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**About Freaks, Killers and Real Men:  
The Vigilante Hero of Aleksey Balabanov's Films**

**DRAFT**

**Introduction: On Culture and Heroes**

It is a truism that cultural heroes are both products and producers of social attitudes and values. In looking at Russian culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is hard not to see obvious correlations between social and political trends and the heroes created by Russian writers and artists: obvious examples are the superfluous man, born as an implicit critique of the closed and repressive society of Nicholas I, and the positive hero, an essential element of the propagandistic and utopian culture of revolution in the pre- and post-1917 Russia. The hero of post-Soviet cinema can be seen as a reflection and a product of a society profoundly traumatized not only by 70 years of Soviet power, but by more than a decade of political crises, economic decline, social unrest and war. The realization that the ideals and values of Soviet society were empty lies ignited not only a wave of revulsion and cynicism, but a search for new values and heroes as well. Because of cinema's role as "dream factory" for modern societies, its central role in imagining new heroes should come as no surprise. Nor is it surprising that the post-soviet hero has been, by and large, defined by his opposition to Soviet values, myths and legends. If Soviet culture attempted to create a supra-national hero, the new Soviet man, post-Soviet cinema stresses specifically national heroes and values. If a willingness to sacrifice personal goals in the service of the collective good was an essential value of the positive hero of Soviet cinema, the post-Soviet hero turns to the opposite values of radical

individualism. In the same way that the positive hero rejected the values of the aristocratic superfluous man, the post-Soviet non-conformist hero represents a complete rejection of the values and worldview of the Soviet positive hero.

On the basis of four feature films he has written and directed since 1997, Aleksei Balabanov has established a reputation as one of post-Soviet Russia's most popular and successful directors. From low budget contemporary urban gangster film to art house stylization of silent pornographic cinema, to big budget crime and war dramas shot on location on several continents, Balabanov's films combine an astonishing stylistic versatility and an equally striking thematic consistency. All of his films feature prominently characters who live on the margins of Russian society: from creators and consumers of pornography in turn of the century St. Petersburg to contemporary urban gangsters, hit men, hobos, punks, pimps and prostitutes, demobilized soldiers, hostages and Chechen terrorists. Balabanov's fascination with marginal characters in extreme situations suggests some of the problems and paradoxes of creating new heroes and values in post-Soviet cinema. In what follows, I will focus on the development of the theme of vigilante violence as the key to Balabanov's response to contemporary post-communist Russian society and culture.

### **Brother (1997): The Ambiguous Vigilante Hero**

Balabanov's first big hit, a low budget take-off on the gangster movie released in 1997, imagined St. Petersburg in the 1990s as a nightmarish Hobbesean world, where the only law is that the strong take what they want from weak. Into this lawless and violent world wanders, quite by accident, the film's young hero, the recently demobilized Danila

Bagrov, a kind of post-Soviet *Ivan durachok* recently roused from his stove, who in a few astonishingly violent days manages to eliminate a good proportion of the local mobsters. Danila lives on the margins of society, among the post Soviet *lumpenproletariat*, the homeless, punks, and the bottom rungs of the working class. Danila has come to the big city in search of his older brother Vitia, who, his mother hopes, will set him on the path to success in the brave new world of post-Soviet Russia. In fact, Danila encounters several father figures: in addition to his brother, the militia officer Diadia Kolia, Hoffman, and even the truck driver who gives him a lift to Moscow at the film's end, all represent models of adult male behavior. In the end, he rejects all of them and sets out on his own for Moscow, his future uncertain. Like the ubiquitous orphan searching for a father-figure in many post-Stalinist and post-Soviet films,<sup>1</sup> Balabanov's Danila Bagrov is searching for a new system of values to replace the discredited values of the Communist era and to fill the moral and ethical vacuum of the post-Soviet world. Despite the obvious influence of American genre cinema, Balabanov's search for new values and a new hero for Russian society takes him towards a new nationalism in the cinema that has been associated with films by Nikita Mikhalkov, Alexandr Sokurov and Balabanov's producer, Sergei Selyanov (footnote: *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*).

