

RUSSIA'S NEW fin de siècle

CONTEMPORARY CULTURE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

edited by

BIRGIT
BEUMERS

Russia's new fin de siècle brings together a range of texts on contemporary Russian culture – literary, cinematic and popular – as Russian artists and writers try to situate themselves within the traditional frameworks of past and present, East and West, but also challenge established markers of identity. Investigating Russian culture at the turn of the 21st century, scholars from Britain, Sweden, Russia and the United States explore aspects of culture with regards to one overarching question: What is the impact of the Soviet discourse on contemporary culture? This question comes at a time when Russia is concerned with integrating itself into European arts and culture while enhancing its uniqueness through references to its Soviet past. Thus, contributions investigate the phenomenon of post-Soviet culture and try to define the relationship of contemporary art to the past.

In the 2010s Russia has again entered political turmoil, so that this is the right time to look at the cultural anxiety and unrealized hopes of the 1990s. A period of boom and loss, this fin-de-siècle is a fascinating subject for Cultural Studies. Lucid and sensitive, Russia's new fin de siècle reveals the riches of Russian literature, film, and media at the turn of the 21st century. These brilliant artists, writers, filmmakers, and moral thinkers saw the end of their civilization; did they help it to make a new start? We know the incredible things that happened in Russia when the 19th century slowly turned into the Age of Revolution – but what will occur after this new fin-de-siècle? Using a path-breaking historical metaphor, this book navigates an unknown civilization in its decisive and fateful moment.

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A Note on Transliteration: We have used Library of Congress transliteration, except where a particular spelling is widely accepted (Yeltsin, Dostoevsky) and where otherwise indicated (i.e. where a particular translation of a novel has been used for references).

Chapter 10

'Address Your Questions to Dostoevsky': Privatizing Punishment
in Russian Cinema

Serguei Alex. Oushakine

Rossiiskaia gazeta, the newspaper of the Russian government, reported in 2009 about a court case in Briansk. A 62-year-old pensioner was sentenced to 11 years of imprisonment for killing three foreign-currency dealers. As the newspaper explained, the pensioner took to the gun in a desperate attempt to defend his own dignity, after the dealers insulted and then beat him up. When asked about the source of his motivation, the pensioner cited *Voroshilovskii strelok/Voroshilov Sniper*, a 1999 film by director Stanislav Govorukhin, in which, similarly, a pensioner turns into a gunfighter in order to make justice right and to punish some juvenile offenders. As the newspaper concludes, the 'locals are still divided about this blood vengeance: some consider the pensioner a murderer, while others share his deadly [*ubiistvennyi*] approach to the notion of "justice"' (Bogdanov 2009).

This case is not the norm, but it is not an exception in today's Russia. In the last decade, the practice of *samosud*, a do-it-yourself version of popular justice, has emerged as a prominent social phenomenon – be it ethnic riots in Kondopoga in 2006 (Anon. 2006) or a smaller-scale murders and punishments throughout Russia (see Gomzikova 2011). In this chapter I will explore only one aspect of this trend: the way the privatization of punishment is represented in Russian cinema. The chapter offers a close reading of two cinematic cases, Andrei Zviagintsev's *Elena* (2011) and Govorukhin's *Voroshilov Sniper*, in order to demonstrate in a reverse engineering move how publically executed punishments of the late 1990s were translated into quiet murders a decade later. This transition from 'punishments outside the law' to 'crimes without punishment', I suggest, is usually linked in Russian cinema to two important trends. First, the impotence of the existing legal system – the inefficiency of the regulatory functions of the state are often counterbalanced by the increasing prominence of networks of reciprocity and forms of loyalty based on family ties. Second, the privatization of punishment, the appropriation of extrajudicial authority is frequently achieved through the aestheticization of violence. The separation of moral issues from the distribution of force allows us to perceive violence as a 'communicative phenomenon', as Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky aptly put it (2009: 63), that is to say, as an artistic device, as a structural solution which is called upon to restore a necessary (narrative) balance.

