core because it fails to describe “a way to die” as well. *Nekommunikabelnost* is not only a complete collapse of meaning-making strategies; it is the usurpation of the power of speech, of one’s voice. It is an objectification that completely encompasses existence in the *chernukha* world – from the impossibility of life to the equal incomprehensibility of death. The *chernukha* film world represents a negative totality that locks its characters in a torturous world with no alternatives and no explanations. And the traumatized viewer watches this world unfold as it implodes from within dismantling the power of discourse and representation. *Chernukha* might be after all an apocalypse. *Asthenic Syndrome* may have gone the farthest of all *chernukha* films, but it also most effectively captured the deeply unsettling apocalyptic nature of the trend.

Chapter 4. The *Chernukha* Protagonist

Asthenic Syndrome gave us a gallery of types, hardly exploring any of them in any depth. The main character, Nikolai, is probably the most inauthentic of them all. A compilation of clichés and stereotypical behaviour, Nikolai is a symptom of the pervasive *nekommunikabelnost*, rather than a full-fledged character. Other *chernukha* films, however, often present richer portrayals, just not necessarily in the vein of psychological depth or intricate complexity. In what follows, I will concentrate on patterns of characterization in *chernukha* films, setting aside questions of gender, sexuality and the representations of women for the last chapter.

Most *chernukha* characters are best characterized as anti-heroes. One can cite the examples of *Assuage My Sorrows*, *My Name is Harlequin*, or *Satan* which each feature a realist portrayal of a less than sympathetic hero, whose actions are not only questionable, but often monstrous. However, most of these characters are not necessarily or unequivocally “painted black,” but often oscillate between victimhood and predatory behaviour, between being products of their environment and defying social and cultural conventions. The heroes of *Assuage My Sorrows* or *My Name is Harlequin* could be characterized as monsters produced by their social milieu, but at the same time they display a certain vulnerability towards their environment which engulfs and crushes the individual. The source of naturalist contemplation of the environment and the types it produces could variably focus on the broader picture of Soviet society or its microcosmic

allegories, like institution (prison, school), social strata (like the working class in *Little Vera* or the privileged class of the party insiders), or marginalized communities (alcoholics in *Dogs' Feast* or the barack dwellers in *Freeze-Die-Come to Life*). The examination of social conditioning, however, does not preclude the complexity and ambiguity of the characterization in *chernukha*. Ambiguity characterizes Sasha in *SER* – neither a child, nor an adult, caught in a brutal indifferent system, and the torturer/victim relationship in *The Guard*. The ambivalent identity of the *chernukha* hero is also evident in films that portray the insiders and supporters of the Soviet system – the characters who are seemingly easier to vilify as perpetrators.

1. Victims and Perpetrators

One of the most debated films of 1988 was Sergei Snezhkin's *Emergency on the District Scale* [ChePe raionnogo masshtaba] – a film banned from screening due to its unfavourable portrayal of Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization) leaders.²⁷ *Emergency on the District Scale* centres on Nikolai (Igor Bochkin), the leader of a local Komsomol division, who is about to be promoted to the municipal Communist party committee. His promotion is promptly celebrated with a steam-bath orgy that includes nude, drunk and copulating Komsomol leaders. Nikolai's promotion celebrations are cut short by the theft of the division's red banner – a symbolic object that vests the organization with power.

²⁷ As reported in Soviet Screen [Sovetskii Ekran]. Issues 8-9, 1989.

The leadership pressures Nikolai to accept responsibility for the crime and suffer a demotion. Instead, Nikolai starts acting defiantly, pointing out to the factory workers that they are mindless sheep led by a bunch of soulless apparatchiks. He intends to divorce his wife and marry his mistress, since he no longer cares about rank. By accident Nikolai spots the thief and retrieves the banner. He is still ready to suffer the consequences, but finds out that the workers took his spiel to heart and the Communist party is launching a “new sincerity” campaign which he is encouraged to lead. The film leaves Nikolai startled by this news. It is left for the viewer to decide whether Nikolai is appalled at the easiness with which the system assimilated his act of resistance, or relieved by the end of his career trouble, or crushed by the fact that his newly found freedom was an illusion.

Nikolai is definitely an anti-hero – the film makes no effort to make him look good. He comes back from the orgy to his wife (Nadezhda Itskova) who threatens to divorce and ruin his career. Their reconciliation is shown as a bed scene paralleled by a voice-over, in which Nikolai contemplates getting rid of his wife, including the possibility of her untimely death, while having sex with her. Demoted for the banner theft, he goes to his mistress (Elena Antonova) and forces sex on her to channel his aggression, pressing her down on a kitchen table amidst the raw meat she was cooking. The exposition of paramount corruption and cynicism amidst party functionaries is what ignited the political controversy around the film. Nikolai does not attract our sympathy any more than any other embezzling politician would, and in this aspect the film is a very typical

perestroika text. However, despite the outrage of censors and the public by the exposure of corruption, the film also delivers a vision of a *chernukha* hero confronted with the hopeless and torturous world of the institution. This gesture is typical of many *chernukha* films, which promote a mixed message of characters being both victims and perpetrators, humble beings and monsters, social deviants and conditioned brain-washed conformists.

The film reaches its apex when an exasperated and shell-shocked Nikolai goes out to a discotheque with his mistress – he has burnt his bridges and reconciled himself with his fate. Then, at the discotheque, he tracks the banner thief and sets up an ambush for him in a room in the communal apartment that the teenage thief lives in with his mother and grandmother. The sequence shows Nikolai sulkily waiting together with the police officer in a tiny room, while the teenager's mother silently sits at the table filled with empty cans, bread crumbs and cigarette butts. The TV streams a long boring speech by Brezhnev, while the grandmother who has suffered a stroke and is bed-ridden, moans in constant pain. The camera cuts from Nikolai to the mother, to the grandmother, to the shabby interior, while the sound of human suffering mixes with official applause. The sequence lasts for a while, letting the viewer fully experience the visual as well as audible horror of the situation. Then the thief returns home – turning out to be just a teenage boy. Nikolai brutally assaults the boy, while his mother screams pulling Nikolai away. The film descends into a familiar mode of excess, brutality and violence.

What makes the previous sequence so jarring and hard to bear is not the graphic nature of it, but the audio-visual impact that the scene has on the viewer, who witnesses cramped impoverished spaces, worn-out characters, and a palpable reality of a body in pain. That tortured body is juxtaposed with the official discourse in its hypocritical emptiness and menacing intrusion into the fabric of everyday life. *Chernukha* literally conflates the institution, represented by official TV, and the extreme expressions of suffering and pain of the groaning ailing elderly woman. Interestingly, both sides of this uneasy equation have a certain quality of detachment – the political ideological propaganda generated by the institution is presented in the form of an indistinguishable babble, the lady who is sick and in pain is shown only a few times, her eyes closed, her face motionless, almost serene.

The eerie effect of the scene lies not only in the fact that it unequivocally equates the socio-political system with the literal and graphic suffering of its subjects, but that it also blurs the boundaries of this equation. For example when the sequence starts, we hear the groaning of old lady and hear the TV, but we are not given the immediate sources of the diegetic sound; instead the camera focuses on the dirty dinner table, Nikolai clutching the banner, the mother sitting at the table, everyone's uneasiness, and the small filthy room. To some extent such a presentation harks back to the natural school descriptive pitch. The unbearable living conditions of the underprivileged family are supplemented by social and political oppression and are metaphorically inscribed through the sounds of pain.

Even more interesting is the effect of this scene in the context of the film, which is conventionally realist, following a linear storyline and utilizing seamless montage. This scene creates a deliberate temporal, spatial and narrative confusion. The viewer is denied access to the source of sound or narrative explanation until later on in the scene. The scene imparts the negative totality that characterizes the torture-world of *chernukha*. The sequence immerses the characters and, by implication, the viewer in a world filled with literal expressions of pain mixed with ideological dogma, creating an illusion of reality that is real and grotesque at the same time – a signature *chernukha* paradox. The boundaries between the parable of ideology and the actual expression of physical pain are blurred – the reality of the scene is gravely palpable but still excessive in its implications (does one actually live amidst groans of pain and party speeches?). *Chernukha* pushes the envelope in terms of surpassing the sociological implications and creating not just a parable of ideology, but a world of pain – frightening and grotesque in its capacity to encompass and defy reality at the same time.

Another important aspect to consider is how the scene impacts our perception of the main character and what it tells us about *chernukha* characterization. The scene is an obvious culmination of our hero's descent from top of the world and the world under his control, to the very opposite end of the spectrum. The disintegration of Nikolai's power and identity starts with an unexpected incident that balloons into an event of existential proportions. Nikolai

goes full circle, starting as a bureaucrat and a hypocrite, to an abuser, and, then, a rebel defying the system, and, finally, absorbed by it against his will. The contrast is visually underscored by the fact that Nikolai starts in a luxury hot tub and ends in a suffocatingly dark room. After that we see our hero walking away with the banner in his hands, alone in an empty street just after dawn – his transfiguration is complete. From being a comfortable part of the system, Nikolai has become an outcast literally and metaphorically, with his sense of self shattered. Nikolai has not become a more sympathetic character, but his status has ambivalently shifted from a despicable human being into someone who has become lost in the *chernukha* world. Nikolai's sense of shattered identity, confusion and deprivation of agency by overpowering forces, has some points of comparison with the classic noir hero.

Noir heroes are often characterized by ambivalence, as pronounced by Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (1955) in their pioneering essay on film noir. They write:

The uncertainty is also manifest in the ambivalence of the characters themselves. The integral protagonist, the elemental figure of the Scarface type, has disappeared from film noir and given way to a crowd of sanctified killers, neurotic gangsters, megalomaniac crime bosses and their perplexing or tainted cronies... As for the ambiguous protagonist, he is often more mature, almost old, and not too handsome, Humphrey Bogart typifies him. He is also an inglorious victim who may suffer, before the happy ending, appalling abuse (21-22).

Borde and Chaumeton note that the central figure of noir – the private detective – is a trickster or a middle-man of sorts, positioned in between the criminal

underworld and the law. He is often confused by complex narrative twists and the predatory motivations of others. In *Murder My Sweet*, the PI is drugged, imprisoned and suffers an injury that almost blinds him. Humphrey Bogart is beaten several times in a dark alley in the *The Big Sleep*, and the Mike Hammer of *Kiss Me Deadly* barely survives a murder attempt. The PI of classic noir, despite being a figure of power, shares this victimization with heroes like brutally tortured Christine from *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Similarly, Nikolai from *Emergency*, despite his privileged position, ends up in the role of a victim. In *chernukha*, neither the privileged nor the downtrodden have full control and understanding of the system. In noir neither the detectives nor the confused by-stander call the shots or know the complete truth about the rules of the game. The rules predictably do not exist, the game is rigged, and everyone has their own agenda, which they often pursue with little success. The noir hero is best described by a famous catch-phrase from *Double Indemnity*: “I did it for the money and for the woman, I didn’t get the money or the woman.” Noir also displays the fatalist and pessimist attitude of heroes who are forced to survive in a chaotic world. Robert Porfirio (1976) writes, connecting the noir sensibility with existentialism:

The pre-existential world of the classical detective was ordered and meaningful; social aberrations were temporary and quickly righted through the detective’s superior powers of deductive reasoning... The hard-boiled writers replaced this with a corrupt, chaotic world where the detective’s greatest asset was the sheer ability to survive with a shred of dignity. Raymond Chandler described this world as a “wet emptiness” whose “streets were dark with something more than night.” (90)

The “darkness” of noir lies, according to Porfirio, in the construction of an ambivalent universe, which refuses the clear-cut narrative solutions, happy denouements, and seamless visual techniques characteristic of its immediate Hollywood context. The power of individual will is dramatically reduced and the confrontation with the dangerous and confusing world of “mean streets” mounts the general sense of anxiety and confusion. Such a sensibility is characteristic of existentialism (Porfirio), a philosophy that problematizes individual free will and independence in the world of natural chance, cultural inscription and socio-economic pressures. Hence, the noir hero’s experiences are that of uncertainty and anguish, an impending sense of doom and a failed attempt at mastering one’s own fate. Though the principal character often outsmarts his rivals, his victory comes at the price and often results in a sense of disenchantment and disaffection. A classic example is when we learn from the tangled story of murder and passion in *The Killers* that the insurance company has saved a few pennies. Or that the sympathetic if not morally righteous hero in *Double Indemnity* has lost everything. Or that the protagonist of *Detour* has become a fugitive and a murderer through a chain of purely coincidental events.

What can a noir hero tell us about a *chernukha* hero? On one hand there is a historical and geographical gulf between film noir’s marginal characters and wise-cracking PIs, and the party apparatchiks and marginalized citizenry of the Soviet Union. The difference also lies in a neo-naturalist technique. Film noir relies on a visual stylization of a mysterious and dangerous universe that brims

with anxiety and confusion. Noir's narrative patterns and cinematic techniques amplify this atmosphere (the hard-boiled narrative, the femme fatale, the voice-over and the flashback). *Chernukha* relies on social determinism and character motivation, descriptive plot lines and attention to the daily grind. In terms of characterization, *chernukha* is interested in the type and the social condition, not the psychological depth or originality of the character and his/her motivations.

These differences noted, there are several points at which the noir and *chernukha* hero intersect. One of them is the fatalistic notion that "life trips you every part of the way" (a quote from *Detour*). The world is chaotic and governed by rules and agents of power beyond the characters' reach. Nikolai from *Emergency* effectively becomes a "noir hero" – and though neither his actions nor his ambitions are sympathetic, it is his inability to bring his life under control that speaks to the noir tradition. I think the noir sensibility poses questions about morality and justice, not necessarily due to its characters' sinister actions, but because the morality of the situation is effectively removed from the characters' active choices. Noir's fatalism and terror resembles Greek tragedy as old as *Oedipus Rex*. The helplessness and futility of individual will, the illusion of order and causality – the veil of Maya – under which the ugly, irrational and irresistible impulses reside is a thread that runs consistently throughout classic film noir. These impulses sometimes ring with exceptional clarity, like in *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis 1950), in which the femme fatale (Peggy Cummings) has a compulsive habit of killing people when she is nervous. Or in *Angel Face* (Otto

Preminger 1952), when the heroine schemes to kill her step-mother and kills her father by mistake. Or the *D.O.A.*, or *Detour*, whose protagonists unwittingly become entangled in deadly situations. It could be argued that noir captures a Dionysian (in Nietzsche's terms) sensibility and anguish of the world being an unknown and dark place in which anything can and will happen to you. The terror is underscored by the haunting beauty of noir visual style and convoluted pace of its narratives with flashbacks (what really did happen?) and voice-overs (did it really happen that way?).

