FOOLS AND CUCKOOS:
THE OUTSIDER AS INSIDER IN POST-SOVIET WAR FILMS

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Post-Soviet cinema has created a cult of the outsider, a reflection of the chaos that has defined life after 1991. Outsiders regularly serve as a means to explore crime, racism, poverty, and even tsarist history on Russian screens. Aleskei Balabanov's immensely popular *Brother* films (*Brat'*, 1998 and *Brat' 2*, 2000), for example, follow the adventures of Danila Bagrov, a former soldier who becomes caught up in the crime scene of St. Petersburg and then Moscow (and even later, Chicago). He is, in Julian Graffy's words, "a representative of a post-Soviet generation unexpectedly released from the cage of moral and social certainties."[1] Danila is an embodiment of the crime, racism, excitement, and ambiguities of post-Soviet Russia. He is an outsider in that most contradictory of Russian cities, St. Petersburg. Yet Danila is not the only outsider that stands as a symbol for post-Soviet culture, just the most convenient one—the use of outsiders in contemporary Russian cinema is such a prevalent theme that it qualifies as a cult.[2]

The army certainly helped to shape Danila's personality and his search for meaning in Russia in the 1990s. Although his past is only hinted at, the audience knows that Danila has returned from a war region and has learned how to handle weapons.

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[1] Julian Graffy, "Brother" *Sight and Sound* 10/5 (May 2000), 44.

[2] See all of Balabanov's films, particularly *Of Freaks and Men* and the films of Pavel Lungin for other particularly important examples of outsiders in post-Soviet Russia. For another time and place where "outsiders" held such appeal in the cultural sphere, see Peter Gay's classic work (the inspiration for this article in many respects): *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1968).

Chechnya is not specifically mentioned, but Balabanov's film implies that Danila has seen action there. His status as an outsider rests on his view of the war, the new Russian state that sent him to fight, and his ideas about Russia's future (Danila comes across as a Russian nationalist who resists the invasion of American culture). *Brother* is not a traditional war film, but its action necessitates an understanding of the Chechen War in particular and Russian history in general.

Danila illustrates some interesting connections between the cult of outsiders in post-Soviet Russia and the role of war in defining Russian national identity. In 2002, a controversy arose about two war films that made these connections the subject for intense debate. This article will examine the debates that erupted over 2002's "Oscar Affair" as a means of exploring post-Soviet culture, the role of war in Russian historical memory, and the use of cinema as a means of challenging history. Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *The Cuckoo* (*Kukushka*) and Andrei Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* (*Dom durakov*), the two films at the center of the controversy, tell us a great deal about the role of outsiders in the post-Soviet cultural atmosphere.

Outsiders as Insiders in Russia

One of the defining cultural features of Post-Soviet Russia has been a thorough reexamination of the past. Scholars and commentators may have had difficulty describing the transition from a communist system to a post-communist one, but the relative pluralism that characterizes the post-Soviet cultural sphere has led to a number of interesting products. Post-Soviet cultural life, as several scholars have argued, has attempted to search for a usable past that will serve as a means for Russians to create a

better future.[3] Not surprisingly, one of the most important arenas in which this search has taken place is cinema. Russian film makers have trained their cameras on all aspects of the Soviet era and started to reclaim certain aspects of the tsarist past as a source of post-Soviet national identity. From blockbusters such as Nikita Mikhalkov's *Barber of Siberia* (*Sibirskii tsiriul'nik*, 1998) to Alexander Sokurov's art house success, *Russian Ark* (*Russkii kovcheg,* 2002), the past has provided fertile soil for Russian directors.

One of the most important genres used in any attempt to deal with the past is the war film. As Denise Youngblood has argued, the war film proved to be an exceptionally important genre in Soviet cinema, for films made about military conflicts frequently provided a highly contested space for challenging Soviet versions of history.[4] War provided the anchors upon which the Soviet system moored itself—born in the First World War, developed in the Civil War, recast in the Second World War, and undermined by the Afghan War, the USSR's history was intimately connected to warfare. Soviet officials frequently employed the rhetoric of armed conflict to describe their attempts to build a new socialist society, a tactic cultural figures also used—one film journal from the early Soviet period was even called "The Cinema Front."[5] Every state tells its history through the prism of war, but few nations have used war as a defining feature of life as Soviet leaders, writers, artists, film makers, and citizens did.

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[3] See Kathleen Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory During the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[4] Denise Youngblood, "The Cinema Front: Soviet War Films," (Talk delivered at the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies, 9 February 2004). See also Birgit Beumers, "Myth-making and Myth-taking: Lost Ideals and the War in Contemporary Russian Cinema" *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 42/1-2 (March-June 2000): 171-189.

[5] Youngblood, "The Cinema Front."

Post-Soviet Russia has also been shaped by war. The bloody conflict with Chechnya has served as the central event of the past decade. For Vladimir Putin and other Russian politicians, the conflict has provided a mission, one connected to the "war on terrorism." Putin's phenomenal success at the polls has rested in part on his ability to persuade Russians that he can supply a sense of stability through a defeat of Russia's enemies that threaten its security. Opponents of Putin's, on the other hand, often use the brutal means employed in the Caucasus as proof of renewed authoritarianism. In the eyes of many Russians (and Western observers), Putin's Chechen War is a reminder of his KGB past and thus Soviet imperialism, while others view the war as a revival of Russia's pre-Soviet attempts to build an empire in the south.

