



Sophie Lee, 'Imperial Residues and the Birth of the Russian Federation: Maternal Care, Racialization and Economic Migration in *Ayka* and *Mama*,' *New Area Studies* 4:2 (2024).

Imperial Residues and the Birth of the Russian Federation: Maternal Care, Racialization and Economic Migration in *Ayka* and *Mama*

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Abstract

Taking as its objects of study two contemporary films, Sergei Dvortsevov's 2018 *Ayka* and Anastasia Borisova's 2019 film *Mama*, this article considers the vicissitudes of life as a female economic migrant and young mother in Moscow, with *Mama* representing the internal migration of its main protagonist from Sakha (known also as Yakutia) and *Ayka* the experience of a new mother from Kyrgyzstan. Both films engage the themes of pregnancy, childcare and racialised labour within post-Soviet Moscow, and they do so in analogous ways, each employing a documentary style that we might see as gesturing towards the 'ethnofictions' of Jean Rouch. Central to my inquiry is that both *Ayka* and *Iye* appeared at a time when pronatalist policies were actively being pursued within the Russian Federation, as part of the highly conservative agenda of V.V. Putin, and yet the dire material conditions of the films' migrant heroines leave them unable to fully 'assent' to their new maternal roles. My article considers each film's attempt to document the unequal access to postpartum care in Russia's metropolis and draws upon theories of cinematic spectatorship to ask whether 'intersectional' Russophone films can transcend the violence of voyeurism and play an active role in feminist advocacy.

'When we talk about the 'Motherland-mother', we are talking about a family. We are talking about something grandiose, powerful, and at once something close to the heart of every person. This is both a Motherland, and a family. In the bigger picture, the Motherland is a family. In our hearts they are one and the same!'

Speech of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, 22 February 2023

The figure of the 'nation-as-mother' is not specific to Russian-language discourse, but its cultural prominence and endurance across a range of different political formations – Russian Imperial, Soviet, post-Soviet – has led to its especial theorisation within numerous scholarly works.¹ The personification of Russia as 'Motherland' was a feature of the official address given by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, to mark the 2023 celebrations of the Defender of the Fatherland holiday almost exactly a year on from the invasion of Ukraine. Putin's continued emphasis on the metaphor may be explained as part of his overall revival of 'many elements of the Soviet political semiosphere';² under Stalin, Soviet society was conceived as a 'Great Family,' whose citizens demonstrated 'unquestioning loyalty' to the state, attaching at least as much importance to 'political kin' as to blood relatives.³ Although 'Fatherland,' and 'Motherland' are in many instances used interchangeably, socio-linguistical studies suggest that the latter carries a stronger 'emotional' valence and is perceived as enduring against all circumstances.⁴ In grammatical terms, it is a feminine noun, as are the nouns in Russian for 'Russia' and 'Moscow'. The image of a common 'Motherland' historically does not just suggest the nation as a vulnerable woman to whom

¹ Oleg Riabov, 'The Symbol of the Motherland in the Legitimation and Delegitimation of Power in Contemporary Russia,' *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 4 (2019): 752–67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.14>.

² Ibid. 756.

³ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 115–116.

⁴ Tatiana Chikaeva, 'Rodina ili Otechestvo: Razgranichenie Ponyatii' in *Vestnik Leningradskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* (St Petersburg, Russia: 2017).

citizens owe the ultimate allegiance in war-time, but it also serves as what contemporary historian Oleg Riabov calls, 'one of the symbolic resources of the interethnic unity,' which concomitantly 'implies natural and thereby inextricable ties among the ethnic communities of the Russian Federation.'⁵ In short, appealing to the figure of the mother-nation prompts citizens both to recognise their own ineluctable relatedness, in spite of any ethno-racial, religious or regional cleavages amongst them, and to subordinate their personal interests as necessary to ensure the nation's future.⁶

For all its potency as a national symbol, the figure of the mother in the Russian Federation has, in her 'real,' embodied manifestation, remained relatively eclipsed from international attention. Since 1991 it has been the masculine heads of state that have become emblematic of the nation, particularly as the possibility for ordinary citizens to create political change has been all but stifled. However, it is within literal female bodies that many of the country's most acute social issues coalesce. In the context of an increasing rate of income inequality between the richest and poorest, a persistent gender pay gap and a demonstrated child penalty, particularly for new mothers, young women find themselves especially exposed to the crises of the Russian economy and affected by increasingly conservative social policies.⁷ Moreover, women of reproductive age are having fewer babies than ever, with an overall birth rate below replacement levels, despite government efforts to encourage child-rearing. Higher birth rates are found mostly within Muslim-majority federal subjects, in the Sakha Republic and amongst

⁵ Riabov, 'The Symbol of the Motherland', 756.

⁶ In using this term I draw on the work of Gunja SenGupta, particularly the chapter "Pan-Mongolism to Anti-Racist Internationalism: Perspectives from U. S. History," in David Rainbow ed., *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2019), 312-338.

⁷ Andrea Atencio and Josefina Posadas, "Gender Gap in Pay in the Russian Federation: Twenty Years Later, Still a Concern," Policy Research Working Papers, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-7407>; Lara Lebedinski, Cristiano Perugini, and Marko Vladislavljević, "Child Penalty in Russia: Evidence from an Event Study," *Review of Economics of the Household* 21, no. 1 (2022): 173–215, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-022-09604-y>



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migrants to the Russian Federation.⁸ As such, the demographic composition of the Russian Federation is likely to change significantly in the next decades, even as Russian ethnonationalism appears to be on the rise.⁹

In thinking about these changes, which are pertinent to scholars of nationalisms, transnationalisms, gender, anthropology of the 'home' and global health, we might be led by the emerging theorists of New Area Studies, which, as Vincent Houben has argued, invites us to take a 'post-disciplinary' approach, seeking to produce knowledge that is 'globally referential and area specific at the same time.'¹⁰ Indeed, drawing on those intersections, this article explores questions of what new mothers in the Russian Federation can expect in terms of postpartum, neonatal, and early years care, and how these expectations differ across the populace. In addition, the article seeks to address what cultural conversations concerning reproductive justice have emerged within recent years in 'Mother Russia' and to what degree these might impact both state policy and public awareness.

Two unique portraits of the changing face of Russia and its emblematic 'Mother' are offered by the recent docufictional films *Ayka*, directed by Sergey Dvortsevoy, and *Mama*, directed by Anastasia Borisova.¹¹ The two films each stage the vicissitudes of life as a female economic migrant and national minority in the Russian Federation's post-socialist capital city. *Mama* represents the internal migration of its main protagonist from the Sakha Republic (known also as Yakutia), and *Ayka* the experience of a woman from Kyrgyzstan. Each of the films' respective heroines are new mothers; thus whilst

⁸ Rosstat: Natural Population Movement in the Context of Russian Federal Subjects for June 2023. August 11, 2023, https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/EDN_06-2023.htm.

⁹ Zoltan Barany et al., 'The Return of Russian Ethnonationalism,' *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/return-russian-ethnonationalism>.

¹⁰ Vincent Houben, 'New Area Studies as an Emerging Discipline. The Way Ahead for Southeast Asian Studies,' *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 51, no. 3-4, 2020, 51-64, 54.

