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The City in Russian Culture

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12 The city as gendered space

The rise and fall of the creative capitals: female directors on post-Soviet urban space

Anzhelika Artyukh and Arlene Forman

After centuries of heated debate, the conflict between Russia's two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, has finally been resolved, at least on the cinematic front. When defined as more than a political and economic center, but also a constant wellspring of social and cultural activities, there is only one city in Russia that can truly meet these criteria. Its citizenry's sustained efforts to declare their home Russia's cultural capital notwithstanding, St. Petersburg can no longer compete with Moscow, today the sole post-Soviet locus generating a plethora of artistic and extra-artistic events. The Putin administration's wholehearted pursuit of centralization has made obsolete the notion of cultural shifts once proffered by the Russian Formalists. No longer can culture erupt on the periphery, thereby producing unpredictable artistic explosions. That last occurred in 2008–2013, when gallery director Marat Gel'man and similarly minded artists moved to the city of Perm to create an extremely fertile, albeit short-lived, ground for contemporary art. At that time the press began writing about Perm's "Cultural Revolution" as well as its project, "Perm is the Cultural Capital of Europe." Not only other Muscovites supported these initiatives: Eduard Boiakov, representing "New Drama," would launch the Perm festival "Texture" in 2010.[1] Equally involved were the citizens of Perm, who with the selfsame vigor produced such new cultural events as the Perm festival "Flaertiana," which at the time became the most vibrant forum in Russia for documentary film. The impact of Perm's renaissance was so significant that it even attracted attention from abroad. In 2011, for example, the Greek director Teodor Currentzis moved to Perm to direct the local opera and ballet theater. Sadly, after Perm's Governor Oleg Chirkunov resigned in 2012 and Gel'man was dismissed as the Director of Perm's Museum of Modern Art (PERMM) the following year, the city rather quickly stopped generating cutting-edge cultural events and no longer attracted media attention, thereby ceding, once again, cultural predominance to Moscow.

Throughout the Putin era, St. Petersburg cultural and political figures periodically express a desire to regain the city's status as cultural capital, one it has claimed since the city's founding as the new seat of government for the Russian Empire and its "window to Europe." This discourse resurfaces every time Petersburg prepares for some large cultural enterprise. No cultural event, be it the Cinema forums or the Media forums that followed, or even its 2014 International

Manifesto, has been able to turn back the tide of cultural centralization. Like a giant vampire, Moscow continues to drain all of the country's resources, including those that are intellectual. Thus, it is no accident that since the 1990s many of the best creative minds have moved to Moscow, and those who did not or have only recently appeared there have also decided to link their activities to Moscow. The creators of "Message to Man," the oldest festival of documentary, short, and animated films, are now trying to duplicate their Petersburg program in Moscow. Prior to his arrest, the daring artist Pëtr Pavlenskii had moved his political actionism from Petersburg to Moscow, and many other northern natives have been creating projects for the Moscow cultural scene.[2] That said, the sharp drop in the price of oil, the war with Ukraine and now with Syria, along with the push toward demodernization and fascistization in Putin's Russia makes Moscow much less attractive in economic and cultural terms, forcing many to think of emigration or permanent employment outside of Russia. (For some that is already a *fait accompli*: Petersburg director Aleksandr Sokurov now films exclusively in Europe; documentarian Vitalii Manskii now works from Riga; and Aleksei Serebriakov, one of the most talented actors of recent times, has renounced his Russian citizenship and moved to Canada.) Moscow, nonetheless, remains the most attractive locus for internal migration, and cinematic migrants have, not surprisingly, continued to flock there. This trend largely accounts for the city's recurrent representation in contemporary Russian cinema, perhaps no more potently than in films made by women directors.

In recent years, women's cinema in Russia has undergone some rather unexpected developments. Russia, like many other countries, has witnessed of late a marked rise in the number of films made by women directors, a phenomenon that has been termed a "female boom." Keeping in mind E. Ann Kaplan's notion of the inseparability of the "imperial" gaze from the "male" in Western patriarchal culture, these female filmmakers present views of a completely different order, ones we describe as cosmopolitan (Kaplan 1997, p. ix). This cosmopolitanism increasingly characterizes not only the films of Russian female directors but also those of female directors in other countries; it is no coincidence that scholars today have begun to view women's cinema as integral to cinema as a whole, as Patricia White proclaims in the title and focus of her latest research: *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015).

In this chapter, we rely heavily on the films of Oksana Bychkova (a director who has enjoyed considerable success at home, though not internationally) and those of Anna Melikian, whose film *Mermaid* (Rusalka) won acclaim at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival and whose latest films (*Star* [Zvezda], 2014 and *About Love* [Pro liubov'], 2015) garnered back-to-back Grand Prizes at the Kinotavr Festival (also known as the Sochi Open Film Festival).[3] In this comparative analysis, we seek to demonstrate that cosmopolitanism has become a basic feature in cinema made by this generation of women, made in a country where the general political course strives for imperial isolation, patriarchy, and national cultural unidimensionality. We also consider filmmaker Natalia Meshchaninova to show that differences in style and background notwithstanding, women directors

in contemporary Russia are in some respect involved in a common search. Their desire for openness (be it in Russia or throughout the world) unites them in many ways that may seem remarkable – in light of the lack of Russian institutions or associations that could bring them together. While in the United States female directors can associate through organizations like Film Fatales, the Alliance of Women Directors, Women in Film, or others that support their projects, the distribution, and hence their festival fate, in Russia women must rely solely on the Kinotavr Festival, whose Program Director Sitora Alieva regularly selects films by women directors. The lack of other institutional support greatly limits the opportunities for Russian women to enter their films into the global context, for them to be viewed and distributed widely. That said, the commonality of their efforts permits us to speak about a basic developmental law of any culture, Russian included, to find ways of overcoming local and national boundaries in the era of the Internet and of new media.

We hope to demonstrate that due to this new operating principle, Russian culture, and cinema in particular, has been able to serve as a form of resistance to the general policies of the Russian administration, inasmuch as they adhere to the ideology of an open world, one based on dialogue with others, rather than the closed discourse of the Soviet and post-Soviet empires, cultivating the divisive, binary opposition of "friend or foe." In their films, this form of resistance also makes use of what Fran Tonkiss has called the "embodied city," where "issues of gender and sexuality affect the perception and the use of urban spaces" (Tonkiss 2005, p. 94).