Cinema has played a vital role in how man Russians have viewed the war—Sergei Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountains* (*Kavkazskii plennik*, 1996), appeared at the beginning of the conflict and reminded audiences of nineteenth century Russian imperialism, while Aleksei Balabanov's *The War* (*Voina*, 2002), reflected the ways in which the ongoing Chechen conflict had hardened each side's view of one another. In short, films of the Chechen War have continued the tendency of Soviet film makers to use the genre of war film as a way of challenging official versions of armed conflict, while others have used film to support the ongoing conflict.

One important event that has not received much attention in Post-Soviet Russia is the Second World War. Known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia, the fight against Hitler and the Nazi armies became the most important myth of Soviet life from 1945 until the late 1980s. Although the regime's uses of the conflict as a sustaining myth waxed and waned, the experience of the Great Patriotic War, as Amir Weiner has argued,

"became a yardstick by which identity, meritocracy, and status were measured throughout the Soviet polity."[6] While the victory over the Nazi invaders continues to serve as an important holiday in Russia, the memory of the war has remained largely uncontested in post-Soviet life. The "cult of World War II in Russia" may have disappeared,[7] but certain versions of the Soviet myth survive. The new Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow, for example, serves as a very visible reminder of the Soviet suffering endured from 1941-1945, ensuring that Russians remember the war as one during which they endured incredible hardships but ultimately triumphed because of their collective spirit. The addition of an Orthodox chapel on the site of the museum may reflect certain changes in Post-Soviet conceptions about the war, but the decision to place a Holocaust memorial around the back of the main building attests to the tenacity of Soviet versions of the war.

Given the willingness of Russian directors to question the Chechen War, the fact that no post-Soviet film reexamined the Second World War seems surprising. Some of the best Soviet films dealt with the Second World War and its ramifications and helped to construct a multifaceted memory of that conflict.[8] At the same time, Soviet films of the

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[6] Amir Weiner, "The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities Within the Soviet Polity" *Russian Review* 55/4 (October 1996), 638. See also Weiner's monograph, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

[7] See Nina Tumarkin's *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (NY: BasicBooks, 1994).

[8] My view of memory, culture, and cinema differs from that of Denise Youngblood's in her article "A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War" *American Historical Review* 106/3 (June 2001): 839-856. Youngblood argues that films such as *The Cranes Are Flying*, *Ballad of a Soldier*, *Fate of a Man*, *The Ascent*, and *Come and See* helped to "return to the Soviet people an authentic memory of the conflict." Although these films certainly provided complex visions of the war, it is hard, as Jay Winter argues in his critique of Youngblood's article, to determine exactly what an "authentic memory" is and how one can discuss it in historical terms. Instead, because of the multiple narratives and multiple memories of war that films contain, it is best to "interpret film lightly" and to pay attention to how any given film is

Great Patriotic War did not challenge certain aspects of the fight against the fascists. Every Soviet film that featured the war stressed the suffering of the Soviet people on some level, even while many films from the Thaw focused on how the war affected ordinary men and women made difficult decisions. Thus, Soviet war films in part confirmed the necessity of the fight against Hitler's forces.[9] Everyone, even children such as Tarkovsky's Ivan, became an insider to the war and how it shaped Soviet experience.

Two films that appeared in 2002 challenged traditions of the Russian war film as a genre by focusing on outsiders. Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *The Cuckoo* and Andrei Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* depict events in the Second World War and Chechen War, respectively. Both use outsiders as a means of exploring these conflicts and articulating pacifist messages. Both attempt to reexamine the past in an attempt to create a post-Soviet culture, and both received considerable critical attention as a result. While Russian critics overwhelmingly preferred Rogozhkin's film over Konchalovsky's, the reaction to the films demonstrated how outsiders became insiders in the search for a usable past.

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received before determining how it embodies a "collective memory." See Jay Winter, "Film and the Matrix of Memory" *AHR* 106/3 (June 2001): 857-864. In this article I employ memory and collective memory as Winter and Alon Confino do—as a matrix that includes a "set of signifying practices linking authorial encoding with audience decoding of messages about the past inscribed in film or in other sources (863)." In other words, before one can talk about "collective memory" or an "authentic memory," one should pay attention to the text and the reception of the text. As the reaction to both films discussed in this essay makes clear, the post-Soviet war film has acted as an important source for understanding memories of the past and how they shape contemporary thought. For an excellent guide to memory and its uses in history, see Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method" *AHR* 102/5 (December 1997): 1386-1403.

[9] See Birgit Beumers, "Myth-making and Myth-taking." As Beumers notes, "the [cinematic] soldiers in the Great Patriotic War—from Alesha Skvortsov of *Ballada o soldate* (Ballad of a Soldier, Chukhrai, 1959) to Nadezhda Petrukhina of *Kryl'ia* (Wings, Shpeitko, 1966)—put their task over personal ambitions (171)."

Cuckoos in War

Aleksandr Rogozhkin has become one of the most popular and critically acclaimed post-Soviet directors. Since 1991, his films have consistently explored Russian history, captured the realities of post-Soviet anxieties, and presented characters that embody Russian traits. *The Chekist*, Rogozhkin's 1991 controversial film, explored the role of violence in the Bolshevik project through the life of a member of the first Soviet political police. Beginning with 1995's breakthrough hit *The Peculiarities of the National Hunt* (*Osobennosti natsional'noi okhoty*), Rogozhkin made a trio of comedies with the same characters that explored life after the Soviet Union and the attempts to preserve Russian national traits (the other two films were 1998's *The Peculiarities of the National Fishing* [*Osobennosti natsional'noi* rybalki] and 2000's *The Peculiarities of the National Hunt in Winter* [*Osobennosti natsional'noi okhoty v zimnii period*]). Rogozhkin expanded on his interests in Russian comedy and war with his 1996 semi-sequel to *Peculiarities*, *Operation "Happy New Year"* (*Operatsiia 'S novym godom'*) and his 1998 metaphoric view of the Chechen War in *Checkpoint* (*Blokpost*).[10] Rogozhkin, in other words, represents the rare film maker who tackles various subjects, genres, and cinematic forms that find both critical and commercial success.