¹¹ *Ayka (Ayka)*, dir. Sergey Dvortsevoy. (Moscow, Russia: Kinodvor/Pallas Film/Otter Films, 2018); *Mama (Iye)*, dir. Anastasia Borisova. (Moscow, Russia: Moscow Film School, 2019).



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Dvortsevov and Borisova's films in general terms can be seen to interrogate the conjunction of racialization and gender in a post-Soviet key, they are specifically concerned with the sociology of reproduction. In *Mama*, the heroine's son is an infant around six months old at the beginning of the film, whereas in *Ayka* the eponymous protagonist has only just given birth; nevertheless, the films warrant consideration alongside one another as they both concertedly address reproductive justice from the postpartum perspective. In de-centering pregnancy, the films bind the mothers' fates with those of their children, such that the focus of spectatorial attention is not on a woman's choice of whether to become a mother, but rather on the political and sociological factors that make new motherhood burdensome for some, and joyful for others.

Despite their common thematics, it is important to note the differences in production histories and reception of the two films, and in particular the relative prominence of Dvortsevov compared with Borisova. Dvortsevov's film was his second fictional feature film following *Tulip* (*Tulpan*) of 2008 and the documentary films *Paradise* (*Schastyey*, 1996) *Bread Day* (*Khlebniy Den*, 1998) *Highway* (*Trassa*, 1999) and *In the Dark* (*V temnote*, 2004). The Kazakhstani actress Samal Yeslyamova, who had made her film debut with Dvortsevov in *Tulip*, learned the Kyrgyz language to play the eponymous Ayka, and won the 2018 prize for Best Actress at Cannes for the film, which was also nominated for the Palme D'Or. This international acclaim was not entirely new for Dvortsevov: *Tulip* had received similar recognition ten years earlier, winning the Cannes Un Certain Regard prize in 2008.

By contrast, Borisova is a much younger auteur, and *Mama* was her capstone submission for her degree at the Moscow Film School. Although it is less widely known outside of Sakha cultural circles, *Mama* was screened at the 6th Russian Film Festival in Paris in 2020, as well as at the 2020 Trieste Film Festival. In the leading role was actress Galina Tikhonova, who had been an emergent talent within Sakha cinema and appeared in more prominent films such as Milko Lazarov's 2018 *Ága*, before her tragic death prior to *Mama's* debut; the film is dedicated to her memory. Whilst both were shot on digital 35mm film, *Ayka* is feature-length at a run-time of 100 minutes, and *Mama* is just twelve

minutes long. Whether Borisova had seen Dvortsevov's film before creating *Mama* is unclear, but an apparent visual intertext to his work is *Mama*'s final scene, which parallels that of *Ayka*: just before the screen goes black for the credits, the young mother is seen in a close-up shot; her dark hair is pulled back into a ponytail as flyaway tendrils frame her exhausted face. In both ending scenes, this final moment is a brief snatch of intimacy between mother and baby; she has spent the entire span of the film without him, a dislocation brought about by economic exigency.

Within the two films migrant women's bodies appear concurrently as objects of commodification, exploitation and sexual violence, and as the sites of these women's own attempts to succeed financially within what economists and sociologists have termed Russia's 'neoliberal policy paradigm.'¹² As single mothers, they are entirely responsible for the economic provision for their babies, yet the motherly body is always compromised in its capacity to reproduce the social ideal of *homo economicus*: in both films the young female migrant, unlike her earlier cinematic predecessors in coming-of-age films about 'making it' in a metropolis, is always entangled by her baby's physical dependence upon her. This contrasts with other films of the '*Gastarbeiter*' genre¹³, where typically the children of the films' protagonists are only financially dependent on them. Nevertheless, with this dual burden comes a potentially emancipatory tenor within both films. In nursing, co-sleeping and during play-time, the mothers in Dvortsevov and Borisova's films draw attention to the myriad human interactions that lie beyond the cash-nexus, and to the clash between competing forms of feminine 'productivity' as parsed within Russia of the 2010s.

¹² Ilya Matveev, "State, Capital, and the Transformation of the Neoliberal Policy Paradigm in Putin's Russia," *The Global Rise of Authoritarianism in the 21st Century*, 2020, 33–50, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367854379-5>. See also Stephen J. Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*. Princeton University Press, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sv1v>.

¹³ Here I am following, but not without some skepticism, the use of this term by Birgit Beumers in: Beumers, Birgit. "A 'Hero of Our Time': The *Gastarbeiter* in Recent Russian Cinema." *Zeitschrift für slavische Philologie* 70, no. 1 (2014): 161–178.

The films frame their central characters as visually distinct from other women in the metropolis, and also as distinct in political orientation to other women from their hometowns who are more intent on preserving their cultural traditions whilst living in the diaspora. Foreign migrants are conditionally welcomed in the Russian capital; before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were approximately 10 million migrants in Russia, with the Putin government's press secretary Dmitry Peskov noting in 2021 that the country 'welcomes' migrants and needs them for 'the realisation of our ambitious plans.'¹⁴ Nevertheless, politicians have expressed explicit concern that the children of migrants must learn in Russian schools, 'to adapt to the multinational and multi-confessional society,'¹⁵ thereby a priori seeking to limit the identification of migrants with their cultures of origin and instead to assimilate to Russian norms. In *Mama* and *Ayka*, the consequences of assimilation are laid bare in the relative isolation of their protagonists; even at the time when their families are growing, there are only flimsy possibilities for kinship within the city.

In *screening* the stories of women who occupy 'nonhegemonic subject positions'¹⁶ in Moscow, on account of at once their gender, socio-economic status, and racialization as 'non-Russians' ('нерусские'),¹⁷ Dvortsevov and Borisova prompt a consideration of what intersectional feminism could mean within Russian-language cinema. The treatment of new mothers in the post-partum and weaning periods becomes, then, in these films at

¹⁴ *The Moscow Times*, 'Virus-Driven Migrant Shortage Keeps Russia from "ambitious Plans" – Kremlin,' *The Moscow Times*, September 10, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/08/virus-driven-migrant-shortage-keeps-russia-from-ambitious-plans-kremlin-a73524>.

¹⁵ TASS News Agency, 'Peskov Announced that Russia Lacks Migrants for the Realization of its Plans,' Tass RU, April 8 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11096635>

¹⁶ Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Cultural Globalization, the "Posts" and the Second World,' essay, in *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 36.

¹⁷ Consider Graber, who writes in her study of language practices in Buryatia that, 'it is far more common for Russian speakers to identify one another by nationality or race than by formal citizenship.' Kathryn Elizabeth Graber, *Mixed Messages: Mediating Native Belonging in Asian Russia*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 2.



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once a metonymy for migrant women and children's rights, and a metaphor for the emergence of a new social infrastructure in the Russian Federation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union three decades ago.

Ayka

Ayka is a bleak work. Its eponymous heroine is not only refused full participation in the Russian feminine rituals around maternity on account of her citizenship, ethnic belonging, and economic insecurity, but even her basic status as a mother is threatened at the film's end. Dvortsevov intended the film as a sympathetic documentation of the phenomenon of migrant babies born to Central Asian mothers being left at birthing hospitals in Moscow¹⁸; by its end, it appears that the heroine's act of maternal abandonment was not in fact the 'only choice' available to her, but rather that it was one more of a series of outcomes in which she had no choice during her time in the Russian capital.