Although he makes friends easily, Danila Bagrov is a loner, an outsider with a mysterious past, who constantly surprises us, and the characters with whom he comes into contact, with his skills and interests. Despite his repeated denials that he saw any real action in Chechnya, it is unlikely that Danila's physical bravery, his coolness under

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<sup>1</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1963), Sergei Bodrov, *Freedom is Paradise* (SER) (1989), Pavel Chukhrai, *The Thief* (1997), Vitaly Kanevsky, *Freeze, Die, Come to Life* (1989).

pressure, or his tactical acumen and skill with weapons were learned while serving as a clerk at army headquarters. But just as important in separating him from the mass of Petersburg professional killers as his military know-how, Danila brought back from Chechnya a set of ethical values that make him an outsider in both the criminal and civilian underworlds in which he lives. As ignorant, naïve and inconsistent as he may be, when it comes to core values, Danila is clear and consistent: in addition to physical bravery, self reliance, unconditional loyalty to “brothers,” and the willingness to use violence to defend the weak and revenge the injured, Danila shares the typically Russian desire to justify human existence.

Influenced by both American vigilante films of the 1970s and the rampant criminality and breakdown in public order in the post-Soviet world, Balabanov puts the question of the ethical justification of violence at the center of his films. *Brother* asks the question: is an individual morally and ethically justified in using violence in defense of the weak and vulnerable in a world where the authorities are unable to maintain order and unwilling to uphold justice? Or will vigilante violence eventually corrupt even the best-intentioned? The popularity of Balabanov’s films and, especially, the personal cult of Sergei Bodrov, Jr., suggest a desperation for a hero who will be able to bring order and justice out of chaos and anarchy and reestablish traditional ethical norms “from the bottom up.” Nevertheless, *Brother* ends on an ambiguous note: (**show clips**) Hoffman’s refusal to accept money and his sad but firm judgment on Danila – ‘vot i ty propal’ – and Sveta’s rejection - “ja tebia ne liubliu” - suggest that Danila may indeed have been corrupted by violence, the “strashnaia sila” of the city that Hoffman is always talking

about. The movie ends with Danila on his way to Moscow and the possibility of a second chance.

### **About Freaks and Men (1998): The Costs of not Opposing Evil**

Although sometimes dismissed by critics as an exercise in pure style lacking in content, and, on the surface, at least, far removed from the world of Balabanov's films sets in the present, *About Freaks and Men* can be read as a sequel to *Brother* and an introduction to *Brother 2* and Balabanov's most recent movie, the 2002 *War*. Although set in a sepia-tone fin-de-siecle St. Petersburg of the silent era, the characters and the world of *Freaks and Men* are strikingly similar to the post-Soviet world of Balabanov's other films. Its characters are all, literally or metaphorically, outsiders, living in the shadows of bourgeois St. Petersburg, where the weak and innocent find themselves at the mercy of the strong and unscrupulous, and kidnappers and pornographers ply their murderous trades without, apparently, any concern for the police.

Through a series of complex plot twists and turns, *About Freaks and Men* depicts, without the slightest moralizing or preaching, the corruption and violation of innocence as two sexually repressed middle-class families fall apart as a result of their coming into contact with Russia's first pornographers. The end of the insular middle class idyll of the Radlov and Stasov families is, like all revolutions, brought about by a combination of political, economic, sociological, technological and psychological forces that are as relevant to the post-Soviet as to the pre-Revolutionary world: not only the absence of police authority, but the presence of unscrupulous and greedy servants and new media technologies that allow corrupt people, influences and images into the hitherto closed and protected world of the middle-class family. This is not to deny that long before

destructive influences from the outside penetrated the insular family life of the bourgeoisie, the core of this world was already corrupt. Balabanov sees all the hidden weaknesses and secret vices of Russia's Victorians, sexual frigidity and repression, voyeurism, and masochism, and a blindness to their own desires and the desires of others. In its depiction of the collapse of the Radlov and Stasov families, *Freaks and Men* suggests an aestheticized and psychologized "End of St. Petersburg," a domestic revolution influenced equally by Marx, Lenin, de Sade, Freud and Sacher-Masoch.

In addition to the unscrupulous machinations of the pornographers and the sexual dysfunctions of the Radlovs and Stasovs, Balabanov finds another cause of the fall of the bourgeoisie in the weakness and passivity of male characters like Engineer Radlov, Dr. Strasov and Putilov, the young and feckless filmmaker who works for the pornographers, despite his love with Liza. Although his intentions, in love and in art, are honorable, Putilov's inability to oppose the forces of evil or to act as a morally conscious and responsible adult, reinforced by the repeated phrases "Putilov, Vam pora" and "Liza, ia spasu vas," seals Liza's fate. Although he eventually succeeds in freeing himself from Johan and Kictor Ivanovich, Putilov abandons Liza to her fate. His professional success – by the end of the film, he appears to be a celebrity film director - suggests not only his personal moral failure, but the failure of the cinema itself to fulfill its promise to become as a medium of spiritual truth to the masses (i.e., Radlov's table talk). By ignoring pre-revolutionary silent romantic melodrama (Bauer), historical and literary adaptations (Chardynin), and monumental propaganda (Eisenstein), and choosing instead to focus on the origins of the pornography industry in S&M postcards and shorts, Balabanov emphasizes the moral and physical freakishness of the cinema's creators and the