Snobs vs slobs: Quiet murders

In September 2011 Russia's prominent film director Andrei Zviagintsev presented his new film *Elena* at the Russian festival Golden Phoenix. In May 2011 *Elena* had received a Special Jury Prize at the Cannes festival in the Certain Regard section; a dozen or so other

international awards followed after that. The critical acclaim abroad was amplified by a similarly laudatory reaction of Russian critics. Some even described *Elena* as 'the best film about contemporary Russia' (Galitskaia 2011), reading in it 'an anticipation (*predchuvstvie*) of a possible collapse' (Borisova 2011). In an extensive interview in Smolensk, Zviagintsev outlined the essence of his artistic project in general and of *Elena* in particular:

Andrei Zviagintsev: I might be pathetic, but the time of camp (*steb*) and irony is almost over. It is time for pathos now.

Journalist: More and more films now show to our young generation how to kill ... Our youngsters are not ready for such a solution! They are not ready [to accept] crime without punishment!

Andrei Zviagintsev: Are you blaming me? Do you really think that the object of art is a manual of sorts, an instruction how to kill? This is ignorance! The idea that art should educate was forcefully imposed on Russian culture by Soviet power, which had only one goal – to forge people, as if they were nails. The artist should be telling the truth, not giving [the audience] the gift of positive emotions. You should address your questions to Dostoevsky. [...] Unfortunately, quite fearsome murders have become a part of our daily routine. Evil has come into our world. [...] the model *Good Defeats Evil* is outdated. Evil sometimes triumphs ... The world is built out of horrible stuff, and therefore neither art nor cinema can take any responsibility for us (Petraikova 2011).

The dismissal of didactic and cathartic qualities of art – getting rid of 'Dostoevsky' – is important, as is Zviagintsev's emphasis of the triumph of Evil. The film, Zviagintsev seems to suggest, creates a possibility for judgement, but it is not a judgement in itself. The responsibility of moral (or aesthetic) evaluation is delegated to the viewer.

With its vaguely religious undertones and minimalist aesthetics, the film clearly managed to touch a social nerve, crystallizing key issues about social inequality, family responsibility, and the line that the individual may (or may not) cross when pursuing his or her view of justice. A story about crime without punishment, *Elena* follows a trend in Russian cinema that envisions the post-Soviet world as a place of moral decay and social anomie. With visual virtuosity, it transmits through a slow-pacing narrative a message that has already been articulated quite vividly in Petr Buslov's *Bummer* (2003): 'Nobody deserves pity. Nobody.'

Certainly the story that Zviagintsev tells us is not new. Vladimir, a successful businessman and a widower in his early seventies, marries Elena, a nurse in her late fifties, whom he met while being hospitalized. The story that preceded the marriage, as well as the two years of family life that preceded the starting point of the film, are never clarified. Yet the film portrays both characters as autonomous units that exist in the same space and even coincide with each other (at breakfasts) but who rarely merge into a couple. Throughout the film, Vladimir and Elena spend most of their time in a luxurious Moscow apartment in self-isolation – in separate rooms in front of their TVs. The proverbial description of the family as the 'nucleus cell of society' is decomposed in the film to its elemental actors. Family here

is a form of spatial co-habitation; intimacy and affection are not entirely absent but they are buried under daily routines and personal reservation.

This spatially dispersed conjugality as a metaphor for contemporary family starts looking different when we learn that Elena and Vladimir have children from their previous marriages. Elena's Sergei, a flabby beer-drinker with a wife, two kids and no job, lives in a crummy apartment in a depressing Moscow suburb. Vladimir's Katerina – the 'hedonist', as Vladimir calls her – is caustically smart and physically fit; she does not plan to have kids or any other long-term personal or professional attachments, preferring sex and cocaine instead. Despite their radically different economic and social background, both Sergei and Katerina practice the same structure of relation with their respective parent: without the parent's money, they would not be able to sustain their lives.

Subtly but persistently Zviagintsev demonstrates how money assumes the function of 'shared substance', i.e., the role of the key organizing entity (like blood or sperm in traditional societies) around which all kinship networks – from family to nation – are built. It is the circulation of money (instead of the usual circulation of people) that determines the configuration of families and clans now. Being outside the money circuit often means being outside the family network.

For a while, *Elena* unfolds as a film about the separate existence of the two clans: one critic framed this social juxtaposition as 'snobs vs slobs' (*snoby i zhloby*) (Shakina 2011). Indeed, Zviagintsev analogizes the relative social autonomy and spatial non-coincidence of the two groups as two currents of money that do not intersect with each other: Elena supports Sergei and his family with her pension, while Vladimir provides Katerina with the necessary allowances.