The Cuckoo tells the story of three outsiders and their wartime experiences. Set in September 1944, the entire film takes place in one of the most remote theaters of the war—the Lapland regions of Finland, near the Soviet border. The setting immediately establishes a difference from other Russian depictions of the Second World War—

[10] See Beumers, "Myth-making and Myth-taking," 186-189; and Andrew Horton, "Boredom and Oppression: Alexander Rogozhkin's *Blokpost*" *Central European Review* 1/6 (2 August 1999); online at <http://www.ce-review.org/99/6/kinoeye6_horton2.html> for more on this film.

Moscow does not appear at all, nor does the Nazi invasion of the USSR factor into the action. Instead, the film concentrates on an area that adds to its focus on outsiders. The film begins with a Finnish sniper named Veikko (played by Ville Haapasalo, a regular in Rogozhkin's films) being chained to a rock by Nazi soldiers. Veikko is a pacifist who has been conscripted into the Nazi army. Because of his views, he has been punished—left with only a few supplies and bullets for his sniper's rifle, Veikko has been cast away from the conflict. When one of the Nazi officers tears away his dog tags, Veikko is marked as an outsider.

The second scene of the film introduces the second outsider, a Soviet Captain who has been arrested for "anti-Soviet activities" and is being taken to a court-martial. The Captain (played by Viktor Bychkov, Kuz'mich in Rogozhkin's national comedies), sits in the back of a jeep while a fellow officer tells him "I believe you're innocent. You're a good man and an honest officer." With his character established, the Captain rides off into the border region, passing by Veikko (although the Soviet officers do not see him). As the jeep pauses for a break, Soviet planes strafe the area and kill all the soldiers except for the Captain, who sustains a concussion. Veikko watches through the scope of his rifle in between attempts to free himself from the rock.

The third outsider then appears, a Sami woman named Anni (played by Anni-Kristiina Juuso). Anni lives in a traditional Sami hut near the region where both Veikko and the Captain have been abandoned, and she stumbles upon the bodies of the Soviet soldiers on a periodic trip to get water. Anni is the ultimate outsider of the threesome—she attempts to live according to her traditional customs, but the war and the worlds of Veikko and the Captain have invaded hers. She starts to bury the Russian dead, but as

she throws sand on the Captain's face, he stirs. She drags him back to her hut to treat his wounds as Veikko again watches. Once the two have left, Veikko renews his efforts to free himself. Through a mixture of cleverness and strength, he eventually succeeds and wanders toward Anni's home. The first third of the film ends when all three outsiders encounter each other—up until that point, minimal dialogue, long shots of the remoteness of the region, and clues into why these three have been emotionally wounded by the war set the stage for the remainder of the picture.

The rest of the film explores how the three outsiders react to each other and how the war has shaped each of their perceptions of the other. The main tension of the story is the relationship between Veikko and the Captain, while Anni provides the only source of understanding. Both combatants respond to her beauty and the fact that the war has intruded upon her life. Anni's husband, we learn, has been gone for four years, conscripted to fight the Soviet Army in the Winter War between Finland and the USSR. Each of the three characters speaks only in their native tongues, a device used to great effect in this and other European war films. Because of their failure to understand each other's statements, the ways in which the war has conditioned both Veikko and the Captain determine how each responds to the other's actions.

Veikko immediately announces that the war is over for him—condemned to die but now free, his earlier pacifist leanings have found confirmation. The Soviet Captain cannot understand Veikko's pronouncements and instead sees only his Nazi uniform. The Captain calls him "Fritz" and labels him a "fascist." The wounded officer also introduces the first meaning of the title when he calls Veikko a "cuckoo," the name Russian troops gave to Finnish snipers. The term refers to a Russian folkloric belief

about the birds—if someone hears a cuckoo in the forest, he asks the bird how many years he has left to live, then counts the bird's cries to get an answer.

Cuckoos appear as a theme in two famous Soviet Second World War films. Sergei Bondarchuk's *Fate of a Man* (*Sud'ba cheloveka*, 1959) follows the story of a single Russian soldier, Andrei Sokolov, and his wartime journey. Sokolov (played by Bondarchuk) survives battle, imprisonment, a concentration camp, and a death sentence over the course of the film. After a daring escape, Sokolov returns to the Soviet front lines. As he walks through a trench, a cuckoo calls out three times. Soon after hearing its call, Sokolov finds out that his wife and two daughters died during the Nazi invasion.

Similarly, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo*, 1962), also traces the wartime fate of a single Russian, the title character. The film opens with Ivan playing outside near his home. When he hears a cuckoo, the young boy runs up to his mother and speaks the first words of the film: "Momma, a cuckoo's there (*Mama, tam kukushka*)." Ivan's mother smiles as the noise of a bombardment breaks the idyllic scene. Ivan, a hardened veteran of war, wakes from his dream of his former childhood. Tarkovsky uses this element of Russian folklore to foreshadow the tragedy that befalls Ivan. His dream sequences portray Ivan's childhood as it should have been, but from the very beginning the cuckoo calls for him.

In Rogozhkin's film, by contrast, the first use of the term "cuckoo" is ironic and serves as a means of understanding the cultural divide that separates Veikko and the Captain. The Soviet officer sees the Finn solely as a sniper who desires his death, while Veikko insists in Finnish that he no longer wants to be a part of the war. Rogozhkin also uses this failure to understand each other humorously. When Veikko attempts to learn

everyone's name, he points to himself and says "Veikko." Anni understands and gives her name, but when the Soviet Captain is asked his name, he replies "Psholty" ("get lost"). For the remainder of the film, both Veikko and Anni refer to him as "Sholty."