The film opens with a traveling shot of four newborn babies in the maternity hospital being moved within a cot to the mothers' room for nursing; they are indistinguishable from one another, united in a polyphonic wailing. In the next shot, however, it becomes apparent that *Ayka* does not receive the same postpartum care as the woman she shares her room with, who looks stereotypically ethnically Russian. The midwife's reassuring and slowly articulated words of encouragement towards that woman as she breastfeeds contrast with her clipped orders to *Ayka*: 'Come and feed your baby... Come quicker!' Whereas the other new mother is tenderly called 'darling,' *Ayka*, delayed in the bathroom, is called upon by her surname 'Talimbekova,' the midwife's voice apparently hostile to its Islamic cadence. As her name rings out, *Ayka* is seen from within the bathroom in desperation: with frenzied movements she is attempting to escape, alone, through its narrow window onto the freezing tarmac below. Clutching her aching belly,

¹⁸ Katerina Markelova, 'Samal Yeslyamova and Sergey Dvortsevov: Cinema That Mirrors Reality,' UNESCO, February 24, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2020-1/samal-yeslyamova-and-sergey-dvortsevov-cinema-mirrors-reality>.



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she is slowed down in her flight by the pains of placental expulsion; nonetheless, she cannot countenance turning back.

To summarize the plot briefly: when in the beginning of the film she leaves the hospital without her son, Ayka goes to a disused warehouse where, alongside other women that speak in various different languages in addition to Russian, she disembowels cooked chickens for a foreman who falsely promises to return shortly with their wages. Based on the dialogue of these women, we infer that this is casual or 'gig' labour, which some of them heard about by word of mouth. Rather than remaining with them, Ayka seeks out alternative avenues of employment, firstly at her old place of work, where she has been replaced as the catering server for a television production company. In her desperation, unable to countenance solidarity along the lines of gender, Ayka is deliberately menacing towards the woman that has replaced her. Through her insistent cry that it is 'my job,' Ayka makes an intriguing property claim over a labour relation. She is nevertheless rejected by her former boss because of her absence during the late stages of her pregnancy, which she explains away as illness. Never does she reveal to him that she gave birth five days earlier. At a car cleaning business, Ayka is refused consideration on account of not being able to provide legally mandated immigration documents; to the edge of the shot on the wall hangs a small poster advertising the Russia 2018 World Cup, an ironic symbol of the inequitable division of foreign visitors into the desired and the undesired. Her registration has expired one year prior; without a work contract extending over this period, she ought to have left the country.

Economists Rustamjon Urinboyev and Sherzod Eraliev contend that in general in Russia, the 'complex, volatile and arbitrarily enforced laws and regulations on foreigners' residence and employment status push large numbers of migrants into the domains of undocumentedness, rendering informal employment the only viable option;' and this despite the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a move that enabled, at least on the level of bureaucracy, a relative simplification of routes to legal

migration.¹⁹ Indeed, analysis of a survey of Moscow-based Kyrgyz migrants found that 'only 14% of people interviewed indicated the situation of Kyrgyz female migrants in Russia had improved after accession. The majority of respondents mentioned that with the EAEU the situation of women migrants had not changed, with many still involved in low-paid, unskilled, and sometimes heavy labour jobs.'²⁰ Other studies of Kyrgyz women within Moscow have also indicated a 'positive correlation between childbirth and a woman possessing a [stable] job,'²¹ with material security found to be a better predictor of a woman's planned pregnancy than other expected factors, such as the availability of help from relatives and a social network. Although this study looked mostly at women in couples, and *Ayka* does not have a co-parenting partner to rely upon, it is applicable to a reading of Dvortsevov's film in that the inverse situation to that described, namely material scarcity, does appear to motivate *Ayka*'s temporary abandonment of her child.

Ayka's trajectory across the city follows her haphazard leads about potential work opportunities. After her rejection at the car cleaning facility, she meets a wealthy ethnically Russian-appearing woman who says that she can offer her employment without a background check and migration screening. They arrange a meeting later in the day at an address on the upscale Garden Ring, and *Ayka*'s small body through a low angle shot is seen as defenseless against the sheets of snow that fall from the tall buildings on the ring-road as she attempts to navigate on foot. In one frame, we see her in front of the Instagram-famous nail salon Nails Sunny, the symbol of an alternate feminine existence within the image-conscious capital, while *Ayka* is an outsider within the glossy world of the economically privileged.

¹⁹ Rustamjon Urinboyev and Sherzod Eraliev, *The Political Economy of Non-Western Migration Regimes: Central Asian Migrant Workers in Russia and Turkey* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 85-86. See also Lira Sagynbekova, 'International Labour Migration in the Context of the Eurasian Economic Union: Issues and Challenges of Kyrgyz Migrants in Russia,' *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3023259>.

²⁰ Sagynbekova, 'International Labour Migration in the Context of the Eurasian Economic Union.' 2017, 19.

²¹ Evgeni Varshaver et al., 'Kyrgyz Migrants in Moscow: Results of a Quantitative Research on Integration Tracks,' *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2425312>: 109.

Continually burdened by the physical trauma of birthing, Ayka is late to meet her potential employer, needing to stop at a veterinary office and ask the custodian, coincidentally a Kyrgyz woman, to use the bathroom. Over the rest of the film, this woman, Chinara, becomes a confidante to Ayka, offering her tea and a bed to lie in. The relationship between Ayka and Chinara, which begins from an assumption by Ayka of an affinity between them based upon physical appearance and occupation, is a reciprocal one. Ayka speaks fluent Russian and can translate the cleaning requests of the veterinary surgeon, and towards the end of the film, when Chinara's son gets sick, Ayka takes on her shifts. The veterinary surgeon's unquestioning reception of Ayka, and lack of formal hiring process for a temporary custodian, suggests that he sees the two Kyrgyz women as interchangeable in some way.

Chinara inducts Ayka into the system of informal healthcare available for migrant mothers. She encourages her to seek medical care with an obstetrician who does not require payment upfront: since she would receive free access to the state medical insurance system as a citizen of the EAEU, this form of care is necessary mostly as a means of evading the state system, which would punish her for leaving her child and perhaps for overstaying her residency.²² When she goes to the obstetrician, whose office is in a basement and operating seemingly without a license, she pretends that she has had a miscarriage. The doctor removes residual tissue from within her womb and prescribes her a course of antibiotics; at the end of the procedure, she tells Ayka that she knows that she has given birth rather than miscarried, inferring based on Ayka's physical condition that: 'you have a healthy, 3kg new baby somewhere.' The doctor seems to have encountered other patients with similarly falsified stories of miscarriage, and thus is disappointed, but unsurprised, by her haste to leave the clinic to return to work. Through the perspective of the obstetrician, the implied spectator learns that Ayka's vulnerable postpartum condition is hardly unique, suggesting that bureaucratic obstacles to

²² See Vitaly Polushkin, RA Halfin, VV Madyanova, and SV Axelrod. 'Trans-National Health Insurance Coverage in Eurasian Economic Union.' *European Journal of Public Health* 27, no. suppl_3 (2017)



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accessing public health services persist amongst the migrant population, particularly amongst those whose registrations have expired due to unemployment.