Chernukha also presents its world as out of joint and beyond control, to which its characters respond with uncontrollable and usually violent impulses; like the sexual violence in *Assuage My Sorrows* and *Emergency*, street violence in *Harlequin* and *Tamara Aleksandrovna*, or violent emotional outbursts in *The Guard* or *Satan* or *Little Vera*. Unlike noir, the *chernukha* world has none of the beauty and subliminal terror implied in the Dionysian abyss and conveyed through the visual technique in film noir. This is how the fatalism and existential despair of film noir becomes the entangled bureaucracy of the Komsomol or the heartless machinery of orphanages or the senseless brutality of army bullying. The system, the institution, that constitutes the torturous horizon of *chernukha* film is not the enigmatic abyss behind the veil of Maya that fills the streets with "something more than night" – sinister but fatally alluring – a characteristic best exemplified in the figure of a femme fatale. *Chernukha* is blunt – it shows you the world in which an unconditional power, embodied through social structures,

crushes the character in the most direct and brutal manner. There is nothing alluring or fascinating about it.

Chernukha has the sensibility of a world in chaos and despair but it is social rather than existential. The “torturers” are usually recognizable and identifiable in Soviet culture – they are institutions that yield the unconditional, almost always physical, power over *chernukha*’s characters. Being mundane sources of evil they still emanate a generic and unspecified menace that does not come under human control. Even those who are in the system do not understand or master it as is the case with *Emergency*. Komsomol is a cynical and dysfunctional institution that is indifferent to Nikolai’s angst and co-ops him as naturally as it is ready to discard him. There is a certain straightforwardness and indifference in *chernukha* to the plight of its characters. *Chernukha* does not just victimize them but makes them an integral part of what sustains its nihilism, turning, alternatively, their monstrous and pitiful sides to view. If the fatalism and despair of the torture world of *chernukha* contributes to us seeing its characters as victims, it is the transgressive nature of *chernukha* films that makes them monsters at the same time.

2. *The Hero on the Margins. The Return of the “Little Man.”*

Chernukha is known to focus on numerous “naturalistic,” or as Mark Lipovetsky describes them – “silenced,” phenomena that were taboo in Soviet cinema and public discourse. The army bullying, life in prisons, difficult children, alcoholics,

destitute individuals, people repressed or persecuted by the state are some of the numerous examples that abound in both *chernukha* cinema and perestroika discourse at large. *Chernukha* narratives that focus on social norms, depicting marginal characters focus on milieus, daily routines and other social signification. These narratives, however, depend on the lead characters to tell their story – in short to make the social angle believable. Their characterization concludes the consistent victimization of the characters that lead to their ultimate destruction. At the same time it endows them with the aggressive violent impulses that feed the destructive social environment. What is interesting is that such treatment is given to the character of the “little man” – a much revered tradition in Russian literature. In accordance with this tradition, a film like *Bespredel* venerates the little man, the prison inmate, led to enlightenment by intelligentsia. *Chernukha* predictably inverts this tradition.

The tradition of the “little man,” living on the margins of society becomes an important theme to be expanded in Russian literature. Following Gogol tradition this tradition claims sympathy and compassion for those crushed by the system. Little men are typically drawn from the dwellers of the many “lower depths” – broken unhappy people, whose dignity miraculously shines through in the worst of circumstances. Examples from literature include Maksim Gorky’s character of Lika in the *Lower Depths* (1901), or Makar Devushkin from Dostoevsky’s *Poor Folk* (1846) and Marmeladov from *Crime and Punishment* (1866).

Chernukha upholds this tradition in its narratives of marginalized individuals like Sasha in *SER*, or the soldiers in the *Guard* or alcoholics in *Dogs' Feast*. In accordance with naturalist ethos it also blends the social determinism and high-voltage passions that underlie the social conditioning. Richard Lehan (2005) stresses the importance of science to naturalists, and the particular impression that Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) had on naturalist writers. The result of this was a description of the human being as preordained to actions and feelings, not only by social pressures, but also by hereditary characteristics, by animal instincts. Naturalism had an acute perception that civilization is just a veneer over bestial primitive emotions – low passions to which there is no rational explanation, only a grim determinism ruling the human nature. The underprivileged, the “little people” are also predisposed to the unfettered passions and lowest animal instincts that complement their miserable social condition.

Contemplating the deviant monstrous image of the “little man” is not new in the Russian tradition. In Russian culture, it can be traced as far back as Gogol's *Overcoat*. After all, the small functionary Akaky becomes a ghost who frightens and scares Petersburg dwellers – turning literally into an unforgiving monster. The tension between the little man and the monster that lies within is less explored by the writers of natural school, who emphasized “brother” rather than “monster” in the *Overcoat*. It is explored more at the turn of the century by Russian realist writers such as Anton Chekhov and Nikolai Leskov. Both writers were keen on disavowing the cultural mythology that surrounded the “little people” – from the

marginalized urban dwellers of *Physiology of Saint Petersburg* to the glorified, by Slavophiles and Tolstoy, peasants. Chekhov's plays and stories often build on the disillusionment with the ideologies and ideals of the gentry and intelligentsia. Chekhov's short story *The Muzhiks* [Muzhiki] from 1897, caused a public uproar for its bleak portrayal of rural life. The story pointed to the many flaws of the peasant lifestyle (such as alcoholism and domestic abuse), appalling rural living conditions, and inflexible village traditions. The picture was a far cry from the idyllic visions of authentic Russianness and harmony commonly associated with the peasantry by the intelligentsia. Both Chekhov and Leskov clearly borrow from the natural school tradition: in the objectified, observant narration of Chekhov and the signature *skaz* technique of Leskov which matches the language of a particular social class. Both writers are masters of Russian realism, and both authors surpass the Russian natural school tradition of the mid-19th century by nuance, ambiguity of presentation, and the depth of their narratives.

Nikolai Leskov's texts rely heavily on *skaz* – adopting a character's speech and making the discourse of the text approximate the culture and speech of its characters. *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* [Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda] (1865) – his most celebrated work – is, at least partly, written in *skaz* manner, immersing the reader in the suffocating provincial environment of the merchant class. *Lady Macbeth* became one of the most archetypal stories in Russian culture. It is a story of a merchant's wife, Katerina Izmailova, who starts an affair with a servant. As the affair progresses, she kills first her father-in-law, then her

husband, and finally a child-heir to her late husband's fortune. Sentenced to prison, both she and her lover are transferred to Siberia together, where he abandons Katerina for another woman. Katerina kills herself and the rival woman by drowning in a frozen river. The story has captured the imagination of many other Russian writers and artists. One fine example is the opera by Dmitry Shostakovich. The *Lady Macbeth* story has produced two film adaptations in the perestroika and early post-Soviet period. One is set in contemporary Russia and is called *Moscow Nights* [Podmoskovnye vechera] (Valerii Todorovsky 1994), another is a 1989 adaptation called *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by Roman Balaian.

Leskov's story shows its characters as inarticulate and incapable of reflecting on their actions or feelings – instead, they are overwhelmed by irrepressible physiology or instincts. Katerina's motivation for the affair is chiefly boredom, a boring unhappy life with an older husband. The physical palpable quality of Katerina's murderous passions is underscored when the text juxtaposes a description of sensual pleasures with cold-blooded murder:

Поел Борис Тимофеич на ночь грибков с кашицей, и началась у него изжога; вдругхватило его под ложечкой; рвоты страшные поднялись, и к утру он умер, и как раз так, как умирали у него в амбарах крысы, для которых Катерина Львовна всегда своими собственными руками приготавлила особое кушанье с порученным ее хранению опасным белым порошком. Выручила Катерина Львовна своего Сергея из стариковской каменной кладовой и без всякого зазора от людских очей уложила его отдыхать от свекровых побоев на мужниной постели; а свекра, Бориса Тимофеича, ничтоже сумняся, схоронили по закону христианскому (105).

Boris Timofeich ate mushrooms with gruel for supper; he got a heart-burn from it. Then suddenly he had pains in the pit of the stomach, terrible

vomitings began and he died in the morning. He died just like the rats in his granary, for which Katerina Lvovna had always prepared, with her own hands, a certain kind of food made of a dangerous white powder that has been entrusted to her. Katerina Lvovna let Sergei out of the old man's store-room and brazenly laid him publicly in her husband's bed to recover from the blows that her father-in-law had inflicted on him. Her father-in-law was buried according to the rites of the Christian Church. Nobody was surprised at this strange occurrence (67).

And on the next page:

... Встала Катерина Львовна, села на постель, целовала, целовала Сергея, миловала, миловала его, поправила измятую перину и пошла в сад чай пить... (107)

Katerina Lvovna rose, sat down on the bed, kissed and caressed Sergei many times, arranged the disordered feather bed, and went into the garden to drink tea... (70)

The murders are depicted via long descriptions and dialogues between the victims and the murderers. Leskov later admitted that he thought he was going crazy, having hallucinations, while writing the novella. The passions in the text culminate in Katerina killing the boy and then, upon being discovered, arranging the corpse on the bed as if it was alive:

Дурак! Вставай, дурак! - крикнула Катерина Львовна и с этими словами она сама порхнула к Феде, уложила его мертвую голову в самой естественной спящей позе на подушках и твердой рукой отперла двери, в которые ломилась куча народа (128).

"You fool – get up, you fool," cried Katerina Lvovna, and with these words she hastened to Fedya, settled his dead head on the pillow in the most natural sleeping position, and with a firm hand opened the door, through which a crowd of people streamed into the house (110-111).

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk contemplates opaque human emotions and dark passions, such as a violence of the everyday which lacks a plausible or rational

explanation. Katerina's overwhelming lust, just like the reasons behind her murderous spree and her boredom, are unknown to herself, and her inner motivations are left obscure. When Shostakovich adopted *Lady Macbeth* to the opera stage, he tried to fit the text into the Socialist Realist canon with its clear-cut rules of good and evil. Shostakovich made changes in the story that emphasized the social origin of Katerina's transgression, namely an oppressive class environment.²⁸ Leskov's story of lust, greed and murder is not easily explained through social tensions, it, in fact, being a *skaz* narrative, the novella does not explain much at all.

The novella ominously includes disturbing dreams of Katerina in which she is obsessed with a strange cat intruding her bedroom, but these are the only glimpse of Katerina's inner life. Apart from dreams, Katerina does not display any moral compass; her moral reasoning is mostly obscure to us and to herself. When Katerina contemplates the murder of the child, she only "grows heavy with thinking" about losing everything, but her actual act of murder is as spontaneous as it is brutal. Sergei, her lover, displays more reflection, he has a rationale (upward mobility) and, consequently, the fear of punishment overpowers him and he confesses to the murder of the child. Katerina's passions are unreflected upon and unknown to her. She is an example of human passions that are dark, perverse and immoral, and are like that because they have a hidden life of their own – inside a human there is a beast.

28 As Andrew Baruch Wachtel argues in *Plays of Expectations* (2006).

Anton Chekhov's *In the Ravine* [V ovrage] (1900) also tells the story of child-murder done for the pursuit of property. Here, the murderess goes unpunished and prospers through her unlawful deed. Chekhov's story is much more matter-of-fact in tone than the elaborate decorative *skaz* style of Leskov. Both texts, however, emphasize the vision of the bestial irrational nature of human beings. The story starts with a strange anecdote about the village in which the action takes place. The anecdote goes as follows:

Как-то на поминках у фабриканта Костюкова старик-дьячок увидел среди закусок зернистую икру и стал есть ее с жадностью; его толкали, дергали за рукав, но он словно окоченел от наслаждения: ничего не чувствовал и только ел. Съел всю икру, а в банке было фунта четыре (144).

It had happened at a funeral repast at the millowner of Kostyukov's that the old sexton caught sight of some large-grained caviar among the appetizers and greedily fell to eating it ; people nudged him, tugged at his sleeve, but he was stupefied with pleasure: he felt nothing, and simply went on eating. He ate all the caviar, and there were some four pounds in the jar (339).

Objectively speaking the anecdote is funny, in a grotesque way. But Chekhov presents it with a sober tone, combining the language of pleasure and death in one sentence. "Stupefied" [okochenet'] means in Russian to go stiff – it is usually said about corpses or people who are "freezing to death." It is important to note that the poor sexton did not feel anything – as if the appetite for caviar had nothing to do with his feelings and preferences. Human passions seem to have a way of their own, instinctual and irresponsible, and are almost always sinister. The murderess in the story is described several times as having the intent gaze of a snake sticking its head out of the wheat field. She is also referred to as a beast –

a “strong beautiful beast” [krasivoe gordoe zhivotnoe]. The murderess kills the baby to claim an inheritance right, but she does so impulsively and on the spot. While her menacing presence and irrational anger are emphasized throughout the story, culminating in the brutal murder. This act releases the natural primordial impulses, confirming the murderess’ bestial identity, and obscures her motivation for a sudden attack. She is simply a snake that bites, a beast that attacks.

Similarly, the humanity of humanity is questioned in *chernukha* cinema. *Dogs’ Feast* [Sobachii pir], a film from 1990 directed by Leonid Menaker, is about a female alcoholic who is a janitor at a railway station, where she repeatedly shown cleaning filthy public toilets. Zhanna buddies up with a recovering alcoholic who has nowhere to go, and together they try to sober up. She falls for him, he falls for the neighbour and she, in turn, kills him and herself on New Year’s Eve. The story ends with a crime of passion as the diabolus ex machina device that finally pushes the heroine over the edge.

The film also shows how Zhanna becomes an outcast not only socially but romantically. Even seasoned critics, like Horton and Brashinsky, call Zhanna an “ugly cleaning lady” in their synopsis of the film. Not because she is actually ugly, but because her marginalized position is accentuated via her romantic failure and the humiliation she suffers from men. Examples include a violent and decisively non-sexual assault on her in a train, or the male railway station passengers who continue to urinate while she cleans the toilets, or the rejection she suffers from Shakurov’s character. The film employs metonymy, showing

Zhanna feeding homeless dogs by the dumpster, identifying her with the helpless and voiceless animals. Both Zhanna and her buddy in *Dogs' Feast* are shown leading a bestial sub-human existence.

The idea of the bestial nature of the lower depths dwellers in Soviet dissident culture goes back to *Heart of a Dog* [Sobach'e serdtse], a novella from 1929 by Mikhail Bulgakov. It satirizes and warns about the dangers of the empowerment of marginalized social classes during the Bolshevik revolution. In this classic, censored by the Soviets, text, a dog is turned into a human by a brilliant surgeon. Unpredictably, the newly-bred individual turns into a vulgar, opportunistic and greedy human being, who proves a perfect fit for the uneducated, bigoted red-necks who ride the wave of class warfare. In the end the appalled surgeon turns this obnoxious being back into the nice dog he picked up on the street and who was happy beyond measure to be adopted. Zhanna is placed by the *chernukha* characterization into a similar category of the sub-human – not a woman, not entirely a human being – an alcoholic living on the margins of society. Her bestiality is implied not necessarily in her dubious actions, but in her very status. *Dogs' Feast*, similar to Chekhov and Leskov stories, shows a deep mistrust in the “little man” as a disadvantaged and suffering victim of circumstance who needs to have his/her “human status” reclaimed as “your brother” (Gogol). Instead *Dogs' Feast* explores the possibility that the little man is both a victim of society and the perpetrator of society's sad state of affairs – much like Bulgakov's dog turned human.