The film alternates between humorous exchanges (one scene finds both Veikko and Sholty talking about love in a sauna Veikko has constructed, then Anni leads the Finn into her hut), Sholty's distrust of Veikko (the Soviet soldier simply cannot abandon his prejudices of the enemy), and Anni's attempts to understand what both have brought into her life. Although none of the characters learn to understand each other, the viewer learns that all have been emotionally scarred by the war. Anni has lost her husband and must try to live off the land alone, Veikko has had his student days interrupted and been forced to fight in a war that repels him, while even Sholty admits that his "soul has been emptied by the war."

Although Anni nurses both men, in the end, Sholty's inability to come to terms with Veikko's character nearly produces tragic results. When a Soviet plane crashes near Anni's hut, the war intrudes again. Both Veikko and Sholty rush to see the plane. Veikko immediately sees the plane's cargo—fliers that announce Finland's exit from the war. For him, his decision to stop fighting in September was the correct one. Sholty ignores the fliers, which are printed in both Russian and Finnish, and sees only the two dead female pilots. For him, this sight is confirmation of his hatred toward the Germans, embodied by Veikko. Sholty takes a pistol from the plane and shoots the "fascist." As Veikko gasps for his life, he forces a flier into Shotly's hand and states "I surrendered a long time ago."

Only at that moment does Sholty read the flier and understand what Veikko has been saying. Conditioned by Soviet calls for revenge, he has refused to recognize Veikko as a human being. Once he reads the flier, however, Sholty carries Veikko back to Anni's hut, where the Sami woman performs a ritual designed to bring Veikko back from the land of the dead. After an all-night vigil, Veikko survives. Anni does not know that Sholty shot the Finn, and asks the Russian to sleep with her. Before they do so, she tells Sholty in her native language that her name is not Anni, but "Cuckoo" (we later learn that Sholty's name is Ivan). Thus Anni/Cuckoo becomes a woman who enables two men to regain a sense of humanity in the midst of war. She is, in Rogozhkin's words, "a cuckoo who raises two nestlings."[11] Actual cuckoos, of course, never raise their nestlings.

Rogozhkin's film uses outsiders and the cuckoo metaphor to advance ideas not usually present in Russian films of the Second World War. *The Cuckoo* contains very little about the war, how it began, and the struggle of the Soviet people under German occupation. Instead, Rogozhkin focuses on a remote slice of life and how war--any war—affects individuals. Each of the three protagonists has experienced depravations and their wartime experience has left them emotionally shattered. Rogozhkin, who stated that "war is a dirty and clumsy business" as a reason why he did not include much combat in his film, produced a lyrical, pacifist film that runs counter to the dominant myths and memories of the Great Patriotic War. His outsiders have become insiders in their attempts to articulate a challenging vision of the war and how it can be understood in Post-Soviet Russia.

[11] Interview with Alexander Rogozhkin by Petr Shepotinnik, "Chelovek—eto zvuchit" *Iskusstvo kino* November 2002. Available online at <http://www.kinoart.ru/magazine/11-2002/repertoire/Cookoo2/>

Russian film critics praised Rogozhkin's film and the way it tackled such a complex subject as the Second World War. Tat'iana Iensen extolled the direction of Rogozhkin, the acting of the three main characters, and even stated that the film had helped to become a part of the history of the war. Iensen writes that Rogozhkin has created a story of three "exiles/outsiders" (*izgoi*), one that offers "an unprecedented interaction between reality and the screen." All three characters have become outsiders in different ways, but the meeting between the three, a meeting that only could have taken place in such a war, produces a new myth about the conflict, one that simply tells the story of "one Finn and one Russian soldier."[12] Although neither fully understands each other by the end, for Iensen, the barriers that existed between the two have opened enough. This "strict, verified, and ascetic" film, she concludes, has become part of that

[12] Iensen's comments offer a counterpoint to Birgit Beumers's assertion that recent Russian films of the Afghan and Chechen Wars do not offer new myths. According to Beumers, the refusal of directors such as Balabanov to "take on such roles as 'missionaries,' 'teachers of ethics,' and 'prophets' of Russia's future" is a sign of an "overall refusal of film-makers to participate in myth-making." Beumers, "Myth-making and Myth-taking," 189. My own views correspond with those offered by Iensen in her review—both Rogozhkin and Konchalovsky tell fictionalized accounts that make statements about war in general. Much like memory, myths also have multiple functions and contain multiple meanings. As Joanna Overing has argued, myths can take the form of "mythic truths"; in other words, ideas about the past contained in cinema can express a certain meaning to audiences that act as a means of understanding their world. Multiple myths can, as Overing states, "endow a people with their images of selfhood by stating sets of identity criteria for a people and a community." In this view, any film that offers a vision of the past can act as a myth, which does not mean that is false or deceptive (as Beumers tends to argue). See the collection edited by Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (which includes Overing's article on myths), *Mythsd and Nationhood* (NY: Routledge, 1997). In the case of the Great Patriotic War, several myths have emerged over the years that inform Russians and how they understand the war and its place in their national identity. Most scholars tend to examine only the "official myth" of the war (see Beumers and Tumarkin) without examining the popular myths of the war. Rogozhkin's film may not conform to standard Soviet visions of the war, but as a work of fiction and a visual narrative, it still presents a mythical version of the war. Moreover, Rogozhkin's take on the war should not necessarily be seen as a "counter-memory" or a version of Youngblood's "authentic memory." Instead, it is one source of a larger myth and memory of the war that Russians draw upon when understanding the overall impact of the conflict. For more on myths, memories, and national identity, see the work of Anthony D. Smith, particularly his collection of essays, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

era of history.[13] *The Cuckoo*'s achievement, in other words, is to add more layers of meanings and interpretations to the memory of the Great Patriotic War.