voyeurism of its consumers in ways that are reminiscent of David Lynch's 1986 masterpiece *Blue Velvet*. Balabanov's ambivalence about the cinema is expressed perfectly in the opposition between two extreme images of art, the transcendent singing of the Siamese twins and the obscene and degrading craft of the pornographers. The fact that the twins suffer a horrible and lonely death, while Putilov becomes a celebrity director of pornographic films provides a striking indictment of the moral vacuity of the cinema as well as the dilemmas of the ambitious artist in a capitalist economy, in which he is dependent on the degraded taste of the mass audience.

With all this in mind, it becomes possible to interpret the significance of Balabanov's decision to place *Freaks and Men* in fin-de-siecle Petersburg, that is, on the eve of the dual revolutions that have defined Russian ideological, social, economic and cultural life for more than 70 years, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the invention of the cinema. In effect, *Freaks and Men* resolves *Brother's* ambivalence concerning the moral justification of vigilante violence by focusing on the human costs of not opposing evil. By putting the pornographic film at the center of the film, Balabanov paints a stark image of an art that ignores its moral and ethical responsibilities. At the heart, then, of *About Freaks and Men* are three interrelated critiques:

- of the failure of the pre-Revolutionary middle class to defend itself and its values against the violence and fanaticism of the revolutionaries;
- of the moral bankruptcy of an art that ignores its ethical responsibilities;
- of artists who compromise with power out of economic self-interest and a desire to make a career.

By using the destruction of two middle class families as an allegory of the various disasters of Russian history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Balabanov justifies Danila Bagrov's vigilante violence in the post-Soviet world and his own activist cinematic project.

Balabanov's image of the pre-revolutionary middle class's blindness, passivity, prejudice, sexual repression, perversity and, ultimately, its responsibility for the disasters of the Revolution is, I have to admit, a relief from the relentless idealization of the Tsarist world that audiences have been subjected to in recent films like Mikhalkov's *Barber of Siberia* and Sokurov's *Russian Ark*. And yet, as I hope to convince you, Balabanov's position is actually quite close to that of these two acknowledged contemporary proponents of a new Russian nationalism in the cinema.

### **Brother 2 (2000): Everything I Needed to Know, I learned in Soviet School**

Having resolved any lingering doubts about the ethical status of vigilante violence in *Freaks and Men*, Balabanov resumes the adventures of his vigilante hero, Danila Bagrov in *Brother 2*. Perhaps the most important difference between the original and the sequel is that no matter how many people Danila maims or kills in *Brother 2*, no one, on the screen or behind the camera, challenges or questions his right to do so and his innocence and absolute moral rectitude remain untouched. *Brother 2* is more explicit about Danila's army service and develops the theme that the values that Danila brought back from the war in Chechnya – self reliance, physical bravery, loyalty, patriotism, willingness to use violence in a worthy cause - are precisely what Russia needs to extricate itself from its assorted post-Soviet crises. At first, however, Danila's views are rejected out of hand by his girlfriends :

- When Danila rejects the music of Irina Saltykova as fake, a symbol of the empty, self-indulgent hedonism of the New Moscow, and contrasts it to “real” music by groups like DDT and Nautilus Pompilius that soldiers listened to during the war, Irina replies that we're not at war, that peace has different laws:



- When he tells Dasha/Marilyn that “Russians don’t abandon their own in war,”<sup>2</sup> he gets the exact same reaction (**show clips**).

But by the end of the film, when Dasha replies to Liza Jeffrey’s “Are you gangsters?” with one of the film’s best and most quoted lines, “No, we’re Russians,” we are meant to understand a new association of Russianness with a willingness to take the law into one’s own hands and not to flinch from aggressive violence in defense of a worthwhile cause.

Rather than modifying Danila’s personal code, *Brother 2* combines the familiar theme of loyalty to a “brother,” in this case a fellow soldier from Chechnya, with the necessity of a new national spirit of Russian patriotism, which includes a significant dose of anti-Americanism. The main sources of Danila’s patriotism, emblems of his childlike innocence, include the little poem that Fedya Belkin recites (Я узнал, что у меня есть огромная семья) and the Nautilus Pompilius song “Goodbye, America” performed by the children’s choir at the same school event. (**Show clip**) The poem eliminates any complex or disturbing political aspects of patriotism by comparing the motherland to one’s family and suffusing the whole in a kind of folklorish or animistic vision of the natural world. The song suggests that the time has come for Russians to reject the utopian dream of America and to focus on their own lives and their country’s problems. Unsurprisingly, the childish simplicity and naïve optimism of these texts pack a strong emotional appeal for the unsophisticated and innocent Danila and, presumably, for the mass audience as well. Anti-Americanism presents a darker side of Danila’s patriotism.