Oksana Bychkova's debut film, *Piter FM* (2006), enjoyed commercial success and brought the young filmmaker into the public eye. Born in Donetsk in 1972 and educated in Moscow, Bychkova filmed St. Petersburg as many tourists do – with reverence and delight. The main characters are brought into contact when Masha, a local radio deejay, loses her mobile phone and Maksim, an aspiring architect from Nizhnii Novgorod, finds it. As Masha prepares to wed a former schoolmate and Maksim considers job opportunities post-graduation, the young man does his best to return the young woman's phone to her. Caught in the bustle of work and pre-wedding planning, Masha cannot arrive in time to meet up with Maksim; Maksim, preparing to move to Berlin for a lucrative architectural position, is similarly distracted, so much so that he fails to recognize that Masha's voice is the one he listens to on the radio every day. The two keep scheduling appointments in different parts of the city, at times passing each other in transit, until the moment when the phone disappears, and with it goes the reason for the principles to meet.

In point of fact, Petersburg becomes the main protagonist of the film, serving as a kind of mythical Europe within Russia. The pair runs hither and yon, through historic parts of the city that due to the cinematography look not simply like a quasi-European space but most significantly as a place for aesthetic creativity. Maksim often sits across from historic buildings created by European architects or by Russians who had studied there and through contemplation derives inspiration for his designs. The location of Masha's radio station allows her to admire European architecture as well, particularly the roofs of old houses, well known as

a place of pilgrimage for several generations of art lovers. The city's numerous rivers and canals serve as more than topographical routes for the circulations of Masha and Maksim; they bring to mind the myth of Petersburg as "The Venice of the North." Bychkova most decidedly looks at the city in the way that most creative people from other Russian cities (those who travel to Petersburg for a pleasant weekend) prefer to see it. While Petersburg may not serve as the ideal spot for artistic endeavors (the social problems and poverty of the citizenry occasionally appear as signs of the time), it nonetheless serves as a non-Russian space for artistic inspiration and romantic encounters. It is not surprising that *Piter FM* has been called the first Russian date film (Forman 2012, p. 214).

Bychkova, who also wrote the screenplay, posits an alternative to Petersburg in the city of Berlin, where Maksim's potential for professional self-realization is practically guaranteed. The contract he won promises rich opportunities for artistic creativity in his chosen profession. His living conditions in Petersburg (where Maksim must work as a janitor in order to retain the studio he has been allocated) only confirm the young man's need to seek greater security in the West. Yet the pastels of Petersburg's Classical and Art Nouveau architecture, the city's quaint winding canals and rivers, the poetry of White Nights (all tourist attractions) keep the young man in their grasp, as does the girl whose voice pours over him like a soothing and seductive balm. Berlin is never shown, is never more than a misty vision of a successful career abroad, whose siren song Maksim ultimately cannot hear, since he remains firmly under the spell of one of Petersburg's voices and its plethora of inspiring urban locales.

For the architect from Nizhnii Novgorod (the city that under the leadership of its young Governor Boris Nemtsov became a symbol of economic reform in the

Figure 12.1 Maksim's Petersburg. Still from *Piter FM*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

mid-1990s), Petersburg, though not his hometown, serves as a native environment, a kind of growing medium that forgives everything, including falling plaster and even homelessness. Bychkova delicately poses the question: what does Petersburg mean for those visiting it? It is both a source of inspiration for the creative mind and a kind of conundrum, a lure for outsiders, a drug whose mythology elaborated by Dostoevsky, Bely, Akhmatova, Brodsky, and the like is somehow preserved in the architectural constancy of the historic city and still seems alive therein. In principle, this is a view commonly held by outsiders, be it artists like the main character or the director Bychkova.

Artists born in Petersburg, as a rule, love to moan about the city as an unchanging "swamp" in which all efforts turn either into trash or into feeble, ineffectual actions. For permanent residents, the city – built on swampland, ecologically challenged, with poor infrastructure, growing ever more clogged with traffic and more expensive each year – provides eternal causes for complaint. They protest the paucity of cultural events there in comparison to such dynamic cities as Moscow or Berlin, while insisting on the city's immutability, appealing to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to include the city center in its list of World Heritage sites. They fear changes to its historic image, not acknowledging that cities, like some people, may not age gracefully. By setting her young characters in historic districts, Bychkova demonstrates, perhaps subconsciously, that there is little else for them to do there but endlessly race around in search of each other. Not only do their perambulations lack the spirit or the tempo of renowned *flaneurs* in the Petersburg literary tradition, but they lack the creative potential ascribed to them by Michel de Certeau to disrupt the spatial relations of power (Tally Jr. 2013, p. 128).

By film's end, Masha has been fired from the radio station for playing songs she likes, rather than the requisite Russian pop. As soon as he leaves work, Maksim loses his studio and winds up on the street. The cultural milieu in which they reside does little to support their personal creativity. No bright career awaits them in the future. But there is the promise of young love that compels them to reject lucrative offers, to call off a wedding, to renege on a contract, and to seek inspiration on the streets of St. Petersburg as they race towards each other. Their rambles around town, however, have additional significance. Bychkova shows that for the modern generation of creative people searching for self-realization, home has ceased to be a fixed, static space. It is no longer associated with a particular apartment, but has shifted to a cultural environment that either proves inspirational or does not. Visitors who are inspired by Petersburg architecture feel more at home there than in the place they were born or raised. St. Petersburg's European appearance forces Maksim to consider moving to Berlin, though he is not at all sure what that city holds for him. In this respect the film questions the notion of national identity, exposing it as a cultural construct. While not a European, the hero's love of Petersburg's European architectural styles appeases his eurocentrism. National identity takes on a cosmopolitan character in Petersburg because it still functions as a "window to Europe." The architectural façade so fanatically preserved by its citizenry (just recall their 2012 battle against the construction of the Gazprom

Tower, which could have destroyed the city's skyline) retained that connection, albeit mythical, to Europe – a grand illusion that young and creative Russian citizens were ready to believe.