The female body and its implicit extension in the body of the child it has borne are in Dvortsevov's film never bodies that are adapted to labour: pediatric care and postnatal care operate on different timelines to the clock of *homo economicus*. Throughout the film, the implied spectator has been made aware, through close-ups of an intermittently graphic nature, of blood and placental tissue that is dripping from Ayka's womb; managing it interrupts her search for employment, and at the same time the imperative to make money puts her at greater risk of postpartum complications. To be sure, Dvortsevov's film is much more explicit than Borisova's in how it figures the female migrant body as vulnerable to harm within the megapolis; at times the scenes are almost gratuitously violent.

In the first scenes of the film, which are especially grotesque, the uterine blood that Ayka is managing is visually contrasted with the juices from the chicken intestines that she removes to make money. There is an uncanny quality to the chickens; with their legs in the air and the hands of the women holding down the breastbone there is perhaps an Eisensteinian intertext traced here intended to compare the act of extraction and human sexual violence. Carol J. Adams, one of the first theorists of vegan feminism, wrote in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* about the importance of meat as patriarchal signifier and of the 'absent referent' always present on a carnivore's plate: the unenunciated death of an animal.²³ At the end of the film, Ayka will reveal to the bailiffs that threaten her for money that her baby was conceived by rape. We might think, then, of this violation as the 'absent referent' of her pregnancy, birth, and post-partum condition. The rape constitutes a rupture not just of legal and moral sexual norms, but also, in making her a mother against her will, of Ayka's self-identity.

²³ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 48.



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As the plot proceeds, we learn that Ayka moved to Moscow with the intention to better her economic situation, and perhaps to return money to her family back home. Through brief shots which show amongst her scant possessions some nonfiction guides on how to start a sewing business, and through snatches of conversation with bailiffs about why she took out the loan, it becomes evident that she had not planned motherhood in the immediate future. This notwithstanding, once she has given birth, she demonstrates great frustration in not being able to perform a maternal role. According to a recent prominent sociological study on motherhood in Russia, 'motherhood is not only compulsory but is also compensatory for many Russian women,'²⁴ an imagined reprieve from material hardships and a broader situation of masculinity in crisis.²⁵ Without her baby, Ayka appears to envy other women whom she encounters who have positive experiences of motherhood. In the room that she shares with multiple other Kyrgyz-speaking women, Ayka overhears a telephone conversation between one older roommate, who is dressed traditionally and wears a headscarf, with her children back home. Immediately after this conversation, the camera shifts to three framed photographs on a shelf, the implication is that the smiling children in the photographs are the woman's family in her homeland. Out of spite, Ayka slams the photographs onto the floor.

At the end of the film, Ayka makes a resigned call to the men to whom she owes money, who have earlier threatened to stalk her family members in Kyrgyzstan if she cannot pay them. At the moment of the call, she is inside the tiny custodian cabinet within the veterinary office, and with sweat dripping down her exhausted face, she tells the men: 'I have no money. I have a child.' Two alternate logics emerge to parse this sentence. For Ayka, having a baby is a justification for her not having money, since in assuming the identity of mother she has been forced to remove herself from the competitive labour market. On the other hand, for those whom she owes money, her having a baby is a solution, rather than an explanation, to this first admission of not having funds. In the next cut, Ayka is seen in the car of these men, and they pressure her to give them the

²⁴ Jennifer Utrata, *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2015), 58.

²⁵ See "Marginalized Men: Settling for the Status Quo" in Utrata, *Women Without Men*. 2015.

child, so that they can organise a black-market for-profit adoption. She tells them that her baby is healthy, and it is here, when they press her for information about his father, that she discloses the rape for the first and only time within the film. As the camera in extreme close-up fixes her exhausted, plaintive and paradoxically childlike gaze at her lenders, she can only murmur affirmatively as the men explain that she is to collect her child the next day from the hospital and sign documents approving his adoption.

The film's ending is, however, cryptic: Ayka returns to the hospital to collect the baby, but whether or not she plans to give him up is unclear. The same medical practitioners that treated her on the previous day are exasperated at her return and demonstrate a generalised anger towards migrant women. The gynaecologist poses a number of rhetorical questions, the last of which is vociferously directed at Ayka: 'Why do *these* all come to Moscow? Why didn't you give birth back home? You all come here. You birth them here, you abandon them... Other women have to look after them... Didn't you think of that?' Here, the intransigent use of the demonstrative pronoun 'these' both estranges Ayka in anonymity and simultaneously destigmatises her apparent moral crime of abandonment by making it familiar: she is not the first to have resorted to such a measure.

On the desk in the office of the maternity ward is a Russian Orthodox icon depicting a blonde Virgin Mary cradling Jesus, as there was also at the beginning of the film amongst the belongings of the other mother in Ayka's room, a holy image of idealised maternity that sits uneasily alongside the clinicians' mercilessness. Whilst there are indeed no explicit religious references in the film, the saturation of Muscovite historical architecture with the image of Mary as well as the Putin-era religious revivals in the capital would suggest the icon as a viable visual intertext to the close-up shots of Ayka, and in a post-production interview of 2019, Dvortsevov called Ayka 'the Kyrgyz Madonna'.²⁶ After she discharges herself, she kisses her crying baby amidst the snowfall,

²⁶ Konstantin Shavlovsky. 'Somewhere There Is Earth.' 'Где-то там есть земля.' Interview in *Seans*, February 2019. Available at <https://seance.ru/articles/sergej-dvorcevoj-ajka-interview/>



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her lifted hood especially reminiscent of the iconography of the Holy Virgin. In the final frames, she must find shelter in an adjacent apartment block to breastfeed her son. In her face's desolate expression, she registers the violent threats of the bailiffs if she will not give him up. There is no protection for Ayka; any optimism she may have had for either motherhood or migration collides in the end with the intransigence of a patriarchal economic system that extracts from the vulnerable everything that it can.

Mama

Mama is more subtle than *Ayka* in its presentation of the hardships facing young migrant mothers. Although it lacks a dramatic climax, it perhaps reflects even better the chronic anxieties faced by the urban poor. Capturing the events of a single day, *Mama* depicts a single mother, Michiye, who has moved to the capital from the Sakha Republic and lives with her infant son in the high-rise suburbs of Moscow. In the film's first frames, mother and baby are depicted as contiguous: her cheeks graze his brow, and her hands envelop his small body. Her long hair stretches out across a decoratively patterned pillow; the shot is illuminated by natural light from beyond the window. Altogether, we can parse this scene through the Aquinian concept of filial 'enfolded'-ness²⁷; the unity of a baby with its parent before it can exercise its own reason. This scene appears before any of the film's dialogue, save for the baby's babble, marking perhaps a kind of prelinguistic bond of kinship as yet uncomplicated by the conditions of Michiye's positionality within post-Soviet Moscow society, bearing the identities of woman, worker, and ethnic minority. Nevertheless, it is not long before the union of mother and baby is compromised, and Michiye leaves the bedroom for a communal kitchen. She has a sublease agreement with another Sakha woman, Aita, and her husband, who, despite not owning a property, are signified as having relative financial security through their possession of premium items such as a Keurig espresso machine. Michiye is reminded by Aita that later in the evening their landlady will arrive; she has not yet contributed her share of the rent.

²⁷ Thomas and Daniel J. Sullivan, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol., 11. (Chicago: William Benton/Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), 437.