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<sup>2</sup> This idea is parodied when drunk Vitia, surrounded by the cops, yells “russkie ne sdaiutsia,” seconds before being dragged out of his hiding place.

Although Danila had no love lost for Americans, Jews, or Caucasians/Chechens in the original *Brother*, his youthful innocence, winning naiveté and good intentions disarmed any serious charges of xenophobia. His inarticulate prejudices had no impact on his relation with Hoffman and could be safely laughed off in the scene where a stoned Danila mistakes a Frenchman for an American (**show clip**). In *Brother 2*, on the other hand, anti-Americanism plays a more central and serious role, not only in the depiction of several characters, but, more significantly, as a major support of the new Russian patriotism. In a sense, the worst crimes of Mennis (i.e., larceny, prostitution, murder, snuff movies) are less a sign of anti-Americanism than the corruption of Russians by America's "*strashnaia sila*," to quote Hoffman. Signs of Americanization are visible in all the Russian émigrés: for example,

- the Gogolian salesman who tells Danila that "Мы русские не обманываем друг друга," and then sells him a car that, instead of going to San Francisco and back, barely gets him from Brighton Beach to the Pennsylvania state line<sup>3</sup> (**show clip**);
- the cynical taxi driver who ridicules Danila for saying that he loves his motherland (**show clip**);
- Dasha, transformed into the hard-nosed prostitute Marilyn by her experience of life on the mean streets of America, before she is finally saved by Danila;
- And, most important of all, in the transformation of Dmitry Gromov. Not only does he refuse to help Danila, who has, of course, come to America expressly to help him and to avenge the death of his brother, but when Danila returns him his money, instead of thanking him, he complains that Mennis didn't pay interest!

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<sup>3</sup> Danila's one weakness is that he is easily manipulated by the discourse of Russian nationalism. See how Vitia manipulates him in the first *Brother* by describing the difficulties for Russians created by the Chechen mobsters.

Danila doesn't say anything, but we imagine that he is thinking of Dasha's comment that the only thing Americans take seriously is money. (show clip)

Money, then, not the city of the original *Brother*, is the real “strashnaia sila” by which America works its corruption. According to Balabanov, Americans are not only obsessed with money, but they believe that money represents strength and, even more importantly, obviates the need for righteousness. To this old and familiar critique of American materialism, Danila opposes the equally traditional Russian notion that strength is in truth or righteousness (*Pravda*). Rooted in folk utopian tales, the symbolism of a struggle between *Pravda* (the light of truth and justice) and *Krivda* (falsehood, injustice) was also used by Bolshevik propagandists in introducing the new revolutionary icon of the Red Star (Stites *Revolutionary Dreams* 1989: 15, 85 and Tumarkin *Lenin Lives* 1983: 70-72). This theme is introduced in the campfire scene, when Danila, Vitia and Dasha debate the sources of strength (Vitia says in money, Dasha says in the “primitive” and “animalistic” force of American blacks, while Danila says that strength is in *Pravda*) and resolved in Mennis's office, when Danila reduces the head American criminal to tears and “convinces” him that strength is indeed in righteousness, not in money. (show clip) Obviously, the director is interested in convincing, not Mennis, who doesn't understand Russian, but his domestic audience of the power of righteousness. Danila and Dasha's triumphant return to Russia rewrites the ambivalent ending of the original *Brother*, when Danila hitchhiked to Moscow to begin a new life, “perhaps as a truck driver.” After all, no one wants to argues with success.

**War (2002): Russian Rambo**

Despite Balabanov's remark (*Brother 2* official website q & a) that there would be no sequel to *Brother 2*, his most recent film, *War*, demands to be read as the third installation of the *Brother* franchise. At its core, *War* depicts a surprisingly tragic version of what might have happened to Danila, last seen comfortably seated on an Aeroflot flight from O'Hare to Sheremetevo, listening to Nautilus' "Goodbye America" on his cd player, upon his return to Moscow. Audiences that have seen Balabanov's earlier films will be familiar with themes and characters of *War*: they include:

- Heroic "outsider" who has learned the lessons of war and argues the necessity of applying them to post-Soviet life;
- Moral imperative of loyalty to brother/comrade in arms;
- Justification of vigilante violence when State cannot insure justice;
- Importance of nationalist discourse and values;
- Corruption of Russian values and life by foreign influences.