Rogozhkin's film enjoyed a great deal of critical success because of the reception it received from critics such as Iensen. Headlines announced the "triumphant flight of *The Cuckoo*" and predicted it would captivate audiences and critics alike.[14] Because of the success of his earlier films, Rogozhkin's account of the war did well at the box office. *The Cuckoo* also captured the 2003 Nika Award (Russia's top honor) for Best Film, Best Director, and Best Actress; the 2003 Golden Eagle Award for Best Film, Director, and Actor (Viktor Bychkov); and the 2002 Best Film and Director prizes at the European Film Festival in Italy. That such an avowedly pacifist film about a mythic conflict received such praise in Post-Soviet Russia reveals how outsiders can provide insight into history.

Fools and Chechens

By contrast, Andrei Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* polarized critics for its use of outsiders to tell a story of the ongoing Chechen War. Konchalovsky's film takes as its inspiration an actual event from the First Chechen War. In 1996, a mental institution near the Chechen-Ingushetia border found itself in the midst of the action. The hospital staff fled the building, leaving the patients literally running the asylum. Amazingly, they managed to survive as battle raged around them. The story of sane inmates in the middle

[13] Tat'iana Iensen, "Nezlye nadezhdy" *Iskusstvo kino* 11 (2002). Available online at: <http://www.kinoart.ru/magazine/11-2002/repertoire/Cookoo/>

[14] Valerii Krichin, "Triumfal'nyi polet 'Kukushki'" *Rossiiskaia gazeta*. Available online at: <http://www.film.ru/article.asp?ID=3612>.

of an insane war proved irresistible to Konchalovsky. Using this factual basis as a starting-off point, *House of Fools* focuses on the true outsiders to war—patients in a Russian mental asylum.

The main character of the film is Zhanna (played by Julia Vysotskaia, who spent two months with mental patients to prepare for the role). Zhanna serves as an emotional anchor for the rest of the patients, who represent an assortment of mental handicaps and nationalities. As a way of adding a touch of realism to his film, Konchalovsky uses actual mental patients for many of his roles—the actors blend in with physically and mentally handicapped people. Zhanna believes that she is engaged to Bryan Adams, the Canadian pop star (who appears throughout the film). Dream-like sequences featuring Adams romancing Zhanna contrast with scenes of the squalid conditions one expects to see in a former Soviet mental institution. For the patients in this "house of fools," the major conflicts concern bathroom privileges and the quality of the food.

The war soon changes this situation. One day the doctor finds the phone dead and, after a troop transport glides by, concludes that he must evacuate the patients. As he prepares to leave, his staff announces that they will not spend the night in the asylum. When morning dawns, the inmates are alone. While they celebrate their "freedom," the patients soon learn how it was obtained—explosions rock the hospital and a portrait of Boris Yeltsin falls from the wall while a television plays images of a Russian general smugly talking about the war. A group of Chechen soldiers enters the hospital, quickly realizes that it is full of mental patients, and promises not to hurt anyone. As they set up camp inside, a Chechen paints, in enormous black letters on the side of the building, "SICK PEOPLE (*bol'nye liudy*)."

The film then focuses on the interactions between Chechens and patients, particularly on Zhanna's relationship with a single Chechen soldier named Akhmed. Zhanna discovers Akhmed and some of his fellow soldiers playing her accordion, and agrees to sing and dance for them. As a joke, Akhmed asks Zhanna to marry him, a proposal she takes seriously. She leaves the Chechens assuming that if she agrees to marry Akhmed, she should turn up that evening for a wedding. Although a "sick person," Zhanna's human emotions contrast with the cynicism of the Chechen troops.

After apologizing to Bryan Adams, Zhanna is convinced by her roommate's argument that she should marry Akhmed because she should "not give up a chance to be happy." She makes her decision, and the rest of the patients help her prepare for her wedding—one of the inmates, Vika, gives Zhanna a white hat and tells her that "it is a powerful symbol. As the world ignores this tragedy, you are marrying a man who is fighting against Russian imperialism. It's an act of international significance. The media should know about it."

Zhanna bids farewell to her friends and goes to Akhmed. When his fellow soldiers make fun of him and his Captain bellows at him for making such a promise, Akhmed announces that he intends to keep his word of honor. Zhanna and the Chechen soldiers dance, drink, and sing. Eventually, however, she tells Akhmed she cannot marry him because her love for Bryan Adams is too strong. As the two sit outside, Zhanna informs Akhmed that "we are alive because someone somewhere loves us. They pray for us and give us strength." Faced with this observation from a "sick person," Akhmed confesses that he never intended to marry her and asks for forgiveness. He also tells

Zhanna that he never intended to fight in a war, but when his brothers were killed and his father's house was destroyed, he asked for a gun.

As the Chechen and patient reach this understanding, the war intrudes again. Russian shells strike the building and Akhmed's unit prepares to attack Russians who are in a nearby market. Zhanna, still clad in her wedding attire and holding her accordion, attempts to play songs that will drive the madness of war away. As she appeals to Akhmed for help, he tells her to get back to where she belongs. Stung, Zhanna stumbles around the hospital courtyard as Vika, who has grabbed a machine gun, shoots at the Russians yelling "down with Russian chauvinism." In the defining scene of the film, a downed Russian helicopter crashes near Zhanna and the resulting explosion blows her hat off of her head. The war has made Zhanna truly mad.