Piter FM did quite well in distribution, earning $7,330,000 (against a budget of $1,100,000 and marketing costs of $3,000,000), thereby demonstrating that its audiences shared these same dreams and illusions. The middle class, or the "creacles" as they are called in Russia (from creative class), began to take shape during the period of high oil prices and government consolidation during the first years of Putin's and then Medvedev's reign. They rather strongly influenced the cultural landscape, particularly in cinema, which at that moment was focused on producing films that would cater to this particular social stratum.[4] The creacles, a generation consisting primarily of young, active urbanites, enjoyed the benefits of the latest technology (mobile phones, Internet) and firmly believed in the possibility of a successful and creative future in their own country. They would, in time, join the ranks of those protesting in 2011–2013. In 2006, however, the year of *Piter FM*'s release, they were a grateful, optimistic audience. Their belief that it was possible for them to be a part of an open world was in keeping with their notion of self, inasmuch as their relative mobility to move about their country and other countries as well gave rise to their notion that it was possible for Russia to become a part of Europe. How else can one interpret Kseniia Sobchak's remark that Putin was preventing her (and her generation) from living in Moscow as if she (and they) were living in Europe? *Piter FM* was yet another variation on the theme, offering creacles a miraculous solution to their problems. Just as they believed that oil prices would wondrously remain high forever, they assumed that their job mobility and consequent opportunities for financial and personal success in Russia would also remain constant.

The characters in *Piter FM* never examine the consequences of their actions, nor do they envision that anything negative could happen to them in the future. We see the same abundance in the mobile phone connecting the two. The era's symbol never runs out of cash, as if some magnanimous benefactor keeps paying the bill. This belief in miracles, which gave birth to a large number of contemporary fairy tales about the creative class, was a distinctive feature of the younger generation's consciousness at that time, eager to dismiss the 1998 default as a childhood trauma overcome long ago. *Piter FM*, like the culture of the creative class as a whole, accentuates the positive, ignoring such trifles as the social problems that surround them. The grandmother living on the street who gets along by conning passersby, the alcoholic wearing ragged slippers, the youngsters in matching jackets complaining about the lack of choice in clothing all serve as comic interludes in a film that rests on the drive of youth and the firm belief that everything will turn out well in the end. While the creative class would have to pay dearly for their political immaturity after the defeat of the 2013 protests, in 2006 they could bask in the illusion that Russia was truly a land of opportunities.[5]

Bychkova's dream of an open world was highlighted in her next movie, *Plus One* (Plius odin 2008). Set in Moscow, the main character, the interpreter Masha, lives a cloistered life in an old Moscow apartment until she meets Tom, a British

Figure 12.2 Masha in the city. Still from *Piter FM*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

puppeteer who has come to perform in the Russian megalopolis. Her knowledge of English makes her indispensable to the foreign performer, who cannot help but get himself into ridiculous situations all over town, but whose escapades create a light-hearted jubilant atmosphere. In the end, Masha and Tom fall in love, but the termination of his contract forces them to part. Their relationship, however, has left its mark, imbuing the heroine with a new feeling of life and the understanding that love can be found not only in Russia.

While Bychkova did not defend Petersburg's status as the cultural capital in *Piter FM* (usually a predilection of the natives), in this film she presents Moscow as a city of boisterous cultural activities. It was hardly surprising to encounter foreigners in Moscow, for in this city there was much for them to do. With a sizeable airport, many shops and hotels, and most importantly, the desire of its young citizens to learn from the experiences of others, Moscow seemed open to the rest of the world. Here clowning and play served to unite people who were without a common language. The young Muscovites training with the clowning puppeteer eagerly heeded his every gesture, his every trick, clearly demonstrating their desire to learn as much as possible from him. Their receptivity, however, contrasts with the clown's experiences outside of the studio, which strongly compromise the idea that Moscow is an international haven. In a capital where English is far from the *lingua franca*, this foreigner often finds himself unable to communicate, leading to further complications.

Bychkova nonetheless displays the variety of Moscow life in the first decade of the 21st century. The British puppeteer feels just as comfortable spending time in nightclubs amidst young people as he does during daytime rehearsals, thus adding

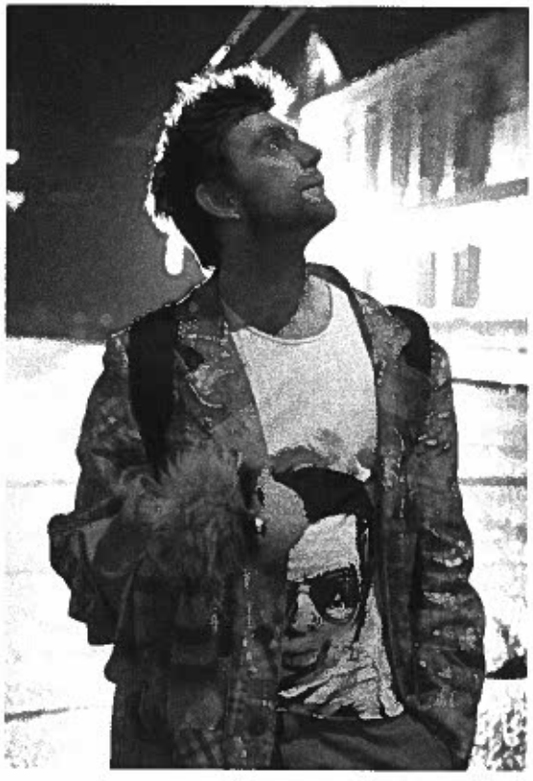

Figure 12.3 A foreigner in Moscow, the city of culture. Still from *Plus One*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

to the image of Moscow as a city where some people actively seek dialogue with outsiders. An affair with a foreigner seems only natural in an environment where people of different cultures are looking to find ways to understand each other, once again helping to raise Moscow's image beyond that of the Russian capital to that of an international metropolis.

If Petersburg provokes a longing to ramble (a feature that Aleksei Uchitel' had already explored in *The Stroll* [Progulka, 2003], casting Evgenii Tsyganov in a major role), then Moscow evokes a desire to create something new, something produced collectively. Moscow demonstrates that it possesses the ability to do so: in the form of money instantly available to implement a project, managers ready to organize it, as well as interpreters, actors, etc. Lacking only were the new ideas that Moscow was ready to purchase in the West and to graft onto its own soil. Petersburg, by keeping to its old ways, its unchanged architecture and topography, made the development of individual careers over time nigh on impossible.

Moscow, on the other hand, was looking for and found new opportunities (it was hardly a coincidence that the interpreter Masha's phone kept ringing off the hook with new offers of employment). Although not a Muscovite, Bychkova has lived there since 2000 and has been able to observe its changing moods. During the 2000s, Moscow was the absolute center of Russian cinema. It was home to all the major studios, technical resources, intellectual reserves, and most importantly, capital (not only from the active support of the Ministry of Culture but also from private investors). St. Petersburg filmmakers, such giants as Sergei Selivanov or Aleksei Uchitel', were forced to live in two cities at once or to look for alternative funding in Europe (as had been the case with Aleksandr Sokurov or Aleksei German).