As the sole parent to her son, Michiye is expected to perform the full set of functions that under patriarchy are normatively assigned to father and mother: that of economic provider and primary caregiver. In *Mama*, however, she is represented as successfully fulfilling neither role. Since she is not from Moscow and does not have a fixed lease, she lacks the requisite 'registration in Moscow or the Moscow region' that would enable her to obtain a microloan from a private bank. Therefore, Michiye's ability to support her child materially is predicated on her departure from their home and entry into the Moscow labour market, which effects the removal of much of her maternal emotional labour. She must outsource this function to Aita, who agrees to look after her child during the workday, whilst she herself performs paid childcare and domestic labour for her employer, a pregnant woman who lives with her husband and their toddler in a detached house in a wealthy suburb. The film makes no mention of Michiye having obtained any tertiary education or training, and thus it is her personal experience cooking, cleaning, and performing motherly duties that equip her to advertise herself for such a role.

As the film progresses, we learn that remuneration for Michiye's casual employment has been digitised, coordinated through a mobile banking app. As such, her employers are able to refuse to pay her immediately after her shift without transgressing social norms of economic transaction; the pregnant lady claims to have forgotten to have withdrawn cash for this purpose and promises to make a transfer to her online account. This delay, as innocuous as it seems to those that hire her, will possibly determine whether she is able to remain in her home. At the end of the film as she returns to the apartment, Michiye must justify to Aita her own overdue payment. Ironically, Aita's exasperated response, articulated in Russian through the phrase, 'Well, I should have guessed with you,' figures the deadline – a discursively constructed temporal border – as a point of return: this is unlikely to be the first time that Michiye has not paid on time.

If we contrast the first scene to the penultimate one, where Aita meets Michiye in the liminal space of the doorway, the alienation of mother from infant is rendered through a switch from vertically oriented proximity to horizontal distance. Michiye is now in the

background of the frame and her face is obscured by that of her baby. Aita holds the baby and faces Michiye as if she pulls the infant towards the camera and away from his mother. She asks him to look at his mother, but he does not. Michiye is also defeminised in this frame by her thick coat and pulled-back hair; the removal of the headscarf that she has been wearing throughout the day also contributes to her apparent androgyny. Earlier in the film, this headscarf has lent her an arguably iconographic appearance that, if parsed through the visual vocabulary of Russian Orthodoxy, might correspond to the image of the Holy Virgin, as was also the case in *Ayka*. However, whereas Orthodox icon types, such as the Bogoroditsa or Hodegetria, normally depict Jesus in the arms of a veiled Mary, Michiye is never able to correspond to this image, since she only wears the scarf to weather the bracing cold outside the home, and so her veil-wearing never coincides with the cradling of her son. We see, then, the impossibility of Michiye's correspondence to this idealised image of motherhood because of her participation in a market economy.

As Michiye retreats to the bedroom where the film began, an enclosed and protected space accessible only to her and her baby son, the camera fixes upon a material object from the outside world: the toy car that her employer's son played with earlier and that had gone missing. The presence of the toy problematizes the ethics of property in a post-socialist key; the implied spectator cannot be sure that Michiye stole the toy, nor whether the film would sanction this theft even if she did. Moreover, there is an ambivalence to the toy's symbolism in that it is at once a marker of material provision, and simultaneously a substitute for parental play: in the scenes at the upscale house, the toddler boy plays with numerous toys, and with Michiye, because his own parents are preoccupied with entertaining guests. Conversations overheard by Michiye as she sets the table for these guests and serves them in the kitchen suggest that becoming a mother has had only a limited impact on the wealthier, ethnically Russian employer's lifestyle: she talks about luxury holidays in Italy and is evidently able to rely upon service workers to balance pregnancy, early years care, and her marriage. Despite having a husband and a number of close friends, she tells Michiye that 'we couldn't do it without you.' Whereas

Michiye must scramble to ensure that her baby is looked after, her employer is able to plan to redistribute her domestic responsibilities ahead of time by booking a nanny.

This reflects a broader tendency in Russia wherein 'childcare is stratified: in middle and upper-class households a significant portion of childcare is carried out by hired help.'²⁸ The closure of Soviet-era creches and nursery schools, and the lack of new state provision for free or discounted childcare is considered by social researchers as but one manifestation of a broader trend of 'the commercialization of the everyday' in the Russian Federation.²⁹ Moreover, what is termed the 'gender contract' is, under these conditions, renegotiated, as women in the most competitive careers cannot afford to work part-time and must outsource their childcare to hired help, whilst lower income women must market their own cheap labour as nannies in order to support themselves, therein reinforcing the stereotype that childcare ought to be managed by women and at the individual family level.³⁰

The average cost of childcare and domestic work in Moscow is estimated at around 300 rubles per hour, equivalent to USD \$3.50.³¹ Meanwhile, the median monthly salary for a migrant worker in Moscow is estimated at 60000 rubles³², such that a migrant childcare worker such as Michiye would need to work a minimum of fifty hours per week to achieve economic parity with migrant workers in other industries. In the Russian Federation, those in permanent employment can receive a total of 140 days of maternity

²⁸ Elena Zdravomyslova, "Nannies: The Commercialization of Care" in Elena Zdravomyslova, Anna Rotkirch, and Anna Temkina (eds.). *Novyi byt v sovremennoi Rossii: gendernye issledovaniia posvednevnosti* [Gender Studies of Everyday Life in Contemporary Russia]. (Saint Petersburg: European University of St Petersburg Press, 2009), 94.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Kamila Gazieva, "Kak Naiti Nyanyu," Tinkoff Journal, February 21, 2023, <https://journal.tinkoff.ru/nanny/>.

³² Alexei Duel, 'Nazvana Sredniaia Zarplata Migrantov v Rossii,' Rossiiskaia gazeta, July 1, 2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/07/01/nazvana-sredniaia-zarplata-migrantov-v-rossii.html>.

leave,³³ with 70 days allocated for the postpartum period, but such provisions are not accessible to those involved in gig labour. The Russian government regularly updates its so-called 'maternity capital' policies, which were introduced to encourage higher birth rates, and which especially reward those with more than one child.³⁴ Since 2019, the government's Social Fund has introduced measures that those households whose total income is less than or equal to 150% of a region's 'living minimal wage,' receive a state benefit for children's supplies equal to the cost of raising a child there, as calculated using municipal averages.³⁵ This benefit can be renewed and received until the child is three years old. However, in Michiye's case, her receipt of the benefit is not guaranteed; firstly, she may not be able to claim the higher rate available in the Moscow region without a permanent resident registration there, and secondly, she must have documents that prove that her son's father, who never appears in the film, has not already tried to claim the benefit. Whilst the heroine of Borisova's film is not under the immediate threat of homelessness and destitution, her economic insulation is thus provided for not by the state, but rather by the generosity of her co-ethnic housemates: there is no suggestion that Aita will be paid to look after Michiye's baby, but rather that she does so out of a sense of dutifulness, pragmatism, and implicitly out of the recognition that her own situation as part of a married couple is one of relative security.