The Chechens do not return to the hospital; instead, the doctor reappears and recounts how he attempted to get a bus for the patients but was captured. Soon Russian troops enter the hospital and immediately act more suspicious and brutal than the Chechens who had previously brought "freedom." This characterization of Russian troops had been established earlier in the film, when a brief ceasefire brought the two sides together. The Chechen soldiers wanted to retrieve the body of a fallen comrade and offered money for his return while Russian soldiers only wanted marijuana and traded ammunition for it. As the commanders of both sides sat and reminisced about Afghanistan, a Russian soldier who had already smoked a joint accidentally fired his rifle, breaking the truce. The episode, the only time when Russian troops appeared before the final ten minutes of the film, established the soldiers along certain

stereotypes—uncaring, uneducated, unpatriotic, and consumed with the desire to get out of Chechnya any way possible.

When the Russian troops enter the hospital, the earlier characterization is fleshed out. All the troops fear that the Chechens booby-trapped the building. One soldier sits in a state of shock and cannot move. When the Russian commander (a cameo by Evgenii Mironov) comes to check on him, he breaks down before the doctor, declaring that "it's crazy out there." For good measure, the Russian quotes Tolstoy and offers a conclusion for the film—"why is man happy when he kills another? What's there to be happy about?"

The Russian troops capture the few remaining "bandits" except for one—Akhmed. The film closes with Akhmed appearing in line for food at the hospital. When the doctor demands to know who he is, Akhmed answers: "I am sick. I need to be treated." The patients concur: "he's one of us [*eto zhe nash bol'noi*]. He's Akhmed." Both Russians and Chechens at the end realize that the outsiders, the "sick people," understand life better than they do.

The War Over Outsiders

Russian critics by and large blasted Konchalovsky's film. In part their anger stemmed from the fact that the Russian Oscar Committee, led by Konchalovsky's brother, Nikita Mikhalkov, selected *House of Fools* as Russia's official entry for the Academy Award over *The Cuckoo*. Articles in the Russian press had a field day with Konchalovsky, Mikhalkov, and the film, prompting an unusual discussion about the merits of these two war films and the outsiders they feature. The public debate provides

a rare opportunity to examine how films represent history, their implications in present-day Russia, and how both films led to discussions about Russian national identity.

When the "Oscar" decision appeared, initially a number of journalists cried foul and relished using the title of Konchalovsky's film. "A Foolish Choice," "Taken by Fools," and other headlines blared across various headlines the day after the selection was announced.[15] For many film critics and journalists, the decision appeared rigged because Mikhalkov led the committee that awarded the Oscar (the fact that Mikhalkov and his brother do not get along and that Mikhalkov voted for Valery Todorvskii's film *The Lover* seemed not to have mattered).[16] Even other Russian directors weighed in on the controversy—Ivan Dykhovichnyi, the director of *Music for December*, *Moscow Parade*, and 2002's *The Kopeck*, gave an interview where he argued that Konchalovsky had become a victim of his brother's intrigues. For Dykhovichnyi, Mikhalkov's decision to vote for another film was only part of his devious plan to *prevent* his brother or any other Russian director from equaling his Oscar (Mikhalkov won in 1994 for *Burnt By the Sun*). In this view, Mikhalkov tapped a weaker film (in Dykhovichnyi's words, "*The Lover* certainly, is a hundred times weaker than *Dom durakov*," proof that Mikhalkov intended for Konchalovsky's film to receive the Oscar nomination). The real "victim" in Mikhalkov's megalomania was Aleksandr Rogozhkin, whose film many believed actually could win the Oscar.

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[15] Diliara Tasbulatova, "Snimaetsia kino" *Itogi* 52/2002 (30 December 2002). Available online at: <http://www.itogi.ru/paper2002.nsf/Article/Itogi_2002_12_30_14_3018.html>

[16] For the relationship between the two brothers, see Denise Youngblood, "The Cosmopolitan and the Patriot: The Brothers Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky and Russian Cinema" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 23/1 (March 2003): 27-41; for Mikhalkov's vote, see Ekaterina Barabasha, "Postuchit li 'Oskar' v 'Dom Durakov'?" *Nezavisimaia gazeta*. Available online at: <http://www.film.ru/article.asp?ID=3497>.

Part of the controversy stemmed from the fact that very few people, including critics, had actually seen *House of Fools* when it received the surprise elevation. Konchalovsky's film had captured the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival, had been snapped up by Paramount for a U.S. release, but had not appeared on Russian screens. By contrast, *The Cuckoo* had premiered both in Russia and abroad and had received nearly universal acclaim from Russian critics. When Rogozhkin's film debuted at the Moscow Film Festival in July 2002, the Moscow paper *Nezavisimaia gazeta* declared that "Tolstoi has provided us with brothers" and praised *The Cuckoo* as "the doubtless leader of the festival."[17] Just as importantly, Rogozhkin's film had not captured any awards at the major European festivals where it appeared. For some Russian journalists, this "snub" confirmed a belief that the West did not understand Russian art, while an "outsider" such as Konchalovsky pandered to Hollywood conventions. When Konchalovsky's film debuted in Russia, the battle lines had been drawn—many critics went to the film angered over the "Oscar Affair" and savaged *House of Fools*.

Gleb Sitkovskii, writing in *Iskusstvo kino*, stated in the first paragraph of his review: "Andrei Konchalovsky has released a bad and thoroughly false film." Among other criticisms, Sitkovskii labels *House of Fools* "Western political correctness," a thinly-veiled attack on Konchalovsky's life in the West (he resides in Los Angeles and London).[18] For Sitkovskii and other critics, Konchalovsky's film panders to the West in

[17] Ekaterina Sal'nikova, "Tolstoi obzavelsia brat'iami a Rogozhkin pobratal russkikh s finnami" *Nezavisimaia gazeta* 2 July 2002. Available online at: <http://www.ng.ru/kino/2002-07-02/9_mmkf.html>.