Women directors also gravitated to Moscow, hence its frequent appearance in their films. Anna Melikian, for example, filmed all of her award-winning films in Moscow, presenting it as the cultural capital of Russia and the sole venue where romantic encounters between representatives of different cultures were possible.[6] Bychkova's strictly monolingual Petersburg is replaced by a multilingual Moscow that makes the city more attractive, its architectural eclecticism and heterogeneity notwithstanding. This multicultural communicative vitality is highlighted in the scenes where the Russian trainees create street performances. The passersby with whom they interact include a person of color, suggesting that only in Moscow could such an encounter take place. When compared to Peking or New York, however, cinematic Moscow seems much less multiculturally and generationally diverse. One needs only compare the international videos each city shot to the tune of Pharrell William's hit song "Happy."[7] The Russian version, shot in Moscow under the auspices of the radio station Europa Plus, is a tribute to youthful narcissism, focusing on healthy, mostly white-skinned youngsters in a space cleansed of anyone else – those over 40 or 50, those of retirement age, not to mention those belonging to Moscow's migrant population. It creates the impression that happiness is the sole purview of young Muscovites, which, of course, speaks to the popular Russian media's manipulation of reality, which precludes discussion of social problems, difference, stratification, and, in principle, the idea of the other.

While certainly not as shamelessly manipulative, *Plus One*, also advertised as a "happy film," is still far from a radical statement. It contains no pointed social message, nor does it shed light on painful social problems. It paints a boisterous, dynamic, and in its own way wonderful world, where even a thirtysomething can find self-realization. At the same time, it's a movie for young political escapists, the creacles, who for a long time had consciously avoided political discourse or participation in the political life of the country. Although it rejects the limited view of Moscow as merely the capital of the Russian Empire, revealing this city's openness to new ideas and cultures, it does so in fantastic form, refusing to comment realistically on matters social or political.

Oksana Bychkova, in essence, adds nothing radically new to the development of Russian feminism, in contradistinction to the activities of the art group Pussy Riot, who have restored the voice of a younger generation of women in Russia and have shown young women as an active political force. Bychkova's early

Figure 12.4 Happy Moscow? Still from *Plus One*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

films, by comparison, are rather timid responses, finding interest in romantic models of love that seem, when compared to real life, rather outdated. The same can be said for Melikian's early films. Though more complex and better executed, they also consciously avoid sharp social criticism, making them the kind of fairy tales that became extremely fashionable in the era when the creative class was dominant. Their box office success suggests that creacle audiences were eager to be entertained and distracted by deceitful conceits, because they lacked the personal resources for critical thinking. As the film critic Dmitry Komm dryly noted, the title of one of the era's most popular films, *Don't Even Think!* (Dazhe ne dumai, 2003), could well serve as the creacles' slogan (Artyukh and Komm 2008). Despite their vague desires to live in a new, open Russia, they preferred not to do the thinking, leaving that to the powers that be, whose agenda for the country's future proved to be quite different from their own.

It is highly symbolic that the previous year Anna Melikian chose a young girl named Alisa as the heroine of her second feature film, *Mermaid*. Having studied at a school for children with Down's syndrome in a small provincial town by the sea, Alisa comes to Moscow with her mother and grandmother, since in today's Russia there's simply nowhere else to go. While Alisa possesses the desire to learn, her stay in Moscow is not in pursuit of higher education or greater knowledge, but really the adventures of Alice in a wonderland of rampant, rapacious capitalism, where all are willing to sell absolutely anything at all, even property on the moon. Which, in point of fact, turns out to be the occupation of the rich young man Sasha (Evgeniy Tsyganov, seemingly typecast as a sex symbol for the creative class), with whom Alisa falls in love. The film unabashedly presents Moscow as a city

of expensive cars, stores, cafés, advertisements, and young people striving to succeed. To be sure, Moscow's frenzied rhythms have turned Sasha into an alcoholic who periodically tries to commit suicide, but Alisa, possessed of the rare gift of magic, saves him from death time and again. The Moscow billboards that advertise that "everything's in your hands" and you just need "to find a mate" seem to serve as guideposts for this stranger in a strange land. Alisa's unworldly perceptions of Moscow recall the unearthly perceptions of the heroine Leeloo in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (a resemblance that seems to motivate Sasha's choice of Alisa's image to advertise his lunar business). Moscow appears as a city of rapid development, where enormous sums of money circulate, where unbelievable social stratification flourishes, yet where good people can still be found, incredible differences in income notwithstanding. In *Mermaid*, another Moscow fairy tale, even the disabled are attractive and well turned out, for the capital's denizens are imbued with beauty, glamor, and success. Even the gawky Alisa, who towards picture's close meets an untimely end, acquires that successful glow: her youthful visage shines down from a billboard advertising Sasha's successful unreal estate business.

Mermaid gives a very accurate reading of creacle desires during this period. The healthy and the beautiful should replace the sick and aberrant (and so the lunar businessman ultimately opts for the hip model, rather than the hick Alisa). Now is definitely not the time to think about social problems or stratification, not the time to think about the fate of migrants and the poor. Moscow is represented as a city of great hopes, where dreams still come true and people can find each other, albeit sometimes not for long. Even foreigners are drawn here, since life proves so interesting and fun. Alisa, dressed first as a mobile phone, later as a mug of beer, is yet another whimsical character in the whirlwind of the capital's

Figure 12.5 Alisa in a Moscow store. Still from *Mermaid*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

street life and common dreams. Moscow becomes a city of crazy and ingenious ideas that ultimately supersede the fate of any one individual; the scale of urban development is so great as to render one death an insignificant statistic. Moscow was also portrayed as the city of hope and success in Melikian's first feature, *Mars* (2004). Almost all of the characters dreamed of moving to Moscow to escape the ennui and stagnation of life in their provincial Crimean town.