A similar portrayal of the “little man” on the margins can be found in *Assuage My Sorrows* – with its hero both a victim and a torturer, an abuser and a victim of circumstances. The film keeps giving us conflicting messages about this messed-up character, making him look monstrous and abusive to his wife, and, then, sincerely seeking her affection and forgiveness. The only constant is that he fails at everything he does. The little man as a monster is bound to suffer even when he is the abuser not the abused. Nikolai of *Emergency* and Boris of *Assuage My Sorrows* both share the noir quality of futility and failure. Both also seem to act compulsively and violently as if forces beyond their control create a compulsion for abuse in them. The *chernukha* characterization is ambiguous, it draws on the tradition of Russian realism and includes a certain noir sensibility of fatalism and doom, albeit without noir existential underpinnings.

If anything, such an ambivalent characterization adds to *chernukha*’s excessive mission that defies the viewers’ expectations and constructs narratives that deconstruct meaning-makings strategies, as I argued in previous chapters. *Chernukha* characters oscillate between the poles of victimhood and abuse, drawing on and subverting the realist tradition. *Chernukha* mocks the Socialist Realism and breaks with realist tradition, relying on the more ambivalent contributions of such writers as Chekhov and Bulgakov. It rejects both the didactic impulse and the idealistic vision in portrayal of the little man. *Chernukha* art promotes a world of negative totality, and displays a deep-seated mistrust and ambivalence towards its characters.

3. *The Other to the Other: Children and Youth in Chernukha.*

Chernukha always anchors its stories in one social paradigm or another. These are not stories of romance, complex human interaction, or human passions in their own right, but are relationships mediated by social order. *Chernukha* films show the world warped by the social system, represented by institutions, marginalized social identities and dysfunctional relationships. On the one hand, this social impulse is very simple – the Soviet regime is regarded in perestroika years as deeply flawed, in some instances almost demonic, as it is captured in the documentaries *publitsistika* of the era. On the other hand, unlike these non-fiction genres, *chernukha* offers no solutions, bears no witness and honours no suffering. *Chernukha* offers no reference point and ultimately no outsider perspective on the social cosmos it portrays – hence its totality and nihilism. A case in point is *chernukha's* portrayal of the Other – or characters who are the “margin to the margin.”

Predictably, it is mostly children and animals. This is a tradition started in the 19th century when literature portrayed children and animals as the innocent victims of human evil or social injustice. Children and animals also became the golden measure for ethical judgement. The most obvious example is a famous argument by Dostoevsky in *Brothers Karamazov* [Brat'ia Karamazovy] (1880): whether the tortured death of one child is worth the prosperity of an entire society. This canon includes the portrayal of a raped thirteen year-old, Matryosha, in *Demons* [Besy] (1872), and a powerful scene of a horse beating in *Idiot* (1869). A

seminal text by Leo Tolstoy *Kholstomer* (1886) is a narrative that is entirely told from the perspective of an old horse, ready for slaughter, using a powerful narrative technique that humanizes animal suffering. In *chernukha* children and animals are most often the “civilian” casualties of the *chernukha* world, whose suffering emphasizes that in *chernukha* redemption is not possible. Children and animals appear regularly; their perspective, however, is often silenced. Obviously, animals do not have a voice, which explains *Asthenic Syndrome*’s choice of dogs as the ultimate outsiders rather than children. Sometimes *chernukha* films employ heavy metaphors like the obvious one in *Dogs’ Feast*.

Some *chernukha* films feature children or animals just briefly as silent observers. In *Little Vera* a scene that was cut out from the North American release has a black boy growing up in a Russian family. We see the boy silently watering the garden and watching a funeral procession pass by his house. This scene suggests that the boy will grow up and face the same problems the others in the film are facing and then, of course, die. His stark otherness is accentuated by the difference in race. His silent effort at actually growing things – as opposed to wrecking things otherwise prominent in the film – underscores his lone and futile effort. In *Dogs’ Feast*, the love scene between the alcoholic man and the neighbour takes place in a child’s bedroom, grotesquely positioning the adult lovers on a tiny bed amidst toys. The scene creates a sense of the violated innocence of a child who is not there, but still becomes a measure of the characters’ action. The scene parallels the betrayal that Zhanna suffers after this

affair, suggesting her identification with the other – children and animals. It also softens our perception of Zhanna as a sympathetic character despite her marginal and bestial status.

Films like *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* and *SER* both feature children as main characters and both films employ the contrast of childhood innocence and the grown-up conditions that the children are forced into. In both films, children become martyrs of the adult world. Sasha's character in *SER* is forced to have a double-identity, being treated like a criminal adult and abused like a defenceless child. Similarly the two children protagonists of *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* are faced with the bleak, grown-up world in which they try to fit in by adopting adult behaviour and ultimately fail. The tension the film sets up is between childhood friendship and the adult roles forced upon children. A case in point is the scene, in which Galia is killed and Valerka is critically injured by the gang members. A train passes by as Valerka and Galia play games. In shot-reverse-shot, we see the face of the man, a member of a gang on the train, who definitely sees the children, but they are too engrossed in their play to notice. We follow the children as they walk along the tracks and Valerka sings a sentimental popular ballad about lovers' suicide. The children stop and the camera follows Galia's intent gaze, which lands on the peaceful landscape of the groves and hills near the train tracks. Then we hear brisk footsteps and gun shots.

The ending does not offer a graphic description of the child's death, but it presents the event as confusing structurally. We have no visual confirmation that

it was the gang members who hopped off the train to kill children, but we follow Galia's gaze seconds before her death. Galia's gaze points to the peacefulness and passivity of nature. Up until this point, nature rarely figures in the film, and in *chernukha* in general, which prefers impoverished semi-urban settings and man-made landscapes. The serene groves devoid of signs of human involvement are contrasted with the malaise and deliberate cruelty of what is about to happen. Nature becomes the silent witness, to which, metonymically, through the contiguity of Galia's gaze, we compare the murdered children. This final gaze fits structurally with the rest of the film's constant juxtaposition of contrasting concepts, images and characters.

The only moments in the film that claim empathy and identification is when *Freeze- Die-Come to Life* shows its admiration for children as children. Children who play pranks, stand up to bullies, fight with their parents, try to play cool and fancy each other. This sympathetic vision, however, operates only as a contrast of showing the children as victims of the system. The film consistently introduces the various atrocities that go on around children, culminating in a murdering spree. A telling example is when Sashka finds his first "porn" picture – a naked woman shot in the head from the local KGB archives. The children are often framed in the shot-reverse-shot technique with adults, and often not well-meaning adults. Thus, we see a close-up of both Valerka and Galia's faces followed by a shot of the gang members right before the criminals decide to get rid of children.

Children, providing an image of innocence and purity, are either sidelined or victimized in *chernukha*. They are witnesses that are unable to speak and are effectively silenced by the grown world of *chernukha*. Sasha in *SER* is confined and abused, the children in *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* are murdered. The final shot of that film presents a very apt portrayal of children in *chernukha* in general – with two petrified, serious toddlers staring into the camera. Even if the camera wants to focus on toddlers, it just cannot – it has to follow the grief-stricken woman, because it is with her, not the silent children, that the *chernukha* world comes to full life.

Children and animals become the ultimate other – one that has to be sacrificed in *chernukha* films. It is the youth, young people, who assume a position of being in between the worlds of adults and children – or between a rock and a hard place. They are in between the irredeemable social world of *chernukha* and the outside martyred world of its innocent victims. “Youth cinema” is a category in itself in perestroika cinema and is often discussed separately. Horton and Brashinsky (1992) devote an entire chapter to the youth genre, so does Anna Lawton (1992), in their surveys of perestroika film. The number of films during perestroika that talk about young people is indeed prominent.

Perestroika cinema takes up the tradition of “difficult children” [trudnye deti], prominent in the Soviet arts after the Thaw. The depiction of adolescents and young people as ambiguous and complex characters was pioneered in the

1960s with the “school films” [shkol’noe kino] that examined young people’s integration in and reaction to the adult world. Some of the most known examples include films like *What If It Is Love?* [A esli eto liubov?] (Iulii Raizman 1961) and *Let’s Survive Until Monday* [Dozhivem do ponedel’nika] (Stanislav Rostotsky 1968). The Thaw saw a resurgence in youth and children oriented cinema, as filmmaking and the arts were revived by liberalized politics and eased censorship. As Horton and Brashinsky put it, the motto for that era was “we are people too” (69) – as the cinema discovered the nuanced and emotionally complex world of childhood.

Horton and Brashinsky name the chapter on youth cinema of perestroika “We are *your* children” – emphasizing a generational gulf in values and attitudes attributed to the last Soviet generation. The perestroika youth cinema includes two film trend-setters that both stirred Soviet society and addressed the quintessential topics of the youth cinema during the 1980s. Filmed in 1984, *Weirdo* [Chuchelo], by Rolan Bykov, is a film of a teenage bullying; most of its narrative focuses on the various ways in which teenagers humiliate and ostracize each other. And the aloof adults do not understand or care to notice the complex predatory dynamics among teenagers. The film is a moving and complex picture of teenage cruelty, and it was a unique production in the USSR. The second trend is represented by Vadim Abdrashitov’s *Plumbum or Dangerous Game* [Plumbum ili opasnaia igra] (1986). It is a story of a high school student, Ruslan (played by Anton Androsov, who would later play Vitek in *Bespredel*). Ruslan has

aspirations to be a detective. He possesses a sense of vigilante righteousness, trying to catch and punish those whom Soviet justice has not quite reached. Plumbum (that is the nickname the teenager chooses) believes that no one is exempt from the law and he delivers his own father to the police for poaching. Ruslan manipulates others to achieve his sense of justice, which is as rigid as the Soviet system itself. Plumbum sees the world in a harsh black and white. His rigidity is what separates this character from both his parents (they are an openly mocked image of urban intelligentsia), and the corrupt and cynical law enforcers who regard him as a freak. He sadistically blackmails and manipulates a woman accidentally embroiled with the mafia, and gains the trust of a homeless man only to deliver him and his small destitute community to the police. In the end, Ruslan's loyal girlfriend, while trying to impress him, falls off a roof of a multi-storied apartment building in a slow-motion sequence of free fall lasting several minutes. The final scene graphically conveys the real-life consequences of toying around with the lives of others. But it does not answer the question whether this message has reached Plumbum himself.

Perestroika cinema picked up on the two extremes of youth cinema represented by *Weirdo* and *Plumbum*. One stands for the impulse to vilify the next generation as amoral and alien; the other to show young people as the victims of a social dysfunction enabled by adults. Horton and Brashinsky note that in comparison to American teenage movies that deal with similar conflicts, Russian films display far greater involvement in inter-generational conflict. In youth

cinema of perestroika there is a tendency to accentuate differences and to explore the gap between the image and reality (youth subcultures and official culture), old values and new values (generational conflict). Many youth films explore the generational and cultural divide, or how the young generation is seen as alienated and different from their parents. Teenage dramas like *Burglar* [Vzломshchik] (Valerii Ogorodnikov 1987), *Courier* [Kur'er] (Karen Shakhnazarov 1982) explored this divide as ideological alienation – from the Soviet ideology and the humanist ideology of the 1960s intelligentsi). The new generation had mysterious interests, ideals and values. Some films like *Tragedy in Rock Style* [Tragediia v stile rok] (1988) by Savva Kulish, or the documentary *Confession: Chronicle of Alienation* [Ispoved': khronika otchuzhdeniia] (Georgy Gavrilov 1989), and, to an extent *The Needle* [Igla] (Rashid Nugmanov 1988), portray young people as lacking a moral compass and a stable value system causing them to succumb to addiction like drugs.

Many perestroika productions saw the youth generation as an agent of change. Juris Podnieks' groundbreaking documentary *Is It Easy to Be Young?* [Vai viegli but jaunam?/Legko li byt' molodym?] (Juris Podnieks 1987) portrays young people as passionate, unwilling to live the life of conformism and hypocrisy of late Soviet culture. The film is shot as a series of interviews and self-expositions by young characters and follows some criminal cases involving young people. The film is mostly on the side of the young people – making the Soviet justice system look inflexible and monstrous. While young people might

be misguided, they are also deeply misunderstood and most of all disillusioned by the adult world. An iconic figure of rock musician Viktor Tsoi became the symbol of necessary change and alienation from the late Soviet culture demanded by the last Soviet generation (in both *The Needle* and *ASSA* (Sergei Solov'ev 1988)). The youth generation as an agent for positive change through underground rebellious community is represented especially well through the underground rock subculture in the cult film by Sergei Solov'ev *ASSA*, the documentary *Rock* (Aleksei Uchitel 1987), and *The City* [Gorod] (Aleksandr Burtsev 1990). These films explored youth counterculture as the locus of resistance to the Soviet hegemony. *Chernukha* cinema remained on the periphery of such filmmaking, and the rebellious romantic spirit of the rock movement was likewise alien to *chernukha*. Most examples of youth genre can be found in slice-of-life family dramas such as *Little Vera* or *Assuage My Sorrows*.

Elena Davydova and Mikhail Gurevich of *Soviet Screen* (1988) note that youth cinema in perestroika exemplifies the “crisis of paternalism” [krizis paternalizma], which shifts from “child-hatred to child-idolatry.” Ultimately, according to the critics, it means the deprivation of voice for the younger generation. In *chernukha*, young people could be perceived as more innocent, something that never happens to adults, but this view is meaningless in the *chernukha* world. In *Asthenic Syndrome*, the shots of bored high school students reciting pre-learned topics on their bright future are directly cut to alcoholic workers talking about snatching some woman's purse. The students in class and

the teachers at the school council meeting engage in similar activities, mostly meaningless and repetitive (such as folding and unfolding origami). *Asthenic Syndrome* suggests that there really is no future for young people in *chernukha*. The young generation is either refused the difference and potential for change by *chernukha*, or it is refused the special bond, the community of young like-minded people, exemplified by rock counterculture, for example.

In *Little Vera*, Vera (Natalia Negoda) – a rebellious and arrogant young woman – asserts herself by smoking, drinking, sleeping around, and generally leading a life of pleasure devoid of hard work and prudish morals. She is caught in a web of loyalties and betrayals after her alcoholic father stabs her boyfriend for irreconcilable class differences. Vera is pressured by family to testify against her boyfriend to save her father from jail. In the end, she attempts suicide as the only way of asserting her will in the coercive world in which she lives. To underscore Vera's loneliness in her struggle against the brutal choices of the adult world Vera's best friend withdraws into the conventional world of her parents by running away with an old married man. In *Assuage My Sorrows* the young woman is a drifter; she enjoys her life and reflects little on it, gets pregnant and is then abandoned. Attempting to stay with an old lady she befriends, the girl ends up with Boris, the unfortunate hero, who rapes her and she passively becomes his live-in girlfriend. When Boris' ex-wife (Elena Safonova) comes to their housewarming party she assaults the girl in an ugly brawl.

What unites the two young heroines of *Little Vera* and *Assuage My*

Sorrows is a defiance of social conventions and a jaded attitude towards adult morality. More importantly both young heroines suffer from their unwilling entanglement in the world of “adult affairs,” which is imposed on their own desires, but is not incidental within the films’ narrative structures. Vera is caught in the conflict between her lover and her family, and the girl from *Assuage My Sorrows* in the relationship between Boris and his wife. Tellingly, both young women take the blow. Vera’s propriety-defying behaviour, which suggests that she aggressively tries to carve her own identity, results in her last defiant gesture of suicide – which she stages as an event accompanied by sparkles, loud music and vodka consumption. By contrast, her “medical revival” into the adult world is portrayed through a violent scene in which Vera hysterically screams and resists the treatment.