This familiar narrative about 'poor' and 'rich' relatives acquires a tragic dimension in *Elena* when the precarious autonomy of the two financial flows – and two clans and two classes that these flows indicate – is threatened. Elena's older grandson, San'ka, faces mandatory army conscription, and there are only two ways to avoid it: either to become a student at the right university or to bribe the right official from the army conscription office. Given the grandson's attitude (he is a *gopnik*, a recent version of hooligan), money is paramount in either case. Elena's pension is clearly not enough, and it is up to Vladimir to save the grandson or let him go under. A potential conflation of money flows (and clans), however, does not happen. Vladimir rejects the unwanted chain of relatedness: the gift is not initiated.

This refusal to engage is interpreted by Elena not as a financial but a moral decision. Vladimir's reluctance to provide money for her grandson is seen as a form of social racism, as a judgement that is motivated not by personal qualities of the individual (Sergei and Katerina are losers, each in a different way) but by his/her origin. Some social failures are clearly better than others. The meaning of the individual's lack of competence or success is not stable; it varies, depending on the individual's social background. Differences in access to money turn out to be only a disguise for more fundamental, anthropological, innate differences.

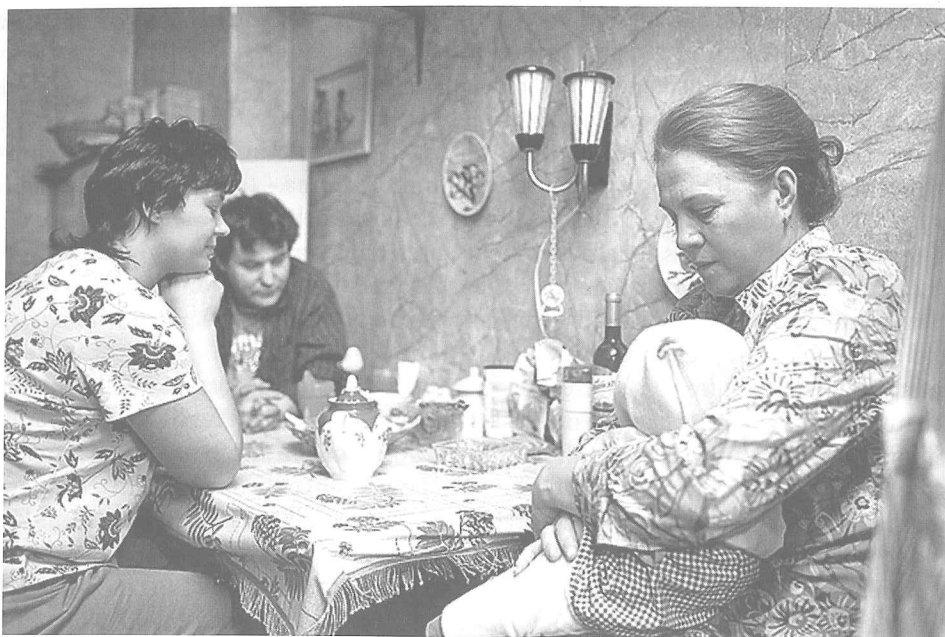


Figure 10.1: Elena and her clan. A still from Andrei Zviagintsev's *Elena*.

Zviagintsev is careful in framing his essentialist message by skilfully displacing the social drama caused by money onto something else: in a classical move, he depicts relations among people as relations among things. Visually, *Elena* is not so much a drama of characters as it is a drama of objects. The conflict between people is always mediated by something material: be it a written note, a telephone or a game console. By minimizing direct interactions and introducing tangible mediators, Zviagintsev solidifies a *social* distance as a material one.¹

It is hardly surprising, then, that in this world of things, the relations between Elena and Vladimir explode precisely at the attempt to objectify family ties in a legal document. Having barely survived a heart attack, Vladimir decides to compose his will. The drafting does not go well, and after several attempts Vladimir puts the draft off. However, he informs Elena about his intention. In a matter-of-fact tone, he explains his decision to leave all his property and money to his daughter, while providing Elena with monthly financial support for life. This attempt to short-circuit the flow of money within one clan/class becomes a final straw: Elena takes things under her own control. Adding a few Viagra pills to Vladimir's daily cocktail of medicine, she waits until Vladimir quietly dies in his bed from a heart attack.