Indeed, the volatility experienced by internal labour migrants to the Russian capital appears mediated in the film by the ability to leverage familial or personal ties. Michiye is geographically severed from her hometown, and there is no information given as to the whereabouts of her biological family, nor to the identity of her son's father. Since she

³³ Marina A. Kingsbury, 'Expanding Understanding of Motherhood Penalty: How Gaps in Family Policies Contribute to Gaps in Old-Age Earnings in Russia,' *Frontiers in Sociology* 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00067>: 4.

³⁴ See Michele Rivkin-Fish, 'Pronatalism, Gender Politics, and the Renewal of Family Support in Russia: Toward a Feminist Anthropology of "Maternity Capital,"' *Slavic Review* 69, no. 3 (2010): 701–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0037677900012201>.

³⁵ The Ministry of Employment of the Russian Federation (MinTrud.) 'Itogi Goda: Podderzhka Semey s Detmi i Sozialnoe Obsluzhivanie Naselenia.' Website of MinTrud, December 31, 2019, <https://mintrud.gov.ru/social/212>

has no obvious financial dependents back home besides her son, the logic of Borisova's film suggests that she may have had initial hopes of financial betterment through her move to the country's economic center, but that the monetary burdens of motherhood, coupled with her relative isolation within the metropolis, led to her being a possible object of financial exploitation. As a single mother, Michiye numbers alongside the nearly thirty percent of Russian women to be raising a child alone.³⁶ A recent study of single motherhood in Russia found that, in the postsocialist era, the valence of motherhood has shifted; it 'has become a private choice and responsibility rather than a public duty and a social good.'³⁷ Concomitantly, per the study, 'single mothers no longer realistically expect much from the state or from most men and, consequently, are resigned to taking what they can get from both, [...] increasingly focused on making money in the capitalist marketplace.'³⁸ The film's numerous wide-angle shots that depict Michiye from behind as she traverses the city's rail stations, snowy boulevards, and underground passageways alone emphasize the ineluctability of her independence. Fittingly, she does not receive any pity in the film; the awkward smile of the glamorous blonde cashier at the private bank where she seeks the loan is more concessive than empathetic. If, per the famous Soviet film, Moscow 'did not believe in tears' in the 1980s³⁹, in the digitalized capital in 2018 Borisova's heroine does not bother to shed any in public.

The fragility of Michiye's local support system is also explored through her relationship with her housemates. At the beginning of the film, Aita and her husband Nikolay, on account of their age and cohabitation with Michiye, might seem to be her biological parents, yet their relation is quickly determined to be that of partners in an economically advantageous division of a financial burden, namely rent and household expenses. The degree to which an implied spectator might consider the housemates to be 'kin' is related

³⁶ Jennifer Utrata, *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2015), 58.

³⁷ *ibid.* 61.

³⁸ *ibid.* 221.

³⁹ In reference to the 1981 film *Moskva slezam ne verit*, a Soviet blockbuster directed by V. Menshov.

thus to this spectator's own understanding of ethnic identity and networks of community for internal migrants in contemporary Moscow. To assume their kinship is to collapse their heterogeneity, yet to ignore their common ethnicity is to refuse the ways in which Sakha people and other indigenous and minority groups are racialised in the Russian Federation's capital city, the population of which is estimated to be at least 70% ethnically Russian.⁴⁰ Aita is the only person with whom Michiye can speak both Russian and Sakha, as well as the only woman Michiye encounters directly in the film who, like her, is on account of her appearance unlikely to be perceived by others as ethnically Russian; the film's subtitles to the Sakha words do not even reveal which language they are speaking, thus withholding this part of their identities from a Russophone spectator. Whether the film can be said to represent a certain solidarity between Aita and Michiye, based upon their shared experiences of acculturation and racialisation in the capital, remains, then, contingent on the implied spectator's own relation to, and deconstruction of, what we might label 'Russonormativity.'

In a field study on xenophobia in Russia, sociologists Gorodzeisky and Glikman describe a revision of Soviet multiculturalism that has intensified since 1991.⁴¹ They write:

It appears that in Russia in the beginning of the twenty-first century, only ethnic Russians, as a majority ethnic group, were "allowed" to take part in the process of re-building the national identity, while actually excluding ethnic minorities (native-born population) from the new borders of the collective. [...] More specifically, 'the national self [has been] redefined from a predominantly civic understanding based on citizenship and identification with the state to a more ethnic one, based on Russian language and culture, one in which ethnic Russians

⁴⁰ Alexander Rogoza, 'Kak Menyalsa Natsional'ny Sostav Za 35 Let.,' msk.kp.ru, April 24, 2023, <https://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/27493.5/4752915/>.

⁴¹ Anastasia Gorodzeisky and Anya Glikman, 'Two Peoples – Two Stories: Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Post-Socialist Russia,' *Social Problems*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spx023>.

take a center stage' (Blakkisrud 2016:250). Ethnic minorities are barely involved in the process of the reconsideration of the national self.⁴²

According to this research, Russian citizens who are not perceived as ethno-racially 'Russian' tend to be skeptical towards foreign-born immigrants to Russia only if they themselves experience 'personal socioeconomic vulnerabilities.' This is in contrast with those that belong to the 'majority ethnic group' whose anti-immigrant views are less based upon 'individual-level attributes' and more influenced by anxieties about threats to an imagined cultural 'collective.' This research informs our reading of *Mama* because it suggests a level of economic security offered to post-Soviet ethnic Russians by their ethnic belonging, as well as a need for individualist self-preservation for minority ethnic groups. Seen through this lens, Michiye experiences two levels of estrangement: firstly, she lacks dependable familial ties in Moscow and secondly, precisely because she is seen as 'other' within metropolitan society, she is more exposed to the knife-edge of capitalism. That there are trickle-down implications of this for early years care and for the next generation is in Borisova's film implicit in the differing fates of Michiye's son and the son of her employer: one who is content with a single toy, has limited time with his parent, and lives within a concrete towerblock, and one who capriciously cries when one of numerous toys is misplaced, who interacts socially with his two parents and their extended network, and who can expect recreational time in a wide private garden. Despite both being citizens of the Russian Federation, the early disparities between the boys are likely to translate in the future to continued economic disparities, particularly since in Russia 'the position of children in the income distribution is highly correlated with the income position of their parents, especially mothers.'⁴³

Nevertheless, the question of whether ethno-racial identity and class identity can be disentangled in Borisova's film is ambiguous. Since Michiye is an internal migrant

⁴² *ibid.* 544.

⁴³ Irina Kartseva and Marina Denisova, "Intergenerational Mobility of Russian Households – Free Network," Free Network, accessed July 5, 2023, https://freepolicybriefs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FREEPolicyBrief_May2.pdf :

moving only from the 'periphery' to the 'centre'⁴⁴, and from a population with relatively low levels of migration to Moscow, numbering around 10,000, the film does not disclose to what extent her economic disenfranchisement is heightened by her minority identity, and to what extent her 'non-hegemonic subject position' is instrumentalised by the director as a metaphor for the broader alienation of Russia's working poor. This is a significant difference from *Ayka*, in which the heroine participates in a much more familiar pattern of economic migration from a poorer former Soviet state to the wealthier Russian Federation.