[18] Gleb Sitkovskii, "Tridtsat' shest' s polovinoi" *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (2003). Available online at: <http://www.kinoart.ru/magazine/02-2003/Repertoire/Fools/>

its attempt to send an "obviously didactic" message of "good Russians, bad Chechens." Comparing the film to Aleksei Balabanov's controversial film, *The War*, Sitkovskii finds Konchalovsky's depiction lacking—Balabanov depicted the Chechens as too bad, while Konchalovsky reversed this characterization. "In general, add Konchalovsky onto Balabanov and you will get *War and Peace*," he wrote.[19] Other critics decried Konchalovsky's supposed influences and blasted *House of Fools* as completely derivative. The film was labeled a copy of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, reminiscent of *Volga-Volga*,[20] and even, in Sitkovskii's imaginative criticism, a rip-off of Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* and Hieronymus Bosch's 1490-1500 painting *The Ship of Fools* (complete with Bryan Adams as the Christ figure).[21]

The perceived slight that *The Cuckoo* received at the hands of Russia's official cinema figures colored many of the reviews for *House of Fools*. After the initial onslaught of negativity, many Russian critics began to reexamine Konchaolvsky's film and its themes. One writer for *Iskusstvo kino*, Dmitrii Bykov, centered his article on Konchalovsky's film around the controversy and the resulting reaction to it. Bykov stated that he could, like everyone else, "review the film badly," but then noted that most reviewers tend to comment on how the film "meanly bypassed *The Cuckoo* for an Oscar."[22] With this in mind, Bykov sets out to view the film more favorably. He compares the acting, pacifist message, and the way in which the realities of war are

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[19] Ibid.

[20] See Valerii Kichin, "Liubite vragov vashikh …" *Rossiiskaia gazeta*. Available online at: <http://www.film.ru/article.asp?ID=3525>.

[21] Gleb Sitkovskii, "Tridtsat' shest' s polovinoi."

[22] Dmitrii Bykov, "Oksiumoron, ili C nami Bog" *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (2003). Available online at: <http://www.kinoart.ru/magazine/02-2003/Repertoire/Bykov/>

presented in both *The Cuckoo* and *House of Fools* and concludes that the former contains nothing better than the latter, and perhaps even "strongly concedes to it." Ultimately, he concludes that "Konchalovsky's film seems to me not pacifist at all," but provides a more complex message where "the irrational inevitability of war is shown with frightening detail." Bykov sees the film as one where all kinds of people caught in the "rage, dullness, and ugliness" of war remain human, people for whom the viewer can feel pity while also remember vividly.[23]

Elena Plakhova, writing in *Moskovskie novosti*, compared the virtues of both films in her article "'Fools' +- 'Cuckoo' = 'Oscar'?" Plakhova calls *House of Fools* "a candid and fair film" that represents a sort of "anti-*War*" free from one of "Balabanov's interpretations." In Konchalovsky's vision, the Chechens "are not shown as degenerate murderers, but as beautiful, noble people placed in a monstrous situation." At the same time, Plakhova praises Rogozhkin's vision of war and its outsiders, branding it "a poetic fairytale/ballad capable of touching even the hardest heart." Taken together, Plakhova muses, the two films' depiction of two very different wars are worthy of the Academy Award.[24]

After the initial furor had begun to subside, other writers began to situate Konchalovsky's depiction of the Chechen War in the context of the times. Aleksei Balabanov's film *The War*, which appeared earlier in 2002, contained characterizations of heroic Russian soldiers combating villainous Chechens. By comparison, according to Valerii Krichin (writing in *Rossisskaia gazeta*), Konchalovsky has created "humane and

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Elena Plakhova, "'Duraki' +- 'Kukushka' = 'Oskar'?" *Moskovskie novosti* 2002. Available online at: <http://www.mn.ru/issue.php?2002-41-44>

noble" characters suffering because of war. Krichin states that the film "has now left the screen and will work on the public consciousness of the masses," a process that he hopes will allow Russian "to forget about Volgodonsk, the Moscow explosions, "Nord-Ost," and, possibly, a destroyed Manhattan." Instead of the "generic images of bearded villains with automatic weapons," Konchalovsky uses "loonies" to remind the viewer that the Chechens remain people too.[25] Because of the general tenor of Russian culture in 2002 regarding the ongoing war, Konchalovsky, as something of an outsider himself, has produced a significant achievement, if not a work of real art.[26]

Conclusions

The protracted, public debate over *The Cuckoo* and *House of Fools* reveals a great deal about post-Soviet culture just as it obscured much about the two films and their role in adding to the memory of the Second World War and the Chechen War. Both of these films contained important ideas about war and its importance in Russian history, and both created striking visual scenes that add to previous cinematic explorations of Russia's wars. The controversy over the Oscar Committee tended to preclude any discussions about how Rogozhkin and Konchalovsky wrestled with the myths and memories of the wars they depicted.

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[25] Valerii Kichin, "Liubite vragov vashikh …"

[26] Ekaterina Barabash eventually reached similar conclusions in a later article she wrote for *Nezavismaia gazeta*. Barabash compared the critical reaction of Konchalovsky's film to the heavy criticism of Nikita Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia* in 1999. In both cases, Barabash argues, critics went to the film already armed with "biases" and "venomous reproaches." Barabash does not consider *House of Fools* to be a masterpiece, but also contrasts its representations of Chechens with the "dangerous influence" of Balabanov's depiction of noble Russians and hateful Chechens. See Barabash, "Kak Konchalovsky-kon"iunkturshchik s"el Konchalovsky-khudoshnika" *Nezavismaia gazeta*. Available online at: <http://www.film.ru/article.asp?ID=3519>. For more on the reception to Mikhalkov's film, see Stephen M. Norris, "Tsarist Russia, *Lubok*-Style: Nikita Mikhalkov's *Barber of Siberia* and Post-Soviet National Identity" (article currently under review).