Similarly Zhanna from *Dogs’ Feast* makes a point of rejecting the social order, her marginalized status, and her addiction by committing suicide and taking another life with her. The girl from *Assuage My Sorrows* takes everything passively and accepts both the rape, the live-in arrangement, and the assault at the party, as if she was not fully there – so inarticulate and emotionless she is in contrast with hysterical Boris and his wife. Her withdrawal could be interpreted as a gesture of defiance in itself – and it also comes at the price of her being raped, abandoned, and beaten. The young hero of *My Name Is Harlequin*, being, like many other *chernukha* heroes (think of Boris, Nikolai of *Emergency*, Nikolai of *Asthenic Syndrome*) rather unsympathetic, forms a genuine attachment to a

woman. This attachment eventually, however, sets her up for gang rape and him for an ultimate humiliation. Harlequin becomes victimized through his decision to go against the rules of his environment.

What defines these young characters is a gap between rigid social constructions (either a generation gap or criminal street code) and their defiance of those “rules of the game.” In *chernukha*, this insistence on difference becomes an instrument of violence and punishment. Children or animals are positioned as outsiders, their otherness illuminates *chernukha*’s torturous world and makes them also martyred innocents. Children and animals are used and abused by and are positioned outside the grown-up *chernukha* world. For example, it never occurs to Valerka to be more careful and to look at who is riding on the train instead of playing with Galia in *Freeze-Die-Come to Life*. The young people, on the contrary, find themselves deeply entangled in the *chernukha* world but unable to live in it – they suffer the deprivation of their own voice, just like the critics in *Soviet Screen* suggested. The gap between them and the adult world is judged in *chernukha* as absolutely impassable.

Chapter 5. The Heroine: Gender, Body and Sexuality in *Chernukha*

Perestroika cinema has a unique place in the history of Russian cinema, pioneering topics previously unexplored and venturing into new territories. Among them, most notably, is the openness with which it addressed sexuality, introducing a body language that the Soviet screen had never witnessed before. However, in *chernukha* that body language is not necessarily about sexual intimacy and exposure to “adult scenes,” but mostly about the pain and abuse that its unleashed physicality brought to the screen. *Chernukha* exposed the Soviet viewer to rape, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse, among other things. The correlation of sexuality and violence in *chernukha* films is also entrenched in the gender question as it is in women’s bodies, which become subjects for the violent physicality and exposed sexuality on screen. How *chernukha* films represent the female body and address sexuality will be the subject of this chapter.

1. Gender Question in Perestroika Arts

The junction of sexuality, body and gender is a rich and well-explored scholarly field, but, for the purposes of my analysis, I will limit myself to a well-known post-structuralist theory of gender as performance, introduced by Judith Butler. Following the philosophy of Michel Foucault on the discursive construction and regulation of sexuality (1976), Judith Butler, in her ground-breaking *Gender Trouble* (1986) argues that gender is performed – or, in other words, culturally inscribed and reinforced through repetitive actions (or performances). Gender

difference is seen as a series of culturally regulated acts. Gender roles are, therefore, not natural but rather constructed and their boundaries are seen as more fluid and ambiguous. The performance of gender, according to Butler, is intrinsically connected to both the construction of hetero-sexuality and the regulation of bodies that are inscribed to perform in accordance with peg-holed discourses on the binary model of sexuality and gender. Therefore, it is instructive for us to look at the portrayal of sexuality and body language in *chernukha* films to determine gender construction in perestroika cinema. And what this gender construction says about the status of women, and their role as the exclusive subjects of both sexualized and abusive discourse of *chernukha*.

The background for the gender question in the Soviet Union and Russia has a complex history that starts with the revolutionary feminist ideas of women's liberation from the "kitchen," and the "bourgeois" oppressive lifestyle, into politics and active participation in the construction of socialism. The Soviet Union indeed pioneered the question of women's rights and provided venues for political, social, and professional involvement of women unprecedented elsewhere. However, it is also acknowledged in scholarship that the actual status of women in the Soviet Union was a subject to a double standard (Goscilo 1996). Soviet women were hailed as active members of the work force, enjoying the same political rights and social opportunities as men, a certain degree of control of reproductive health (such as legal, free, and easy access to abortions, but limited to no access to contraception due to a backwards consumer-oriented industry), and

social services, such as free childcare or paid maternity leaves. Statistics also show much lower numbers of women in top managerial positions or in the Communist party apparatus throughout the history of the Soviet Union. Divisions remained between typical “female” and “male” professions (such as the military and nursing), and traditional cultural conventions about gender roles were upheld, such as an unequal distribution of household responsibilities or social acceptance of domestic violence. A party decree issued in 1930 stated that the equality of Soviet women has been achieved. It was followed by subsequent elimination of the women’s rights committee, and a later ban on abortions during the totalitarian reign of Joseph Stalin. This discrepancy between reality of gender discrimination and official doctrine of equality continued throughout the Soviet period when any feminist or women’s grassroots organizations were effectively repressed by the state (Goscilo 1996).

The point that is of particular interest to me is the theory of so-called Soviet woman’s “double burden.” The double burden reflects a double standard that represents both the discriminatory cultural attitudes and Soviet gender-related policies. A typical Soviet woman had no choice but be a part of the workforce (since unemployment was illegal), but at the same time she was expected to bear a sole responsibility for child-rearing and managing the household, representing the traditional cultural gender roles of mother and homemaker. Helena Goscilo writes:

Ever since the Stalin period, when the official culture joined women’s economic role to the glorification of maternity and reaffirmation of

women's traditional familial duties, the Soviet state and society exhorted women to be both producers and re-producers. As a consequence they bore the double load of full-time work and domestic responsibilities. ("De-Hexing Sex" 8)

An iconic cultural image of woman as the "work-horse" who runs the household, takes care of children while working a full-time job is a prominent in multiple works of Soviet literature and cinema. In texts by Liudmila Petrushevskaya and Liudmila Ulitskaya, for example, the generations of women who are in charge of family life are the focus of the story, while men are delegated to the periphery. Men's involvement in family life is minimal, their motivation is either predatory (they drink, cheat or simply serve the function of impregnating women) or obscure (for example, we rarely know what the male characters think or feel in Petrushevskaya's texts).

Several scholars also point out certain emasculating representations of men and sexual relationships in Soviet cultural texts, particularly during Stalin's rule, as a casualty of the totalitarian cultural constructs of masculinity (Lilya Kaganovsky's *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade* 2008). For women, however, these emasculating representations do not necessarily translate into the language of empowerment. On the contrary, the generations of women that run the households and control family life and each other in Petrushevskaya stories, in words of Helena Goscilo, perpetuate "immobility, repetition and the centrality of a fixed site where rituals are acted..." (74) when "ceaseless conflict becomes meaningless" because "daughter replicates mother" ("The Glyph of the Heroine" 73). Goscilo stresses the fact that the female centred household of

Petrushevskaya's stories provides an unhappy picture of stasis of the perpetuating violence and daily struggles that women encounter through the inhumanity of the state, passivity of their men, and their resentment of each other. Absent or passive emasculated men also signify an impossible romantic interest. Romantic relationships are sought as the validation of women's traditional role as homemaker, but the romantic fulfillment is as ephemeral as the achieved "developed socialism" of the late Brezhnev's years.

The best cinematic example of the double standards of gender expectations is the epic blockbuster *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* [Moskva slezam ne verit] (Stanislav Govorukhin 1980), a film that spans several decades in the lives of three female protagonists and their strive for happiness. The principle heroine, Katya (Vera Alentova), after the trials and tribulations of unplanned pregnancy and being a single mother, becomes a successful executive of the Soviet factory. Tellingly, the film asserts that despite her high professional status Katya can only find happiness if she finds a man. A model Soviet worker, she also fulfills the romantic obligation by becoming a Soviet heroine par excellence. Other films like *Singles Will Be Granted a Dormitory Room* [Odinokim predostavliaetsia obshchezhitie] (Samson Samsonov 1983) and *Single Woman Wants To Meet A Guy* [Odinokaia zhenshchina zhelaet poznaomit'sia] (Viacheslav Krishtofovich 1986) emphasize romantic fulfillment as well, even if the male subject is less than worthy of attention. Gosha (Aleksei Batalov), the male interest in *Moscow* is an uneducated worker, whose male pride is wounded by Katya's professional

success. Consequently, he runs and hides from Katya for several days, before re-entering the “nunnery,” as he calls it, [zhenskii monastyr’] – Katya’s incomplete family of her and her fatherless daughter. Similarly the heroine of the early perestroika *Single Woman*, a successful professional woman Klavdia (Irina Kupchenko) settles for an alcoholic companion (Aleksandr Zbruev).

Single Woman creates an interesting vision of the double burden. The heroine is an independent woman that embodies Soviet standards and a way of life (even if she makes most of her money on the side as a seamstress). Her independence is represented by her own space (an apartment) that she cleans obsessively. A man is an alien element that ruins the contrived harmony of that space – he litters, gets drunk and misplaces things. His presence, nonetheless, is judged far more important than her independence or professional success. In fact, the heroine is willing to risk her job to stay with an alcoholic vagabond. In the end, both her personal space and professional success are in jeopardy while the outcome of her romantic relationship is less than certain as we see no definite resolution to the hero’s substance abuse. It is significant that the film represents the beginning of the Glasnost era. *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears* asserted the Soviet fairy tale that a woman can have both the domestic bliss and professional success, all the while taking care of children and a house. In the *Single Woman*, which remains hopeful, all these possibilities are already called into question and often presented as mutually exclusive. A step further, in *chernukha* films the double burden will become the deadlock of failed paths and impossible solutions,

very much like Petrushevskaya's prose discussed in chapter one.

Perestroika, despite being a period of radical changes, did little to address or reconfigure the "gender question" [zhenskii vopros]. It is acknowledged by feminist scholars that the feminist movement or gender studies is virtually non-existent in Russia and the former Soviet Union to this day, with successful women artists or politicians distancing themselves from openly feminist discourse.²⁹ During perestroika, the conservative values that constituted the undercurrent of the "double burden" came to the forefront, when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced policies encouraging women to stay at home and care for children. Helena Goscilo (1996) asserts that the lifting of taboos on explicit "adult" material and the openness with which family matters and gender inequality could be discussed did not change the perception and role of gender. Despite the explicit sexualization of the gender representations, argues Goscilo, they still abide by traditional dichotomies, the tropes of "nature and nurture," and the stereotypical opposites of a "mother" and a "whore."

It is true that the two most popular films of the perestroika era that focus on female characters, *Little Vera* (1988) and *Intergirl* [Interdevochka] (Petr Todorovsky 1989), both explore transgressive female sexuality. Their transgression, however, is eventually punished while the heroines of both films yearn to fulfill traditional female roles. *Little Vera*, which I will look at more

²⁹ Helena Goscilo writes: "[Russian women's of the intelligentsia] reflexive response to the very terms woman writer and feminist recalls Dracula recoiling from the cross." ("De-hexing Sex" 6) Irina Makoveeva in a 2007 article devoted to women's cinema in today's Russia also acknowledges from the start that women's cinema has neither discursive space nor cultural sanction in today's Russia. ("The New Century: Has the Russian Pandora Time Come?")

closely as a *chernukha* example, shows Vera as a sexually liberated and independent-minded woman; however, it is her desire to integrate her transgressive relationship into the conservative structure of her working class family that creates the fatal tension.

Intergirl, which is generally a perestroika fairy tale, glamorizes the life of an elite prostitute, Tanya (Elena Yakovleva), who predictably has a heart of gold and works as a nurse during the day. Tanya escapes economic hardship through a successful marriage to a foreigner only to perish in a car accident. The accident is induced by Tanya's anxiety and guilt for abandoning her homeland and her mother – a sick old teacher who commits suicide upon finding out her daughter was a prostitute. This gesture effectively equates the nurturing mother figure with motherland and prostitution with national treason. Ludmila Budiak (1991) notes that the success of *Intergirl* created shock waves across the country as young women started declaring their intentions to become hard currency prostitutes. Such unexpected mass appeal, in my opinion, lies in the paradoxical fact that by selling her body, Tanya actually takes charge of her life, liberating herself from the impoverishment of the Soviet lifestyle. The film, sympathetic to Tanya's plight, still, however, reaffirms the conservative values of nurture and nature as female gender's only performative territory. Tanya's taking charge of her body results in its wilful mutilation as she drives to her death. Her sexual transgression also looms as an omen of selling "mother Russia" and a symbol of national humiliation as envisioned in the post-Soviet 1990s (discussed by Eliot Borenstein

in *Overkill* in a chapter aptly titled “Pimping the Motherland”).

Similarly, it is a reasonable assumption that *chernukha* cinema, being part of perestroika culture, does not revolutionize the sexuality and gender questions, however, it certainly puts a particular spin on both the double burden and traditional Russian gender paradigms. I argue that the *chernukha* view on work, family, child-rearing, romantic relationships and the ill-famed double burden sees these ideas to the nihilistic conclusion. In *chernukha*, gender configuration is represented not only as hypocritical and laden with overbearing mutually exclusive requirements, but also harmful in a very direct and violent way. The dissidents of the late Soviet era would often compare the paramount corruption and negligence for human life and dignity in the USSR to being “screwed over” or “raped” by the state. The impossibility to reconcile the conservative gender tropes and the Soviet facade of gender equality, the hypocrisy of the double burden, in *chernukha* is translated into over-exposure. In *chernukha* extreme violence serves as the metaphor of “being screwed over” by culturally constructed representations of gender, both Socialist and the conservative patriarchal values are inverted and seen to a nihilistic end. *Chernukha*, reflecting on the double burden of Soviet women, represents it as a totalizing violation.

The first subversion in *chernukha* is the official claim of professional equality. The heroine of *Dogs’ Feast* has an appalling job of cleaning what seems to be exclusively men’s public toilets. Her professional environment is presented as a dirty, nauseatingly ugly, and obscene occupation – a dubious celebration of

the right to work. Vera of *Little Vera* views her future training at the telephone operator school as a dead-end prospect, and she clearly scorns the working class environment her family lives in. The female school teachers of *Asthenic Syndrome* and *Tamara Aleksandrovna* are subject to abrupt bouts of unexplained violence and cruelty towards their colleagues and pupils. The nightmarish *byt* [daily life] of *chernukha* cinema also becomes firmly associated with the women's burden as a principal homemaker. Cramped apartments, run-down facilities, burnt-out bulbs, food line-ups and free floating trash characterizes living spaces in *Little Vera*, *Asthenic Syndrome*, *Assuage My Sorrows* and many other films.