We might consider Borisova's film through the theory of Hamid Naficy, who divides the genre of what he calls 'accented cinema' into three subgenres, the 'exilic, diasporic and ethnic.'⁴⁵ In each case,

accented films signify and signify upon the conditions both of exile and diaspora and of cinema. They signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers.⁴⁶

For Naficy, the very fact of Borisova's self-identification as Sakha and status as a graduate from the Moscow Film School already implies her as an 'accented' auteur, even before one considers the thematics of her film. Naficy's three subgenres are distinguished by their relationship to place, with the third, 'postcolonial ethnic and identity film,' most concerned with 'the exigencies of life here and now,' and by its engagement with the 'politics of the hyphen,' of how to reconcile different aspects of one's identity within multiculturalism.⁴⁷ *Mama* belongs, we might say, to this third type. If, as Naficy argues, the accented style constitutes a cinematic 'example of free indirect discourse, in the

⁴⁴ See Emma Widdis, "Introduction." *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ *ibid.* 4-5.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* 15.

sense of forcing the dominant cinema to speak in a minoritarian dialect,'⁴⁸ then its employment both of a second language and of the first-person subjective gaze of Michiye disrupt the fantasy of contemporary life in networked Moscow: for every mobile banking app there is also a payday loan shop, for every plush home in the Rublevka suburbs there is a dimly-lit tower block in Kapotnya, for every on-demand babysitter a baby left at home. Borisova might thus be said to intervene into a new canon of filmmaking from the Sakha Republic, in which 'Russia looms large as the unseen "other" against which Sakha collective identity is constructed.'⁴⁹ In making a film about Sakha motherhood from the centre of Russia, she meditates on the possibility of collaborative Federalist futures at a time when society is characterized both by devastating economic cleavages and by alarmist journalistic rhetoric that 'ethnic Russians' are at risk of being replaced in their titular nation due to low fertility rates.⁵⁰

Mothers, Represented

As cinematic rather than ethnographic artifacts, Borisova and Dvortsevov's films present challenges to those wishing to draw neat conclusions as to the precarious positions occupied by young migrant mothers in 'real' Moscow. Both Dvortsevov and Borisova in post-release interviews have said that they made their respective films after observing the plights of actual mother migrants; nevertheless, they have each turned to fictionalisation rather than documentary to trace this kind of precarity. To approach *Mama* and *Ayka* thus requires a consideration of one of the principal debates that has arisen within critical film studies, and especially within feminist film studies: that of the split between film text and context, or, as Jane Gaines writes, the split between the

⁴⁸ *ibid.* 25.

⁴⁹ Adelaide McGinity-Peebles, 'Cinema, Ethnicity, and Nation-Building in the Sakha Republic (Russia) and Kazakhstan,' *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.1326>.

⁵⁰ Vadim Bondar, 'Bez Kardinal'nogo Uvelichenie Rozhdaemosti u Strany Net Perspektiv,' *Biznes Online*, accessed July 5, 2023, <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/502049>.

'operations of the cinematic text' and its 'sociological reference points.'⁵¹ Moreover, how these films respectively posit a spectator may inform whether or not we might understand them as 'women's films,' and as films that offer the possibility of affecting the material conditions of the kinds of migrant mothers they seek to represent.

After the success of his 2008 film *Tulip*, a tender depiction of the fraught transition of a Kazakh marine officer deployed in Russia back to nomadic life in the Kazakh steppe, Dvortsevoy in conceptualizing *Ayka* drew upon his own personal history as an ethnically Russian man born in Soviet Kazakhstan to address the phenomenon of left children in a culturally sensitive way. With many Kyrgyz friends in Russia, where he is principally active, Dvortsevoy in interviews contemporaneous to the film's debut posited a kind of generalized ethics of former Soviet 'Asians,' claiming that he 'knows very well the Asian mentality, and that Asian women do not just easily give up their children, they would have to have a very strong reason to do so.'⁵² Whatever one makes of this essentialist statement, which collapses the specificities of Asia and specifically former Soviet republics in Central Asia, the director here is engaging a broader turn within cultural critique of the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods to acknowledge the 'similarities of treatment in the official realm and commonalities of migrant experiences' amongst so-called 'Soviet Asians' from the republics to the south and south-east of the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.⁵³

Dvortsevoy also here circumscribes a desire to blend the fictional with the documentary, perhaps in a manner analogous to the 'ethnofictions' of celebrated anthropological filmmaker Jean Rouch, or to the Vertovian 'film-truth' reels of the early Soviet period. As one Anglophone review of the film notes, the work of the Dardennes is both

⁵¹ Jane Gaines. 'White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory.' In *Feminist Film Theory*, 293–306. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁵² In Lazat Zhanybek Kyzy, 'Dvortsevoy: *Ayka*- Obraz Ochen 'Sil'noy Kirgizskoj Zhenschinoy,' accessed July 5, 2023, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-dvorcevoi-aika-migrants/29242917.html>.

⁵³ Jeff Sahadeo, 'Druzhba Narodov or Second-Class Citizenship? Soviet Asian Migrants in a Post-Colonial World,' *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 559–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930802018463>.

acknowledged by Dvortsevov as an influence on *Ayka* and concurrently downplayed by him,⁵⁴ seeking to allow the particularity of *Ayka*'s situation to stand on its own. The majority of Dvortsevov's filmic work before *Tulip* was within the documentary genre, but in an interview retrospective of his work he acknowledged a concerted turn away from working with 'real' subjects out of fear of the consequences that their involvement in his work might bring forth. Comparing documentary filmmaking to 'becom[ing] a vampire,' he now no longer can condone following real subjects, 'using their lives, turning them into art and then abandoning them to their own devices.'⁵⁵ Thus, whilst *Ayka* retains some aspects of the documentary genre, particularly, as Mortensen has noted, since much of its dialogue was 'improvised' and nearly all its actors were amateurs, its heroine's destiny is clearly predetermined by the director, plotted in his storyboards. This has especial implications for a film that deals so harrowingly in violence against women; in making a migrant woman 'consumable' on screen, and in framing her story around moments of particular stress or uncertainty, it is unclear whether the film reenacts the very same objectifying gaze that *Ayka* has been subjected to ever since arriving in Moscow. In an interview with Radio Liberty, Dvortsevov said that he had, 'wanted to articulate that the motherly instinct is stronger than anything, stronger than any obstacles or barriers, than any circumstances,'⁵⁶ thus seemingly justifying why his heroine is exposed to the extreme of these circumstances. Despite his own good intentions, the 'vampiric' tendency that Dvortsevov may have felt within documentary has, in the docufiction, alighted on the generic figure of the female; the close-ups of *Ayka*'s blood perhaps carry a different valence when choreographed by a masculine auteur.

Drawing on the work of Mary Ann Doane on the 'woman's picture,' Annette Kuhn has suggested defining the woman's film as one whose 'plot is organized around the

⁵⁴ Stehn Mortensen, 'Sergei Dvortsevov: *Ayka* (aka *My Little One*, 2018),' *Kinokultura* 63, 2019.

⁵⁵ Pawel Pawlikowski, 'Sergei Dvortsevov: The Man Who Films Goats,' *The Guardian*, November 5, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/nov/05/segei-dvortsevov-pawel-pawlikowski>.