The fantasy notwithstanding, *Mermaid* contains moments that anticipate possible disaster. Melikian inserts news footage about football fans wreaking havoc in Moscow stores after the defeat of a Russian team by Japanese athletes. In the dramatized mayhem, Alisa's funny costume is destroyed, and at that moment another image of Moscow emerges – macho, male-dominated, aggressive, militant (it is not by accident that all the fans are men). Another inserted news clip shows members of the State Duma in hand-to-hand combat as the parliamentarians fight over yet another law, testifying to the fact that male aggression is rampant at seemingly higher societal levels. The film abides by the notion that war and aggression are associated with the male world, and love with the female world. For the sake of their beloved, the two women were able to find common ground, managed to agree with each other, whereas the men found agreement hard to achieve and could betray the women with the same ease that sparked their initial infatuation. This Russian machismo that has been cultivated by those in political power represents a vertical of phallic power in which women become subservient to men. This is reflected in the film when Alisa and her rival Rita literally become Sasha's servants (Alisa cleans his home, while Rita satisfies his sexual needs without the prospect of sharing more). While beautiful women may dazzle from billboards, the funds to maintain their beauty reside solely in male hands.[8]

Figure 12.6 Male-dominated Moscow. Still from *Mermaid*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

Women directors in Russia simply do not possess the power to overcome this patriarchal order inasmuch as their films are financed by male producers who receive the lion's share of funding from the Ministry of Culture, which is headed by a male Minister who answers to a male Prime Minister, who answers to a male President. Although some contemporary Russian feminist sociologists (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2012, pp. 13–34) believe that the Russian patriarchy is on the wane, we contend that it is alive and well and elaborating the militant aggressive politics of Russia today. All the more so when the Russian Orthodox Church, in collaboration with the government and the Federal Security Bureau, also defend the patriarchal model of development. Aleksandr Etkind (2013) employed the term "petromacho" to describe the resource-oriented Russian government that propounds a politics of demodernization that rewards only the 2 per cent of the population involved in the extraction of natural resources. In the era of high oil prices that gave birth to the creacle culture, it was still possible to support Moscow's development, for the capital then served as a kind of showcase for the consumers of these oil and gas products. Other cities would receive support from the center on the basis of residual resources, which only heightened the separatist mood throughout the country. As Etkind (2013) writes:

> During the aughts Russia, particularly Moscow, swelled up with wealth; thanks to the miraculous mechanism of raw material dependency, consumption grew throughout almost the entire decade while the country deindustrialized, destroyed human capital and funneled unearned money into the economy through direct or indirect government disbursements to the population. But above and beyond this material prosperity among the cadres and pages of Russian culture roams, much like Marx's specter haunting Europe, the image of the homeless. It conjoins ancient fears of poverty, memories of the horrors of Soviet famine and the Stalinist terror and finally, the disenfranchised migrants always in the line of vision of the Russian consumers they serve.
>
> (p. 88)

Both Bychkova's and Melikian's films visually display this image of a dominant Moscow that absorbs all of Russia's financial and intellectual resources while attracting foreigners who wish, at the very least, to observe this expanding soap bubble (*Mermaid* is replete with shots of foreign tourists snapping pictures of the capital) and, if possible, to enjoy some of the riches before the bubble bursts.

Etkind's image of the homeless truly comes into view in Bychkova's *Another Year* (Eshche odin god), whose January 2015 premiere in Rotterdam was a major international breakthrough for the director. Based on Pavel Arsenov's 1979 film *Don't Leave Your Lovers* (S liubimymi ne rastavaisia), the drama unfolds in contemporary Moscow, where two newlyweds suffer the vagaries of survival in the capital. Zhenia, a graphic designer, is a recent hire in a slick public relations firm. Her husband, Egor, a university graduate unable to find work in Moscow, works its streets instead, as a gypsy cab driver. The picture focuses on these

twentysomethings, trying their best to maintain their love in the face of intractable problems – a lack of money, differing interests and aspirations, and most importantly, the impossibility of finding a real home in the great metropolis.

The six years between *Plus One* and *Another Year* were particularly critical for Russia as a whole. The 2011 Parliamentary elections and the 2012 Presidential election gave rise to a protest movement that demonstrated a profound rift in Russian society, where only a small fraction of the population recognized that Vladimir Putin and his handmaiden United Russia party were incapable of carrying out a policy of modernization. In this period, Putinism clearly became associated with demodernization, a return to Russian Imperial politics with a neo-Soviet flair. Increased state control over private enterprise through the adoption of numerous laws complicating business dealings dashed hopes for further economic growth. The fall in oil prices made it clear that natural resources alone could not provide for this vast country. Russia openly became associated with a kind of bureaucratic feudalism that eschewed the laws of the social contract, favoring instead such manipulative practices as brainwashing through television and other media, as well as physical repression enacted by the courts (thus sparking a new wave of emigration).[9] Last, but not least, the 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a new aggressive stage in Russian foreign policy, one that can still be observed today.

Similar repressive processes were at work in the field of cinema. Due to the reactive policies of the Ministry of Culture and a series of newly enacted laws, the film industry had to reorient itself quickly to correspond to the new social order. Laws passed in 2014 ensured that by year's end films containing non-normative (obscene) language could not be screened, and no film could be shown in Russian film festivals without authorization from the Ministry of Culture. The year before saw the passage of a law prohibiting homosexual proselytizing among adolescents, which essentially cut off the possibility of cinematic (or other) treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) concerns. Many filmmakers grew demoralized, unable to comprehend how to work under these new conditions, and what kind of film language to employ. To be sure, some agreed to fulfill the new social order, presented by the Ministry of Culture as a way for Russia to distinguish itself from Europe (sadly, many of their films would gravitate towards the ultranationalist or fascist). Others, trying to navigate the reef of prohibitions, looked for alternative ways to survive, often leaving the profession. Making quality film under these conditions proved quite difficult, and as a result the percentage of Russian films at international film festivals has declined precipitously.

In many ways, *Another Year* conveys the depressive mood of this period, in no small part due to Natalia Meshchaninova's contributions to the screenplay. Also a director, Meshchaninova's 2014 radical female cri-du-coeur *The Hope Factory* (Kombinat "Nadezhda") focuses on Sveta, a young girl who longs to flee to Moscow to escape the despair and hopelessness of life in her native city of nickel, Noril'sk.[10] Judging by *Another Year*, escape to Moscow would not provide Sveta with either a personal or professional panacea, for the film offers practically no hope at all. Bychkova's film details rather complicated gender relations between

a newlywed couple. The husband can barely tolerate his wife's success, while she tries to help him with his career, but to no avail, for the guy never receives a job offer. This reality in which the young find it extremely difficult to find a place for themselves, given the extremely limited prospects for self-realization, suggests that contemporary Russia lacks the social structures for advancement and that the young may well comprise the most vulnerable layer of society. Moscow is presented as a dangerous place, where someone can clock you on the head with a liquor bottle just because he didn't want to pay you for your work (as happens to Egor in his cab). The only hope of settling there involves finding a partner lucky enough to already have an apartment; otherwise, you could easily wind up on the streets.