By shifting the genre from urban criminal drama to war film, Balabanov increases the historical and political specificity of the plot and characters and significantly darkens the overall feel of the film. The characters, situations and the violence, especially two absolutely horrifying pre-credit murders, are less cartoonish and the fate of the "hero" more tragic than we would expect from the director of the *Brother* films.<sup>4</sup> In order to free the hostages from a band of brutal Chechen fighters, the everyman hero Ivan becomes his enemy: by killing anyone who gets in his way and enslaving and brutalizing a Chechen shepherd, this Russian Rambo accomplishes his mission and is praised by Aslan, the commander of the Chechens, who says: "Ivan, ty nastoiashchii goret." The tragic paradox, of course, is that in order to defeat a cruel enemy in the name of a "higher" and more humane civilization, Ivan has to abandon the values of that "higher" civilization and

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<sup>4</sup> The interest in media representation of reality connects *War* to *About Freaks and Men*.

descend to the level of his enemy. Instead of being rewarded for liberating hostages, Ivan is arrested and charged with kidnapping and murdering civilians. The government's cynical willingness to punish Ivan for wartime brutality connects *War* to a series of anti-war films, from Stanley Kubrick's 1957 *Paths of Glory*, to Bruce Beresford's 1980 *Breaker Morant* and, most recently, Alexander Rogozhkin's 1998 *Blockpost*. But *War* does not seem like an anti-war film: rather Balabanov is repulsed by a hypocritical government and incompetent army leadership fighting a war they lack the will to win. By arresting Ivan, the Russian government falls victim to the sort of narrow and legalistic reasoning that has been castigated as antithetical to Russian values and thought by Russian nationalists from the Slavophiles to the present-day.

While Ivan's heroism is undercut by his brutality, Captain Medvedyev, played by Sergei Bodrov, embodies a more politically correct and more traditionally Russian version of heroism. Because of paralyzing injuries suffered when he was captured, Captain Medvedyev's heroism is expressed in his indomitable spirit, his insistence on remaining a soldier in spirit, and his refusal to be broken, no matter what his captors do to his body. Because his heroism is passive, that is, resides in his ability to survive brutalization by his captors, Medvedyev avoids Ivan's fate, and his heroism is intact at the movie's end. Medvedyev's passive heroism has deep roots in Russian cultural and religious traditions, especially the "Martyr Saints" of the Orthodox Church (e.g., Saints Boris and Gleb) as well as in the popular Tolstoyan image of the Russian soldier's greatest strength being his stamina and ability to bear up to hardships that would crush most men. The film's pessimism is relieved somewhat by the knowledge that the Captain will not abandon Ivan. At least, that is Ivan's hope. Ivan's fate suggests that, despite the

success of his mission to free the hostages, Balabanov remains conflicted about the morality of vigilante violence even when committed in the name of a worthwhile cause. The figure of Captain Medvedyev, on the other hand, suggests not only the director and screenwriter's desire for an authentically Russian, and ethically unassailable, form of heroism, as well as the practical difficulties involved in squaring this circle. Unable to accept Ivan's brutality and his imprisonment, Balabanov defers the dream of a truly Russian hero saving the day till the next film.

### **Conclusions: The Vigilante as Tragic Hero**

I have argued that the central theme tying Balabanov's four films together is an examination of the ethical and moral justification of vigilante violence, defined as the willingness to use violence in a worthwhile cause when the State has proven itself incapable of establishing minimal security and social justice. Balabanov's films all reflect the raging anarchy of post-Communist Russian life, the desperate desire of many ordinary Russians for simple solutions to complex problems, and the power of nationalist discourse in contemporary Russian culture. In the course of Balabanov's films, the vigilante evolves from a naïve and innocent hero of contemporary urban folklore into a tragic figure, who sacrifices himself, metaphorically and literally, to save the rest of us. Balabanov interrogates the consequences of the vigilante's active opposition to evil, comparing them to the costs of the liberal middle class's passive non-resistance to evil. Despite all of his flaws, the vigilante remains an extremely attractive figure to Balabanov, and his audience. While many viewers recognize and are repelled by Balabanov's use of the traditional tricks of the demagogue – the reliance on simple solutions to complex and intractable problems, the willingness to trade in xenophobic stereotypes, the

privileging of action and emotion over reason, etc. – given the power of the media to model reality, an important theme of all of Balabanov's films, it would be wise not to underestimate the power of Balabanov's vigilante critique of contemporary Russian society.