Elena never gets caught; nor does she tell anybody about the real circumstances of Vladimir's death. Drafts of Vladimir's will are carefully burnt, and in the end her crime is rewarded: Vladimir's property is equally divided between Elena and Katerina. In the final

scene, Elena reunites in her spacious apartment with her son, two grandsons and a pregnant daughter-in-law. Life goes on.

It is precisely this open-ended finale of a story about murder motivated by money that makes *Elena* so significant and symptomatic. By shifting his gaze to material objects and by relying on 3/4 shots in portraying people, Zviagintsev unsettles any form of affective identification with the film's characters, positioning the viewer as a remote witness above (or on the side of) the conflict instead. Neither endorsing nor condemning the killing and with cold and distanced precision, *Elena* presents a case of *samosud*, an act of punishment in the name of a personalized version of justice. Nobody deserves pity in the film. Yet nobody is blamed, either. *Samosud* emerges here as a technical tool of sorts, as a default mechanism that restores the natural balance.

When Woody Allen retold and reframed Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in his *Match Point* (2005), he got rid of Raskolnikov's original fascination with superhuman abilities to transcend moral limits, picturing instead a generally unfair life. Indifferent to issues of justice and ethics, Allen's life is mostly governed by chance that could save (undeserving) individuals from oblivion, poverty or punishment. For Woody Allen, crime without punishment serves as an example of a general lack of causality in the modern world. Like in a tennis match, one can direct the movement of the ball only to a point: the simultaneity of different processes initiated by different players makes it next to impossible to control or predict the outcome of the social game.

Zviagintsev's version of crime without punishment is not about the celebration of chance or the evacuation of responsibility, though they are a part of the story, too. Nor is *Elena* driven by the theme of passion or revenge. Instead, the quiet murder is a calculated action here, 'an asocial concept of justice' (Goscilo 2010: 141), an action that is rooted in some fundamental belief in a hierarchy of values. *Samosud*, as Zviagintsev shows us, is not reducible to exercises of violence only. As the etymology of the word suggests, *samosud* requires a mental evaluation of options; it involves a deliberate judgement, not a spontaneous reaction.

In numerous interviews that followed the premiere of *Elena* Zviagintsev made it clear that the film is not a story about Elena's temporary blackout that pushed her to an unreasonable action. Rather, this is a paradigmatic story about the clash of civilizations of sorts, with Vladimir, 'who seems to be firmly controlling the world', on the one side of the divide, and with 'Elena-Motherland [...] constantly producing the thread of matter, giving birth to the flesh with nobody to animate it, on the other (Maliukova 2011). Valerii Kichin, an outspoken film critic, pushed this line of the argument to its limits, (seriously) suggesting to perceive Vladimir as a contemporary incarnation of Russian aristocracy, as a perfected and civilized Lopakhin from Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). This new Lopakhin is

pragmatic and hard-working; against the background of the cadavers who are only capable of drinking and guzzling, he appears like a spiritual nobleman [...] This is why it is so painful to see how the lifestyle that he so lovingly created would be so easily destroyed by the new barbarians, who would spit with gusto from the balcony [of his apartment]; just

like they spat in 1917, having thrown Rachmaninoff's grand piano out of the window. [...] We are in pain not only because these cadavers would turn a nicely furnished world in a pigsty, so familiar to them; we are also in pain because they are devoid of basic human qualities, and any society that is made up by them has no future.

(Kichin 2011)

Kichin would have liked the fact that one of the initial titles of the film was *The Invasion of Barbarians* (Borisova 2011). Unlike Kichin, Zviagintsev is reluctant to reduce the social to the biological, preferring to gloss over the main message of the film as a story about 'a personal apocalypses' (Bobrova 2011) that takes place against the backdrop of 'total metastasis' of social bonds in contemporary (Russian) society (Solntseva 2011). Elena's *samosud*, then, becomes a symptom, a metonym, a point of entry into a larger field of enquiry. The aesthetic distancing in *Elena* elevates a particular murder to the status of allegory, effectively reframing a criminal plotline as a story about the triumph of Evil in the world where nobody deserves pity.