Another Year demonstrates that Moscow's upsurge had run its course. The next generation rushing to the capital could no longer achieve what others like them had a decade ago. New members of the creative class (and Zhenia, who works in an advertising agency, is surely one) can barely survive in this new environment. Yet the director's attitude towards it all seems fairly measured. This political apathy, not as noticeable in her earlier films, which were swept up in the creative upsurge that was supposed to last forever, comes to the fore in *Another Year*.

The director tries to sympathize with her characters who stubbornly avoid political issues, refusing to respond to the obvious – that protests and a systemic crisis had changed Moscow. Their apolitical stance is highlighted in the New Year's Eve scene where the couple and their friends await 2012, while stubbornly insisting that the passing year had been a good one. While Russia and the rest of the world had learned in 2011 of fraudulent parliamentary elections and the trial of Pussy

Figure 12.7 A good year in a good city? Still from *Another Life*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru

Riot, these young people simply ignore these political events, displaying the conformist traits of the creative class. Although Bychkova's detailed depiction of the present urban environment conveys Moscow as a societal dead end for the young, the director does nothing more radical than to illustrate this societal impasse.

The film vividly depicts how the creative class has grown weak and that its degradation has put an end to dreams of success in the big city. The young, creative Zhenia is powerless to cope with life's difficulties, although she possesses considerable artistic talent and is well respected within her design agency. The time for modernizing dreams, the days of big money and easy times have passed, now replaced by the slow, difficult, cash-strapped daily grind, which inexorably trumps the energy of youth. Her desire to depict such torpor may well have prompted Bychkova to choose a film from the late Brezhnev era as inspiration for this contemporary update.

In short, *Another Year* commemorates the beginning of the post-Soviet era of stagnation under Putin. Another prime cinematic representation can be found in another film also shot in 2014, the aforementioned Natalya Meshchaninova's *The Hope Factory*. In her debut film, the director presents the city of Noril'sk as a kind of metaphor for the stifling and unbearable epoch, which the young aspiring Sveta cannot tolerate. Moscow, a city where the heroine has never been, represents a faint hope for something better, but the film doesn't resolve how she can attain this dream. The close ties between the two movies stem, in part, from Meshchaninova's contributions to the script of *Another Year*, but even more striking is the vision of the younger generation that both directors share. No longer able to feel themselves at home anywhere, young people now scurry about in search of a partner and self-realization.

The film enables viewers to encounter another new feature of Russia today. As the middle class rose, it became accustomed to the idea of mobility. Travelling abroad, moving from town to town, from firm to firm, changing residences or partners, etc. instilled in the creacles the idea that mobility was the basis of creativity and success. In one way or another, Bychkova's, Melikian's, and Meshchaninova's films capture situations connected to the mobility of this new generation that is not content to stay in one place, a generation always on the lookout for something new, including a new home. For them remaining in one spot, in one given city or residence, seemed a form of stagnation, since new times require a constant reconsideration of your options.

Not surprisingly, women in Russia are actively reexamining their identification with the roles of keepers of the hearth and mother hens that the patriarchy has assigned to them. Bychkova's films demonstrate how women, on the one hand, look for a partner with whom they could build a home, but on the other hand, they clearly understand that life in that nest will never bring them the happiness they feel is their due. In *Piter FM* Masha has a job, an apartment, and is preparing to marry a man she's known since grade school. Yet a chance acquaintance over the phone with the architect Sasha forces her to cancel her plans and to begin to think about a different way of life. The interpreter in *Plus One* is quite comfortable on her own in a Moscow apartment until she meets the British puppeteer. At picture's

close she watches as a plane departs for foreign lands, and she begins to consider the possibility of traveling herself. *Another Year* features a young woman who abandoned her birthplace to come to Moscow and stubbornly tries to preserve the new home she and her beloved create in the capital. Once she winds up in a communal apartment without him, her nesting instincts disappear, for she has no one with which to build a new refuge. This search for a home is not limited to women; in this respect the men here are no less active. In women's cinema their "homing instinct" is no weaker than that of their girlfriends. In a sense, women directors impose upon their male characters a basic female instinct, not wanting to show them as loners.

Yet it is still possible to note the characteristic difference between this moving generation and the "limitchiks," the Soviet workers brought from the countryside into major urban centers. The latter arrived in a new city to settle there, to dig in once and for all. The creacles don't conceive of the city as their final refuge, their new forever home. As a group they are much more peripatetic (the mobile phone, then the Internet have become the natural symbols of their era). As rapid stagnation in Putin's Russia began, many did not want to abandon their mobility, which would not be possible in a period of economic decline, and opted for emigration as their last hope to preserve their creative flexibility.

Watching Bychkova's movies in chronological order, it is easy to see how Moscow has changed, each time depriving the populace of more opportunities for mobility. In *Another Year* the newlyweds come to Moscow from different cities and begin their life together in a rented apartment. When their relationship falters, they both have to find a new place (Egor moves into the apartment of his new girl; Zhenia rents a room in a communal apartment). For her the move is a case of downsizing, and for him an improvement in living conditions, but a life without his inamorata, for both characters are well aware that they still love each other. Under the female gaze this male figure is viewed quite critically, indicating that today's man is more of a conformist and much less able to cope with difficulties. *Another Year* implies that men in Russia seem to be deteriorating, not willing to show traits of courage, strength, or nobility. A male passenger hits Egor over the head with a bottle, so as not to pay for a cab ride he could easily afford. Egor is ready to cozy up to a woman he doesn't love simply because her family can help him to get established in Moscow. The film lacks male heroes or instances of male sacrifice, which makes the situation more hopeless and the fate of the women even sadder. Considering that the average lifespan for men in Russia is lower than in the rest of Europe, their fear of engaging with the life that surrounds them has some basis in fact. Men seem afraid to live life to the fullest, and women, in comparison, look like real warriors.