In *chernukha* a Soviet woman finds no refuge in the traditional female roles when families disintegrate and the generations acquire deep resentments for each other as in *Little Vera*, *Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksandrovna*, *Assuage My Sorrows* and many others. While sexuality emerges as an exciting novelty in media, *chernukha* films present romantic and sexual relationships as the source of both abuse and disappointment, mockery and humiliation with rape being a very common development (as in *My Name is Harlequin*, *Assuage My Sorrows*, *Taxi Blues* and many others). Eliot Borenstein (2008) rightly notes that the joining of sex and violence has been a staple of popular culture for a very long time. However, the decisively non-entertaining, visceral character of *chernukha* productions make this pairing seem either ill-conceived (the films try to entertain but fail) or symptomatic of the cultural condition that produces these films, and consequently denies them entertainment value.

Chernukha films seem to invert the traditional gender inscriptions, insisting that gender is “performed” through torture, mutilation and abuse of the female body, defining both gender and sexuality primarily through violence. This violence most often comes at the hands of men, but frequently it is implied as victimization by the state, society or fellow women, as in the wife and lover brawl in *Assuage My Sorrows*, or the female fight for a man in *SER*. Similarly to the communicative void that characterizes *chernukha*’s nihilism in *Asthenic Syndrome*, gender difference is also presented as an impossibility of cohesive cultural representations. Gender and sexuality become devoid of both their traditional and ideological weight, where both the official Soviet doctrines on gender and traditional patriarchal perspectives dissolve into indiscriminate violence. I argue that *chernukha* fosters a vision of gender that is essentially traumatic – a vision that tries to respond to the new possibilities in gender configurations and reach a new ground for making meaning but fails. Through close analysis of *Little Vera* and some other films, I will look into how sexuality, the female body, and trauma articulate themselves in *chernukha* cinema.

2. *Sexuality and Body Representations as Trauma: Case study of Little Vera*

As I have previously argued, *chernukha* cinema could be productively looked at as a discourse of trauma, associated with the turbulent perestroika and post-Soviet years. When film noir is treated as an embodiment of post-WWII anxieties which manifest themselves as a stylized dark and anxious world, an important part of

such an analysis is that the films channel traumatic events in a circumvented and subliminal way. A classic example is, of course, the femme fatale of film noir, which a cultural representation that renders itself to multiple interpretations about the changing role of women in post-WWII society, the perceived dangers of female sexuality and independence, and the configurations of gender representations in classical Hollywood cinema.

Trauma studies have been successfully integrated into film and literary studies as the means to articulate gaps and repressed anxieties within both personal and national narratives in art. Trauma is described as a shocking and devastating event that might not be immediately harmful, but elicits a belated psychosomatic response involving obsessive re-enactment and a return to the original event. Concepts of latency, belatedness, and repetition bear special significance for trauma theory. As Cathy Caruth (1996) puts it, the traumatic event is not forgotten, but, rather, exists only in a post-traumatic re-enactment. Trauma is a muted discourse, an event that does not “leave traces” and requires a special inquiry to disclose it. I would like to look at the *chernukha* treatment of gender and sexuality as an enactment of trauma associated with the crisis of perestroika – the re-evaluation of both the Soviet ideological constructions and patriarchal values, known as the double burden. When it comes to film movements or trends that reflect the anxieties and insecurities of the times of transition, trauma analysis is especially helpful as the films become a “wound that speaks” (Caruth). Since trauma is known only in the aftermath of the traumatic

event, *chernukha* cinema can be viewed as the epitome of the identity and value crisis of that period; a dark spot that still attracts public anxiety.

It is a well-established fact that *chernukha* appeared amidst the bewilderment of perestroika and that its large cinematic and literary corpus reflects the conditions of the dysfunctional system of the late Soviet state. However, there is nothing latent or circumvented about this reflection – *chernukha* is not a subliminal art, nor does it seem to strive for an allegory. It is the straightforwardness and brutality of *chernukha* cinema that elicited a negative response from critics and audiences. It is its directness and affinity with real life that disturbed and unsettled the spectator at the time. In that sense, *chernukha* cinema addresses history as much as it constructs it, or, as I argued before, *chernukha* is a story that becomes history. As such *chernukha* might not offer any solutions to the state of social and cultural crisis, but on the contrary facilitate the collapse of meaning associated with the trauma of transition. *Chernukha*, like traumatic reenactment, is the symptom – it does not offer solutions; its nihilism propels the dismantling of cultural representations. That is why it also becomes the darkest and most repulsive memory in Russian culture today, an emblematic umbrella term for things gone horribly wrong. *Chernukha* is a phenomenon that, like noir, functions broadly across the genre spectrum, engaging a variety of directors, low and high brow production, various discourses and styles, eluding definitive borders and definitions. *Chernukha* also marks a cultural current or trend that, like traumatic reaction, is largely unconscious – no director would set

out to make *chernukha*, and also compulsive – no matter how hard some of the *chernukha* films try to fit the genre formula, for example, they manage to produce exactly the same excessive nihilistic message.

Cathy Caruth argues that viewing history through the notion of trauma allows for the “possibility of history which is no longer straightforwardly referential ([...] no longer based on the models of experience and reference) [or] permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). Therefore, one can conjecture that the view of history as a referential discourse – or a complete logical narrative can be challenged by the discourse of trauma. I will not dispute the fact that *chernukha* does reflect the historical discourse of its time, but, in accordance with Caruth’s suggestion, I argue that *chernukha* also bears the weight of another history. This history becomes the embodiment and “acting out” (as opposed to “working through”) of trauma.

The engendered body on-screen is a necessary part of the construction of such traumatic history, because trauma is in many ways a somatic event, when the symptom “speaks its subject’s body” (Elsaesser 2001: 199). The body discourse in *chernukha* viscerally enacts traumatic anxieties of the times as much as it reflects the immediacy of the *chernukha* worldview. *Chernukha* cinema advances the notion of the traumatized female body on-screen via its excessive physicality and taboo-breaking focus on sexuality, nudity and violence. Many, if not most *chernukha* films also feature women as protagonists or cast them in leading

roles.³⁰ I argue that the body in *chernukha* film becomes a junction where sexuality and gender meet to produce a narrative of trauma. To illustrate my point, I revisit *Little Vera* and its politics of the body and sexuality.

Little Vera [Malen'kaia Vera] (Vasily Pichul 1988) became a national blockbuster and made its way to western box offices primarily because of its daring use of sexuality. What shocked and attracted the Russian viewer in 1988 was probably not so much the scenes themselves, as the bold articulation of sexuality and desire presented in the film. The shock value of *Little Vera* was attributed to several aspects which blur together: the nude body, the scenes of intercourse, and seduction and sexuality as a mode of behaviour. Apart from the general puritanism of Soviet culture which was shaken by the film, the use of body language points to an important aspect in the film, something that might be called an "affective body."

Vera (Natalya Negoda) is portrayed mostly as a sensual being, who invests her life with meaning via earthly pleasures. Sergei, her boyfriend (Andrei Sokolov), is often bored or seems dissatisfied, but she never is – as if her own sexuality saturates her with constant pleasure and energy. Vera rarely talks, or makes any sense when she does – she sings, quotes her friend's poems, screams, cries, laughs, fights and purrs when in the arms of her lover. This bodily vitality and Vera's bodily sensuality led some critics, such as Tatiana Moskvina (1994) to

30 For example, *Little Vera*, *Interqirl*, *The Asthenic Syndrome*, *The Dogs' Feast*, *The Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksandrovna*.

praise the film, despite its depressing overtones, for discovering the vital energy of the body. I would agree with Moskvina if the film were not so genuinely depressing. There is a suicide, a rape and a murder attempt, false testimony, heavy drinking and dysfunctional relationships. I suggest that the notion of the affective body encompasses both the discomforting and the exciting perturbations that different bodies undergo in the film.

The notion of affect comes from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and denotes a pre-structured and pre-conscious bodily intensity that contextualizes the body in the world and also marks its potential (virtual) realities that relate it to other bodies. It is important to mention that Deleuzian concepts such as a “body without organs” or “deterritorialization” (found in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*) reject the traditional Cartesian idea of a unique consciousness that is embodied in the individual subject (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Affect erases the subject-object boundaries in favour of unstructured intensities and forces. Brian Massumi writes in his “Notes on the Translation” to *A Thousand Plateaus*: “[Affect] is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Massumi 1987: xvi). Affect appears in interaction and what Massumi calls “openness to context” (Massumi 2002). He compares affect with eruption, a state that changes the scale of experience and affects the bodies set in motion. The body “unfolds” its contexts as numerous potentials and interplay of forces rather than interactions

between individual consciousnesses. The bodies (not necessarily human) reconfigure themselves into a multiple heterogeneous reality of a rhizome.

Deleuze and Guattari write:

How could movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritorialization not be relative, always connected, caught up in one another? The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp: but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome (10).

An affective body, then, is the product of the pre-individual intensity that is shaped by and shapes other bodies endlessly unfolding into different contexts. Affective bodies are spontaneous and eruptive, forming a heterogeneous map.

In this sense *Little Vera*'s body discourse is not exclusively the discourse of sexuality or the discourse of a romantic couple. The film, though diverse in its dispositions, displays great prominence in portraying bodies in all situations. The story takes place in a seaside town during summer, so the weather is hot and the men do not wear shirts indoors, or they wear only swimming trunks. The women wear mini-skirts (it is the 1980s after all) or swim-suits. The story is persistent in the exposure of the naked body, and the naked bodies constitute an affective continuum in the film. In one of the sequences, which bears little narrative weight, but rather supports the physiological sketch idea of describing the milieu or the environment in which the characters live, the film shows a self-improvised tattoo workshop on the beach. The sequence in which a man is tattooed is edited

in such a way that the bodies of the clients and the hands of the tattoo artist applying the design are perceived in a continuum of hands, chests and backs. Their images slide into each other, forming a contiguity based on bodily responsiveness and connectedness. This happens several times in the film. Another scene occurs early in the film and involves a fight at a discotheque. Two rows of dancers face each other as a choreographic prelude to the actual fighting. The bodies merge and effortlessly move from one state to the other: the scene is filled with a energy that strangely feels triumphant.

The affective body is necessarily a continuum that also operates on principles of contiguity rather than causality (and this is also a reason why these scenes do not bear particular narrative weight). The affective body in *Little Vera* exemplifies the interconnectedness and indifferentiation that is also marked as neither good nor bad. Deleuze's theorization of affect is beyond traditional ethical divides, and exists rather in an ontological sense of relationship between human bodies and the world. In the film, the camera adopts a neo-naturalist observant perspective and refrains from judgement, making the affective interaction between the bodies a fact of life rather than a position of moral degradation that could be called upon (tattooing or fighting as criminal or distasteful acts).

In *Little Vera* the causality relations are often replaced by bodily contiguity relations. In the scene in which Sergei is stabbed, we witness how bodies affect other bodies in a violent way. The sequence is shot as follows: Sergei gets up; Vera's father (Iurii Nazarov) stops him by the hand, Sergei grabs his hand and

drags the old man into the bathroom and locks him there; Vera releases her father after a short discomforting hesitation and turns away from him in disapproval; Vera's father turns away from her and stabs Sergei. Though the characters cannot stand each other, turning away from each other, their bodies engage in an affective and violent contiguity. Moreover, the camera imitates the bodily contiguity and does not show us Sergei after being stabbed and what happens to him, which would be a shot-reverse-shot technique commonly used to convey cause-effect situations or to create a unity of space and time. Instead, the camera focuses on the father, who covers his face with his hands, becoming a faceless body that was set in motion by the stabbing; his body fading into the darkness of the bedroom.

It is important to note that the film is shot in such a way that the frame always seems to be overflowing with bodies and faces; it is deliberately cloistered and narrow. The privileged mise-en-scene of the film is the narrow passage between the kitchen and the hallway in Vera's standardized apartment. Parts of the walls deliberately appear on the edges of the frame creating an effect of claustrophobic space and the characters routinely squeeze their way in and out of the kitchen, which becomes the arena for the murder and suicide attempts. Such framing suggests the infamous forced communality associated with Soviet life. This communality is underscored when the characters violently collide in this closed, stifling proximity. The forced intimacy of living arrangements is juxtaposed with the joyful sexual intimacy of the romantic couple and in the end the former destroys the latter.

The film is not just about the body and its affective force but also about the bodily affliction and suffering that marks *Little Vera*'s configuration of gender and sexuality. And it is significant that what makes the bodies in the film passionate and sexually charged: bodily contiguity, intertwining and affective performance – also makes those same bodies suffer. The body becomes subjugated and mutilated through other bodies connected to them in an unbreakable bond of affliction and pain. Sexuality turns out to be the site not only of liberation but also of constriction. The sexually charged bodies that offended so many viewers are also hostages to the traumatic anxiety. It appears that bodies do not exist just for pleasure; that intimacy and interconnectedness is a force of coercion and suffering, as if one's body does not belong to oneself. Sexuality becomes a site of both joy and suffering, caught between public and private, collective and individual.

When Sergei is stabbed and Vera finds herself in the conundrum of saving her father and testifying against Sergei or telling the story honestly to the police, her attitude and body language change dramatically. I would call this change a desire to disconnect, to somehow shake off the bonds that connect and relate her to the people around her. It is manifested in a purely bodily fashion in several scenes, specifically a scene at a family picnic: Vera assumes a sort of a foetus position with her legs, arms and head tucked under her body.³¹ More than

31 This “foetus” position could also be theorized as a desire for regression, return to the womb. However, the position visually is not as much foetus-like as “stump” or “bump” – like. It is always shot from the angle that does not allow us to see the tucked limbs and hidden face.

anything this pose is reminiscent of a “human stump” [chelovecheskii obrubok], a metaphor coined by Varlam Shalamov in one of his *Kolyma Tales* [Kolymskie rasskazy] (first published in Russian in 1978) called *An Epitaph* [Nadgrobnoe slovo]); it is also mentioned in his poem *The Wish* [Zhelanie]. A character imprisoned in a labour camp, when asked what he desires the most, answers that he just wants to be a human stump, with no legs and arms so he could spit in the face of his torturers with no fear. Before she attempts to take her own life, Vera tries to subject her body to a reduction procedure; to cut herself off from the communal body that usurped her individuality. Significantly the “stump” pose in the film is associated with the “yoga position,” promoted by Vera’s friend. The position is meant to cleanse oneself from the “foul influences of the environment.”

Little Vera, featuring the first explicit intercourse scene in Soviet cinema, seemingly introduced the “liberated” and unashamed body to the Soviet screen and a different gender configuration. However, sexuality in *chernukha* films is not necessarily the straightforward, pop-culture driven, clichéd discourse of the “naked woman smoking marihuana” variety. The most obvious sensationalist excess in the films of the perestroika period, including *Little Vera*, refers to the lifting of taboos on sex and erotic material, touchy subjects of prostitution, family dysfunction and adultery, and individual romantic relationships not couched in the socialist collective good. Such unconstrained, and unparalleled in the history of Soviet cinema, freedom of expression, however, did not take the conventional

route of genre formula or the viewers' pleasure principle. As Marina Drozdova asserts: "[the cinema]... despite proliferation of sex scenes in the films..., is not offering us real erotic images" but rather "...sex represents the sublimation of... different urges." (198). Drozdova suggests that the unleashed sexuality and physicality, instead of serving as a basis of conventional cinema genres (such as physically excessive pornography, or melodrama) dwells on a violent discourse that, as Drozdova argues, makes this new found sexuality non-sexual.