Jay Winter has warned against reading any film "directly and in an unmediated way as a text to be incorporated within discursive fields of different origins and character."[27] In the case of Russian critics who wrote about the "Oscar Affair" and both films involved, most tended to view the works of Konchalovsky and Rogozhkin through one lens—Konchalovsky's "didactic film" and Rogozhkin's "poetic film." "Film," as Winter persuasively argues, "does not instruct or indicate or preach. It ministers, it challenges conventional categories of thought, it moves the viewer." Ultimately, "no film is strictly didactic, since images have a power to convey messages of many kinds, some intentional, some not."[28]

How then do the films of Konchalovsky and Rogozhkin minister and challenge? Both offer important ways to think about the memory of war in Post-Soviet culture and national identity. Both continue the tradition of the war film as an important, highly contested space for challenging versions of history. Both contain images of war and characterizations of outsiders that leave any viewer with much to consider. Lost in the hullabaloo over which film should be the official Russian selection for the Academy Award was any discussion about how Rogozhkin's film represents the most important cinematic vision of the Great Fatherland War since Elem Klimov's *Come and See*. *The Cuckoo* is populated by three true outsiders of the war, and opens up new opportunities for discussions about the war and its myths in Russian memory. The 2003 appearance of Aleksei German, Jr.'s *The Last Train* (*Poslednii poezd*), which features a Nazi soldier as

[27] Jay Winter, "Film and the Matrix of Memory" *American Historical Review* 106/3 (June 2001), 857.

[28] Ibid., 857-858.

a human and not as a butcher, suggests that Rogozhkin's reexamination of the Great Patriotic War will not be the only one.

Only a few writers placed *House of Fools* in the context of most discussions of the Chechen War taking place in 2002. Alongside films such as Balabanov's *The War* and in the midst of fears resonating as a result of Moscow attacks, Konchalovsky's use of outsiders to convey humanistic themes about war and its culture represented a much more complex message about Post-Soviet life.

At the very least, these two films released in the same year attest to the multiple ways Russian film makers approached and appropriated the past, a point made by Diliara Tasbulatova in an optimistic article published at the end of 2002. Pessimistic pronouncements from the mid-1990s about the impending destruction of Russian cinema at the hands of Hollywood imports did not prove correct, for "2002 was extremely fruitful for Russian cinema." Nearly seventy films appeared, audiences increased, and directors released films about war (including Rogozhkin, Konchalovsky, and Balabanov, but also Nikolai Lebedev's *The Star*), post-Soviet crime (*Anti-Killer*, made by Konchalovsky's son Egor), the imperial past (Sokurov's *Russian Ark*), literary classics (Kira Muratova's *Chekhovian Motifs*), and social life (Irina Evteeva's *The Clown* and Todorovsky's *The Lover* were two of the most critically acclaimed in this genre). Overall, Tasbulatova concludes, "Russian cinema displayed films across all genres, except the boring one."[29] The Oscar affair helped to overshadow the fact that Russian films won prizes at festivals across Europe and North America. The arguments over

[29] Diliara Tasbulatova, "Snimaetsia kino." For another interesting view of the revival of Russian cinema by 2002, see Tat'iana Moskvina, "'Papino kino' i otechestvennaia kul'tura" *Iskusstvo kino* 2003/2. Available online at: <http://www.kinoart.ru/magazine/02-2003/Here%20and%20Now/moscvina/>.

which vision of war should be considered the best Russian film of the year provided a fascinating paper trail to read, yet it also attests to the various attempts cinema endeavored to represent Russia's past, present, and future.

Both *The Cuckoo* and *House of Fools* present intricate details of war in general and Russia's wars in particular. Rogozhkin claimed that he is "a historian" who finds "much in domestic war films that irritates" him. Even in the Great Patriotic War, for the director "war all the same remains war—there is nothing more foul or mean."[30] His film thus undermines many of the ways war films presented conflict in the Soviet period and offers a much more complex view about how "normal people are forced to become enemies in wartime."[31] Konchalovsky's film also presents war's impact on its participants as well as people who cannot fathom why people fight. His version of events in Chechnya adds to previous anti-war films such as *Prisoner of the Mountains*, among others. War films, in Russia and elsewhere, frequently portray victims and innocents to tell their stories, but rarely do outsiders to war figure so prominently and contest versions of warfare as significantly as do these two films.

House of Fools is set within a madhouse, which, as Angela Brintlinger has recently argued, represents one of the most important sites for artists attempting to confront the Russian past and post-Soviet present.[32] Novelists such as Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Makanin have set their works and their "outsider heroes" in the madhouse as a means to examine the relationship between self and society. In doing so, both "sift

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[30] Interview with Alexander Rogozhkin by Petr Shepotinnik, "Chelovek—eto zvuchit."

[31] Ibid.

[32] Angela Brintlinger, "The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past" *Slavic Review* 63/1 (Spring 2004): 43-65.

through the debris of Russian history, searching for what they can use to better understand their present moment."[33] The same could be said of the use of the madhouse in *House of Fools* and Anni's nest in *The Cuckoo*. Fools and cuckoos, it seems, say a great deal about Russian memory, history, and national identity in the Post-Soviet era.

[33] Ibid., 63.