The rise of such young women became highly noticeable precisely at the time the film was shot – during the trial of Pussy Riot. The group symbolized the radical resurgence of Russian feminism and the open demand of young women to gain a political voice in Russia. Pussy Riot publicly staged a rebellion in the form of a punk protest, but also demonstrated their ability for group organization and for open, direct criticism of the present political administration, albeit clothed in

artistic form. When compared to Pussy Riot, whose trial became a global media event that made Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alëkhina, and Ekaterina Samutsevich new symbols of the protest movement, Bychkova's brand of feminism is far from radical. But the same must be said of Russian women's cinema as a whole, its lack of political radicalism in no small part due to its extreme dependence on funding from the Ministry of Culture and the power structure within the Russian film industry.

Cinema in Russia is controlled by the state through rental licenses, movie theater regulation, and censorship laws. *The Hope Factory* (2014), one of the rare radical films from a woman director, never saw public release in Russia, available only on the film festival circuit. Recalling the slogan of second-wave feminism that "the personal is the political," we can trace the political through the alignment of "personal herstories" and romantic relationships. The evolution of Bychkova's films graphically illustrates how romantic euphoria and youthful drive evaporates from women's cinema, as does immaturity, because from film to film the characters come ever closer to a life crisis or a dead end.

Bychkova's detailed analysis of the social aspects of life *in Another Year* shows the marked influence of documentary film techniques upon the director and also speaks to the general evolution of Russian post-Soviet cinema. The generation of filmmakers, who began their creative life at the end of the 2000s (such as those christened "the new quiets" – Boris Khlebnikov, Valeria Gai Germanika, Alexei Popogrebskii, Dmitrii Mamulia, and Bakur Bakuradze, among others) focused to a much greater extent on the aesthetics of documentary film and New Drama, making their films social statements that may be quiet in terms of political message but scream volumes about unsolvable social problems.

The international festival success of "the new quiets" has influenced Russian art house film in general, helping to direct the efforts of even younger directors, among them Natalia Meshchaninova and Yurii Bykov. The painful severity and the unconditional depression of their pictures, which current Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskii termed depictions that "Russia is shit," became one of the grounds for the Ministry of Culture's sharp reactive politics of recent years. Its goal is the ideological reformation of the image of Russia in contemporary cinema. The Ministry's call for films of patriotism and heroic pathos, films that evoke past Russian victories, is designed to create a passéist cinema that can replace films that reflect on the ills of the present. According to the Ministry of Culture, cinema must demonstrate that Russia follows its own path, one distinct from Europe, confirming the value of Count Uvarov's old triad (once again popular in Russia today) "Orthodoxy-Autocracy-Nationality," and must present only traditional interpersonal relationships.

This traditionalism, which focuses exclusively on heterosexual relationships and values only a female prime directive "to give birth and to love," still remains a part of Russian women's cinema. Bychkova, for example, generally excludes even the slightest suggestion of alternative models of sexual relations. While Anna Melikian does allude to them, it is normally in an ironic key. In contemporary Russian cinema, few wish to tackle the subject openly, knowing that films

containing alternative sexualities will not be distributed. That is not to say that some aren't bold enough to play around the limits, as Melikian does in her latest film *About Love* (2015), which was awarded the Grand Prize at the 2015 Kinotavr Film Festival. This series of loosely connected stories begins with an unusual sexual relationship: the first novella centers on a devoted couple, both ardent manga fans, who are passionate about each other, but only when dressed as their anime heroes. When they meet for the first time in everyday real life, dressed in normal clothes, as Igor and Lena, they have absolutely no connection with each other.

In releasing a cavalcade of boldly made up, extravagantly coifed, and brightly garbed youngsters onto the streets of Moscow, Melikian appropriates Japanese anime culture to create an aesthetic protest. Despite the fact that this couple is heterosexual, Melikian definitely wants her audience to consider "the other" in modern Moscow and to see that conservative definitions cannot encompass true sexuality. This is underscored in the club scenes in which large groups of anime fans gather together (amidst the variety of the crowd in the quick panning shots a careful viewer might even spot a reference to the gay leather subculture). Another segment of the film, about the graffiti artist Boris (Evgenii Tsyganov, once again), who derives inspiration from two different muses at the same time, provides a non-traditional solution. Once the women learn about each other, they propose that they all live together as a ménage-a-trois. Melikian illustrates that life in Moscow today unfolds in much more complicated patterns than those imposed from above by the Russian power elite, who insist that Orthodox traditional values be upheld, including the caveat that three generations must live together under one roof. State Duma Deputy Elena Mizulina's astonishing proposal to prevent childless women from pursuing higher education has, fortunately, yet to be approved. Working in tandem, the state and the Orthodox Church aggressively foist their

Figure 12.8 Other Moscows. Still from *About Love*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

propaganda on the young, but young people still possess the resources to resist. While they may not choose the political radicalism of Pussy Riot, at the very least they can still find alternatives, even if they are temporary, in the club life of Moscow at night.

This youngest generation's desire for alternative lifestyles suggests that they are prepared to adopt the values of other cultures and tailor them to their native land. This process of recycling, though slow, is still quite noticeable, suggesting that the post-Soviet period of open borders, foreign movie rentals, widespread video piracy, and freedom of information have left their mark (thankfully the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter are still not strictly controlled in Russia). While the anime characters from *About Love* might look provocative on the streets of Moscow, they firmly insist on their own right to exist, to go to their favorite club, and to "recruit" new members who wish to find a mate. "We live in a free country!" says the female cosplayer who is arrested by the police. Of course, this has little to do with the realities of modern Moscow, which is awash with policemen, swat teams, emergency, security guards, agents of the Federal Security Bureau, etc., but behind these words lurks that hidden dream that no one wants to forsake.[11]

About Love enables us to see how the imperial gaze, which involved the subordination of cultural diversity to national uniformity, had been replaced by an attempt to construct a cosmopolitan vision of Moscow as an open, multicultural space. The cosmopolitan gaze is just as prominent in the center of the film, where Melikian focuses on a young Japanese tourist who is deeply devoted to Russian culture, who has come to Moscow to pick a suitor from among the six Russian men she has met on a dating site. Sadly, not one of these Russian natives is familiar with any of the texts the girl adores.