I argue that sexuality in *Little Vera* exhibits such an ambiguous appeal because its transgressive drive to liberate the body is juxtaposed with the traumatic inability to do so. The film narrates the incapacitation of individual will and the inability to differentiate oneself from the omnipotent and intrusive collective body. Similar impasse is reflected in *chernukha's* dark torturous world, discussed earlier, the victimization of the characters, and its narrative nihilism that actively dismantles any credible discourse (*nekommunikabelnost*), offering nothing but a traumatic stupor that reflects "life as it is" which is simultaneously is "no way to live." The affective body relations are not liberating, as such, or constricting, as such. Rather, the film is preoccupied not only with the construction of a different take on the body and gender, but also with the dilemma of whether it is at all possible to have new relations between the body and its surroundings, other bodies in history, and with regards to history. That is to say, is it enough to mark restraint with liberation, non-existent sexuality with the non-discriminant indulgence in sexual pleasures to change the power of historical

reference? The traumatic contradiction in the film is precisely such: the traumatic history is the history of arrested movement, melancholy – an inability to cope, to work through the trauma, of compulsive repetition that does not realize its compulsiveness, its symptomatic nature. *Little Vera* gives us all the sex we want but its sexuality and body configurations are still locked in the grid of history and repression of the individual body. The deceptive nature of the Soviet double burden is seen in *chernukha* to its nihilistic end – when the excessive demands of cultural and social gender constructions collapse into the impossibility of any meaningful gender configuration but the one that negates *both* individual choice and cultural tradition (as we see in the failed nurturing and familial ties in *Little Vera*). Or maybe, it is a double burden in reverse – if the double burden demanded both professional and familial obligations, *chernukha*'s double burden argues that neither the cultural tradition, nor individual will, are capable of establishing a meaningful gender configuration and are discredited in the end.

The bleak vision in *chernukha* seems to come not from the transgressions of the norm and indulgence in taboos, but through the inability to overcome the traumatic experience or rather a fixation on it. The film is stuck in between charting the transgressive and affective body and subjugating it to the violent communal body that destroys the self. The deprivation of one's self and appropriation of it by a collective body is evident in the interrogation scene, when Vera's parents persuade her to testify against Sergei. Vera comes into a small cluttered office where she sits next to a young man from her circle of friends.

Their voices intersect and weave some new confusing story that includes the indifferent police investigators making tea and discussing lunch plans, depriving Vera of her own voice – not just the ability to speak the truth – and making her story and her plight a joke.

Significantly, the death and suicide (the gravest turns of the film's plot) happen when the characters are completely alone and abandoned. The only privilege that the individual has in *chernukha* is to die when she rejects the communal body and the usurpation of her identity. By contrast, Vera's rescue by her brother happens in a very violent fashion. Her brother drags her around, pushing her into the bathroom, while she is resisting and screaming violently, smashing everything around her. Vera's revival becomes a violent resurrection and return to the world of other bodies bonded together. It seems that sexuality and the body in *Little Vera* exemplify all the weight of ambiguity and confusion of its times. It transgresses the norm and breaks taboos only to find out that sexuality in itself is trauma, it is a "wound that speaks," to use Cathy Caruth's metaphor, rather than a means of sexual liberation or even the return to the traditional nurturing roles for women brought on by Glasnost.

It seems that both sexuality and gender inscription in *chernukha* films display ambivalence, inversion, and contradictions. *Chernukha* exemplifies the clash between "working through" and traumatic repetition. Perestroika cinema works through the Soviet legacy as a legacy of destruction by engaging with transgressive topics and shocking stories, but it falls back into the melancholic

stupor of an inability to speak, to move, to be oneself. Because of *chernukha*, we can speak not only of cinema reflecting, assessing, and dissecting trauma, but of actually embodying traumatic discourse, being the symptom that “speaks its subject” – the transitional times of crisis.

3. *The Noir Femme of Chernukha*

At first glance it seems that nothing in the history of cinema is further from film noir’s femme fatale than the heroines of *chernukha* cinema. The first and foremost reason, as was evident in the discussion of visual style, is the powerful beauty with which the “bad” heroines are portrayed in noir. The femme fatale’s talent for seduction and manipulation of her sexuality in order to bedazzle the unfortunate hero makes her both dangerous and irresistible. Her sexualized nature is articulated in clothes (or lack thereof as in *Double Indemnity*), accentuated long legs (as in *Double Indemnity* and *Kiss Me Deadly*), luxurious hair (as in *Gilda*) and other visual markers of over-sexualized appearance (Janey Place 1998).

Despite her dazzling beauty, the classic femme fatale is a dangerous dame. The male protagonists of noir films are often deceived and victimized by especially manipulative and cold-blooded females (*Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, *The Lady From Shanghai*, *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak 1949) and others). Classic film noir offer a range of women characters that, however, include: those who do not consciously seek to harm others, but are caught in the same circumstances that facilitate the downfall of the hero (like in *Pitfall*); and those who are simply

“fatal” women without malicious intent and sometimes even knowledge (as in *Laura*, in which the heroine’s portrait inspires murder). Thus, sexuality is firmly associated in *noir* with death and danger even regardless of the femme fatale’s intentions.

Beautiful but deadly women are portrayed visually as a part of the stylistic landscape that noir paints – intricate chiaroscuro lighting and the tails of cigarette smoke accentuating both the sexualized and mysterious air about them – warning of their duplicity and irresistible allure. Femmes fatales are also almost always punished for being transgressively powerful and usually perish at the hands of the men they try to manipulate (*Double Indemnity*, *The Lady From Shanghai*), law-enforcers (*The Killers*), or via diabolus ex machina accidents (*Dark Passage*, *Detour*).

Chernukha heroines are, of course, “ugly” and battered. Every effort in *chernukha* films is made to strip female portrayal of any shadow of sexual appeal or conventional beauty. Visually the films insist on a plain and unadorned portrayal, eschewing flattering angles or visual effects. The 1980s, much maligned, “grey” films’ grainy and unimaginative style is also a staple of *chernukha* slice-of-life dramas. In addition, the films choose consciously demeaning or “unpretty” details. They include the deliberately kitschy and impoverished costumes in *Asthenic Syndrome*, and the shabby female attire in *Dogs’ Feast* or *Assuage My Sorrows*. If women in *chernukha* smoke – they do not leave wispy tails of mystery behind – but usually smoke on the verge of a nervous

breakdown, or smoke men's cigarette accompanied by a drink in a certain gender reversal (*Assuage My Sorrows*, *Asthenic Syndrome*). These visual tactics accompany narratives that aim to thoroughly humiliate and subject women to violence. For example, sexualized images in *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* are also chillingly images of death: examples include the "porn" photo of the executed woman or a sex scene between an emaciated labour camp prisoner and a local man. Even the sexualized portrayal of teenagers in *Little Vera* borders on hysterical and distasteful. Vera's provincial pitiful chic comes in the form of cheap plastic jewellery, fishnet stockings, and a garish top that she wears throughout the film (Marina Drozdova also noted at the time the poor taste of Vera's attire). This outfit comes in sharp contrast to the more humble and usually unkempt clothes Vera wears around the house, just as her massive hairdo contrasts with her natural hair. As a result we see Vera as emboldened in her sexuality but not beautiful, defying social norms, but also extremely distasteful.

Similarly there seem to be few similarities between the *chernukha* heroine and femme fatale in terms of narrative construction. Victimization and abuse are more pronounced in *chernukha* and often befall women. Women in noir also suffer either the consequences of their criminal actions, or get embroiled in circumstances that victimize them (as Gloria Graham's character in *The Big Heat*, or Laura and Gilda in those two eponymous films). However, there is almost always a sense of retribution or cause and effect in noir, where, as feminist scholars have argued persuasively, the noir woman's fault lies implicitly in her

empowered sexuality.

Narratively, the femme fatale is an ambiguous figure: she is condemned as a sinister, manipulative criminal and at the same time she is presented as a powerful character. Janey Place argues that this discrepancy is apparent in the visual power of “freedom of movement and visual dominance” (56). She writes:

The strength of these women is expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting. They are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame and/or in the foreground or pulling focus to them in the background. They control camera movement, seeming to direct the camera (and the hero’s gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move (“Women in Film Noir” 55-56).

The femme fatale is granted a power of movement and a dominant enigmatic visual presence, in contrast to the static images of women as the objects of the male gaze in classical Hollywood as theorized by Laura Mulvey (1973). Karen Hollinger (1996) expands that point by showing that a predominantly male voice-over narration became a strategy for narrative dominance contested by the visual assertiveness of the “dangerous dame.” Hollinger notes that this cinematic clash, though ultimately destroying the femme fatale, invests her identity with ambiguity. Thus, Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* hesitates to fire her second shot aimed at her lover, amazed at her own ambivalence, and he shoots her fatally as she embraces him. Even more ambiguous are the borderline femmes fatales like Gilda. She is constructed by the voice-over narration of the protagonist as manipulative and pragmatic. In the end, we learn that Gilda “is innocent.” She is

not a fatal woman, and the pathologically hateful and confused protagonist pleads for her forgiveness. It seems that the femme fatale is about transgression, the male self-image, and sexual anxieties more than anything else.

The danger of empowered sexuality is often theorized to be a projection of the post-WWII anxieties concerning the change in family dynamics, women's access to the workforce, and generally with the historical transition after the war. As E. Ann Kaplan argues in the preface to *Women in Film Noir* (2008), the danger of sexuality manifests itself in male fantasy about the spider-woman and dangers she represents to patriarchal order, but it can also be seen as a fantasy of empowerment to the female viewer. Or, as Sylvia Harvey (1999) argues, the ambivalent representation of femme fatale contains "seeds of counter ideologies," when:

Despite the ritual punishment of the act of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained... (45)

The transgression of the femme fatale in film noir, in other words, is represented as both empowering and doomed, its ambivalence contributing to the generally defiant reputation of film noir. And although there is a gulf separating the visual and narrative presentation of *chernukha* and noir heroines, I argue that *chernukha's* victimization of women on screen is also grounded in a certain ambivalence of representation.

Chernukha films feature heroines more than they do heroes, notoriously, as

I discussed, presenting gender configuration in an impossible and violent double bind – the destructive and nihilistic vision. Several critics, such as Igor Lukshin (1991), for example, attribute that phenomenon simply to victimhood, arguing that women became emblematic of the suffering and humiliation of the individual in *chernukha*. Traditional ideas of romance and nurturing or Soviet constructs of professional independence repeatedly appear not only as hypocritical, but downright harmful in a very somatic violent way. Similar to Vera, the heroines of *chernukha* films are thoroughly muted, crippled and deprived of any sense of self-dignity and identity in the end, just as men too are often victimized, becoming passive heroes or anti-heroes.

However, it is also women that become the focus – the voice and the face of the darkest films of the perestroika era. First, I would like to point out the abundance of close-ups of female characters in *chernukha*. *Assuage My Sorrows* is especially telling in this respect, where the close-ups have a quality of a direct address to the viewer. In one of the scenes an old woman speaks directly to the camera, narrating a traumatic event from her childhood during the times of the civil war; this close-up is juxtaposed with a panning shot of nocturnal Moscow. The implication is that the old heroine not only narrates her life, but also narrates history, her point of view and personalized experience being privileged by the film and, encompassing national history, a troubled past, and an uncertain present. At the end of the sequence, the panning shot lands on the face of a young woman, presenting the continuity between past and present, as well as the continuity of

suffering and pain (the young girl will suffer a rape). The film sympathizes and identifies with that continuity, relating the suffering shared by women to the viewer.

In another scene in the same film, a distraught female character addresses the camera with a painful and self-exposing confession of a sexual nature. The woman sits on a chair and smokes in a frontal close-up, intended as a humiliating exposition while offering the intimacy of direct interaction at the same time.

Women are not afraid to confront the camera's gaze in *chernukha* films. The woman's plight is an uncomfortable confrontation for the viewer, and at the same time a powerful command, where she takes control of the screen space, if only by the virtue of self-humiliation and suffering. A hand reaches forward offering a shot of vodka from off-screen. The woman drinks, the camera pans to the left, and we see that it was another woman, the old lady from the previous sequence, who offered the drink and diverted our attention. The women again establish a bond, expressed via affective contiguity, as often seen in *Little Vera*, and, though it might be an ambiguous bond of suffering and pain, it plays out as a privileged position of support and understanding usually uncommon in *chernukha*.

I would not argue that *chernukha* films introduce or employ a female standpoint, or reflect on feminist discourse. Many of the close-ups that foster the centrality of female characters have a feeling of exposure, women are pinned under the camera's gaze – usually in very humiliating moments, such as the attempted suicide in *Little Vera*. Just as in film noir, the representation of women

oscillates between commanding presence and the debilitating discourse of victimization (*chernukha*) or vilification (noir). The films expose and subject women to violence, but simultaneously make them the voice that addresses the viewer in an illusion-breaking presence that commands our attention. Their plight and emotional appeal, as well as the directness and frankness of their addresses, provide the ground for a model of identification.

The centrality of women in *chernukha* can not be underestimated. Often women are the driving force of the story (as in *Little Vera*, *Dogs' Feast*). Sometimes they determine the narrative structure in absentia as in *Tamara Alekandrovna*, which is structured around a woman's absence. In films that feature male protagonists like *Assuage My Sorrows* or *Freeze-Die-Come to Life*, women play a formative role that helps the viewer connect to the world of the film, no matter how unwelcoming it is. It is also through women's suffering that *Freeze-Die-Come to Life* delivers its final message to the viewer, or through rape that the narrative of *My Name is Harlequin* reaches its apogee. We can see how both the cultural constructions of gender and sexuality are dismantled in *chernukha*, creating a traumatic representation that promotes melancholic stupor in the face of change, *nekommunikabelnost* in face of collapsing "maps of meaning" (a term used by a cultural theorist Stuart Hall). *Chernukha's* take on gender can definitely be described as a logical continuation of its general nihilistic drive which denounces all ideologies, creating a visceral excess that refuses cultural appropriation. However, it does not answer the question – why women

become the epitome of *chernukha* transgressive violence?

One argument belongs to feminist theory of psychoanalysis: women on screen are reduced to the subjects of male fantasy (as they are relegated to the margins in patriarchal society) and their status of the fundamental Other invites victimization. This is a very compelling argument; however, it requires a scope of investigation outside this work. What interests me is the comparison between the femme fatale and the *chernukha* heroine. As I noted earlier, the femme fatale's representation is ambivalent in terms of the power she is vested with, and the burden of vilification and danger she carries. Similarly *chernukha* women, although bearing most of the suffering and injustice in *chernukha*, serve as a locus point of this grim trend, often commanding both the camera and the narrative. Women's suffering in *chernukha* is not solely bound to traditional Russian cultural trope of "long-suffering motherland" [stradalitsa zemlia russkaia] associated with femininity, since the women are by no means saints, but they still master the viewers' sympathy and identification.