⁵⁶ Lazat Zhanybek Kyzy. 'Dvortsevov: *Ayka*- Obraz Ochen' Sil'noy Kirgizskoj Zhenschinoy.' Accessed July 5, 2023. <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-dvorcevoi-aika-migrants/29242917.html>.

perspective of a female character, and which addresses a female spectator through thematic concerns socially and culturally coded as “feminine”.⁵⁷ Where *Ayka* differs from *Mama* is in the absence of ‘voyeurism,’ something that both Kuhn and Laura Mulvey have identified with a ‘masculine’ gaze.⁵⁸ If *Ayka* portrays a relentless flow of negative events for its heroine, in *Mama*, there are brief moments when Michiye is seen as playful, carefree, taking risks and, ultimately, making it until the next day. Many of the shots are of her reflection in a window, and there are a few of her smartphone, such that the camera eye is not exclusively pointing at her, but rather is focalised through her own vision. Parts of her biography are elided, such as who the father of her child is, and the short length of the film compared with *Ayka* means that it cannot yield a full prediction of what lies ahead for her. Whilst, as Kuhn has elaborated, it is too simple to conflate female autership with feminist filmmaking, Borisova’s own identification as a Sakha woman may allow her film to posit a feminine spectator who can see Michiye as more than her circumstances.

In interviews about *Mama*, Borisova nonetheless acknowledged the unsettling power of her film, suggesting that, ‘for some people this film is hard to receive, because it is not a viewer’s film, but rather a festival film, one for critics.’⁵⁹ These comments are important as they also point to the fraught ethics of auteur cinema: the explicit addressees of the films may be a globalized cinematic elite, who, as one Peruvian critic of *Ayka* described, may be seeking a ‘miserabilism’ on screen that flattens the lived reality of the populations that they engage.⁶⁰ Such a sentiment underlies Lilya Kaganovsky’s important but curious review of *Ayka* in the Russian cinema journal *KinoKultura*, particularly her concluding

⁵⁷ Cited in E. Ann Kaplan, ‘Troubling Genre/Reconstructing Gender,’ in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Urbana: Ill., 2012), 73.

⁵⁸ Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. (London: Verso, 2001).

⁵⁹ Viktoria Sergeeva, ‘The Final Film Role of Galina Tikhonova. “Iye” Published on the Site of “The Art of Film.”’ YSIA. March 31, 2020. <https://ysia.ru/poslednyaya-rol-v-kino-galiny-tihonovoj-film-iye-opublikovali-na-sajte-zhurnala-iskusstvo-kino/>

⁶⁰ Mónica Delgado, ‘Cannes 2018: Capharnaüm by Nadine Labaki and Aika by Sergei Dvortsevov,’ Desistfilm, accessed July 5, 2023, <https://desistfilm.com/cannes-2018-capharnaum-by-nadine-labaki-and-aika-by-sergei-dvortsevov/>.

claim that the film is about the 'abject,' that it is, 'a film about seeing that which we have rejected, spat out, *othered* and now refuse to acknowledge as part of ourselves.'⁶¹ Not only is this conclusion reductive in its assumption of a collective 'we' of cinema-goers, untroubled and isolated from those such as *Ayka*, but also it collapses the maternal thematic into the general situation of Moscow as what Kaganovsky terms a 'cruel'⁶² city, when in fact much of the film demonstrates the especial threats placed upon female bodies of reproductive age. While, to be sure, Kaganovsky is correct in tracing affinities between exploited labourers globally, her reading of the heroine as 'a kind of combined portrait of migrant women,' who 'could exist almost anywhere: Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Canada, Mexico or the United States,'⁶³ is problematic in that it cynically forecloses the possibility of such films inspiring in Russia any productive critical reevaluations of structural injustices and the emergence of a canon of intersectional feminist Russophone film. This takes us to another important tension within critical cinema studies, namely that between the 'social audience' and 'spectator' of a given film. Even if Dvortsevov and Borisova's films do leverage filmic language to interpellate a spectator who feels pity for *Ayka* and *Michiye*, without an extradiegetic 'group of people who buy tickets at the box office'⁶⁴ within Russia, the impact of their work may be limited to the mere registration of reproductive injustice, without a path forwards.

Unlike *Mama*, which was written by Borisova alongside her fellow Moscow-based Sakha director Vladimir Munkuev, *Ayka* received funding from various international sources; in addition to the Russian Ministry of Culture, it was a co-production with the Council of Europe, the Mitteldeutsche Medienfoerderung, and the Polish Film Institute. In the press pack for its Cannes screening, Dvortsevov is quoted as saying that his film is both 'about a Kyrgyz girl' and 'about all of us;' like Kaganovskaya, affirming the need for a

⁶¹ Lilya Kaganovsky. 'Review: Sergei Dvortsevov, *Ayka* (Kazakhstan, 2018).' In *KinoKultura* 65 (July 2019). <http://www.kinokultura.com/2019/65r-ayka.shtml>

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Annette Kuhn. 'Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory.' In *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sue Thornham. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 150.

film to appeal to the universal yet therein undermining its disruptive potential outside of the cinema. It is pertinent that Anton Dolin, the reviewer of the film from the now-banned *Meduza* describes *Ayka* as a 'humanitarian catastrophe of Sobyenin's Moscow,' noting that the events take place 'in our time.'⁶⁵ Dolin sees the city as 'captured with surgical precision;' from its 'insurmountable chaos and paranoid control, momentary glamour and commensurate poverty,' yet his review does not merely subsume the feminine migrant narrative into a broader critique of contemporary Russia, but rather commends Dvortsevov for addressing the specific plight of new migrant families in its capital.

When considering what *Ayka* and *Mama* as cultural products can achieve for reproductive justice, we can employ the critical vocabularies of both postcolonial and feminist studies. Although the nuances of debates surrounding 'decolonization' within studies of the post-Soviet states lies outside the scope of this article, both modern-day Kyrgyzstan and the Sakha Republic were once colonial possessions of the Russian Empire.⁶⁶ *Mama* and *Ayka* may provoke what Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang have described as 'settler guilt and haunting,'⁶⁷ which cannot easily be displaced through minor conciliatory policy changes. At a time when the Russian government has adopted a decidedly pro-natalist position⁶⁸, both films prompt their implied spectator to revise their conception of 'wanting a child' as a discrete binary decision, and instead to see the assent to motherhood as an ongoing process, contingent upon the minute-by-minute material conditions to which an expectant or new mother is subjected. The absence of levity in each of the films, save for a few short frames featuring babies and infants, can

⁶⁵ Anton Dolin. "'Ayka': A Humanitarian Catastrophe in Sobyenin's Moscow: Sergei Dvortsevov's Film About A Kyrgyz Migrant Shown at Cannes.' *Meduza*. May 19 2018.

<https://meduza.io/feature/2018/05/19/ayka-gumanitarnaya-katastrofa-v-sobyeninskoy-moskve>

⁶⁶ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.' *Decolonization : indigeneity, education & society* 1.1 (2012): 1–40.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 9.

⁶⁸ See Helge Blakkisrud, 'Russkii as the New Rossiiskii? Nation-Building in Russia after 1991,' *Nationalities Papers*, 2022, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.11>.



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be understood perhaps as a mechanism for alerting the implied viewer that the 'reprieve' which they might seek from their complicity in structural inequality is never coming, that no policy changes can make up for past traumas of these migrant mothers, but that activism for holistic reproductive justice, with a focus both on the etiology of inequities and on the gradual efforts to correct them, is still worthwhile.⁶⁹



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