With wit and irony, Melikian shows that today's custodians of Russian culture are primarily foreigners, for the Russians themselves are burdened with various

Figure 12.9 A new cosmopolitan Moscow? Still from *About Love*.
Source: kinopoisk.ru.

thorny and at times irresolvable problems. Even so, they cannot help but search for contacts with people from other cultures, because for modern Moscow creacles this has become a behavioral norm, as well as a possible source of income. In this sense, the scene where one of the potential Russian suitors asks the Japanese woman to give him money for his mother's operation is particularly revealing.

About Love also addresses the increasing complexity of life during Russia's new economic crisis, particularly in a tale that unfolds in Moscow City, the capital's business center. It opens in a boardroom, where the head of a firm, citing the crisis, notes that the business cannot operate as before and then summarily fires everyone. The one exception is his secretary, whom he immediately propositions. Her choice: to sleep with the boss in the hope that he'll keep her on or keep her in an apartment in Moscow, or join the growing army of the unemployed whose ranks already include her boyfriend.

Interestingly, Alexey Filimonov, the actor who played the newlywed husband in Bychkova's *Another Year*, also plays the boyfriend here, perhaps typecast as a young man lacking fortitude, one who lets his woman shoulder all of the couple's burdens. Both Melikian and Bychkova make Moscow a city of strong females who look for solutions in times of crisis, yet find almost no support from the men they love. Cruel Moscow forces the women to become predatory, adventurous, to risk their health and well-being to cling fervently to love, because it still brings them the strength they need in their struggle to survive.

This undoubtedly female perspective, both critical of and ironic towards men, still has persuasive power, given the fact that young women do possess enormous creative potential in Russia today. As these films suggest, these women need a home, which they can achieve only with extreme difficulty and at a great personal cost. Their passive male partners serve as a reminder that the patriarchal notion of female passivity is no longer operative. Hence, film heroines have become more independent, because more and more they are compelled to make important decisions by themselves.[12]

Women's cinema also presents a mini-history of the recently nascent creative class, which actually turned out to be a rather thin layer of the urban population. The rise of the creacles and their initial euphoria generated by achieving wealth and success quickly during Putin's first presidency would change by his third term to concerns about the war in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, economic sanctions, and the war in Syria. Those who had managed in the 2000s to create their own business or to invest in private property had a rare choice – to survive at home by trading on their possessions or to escape the "terror, war and poverty" (Iakovlev 2015).[13]

Russian cinema, including films by female directors, also experienced the euphoria of industrial revitalization, characterized by a fairly large number of films released in the first decade of the 21st century, to witness declining production figures which lead to a period of marked underproduction.[14] Growing disbelief in the government and Putin based on a set of reactionary measures enacted by irresponsible politicians in 2015 (termed "the last year of hubris" by New York University Professor Mikhail Iampolski [2016]) would put society and

filmmakers in the unenviable position of having to devise new strategies for physical, economic, and professional survival.

More and more filmmakers who disagree with the policies of the present administration are considering crowdfunding to realize new projects, rather than look for support from the Ministry of Culture or the Cinema Fund. Their desire to attain the total financial independence that Russian filmmakers in the 2000s attempted to achieve serves as one of the few positive developments in a country that has witnessed the onset of political reaction, depression, and the specter of revolution.

Notes

1 The New Drama movement in post-Soviet Russian theater focuses on contemporary issues while employing the aesthetics of street and verbatim speech. While the Moscow theater Doc became the center for New Drama, those involved in the movement included playwrights, directors, and actors from different regions throughout Russia.
2 This category includes Dmitrii Komm and Anzhelika Artyukh, who began creating new programs for the Moscow Film Festival in 2014 and 2015, respectively.
3 In 2008 Melikian's *Mermaid* won awards at other international film festivals in Berlin, Karlovy Vary, and Erevan (2008). That year *Variety* included Melikian in its list of the top ten most promising film directors.
4 Such films include Ruslan Bal'tzer's *Don't Even Think!* (*Dazhe ne dumai*, 2003), Evgenii Bedarev's *In Expectation of a Miracle* (*V ozhidanii chuda*, 2007), Aleksandr Strizhenov's *Lovey-Dovey* (*Liubov'-morkov'*, 2007), Maksim Pezhemskii's *Lovey-Dovey 2* (*Liubov'-morrkov'-2*, 2008), as well as Anna Melikian's *Mermaid* (2008).
5 The campaign to actively promote this slogan, displayed on a tricolor banner, appeared somewhat later.
6 Born in Baku in 1976, Melikian moved to Moscow to study cinema at the All-Russian State University of Cinematography.
7 "Happy in Peking" is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gPPJdLL0OY,
"Happy in New York" at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Lz6SF3s0h0,
"Happy in Moscow" at www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d1dBtw02SI.
8 Unlike the female images adorning this hyper-masculine urban space, alternate distaff bodies experience, on balance, more of the city's violent aspects than its freedoms. In at least one case this happened after the film's release: scenes that featured Alisa with an upbeat young woman in a wheelchair were subsequently excised from the version exported to the West.
9 During 2014 more than 4685 citizens from Russia emigrated to Israel, the highest figure in 16 years. According to *The Guardian*, the numbers rose by 50% in the first quarter of 2015. "Jewish Migration to Israel Up 40% This Year So Far," *2015/may/03/jewish-immigration-israel-jumps-this-year-ukrainians-russians-europe-paris-attacks*.
10 Born in Krasnodar in 1982, Meshchaninova graduated from Kuban State University, then studied documentary film in Moscow under famed director Marina Razbezhkina.
11 Melikian highlights alterity through the differing vignettes she creates and through the subjective notions of the characters within them. Her onscreen Moscow can accommodate non-traditional behaviors and sexualities.
12 Melikian's recent vision of the urban center highlights alterity both through the differing vignettes that take place therein and the subjective perceptions of their participants. Her vision of Moscow is the most highly gendered, able to accommodate non-traditional behaviors, non-normative sexualities, and non-patriarchal views of women. See Tonkiss F. 2005, pp. 94–112.
13 The respected journalist Vladimir Iakovlev, the founder of the newpaper *Kommersant*, recently decided to emigrate to Israel.

14 For a discussion of earlier periods of "cine-anemia" see Condee, N. 2000, "The Death of Russian Cinema, or Sochi: Russia's Last Resort," in G. Freidin (ed.), *Russia at the End of the Twentieth Century: Culture and Its Horizons in Politics and Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford. Available at: www.stanford.edu/group/Russia20/volume/ http://web.stanford.edu/group/Russia20/volumepdf/condee.pdf.

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