Vera from *Little Vera* or Zhanna from *Dogs' Feast* or the wife of Boris from *Assuage My Sorrows* are not positive heroines. The films also stress that the women ended up where they did by choice and are not simply the victims of circumstance. This is especially evident when Boris' wife starts a brawl with the raped girl, or when Zhanna showcases appalling and abusive behaviour throughout the film. They do not suffer innocently either, even though their lives are caught in the vicious circle of social malaise. The femme fatale dazzles us

(and the noir hero) despite her obvious amoral behaviour. Similarly, *chernukha* heroines appeal to us despite the mire of misfortunes and misogyny that they endure. This appeal does not extend our satisfaction with the movies, or make *chernukha* somehow “lighter.” What I think happens is similar to the improbable imperfect community forged in Petrushevskaya stories.

In Petrushevskaya, as I have argued earlier, the bleak stories feature several techniques (such as first-person narrations, colloquial speech that gives them quality of an oral history, focus on women’s plight) that implicate the reader as witness and a part of a community based on suffering, but nonetheless a community. If talking is indeed a cure, Petrushevskaya’s stories show just that despite their excessive bleak and hopeless narratives. Although, it seems hardly possible for most *chernukha* films to achieve the “talking through” phase, in the moments in which women take control of the camera, that may be what is happening. It is no coincidence that these moments also happen visually in the form of a close-up, or even a direct address. The viewer, the one aptly described by critics as lost in the sea of visceral excess, grim plot loopholes, and revolting characters, can bear witness to the dark world of *chernukha* in these moments. Just as the femme fatale is both the fulfilment of a male fantasy and a threat to gender cultural constructions, the *chernukha* woman is a part of its torturous world, but her appeal goes beyond it as well.

Unlike femme fatale, the *chernukha* heroine does not project empowerment, but facilitates empathy and identification, therefore bearing

witness. Articulating the traumatic experience is an essential way of dealing with trauma, because it is with lack of articulation, that trauma reaches an impasse. E. Ann Kaplan (2001) argues that trauma films have several modes of addressing the spectator with a trauma narrative. The film presents trauma as a “locatable and curable” event, the spectator experiences closure (mainstream melodrama); the film vicariously traumatizes the spectator through the abusive language of trauma; the spectator is a voyeur that observes the traumatic events from a distance (television news); the spectator becomes a witness of the trauma narrative and the post-traumatic disorder as in celebrated *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais 1959) (Kaplan 204). Bearing witness, as Kaplan suggests, is a way to represent the unrepresentable – or to find the way of articulating and making meaning of a traumatic situation.

That is not to say that the *chernukha* world becomes somehow more comprehensible or less revolting; but the emphasis that it puts on women provides a possibility for just a seed of “counter-ideology” – one of witnessing traumatic times rather than being absorbed by them. Women in *chernukha* invite empathy and we as viewers witness their plight, rather than being simultaneously embroiled and repulsed by *chernukha*’s relentless darkness. To witness implies at least a partial understanding and forgiveness – a quality that *chernukha* almost always shuns, but that still reaches its audience when a woman speaks to it from the screen. When I used to speak about *chernukha* at various venues, I was often asked about “the light at the end of the tunnel.” A general concern is, naturally,

what purpose do all these horrors serve. Is there a lesson, or is there a productive (never mind positive) conclusion to be drawn? It seems that the question of women in *chernukha* finally brings some light to the *chernukha* tunnel and on this note this text ends too.

Conclusion

“Dear, you’d better turn to the bright side.” An advice from a Russian cinema critic.

In this work I have looked at various facets of the *chernukha* phenomenon in art, predominantly its cinema, comparing the Russian cinema of crisis with American film noir of the 1940s and the neo noir trend of the 1970s. I also have demonstrated the roots and cultural context of *chernukha* cinema, as well as provided an overview of its narrative patterns, visual techniques and methods of characterization.

Chernukha’s origins lie most notably in the natural school. However, while *chernukha* cinema is indebted to the Russian natural school tradition of 19th century, exploiting similar themes of “little man,” social determinism and enlightenment value of art, it ultimately subverts natural school sociological critique through its excessive visceral visual aesthetics and absence of clear-cut morals or pitch for social justice. Similarly *chernukha* has much in common with the neo-naturalist fiction of the late 1980s-early 1990s. These commonalities include attention to marginalized groups, as in the prose of Sergei Kaledin, the propensity for transgressive and brutal descriptions, as in the prose of Viktor Astaf’ev, and the presentation of the everyday as the source of mundane evil and the break-down in human relations, as in the prose of Ludmila Petrushevskaya. *Chernukha* cinema comes closest to Petrushevskaya in its paradoxical combination of transgressive and grotesque aesthetics and the daily grind typical

of neo-naturalism. *Chernukha*'s transgressivity invites a comparison to postmodern fiction, namely the prose of Vladimir Sorokin, which is marked by similar excesses and shocking thematics. It is argued that *chernukha*, unlike postmodern fiction, does not operate on the concepts of irony and defamiliarization, which seek to deconstruct the very ideas of literary language or discourse of ideology. *Chernukha* takes itself seriously, claiming to be a real reflection of life rather than a postmodern deconstruction of it. *Chernukha* presents a certain surplus – an excessive and uncomfortable meaning – which I call the “outrageous socks” syndrome, or the “dirt under the nails” (Deleuze) metaphor. *Chernukha* excess does not fit into sanctioned narratives and cultural discourses and presents a representational as well as hermeneutic problem for the viewer and critic.

This paradox of excess is grounded in the fact that *chernukha* claims affinity to real life and faithfully imparting that reality to the screen. I argue that *chernukha* creates a distinct authentic historic sensibility, all the while engaging in a visceral and excessive representation that puts the spectator in the double bind of “this is our life” but “it is no way to live.” Functioning as an immediate traumatic reenactment of the collapse of Soviet way of life and cultural values, *chernukha* cinema offers a nihilistic subversion of previous dominant narratives, defying both popular and high-brow expectations of the work of art. In a way *chernukha* is a story that became history, as its fictional narrative and even more fictional reputation of bleakness, destruction, and obscenity blended itself into the

historical narrative of perestroika trauma.

Introducing transgressive shocking imagery, *chernukha* achieves what I call “unethical representation” – when the gap between the spectator’s expectations and the excessive nature of representation create a transgression leading to resistance to interpretation and collapse of meanings. Trauma is known only in the aftermath. Its peculiarity is in the inability of the subject to represent, to vocalize and verbalize the traumatic event. Trauma, in other words, “speaks the subject” (Elsaesser) through suffering. It is the “wound that speaks” (Caruth). Similarly *chernukha* is a symptom, its radical language expressing the inability of expression, of processing everything that befalls in a time of crisis. *Chernukha* is not simply about dysfunction; it is a melancholy art – the art that defies functioning, containment and “working through” strategies. *Chernukha*’s deep mistrust of cultural narratives and its bleak outlook on social and cultural bonds resembles another cinema of crisis – neo noir of the 1970s.

Similarly traumatic are representations of gender, body and sexuality in *chernukha* cinema, which is notorious for victimizing female characters and its “indulgence” in bodily excess and violence. Representations of gender in *chernukha* invert the notions of both Soviet official discourse and traditional patriarchal values, a conflict between which is known as the “double burden.” Adopting Gilles Deleuze’s notion of affect and the concept of affective body, I argue that representations of body and sexuality in *chernukha* reveal the patterns of traumatic repetition and melancholic stupor rather than sexual liberation and a

new configuration of gender identity. *Chernukha* reflects yet again a traumatic reenactment rather than a working through of the trauma of perestroika. However, as a comparison with classic film noir's femme fatale shows, the gender representation in *chernukha* is also vested with power even if it subjects women to unprecedented violence. Similar to the imperfect communal bond that women establish in Petrushevskaya's texts, women in *chernukha* still hold both a sympathetic and commanding presence, calling on the viewer to witness their plight rather than just submerging her into *chernukha*'s negative totality. As such the gender question becomes the only "seed of counter-ideology" (Harvey) in *chernukha* cinema that promotes viewer identification and understanding of a time of crisis.

In addition to the focus on gender and sexuality, *chernukha* pays paramount attention to social life and the environment as foundational for its characters, examining the relationship between its characters and social institutions. I argue that *chernukha* cinema presents its characters as essentially ambivalent, oscillating between victimizing and victimized behaviour, a strategy that is paralleled in that 19th century literature. Providing examples from the texts by Chekhov and Leskov, I demonstrate how they employ the portrayal of the "little man" as both victim of society and monster perpetuating social dysfunction. *Chernukha* is also characterized by a sense of fatalism and failure as characters confront the all-encompassing social machinery, akin to character portrayal in classic film noir. While children and youth are seen as the Other of *chernukha*, or

markers of impossible innocence and distinct difference, in *chernukha*'s violent world. The emphasis on the social environment that manipulates and engulfs the helpless characters is an important characteristic of the *chernukha* film world that creates its unique bleak sensibility and atmosphere.

I argue that the peculiarity of *chernukha*'s film world lies in the negative totality of the world closed in on itself. Similar to film noir and neo noir, *chernukha* presents a film world that is a distinct universe to which there seems to be no alternative or a counteracting sense of normalcy. The *chernukha* world, however, is a more radical phenomenon than noir. The *chernukha* world's self-sustaining quality, instead, bears similarities to the concept of torture as introduced by Elaine Scarry. *Chernukha* world usurps the power of speech and identity, presenting itself as an immediate and all-encompassing reality that confronts the characters as an uncontrollable, malicious and inescapable force of violence, through which the characters are objectified and viewers are vicariously traumatized. The focus on society, its institutions and margins, is the ideal environment for such objectification and usurpation of one's voice. The concept of *nekommunikabelnost* [non-communicativeness] in the film *Asthenic Syndrome* is particularly apt at showing how *chernukha*'s torturous world implodes language and discursive practices from within the film to foster its nihilistic vision. *Nekommunikabelnost* is not just the absence of communication and understanding, but also the lack of channels with which to communicate. Family dysfunction, generational conflict, marginalization and usurpation of one's

identity by institutions are all indicative of the premise of a void of meaning and an essential gap of understanding from which *chernukha* characters suffer.

The nihilistic premise of *chernukha* is not only that there is no “true world” (Nietzsche), but there are no means of narrating your suffering in the inverted world *chernukha* portrays. The drive toward non-meaning and extermination of all possible ideologies sets *chernukha* apart from both Russian cultural tradition and its immediate context of perestroika. *Chernukha* became neo-naturalism without the enlightenment characteristic of the natural school, exploitation without the “dirty” fun of it, and perestroika without actual “perestroika” – or reorganization and reform. In short, *chernukha* picked diverse discursive practices and traditions, but stripped them of their rationale or meaningful interpretation. It is a visually enacted “infinite deadlock” [beskonechnyi tupik] – the title of a famous dissident novel by Dmitry Galkovsky, that while itself is not *chernukha*, still ponders the same questions of failed ideologies throughout Russian cultural history.

What is to be done? This perennial Russian question is also the name of the famous 19th century revolutionary novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky. *Who is Guilty?* is yet another classic text on social transformation by Alexander Herzen, whose name was replicated in a 1902 text by Lenin. Chillingly, *chernukha* for the first time in Russian cultural history presented an answer that there is simply nothing to be done and nobody to blame – wiping the history of cultural interpretations blank. Unlike postmodern fiction that deconstructs the very

validity of the perennial Russian questions [russkii vopros], *chernukha* does not cast an ironic gaze on metanarratives. There is nothing to gain from *chernukha*'s dark drive. No reflectivity and self-awareness of meta-narratives enriches *chernukha* cinema. *Chernukha* is deadly serious and determined in its devastating impulse. Can an art of nothing exist? Probably not, and *chernukha* never becomes a pure, easily defined form – but rather a highly hybridized and vague creation that like a palimpsest reflects many discourses and echoes many traditions. *Chernukha* is a reckoning for Russian culture and the centuries of myth-making and soul-searching – it is its Tanatos. If culture could have a Freudian death drive it would be *chernukha*.

However, as Freud observed about Tanatos, and as we all know from the fascinating powers of dark noir underworld – the death drive can be mesmerizing. *Chernukha*'s relevance today is attested by those international cinematic trends that explore transgressive visuals and extremely violent and grim subject matter, such as New French Extremity, which specializes in graphic off-beat horror. It also has, similar to *chernukha*, puzzled critics about the “meaning of it all” (Quandt 2004). No matter how derided *chernukha* as a concept is in Russian culture, it persistently resurfaces and engages the public and filmmakers years after the original movement has come to pass. I have shown through a brief consideration of such controversial productions as *The School*, that the concept is very much alive in contemporary Russian political and cultural discourse.

One potential question that this thesis unfortunately did not have space to

consider is what happens to chernukha after *chernukha*? How does a short-lived film trend become one of the central notions of right and wrong on the scale of public taste and cultural distinction. While the transmutations of *chernukha* in the “wild 1990s” are well researched and persuasively argued by scholars such as Eliot Borenstein, the contemporaneity or as Russians would say “*aktualnost*” of *chernukha* for today’s Russian cinema, and by extension society, presents a very interesting point of consideration. If *chernukha* was an embodiment of trauma of transition, the fate of its dark vision would also be suggestive of the appropriation or containment of this traumatic past. If we look for *chernukha* motifs, patterns or language in contemporary Russian cinema, would we be able to find out how today’s Russia looks back on its times of transition (or does it even look back at all)? Without conclusively answering that complex problem, I would like to offer a brief analysis of recent Russian blockbusters, the vehicles of popular entertainment, seemingly removed from the obscure and loathed life on the margins that chernukha offered - the fantasy duology *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*.

Night Watch [Nochnoi dozor], directed by Timur Bekmambetov, released in 2004 became an instant hit in Russia and one of the most financially successful Russian productions of recent years, surpassed only by its sequel, *Day Watch* [Dnevnoi dozor] in 2006. Both films belong to the fantasy genre, telling the story of the Others [inye] – a special race of super-humans that are immortal and live on human blood. Some of them, however, are “good guys” and are called the “Night

Watch,” and some are “bad guys,” called the “Day Watch.” They each keep an eye on each other, so no side abuses its power over humans. *Night Watch* narrates a father-and-son redemption story that concludes in the narrowly escaped destruction of the world. In the end redemption is found, as well true love for the redeemed protagonist.

Despite the fact that the story is based on a series of best-selling novels, both films maintain a very distinct visual appeal based on fast-paced special effects and effective cinematic allusions. *Day Watch* alone, for example, quotes *X-Men*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* almost in the same breath. *Night Watch* alludes to *The Matrix*, fashioning the protagonist after Neo, and sporting a similar video game style cinematography. It also employs multiple variations of the vampire narrative, as well as allusions to *Lord of the Rings*. For instance, the Others of the two films not only possess superpowers, those unique gifts drawn from the comic book tradition of superheroes. They are also wizards, belonging to a fantastic and archaic world order, and decadent gothic urban vampires, all at the same time. The *Watch* movies seem to engage in a Socialist competition – Russian blockbuster movie has to be bigger and better than Hollywood. The protagonist of *Night Watch* is not *quite* like Neo from *Matrix*; he is Russian Neo. The photographs that come alive do not simply allude to *Harry Potter* but they are pictures of worshipped Russian soccer players.

There is a sly sincerity to such an endeavour. On the one hand, the desire to appropriate Hollywood and make the well-known effects, images and stunts

somehow Russian is a self aggrandizing effort, presented as a continuous stream of visually aggressive sequences that barrage viewer with allusions. On the other hand, an overwhelming level of quotations, with the occasional bit of irony and humour detaches the narrative from strict imitation, suggesting instead a playful appropriation. Thus, several references to *Matrix* transform into a rather humorous depiction of a Russian cultural comic trope – hang-over. Sincerity and irony, allusion and its deconstruction, combine and arm the *Watch* films with a novelty and recognition that often catches the viewer by surprise.

Still more interesting, *Night and Day Watch* actively engage in the appropriation of history, namely Soviet history. Mikhail Ryklin asserts in the collection *Watch as a Symptom* [Dozor kak simptom] (2006) that the good and bad others are divided in the film by political markers. The “night watch” good guys are marked as Soviet: they drive an old car with a Soviet logo; their organization is disguised as a government agency with a typical Soviet abbreviation. The bad vampires are marked as “new Russians” - the generation of Russian nouveau-riches that prospered in the late 1990s. The “day watch” others lead a decadent luxurious lifestyle, and indulge in the latest gadgets and video games, unlike the modest night watch folk, whose equipment (magical and otherwise) looks like it was designed in the 1970s.

The director and producer of the *Watch* duology specifically stated that they were making films with “something patriotic” in mind. That statement and the incorporation of Soviet nostalgia into the films became the ground for Russian

critics to talk about the *Watches* as the “last films of the liberal era,” linking it specifically to Vladimir Putin's presidency. They were viewed by many abroad and at home as an authoritarian restoration that exploited Soviet nostalgia. Mikhail Ryklin also comes to the interesting conclusion that the Others, Soviet or nouveau-riches, are distanced from regular humans, who become essentially “food” for superior beings of all moral orientations, who are preoccupied mostly with maintaining the balance of power between themselves. Additionally, the *Watch* films' world is not air-tight or separated from the real world, as in regular fantasy. Instead, it is deliberately set in contemporary Moscow, in which ordinary people appear only as pawns in the games of superior creatures. Ryklin sees it as a metaphor of the grim political situation in contemporary Russia, in which, he asserts, moral judgement has become relativized, a thing rarely promoted by Hollywood genre filmmaking.

As the *Watch* films continue their balancing act between Hollywood thrill ride, nostalgic reference, and moral ambivalence, they begin to resemble *chernukha*. Not by any amount of gore and violence, but rather by the unsettling character of that violence, the absence of human connection in the superhuman world (that is the contemporary *nekommunikabelnost*). The superfluous excessive element that marked *chernukha* transgressivity, also marks the over-the-top *Watch* narrative. The *Watch* films are not *chernukha* in its original or even pastiche sense, but they do seem to look back at it. Transgressive, kitschy and nostalgic, they can be looked at as an ambivalent attempt to articulate “what is to be done”

and “who is to blame” for the trauma of the last decade.

The *Watch* films not only mark characters and situation as Soviet and post-Soviet, new Russian. The distinctions between Soviet and new Russian are obviously there, but they are part of a larger narrative that the films construct. The two films are a continuous narrative, in which night watch member Anton Gorodetsky (played by Konstantin Khabensky) makes a mistake back in the early 1990s that comes back to haunt him a decade later. By fixing that mistake, he turns the narrative around, going back in time and saving the world, of course. He is shown returning to the brightly lit, spring-like 1990s, while he happily strolls down a boulevard and meets his romantic interest, long before they become aware of their dormant superpowers and the entanglements that they will bring. It is truly a return to a state of innocence.

Notably the two rival leaders of the “day” and “night” watch sit right there playing chess, benevolently looking at the hero and his reversal of fortune. It is also important to note that Anton, the hero, has reverted to his human state by amending the mistake, making the divide struggle between the good-Soviet “watch” and the bad-new-Russian “watch” irrelevant. The *Watch* films promote continuity that otherwise might be hard to find – a narrative that brings a story to history – and this time the story is not *chernukha*. It is, quite literally, a fairy tale. The *Watches* embrace the primordial mythical paradigm of struggle and balance of day and night, good and evil.³² The naive gesture of turning back time and

³² I owe this observation to Dr. Elena Siemens.

fixing everything retroactively is a longing for closure; in a way it is a working through strategy. A strategy that, consciously or not, exorcises *chernukha* demons from the Russian mind.

Chernukha so aptly captured perestroika as a breach, a black hole in discursive coherency and historic contingency that in the public consciousness it became a substitute for all the things gone wrong back in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period. *Chernukha* usurps the narrative of history, claiming there is no story to tell because history is (or becomes?) a series of ruptures and fragments. The contemporary Russian cinema project of appropriation not only tackles Soviet nostalgia, but also forges the transitional period into familiar territory, making its timeline linear, its difficulties explained. Even if that appropriation creates a utopian (as in *The Watch* films) or a dystopian mythology, as in the recent film by Aleksei Balabanov's *Cargo 200* [Gruz 200] (2008). The important part is that today the story is told and it makes sense.

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Appendix. Filmography

Russian and Soviet Cinema

Abbreviations:

Moscow Film Studio - Mosfilm

Leningrad Film Studio - Lenfilm

4 [Chetyre]. Dir. Ilya Khrzhanovsky. Filmokom, 2004

A Single Woman Wants to Meet a Guy [Odinokaia zhenshchina zhelaet poznaomit'sia]. Dir. Viacheslav Krishtofovich. Dovzhenko Studio, Kyiv, Ukraine. 1986

An Unfinished Piece for a Mechanical Piano [Neokonchennaia p'iesa dlia mekhanicheskogo pianino]. Dir. Nikita Mikhalkov. Mosfilm, 1977

Andrei Rublev. Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm, 1966

ASSA. Dir. Sergei Solv'ev. Mosfilm, Creative Association "Krug," 1988

Assuage My Sorrows [Utoli moia pechali]. Dir. Viktor Prokhorov and Aleksandr Aleksandrov. Mosfilm, 1989

Asthenic Syndrome [Astenicheskii sindrom]. Dir. Kira Muratova. Odessa Film Studio, Ukraine, 1989

Bespredel. Dir. Igor Gostev. Mosfilm, 1989

Burglar [Vzломshchik]. Dir. Valerii Ogorodnikov. Lenfilm, 1987

Burnt by the Sun [Utomlennye solntsem]. Dir. Nikita Mikhalkov. TriTe Studio, Russia, Camera One, France, 1994

Cargo 200 [Gruz 200]. Dir. Aleksei Balabanov. STV Cinema Company, 2007.

Confession: Chronicle of Alienation [Ispoved': khronika otchuzhdeniia]. Dir. Georgy Gavrilov. Mosfilm, 1989

Courier [Kur'er]. Dir. Karen Shakhnazarov. Mosfilm, 1982

Day Watch [Dnevnoi Dozor]. Dir. Timur Bekmambetov. Bazelevs Production, 2006

- Dear Elena Sergeevna* [Dorogaia Elena Sergeevna]. Dir. Eldar Riazanov. Mosfilm, 1988
- Dogs' Feast* [Sobachii pir]. Dir. Leonid Menaker. Lenfilm, 1990
- Emergency on the District Scale* [ChePe raionnogo masshtaba]. Dir. Sergei Snezhkin. Lenfilm, 1988
- Flights in Dreams and In Reality* [Polety vo sne in naiavu]. Dir. Roman Balaian. Dovzhenko Studio, Kyiv, Ukraine, 1982
- Freedom is Paradise* [SER - svoboda eto rai]. Dir. Sergei Bodrov Sr. Mosfilm, 1989
- Freeze-Die-Come to Life* [Zamri, Umri, Voskresni]. Dir. Vitaly Kanevsky. Lenfilm, 1989
- God's Tramp* [Bich Bozhii]. Dir. Dovzhenko Studio, Kyiv, Ukraine, 1988
- Humble Cemetery* [Smirennoe kladbishche]. Dir. Aleksandr Itygilov. Dovzhenko Studio, Kyiv, Ukraine, 1989
- Husband and Daughter of Tamara Aleksnadrovna* [Muzh i doch' Tamary Aleksandrovny]. Dir. Olga Narutskaia. Mosfilm, 1989
- I Am Walking Along Moscow* [Ia shagaiu po Moskve]. Dir. Georgy Daneliia. Mosfilm, 1963
- Intergirl* [Interdevochka]. Dir. Petr Todorovsky. Mosfilm, 1989
- Is It Easy to Be Young?* [Vai viegli but jaunam?/Legko li byt' molodym?]. Dir. Juris Podnieks. Riga Film Studio, Latvia, 1987
- Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* [Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo Uezda]. Dir. Roman Balaian. Mosfilm, 1989
- Let's Survive Till Monday* [Dozhivem do ponedel'nika]. Dir. Stanislav Rostotsky. Gorky Studio of Youth and Children Motion Pictures, 1968
- Little Vera* [Malen'kaia Vera]. Dir. Vasily Pichul. Gorky Studio of Youth and Children Motion Pictures, 1988
- Moscow Does Believe in Tears* [Moskva slezam ne verit]. Dir. Stanislav Govorukhin. Mosfilm, 1980

Moscow Nights [Podmoskovnye vechera]. Dir. Valery Todorovsky. Studio TLT, Russia, Les Films du Rivage, France, 1994

My Name is Harlequin [Menia zovut Arlekino]. Dir. Valery Rybarev. Belarusfilm, 1988

Night Watch [Nochnoi Dozor]. Dir. Timur Bekmambetov. Bazelevs Production, 2004

Plumbum, or the Dangerous Game [Plumbum ili opasnaia igra]. Dir. Vadim Abdrashitov. Mosfilm, 1986

Repentance [Monanieba/Pokaianie]. Dir. Tengiz Abuladze. Georgia Film, 1984

Rock. Dir. Aleksei Uchitel. Leningrad Documentary Studio, 1987

Russia That We Lost [Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali]. Dir. Stanislav Govorukhin. Mosfilm, 1992

Satan [Satana]. Dir. Viktor Aristov. Lenfilm, Creative Association "Ladoga," 1990

Second Circle [Krug vtoroi]. Dir. Aleksandr Sokurov. Soviet Heritage Fund, Leningrad Division, Centre for Creative Initiatives; Studio Troitsky Most, 1990

Singles Are Granted a Dormitory Room [Odinokim predostavliaetsia obshchezhitie]. Dir. Samson Samsonov. Mosfilm, 1983

Snowball Berry Red [Kalina Krasnaia]. Dir. Vasily Shukshin. Mosfilm, 1973

Solovki Power [Vlast' Solovetskaia]. Dir. Marina Goldovskaya. Mosfilm, Creative Association "Krug," 1988

Stalker. Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm, 1979.

Taxi Blues [Taksi Bliuz]. Dir. Pavel Lungin. Lenfilm, Russia, Centre National de la Cinématographie, MK2 Productions, France, 1990

The Bum [Bez opredelenного mesta zhitel'stva]. Dir. Nikolai Skuibin. Mosfilm, 1988

The City [Gorod]. Dir. Aleksandr Burtsev. Lenfilm, 1990

The Fountain [Fontan]. Dir. Yuri Mamin. Lenfilm, 1989

The Guard [Karaul]. Dir. Aleksandr Rogozhkin. Lenfilm, Creative Association "Ladoga," 1989

The Highest Trial [Augstaka tiesa/Vysshi sud]. Dir. Herz Frank. Riga Film Studio, Latvia, 1987

The KGB-Man [Chekist], Aleksandr Rogozhkin. Lenfilm; Russian Union of Filmmakers; Studio Troitsky Most, Russia, La Sept; Sodaperaga, France, 1992

The Leg [Noga]. Dir. Nikita Tiagunov. Studio 12A, 1991

The Needle [Igla]. Dir. Rashid Nugmanov. Kazakhstan Film Studio, 1988

The School [Shkola]. Dir. Valeriia Gai-Germanika. Igor Tolstunov Production Company, Krasnyi Kvadrat, 2010

The Zero City [Gorod zero]. Dir. Karen Shakhnazarov. Mosfilm, 1989

This Is No Way to Live [Tak zhit' nel'zia]. Dir. Stanislav Govorukhin. Mosfilm, Russia, Filmverlag der Autoren, Germany, 1990

Tragedy in Rock Style [Tragediia v stile rok]. Dir. Savva Kulish. Mosfilm, 1988.

Weirdo [Chuchelo]. Dir. Rolan Bykov Mosfilm 1984

What If It Is Love? [A esli eto liubov'?). Dir. Yuli Raizman. Mosfilm, 1961

Whit Monday [Dukhov Den']. Dir. Sergei Sel'ianov. Lenfilm, 1990

Film Noir and Neo Noir

Angel Face. Dir. Otto Preminger. RKO Radio Pictures, 1952

Body Heat. Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. The Ladd Company, 1981

Chinatown. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures, Long Road Productions, Penthouse, 1974

Criss Cross. Dir. Robert Siodmak. Universal International Pictures, 1949

Crossfire. Dir. Edward Dmytryk. RKO Radio Pictures, 1947

D.O.A. Dir. Rudolph Mate. Cardinal Pictures, 1950

Dark Passage. Dir. Delmer Daves. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1947

Detour. Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer. Producers Releasing Corporation, 1945

Double Indemnity. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944

Gilda. Dir. Charles Vidor. Columbia Pictures, 1946

Gun Crazy. Dir. Joseph H. Lewis. King Brothers Productions, 1950

Kiss Me Deadly. Dir. Robert Aldrich. Parklane Pictures Inc., 1955

Laura. Dir. Otto Preminger. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1944

Mildred Pierce. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1945

Murder My Sweet. Dir. Edward Dmytryk. RKO Radio Pictures, 1944

No Mercy. Dir. Richard Pearce. TriStar Pictures, 1986

Out of the Past. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. RKO Radio Pictures, 1947

Pitfall. Dir. Andre de Toth. Regal Films, 1948

Point Blank. Dir. John Boorman. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1967

Serpico. Dir. Sidney Lumet. Artists Entertainment Complex, 1973

Sunset Boulevard. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1950

T-Men. Dir. Anthony Mann. Edward Small Productions, 1948

Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures, 1976

The Big Heat. Dir. Fritz Lang. Columbia Pictures, 1953

The Big Sleep. Dir. Howard Hawks. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1946

The Conversation. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. The Directors Company, The Coppola Company, American Zoetrope, 1974

The French Connection. Dir. William Friedkin. Schine-Moore Productions, D'Antoni Productions, 1971

The Killers. Dir. Robert Siodmak. Universal Pictures, 1946

The Lady From Shanghai. Dir. Orson Welles. Columbia Pictures, 1947

The Long Goodbye. Dir. Robert Altman. Lion's Gate Films, E-K-Corporation, 1973

The Naked City. Dir. Jules Dassin. Hellinger Productions, Universal International Pictures, 1948

The Parallax View. Dir. Allan J. Pakula. Doubleday Productions, Harbor Productions, 1974

Touch of Evil. Dir. Orson Welles. Universal International Pictures, 1958

White Heat. Dir. Raoul Walsh. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1949