Lonely avenger: Pointed strikes

Zviagintsev's *Elena* – with its distancing gaze and muted emotions – is a serious cultural evidence of the gradual transformation that the perception and representation of violence has gone through after the collapse of the USSR. Perhaps it would not be a mistake to suggest that the film reached a certain peak in tracing the process of privatization of violence in post-Soviet Russia. The epic tonality of *Elena*'s 'quiet murder' presents a striking contrast with random exercises of power administered by 'violent entrepreneurs', which was so common for the Russian cinema of the 1990s.²

The domesticated nature of violence highlighted by Zviagintsev brought with it yet another important aspect: not only does violence become strategically deployed within the closed limits of the private space, but it is also seen as justifiable. Relativized and contextualized murder, in other words, lost its absolute negative quality. *Samosud*, as a self-performed act of justice, has emerged as a key outcome of this re-evaluation of acceptability of privately exercised force. Important here, though, is that these (aesthetic) representations of taking law (and punishment) in one's own hands are often construed as implicit or explicit performances of political disagreement with existing modes of social validation.³

The almost universal praise of *Elena* by Russian critics documents another important change: the film's conflict had a class-based dimension, which was not ignored by reviewers, but only a few decided to dwell on it. Following Zviagintsev's suggestion to see the film's characters as timeless 'archetypes' (Egiazarova 2011), most critics refrained from reading the film as a mirror reflection of on-going processes in the country. This aesthetic modality of reading is relatively new: until very recently rhetorical and tropological interpretations of cinematic characters were mostly overshadowed by much more reality-driven concerns with

cinematic authenticity. The public perception of Govorukhin's *Voroshilov Sniper* is a good point in case. With poster-like boldness, Govorukhin's film articulates a message that was somewhat obscured by Zviagintsev's epic tonality, namely: 'frontier justice', as the English equivalent of *samosud* suggests, emerges when the state and law lose their regulatory power. *Samosud*, then, is not a consequence of a fundamentally flawed human nature but the result of concrete social conditions.

Despite their radical differences in visual aesthetics and narrative structures, *Voroshilov Sniper* and *Elena* focus on the same issue of the moral acceptability of violence. There is a significant difference, though. The dilemma of suspended or withdrawn judgement ('crime without punishment'), which is so crucial for Zviagintsev, manifests itself only in rudimentary terms in *Voroshilov Sniper*. Govorukhin's main question is not whether crime could or could not be punished. The main ethical issue of his film is whether crime could be punished by extrajudicial means. The crux of the drama in *Voroshilov Sniper*, therefore, has to do with the recognition of the radical non-correspondence of justice and law.

Voroshilov Sniper is, perhaps, the first post-Soviet cinematic production that expressed in an accessible visual language the idea that social humiliation, taken together with a lack of protection from the state, could be counterbalanced by self-executed acts of revenge aimed at restoring justice and punishing the offenders. True, to some extent this positivization of 'the man with a gun' already took place in Aleksei Balabanov's *Brother* (1997). Yet the point of Balabanov's film was not so much to demonstrate the collapse of legal system but rather to depict the process of self-organization, the process of self-structuring of the criminal milieu that emerged in the 1990s independently of the state. Mainly, *Brother* focused on the possibility of preserving the moral compass ('Truth') in the situation of political and ethical *bespredel*.⁴ *Voroshilov Sniper* starts from a different premise and from a different historical location. The title of the film is indicative here, referring to the badge of honour with the same name that was introduced in 1932 by the Soviet government in order to reward and stimulate the mass movement of snipers. The Soviet past is evoked here as a spring board for a moral counterattack, but also as a last resource of social skills.

The plot of the film is an explosive mixture of melodramatic twists, detective themes, comic lines and action-movie clichés assembled against the backdrop of the corrupt post-Soviet state. In a small town not far away from Moscow there is an odd family. Ivan Afonin, a veteran of the Great Patriotic War with multiple awards and decorations, takes care of Katia, his 18-year-old granddaughter, a student at a local musical college. Katia's father is missing; her mother – Ivan's daughter – is hardly present, constantly shuttling between Russia and Turkey with textiles and coat furs for sale. Govorukhin depicts this break up of the generational chain and the fragmentation of the family structure as parallel to the decomposition of larger societal bonds. A compressed synopsis of the situation in the country delivered through Ivan's television creates the necessary political landscape – with miners on strike in Siberia, with the government paying off arrears of wages and with 'band-formations' getting active in Dagestan.

These social upheavals, however, are distant, entering Ivan's well-measured life only sporadically. By and large, the quiet provincial town seems to be mostly immune to the corrosive influence of post-Soviet capitalism: pensioners are still playing their chess games at the communal table in a leafy courtyard, just as they played them 20 or 30 years ago. From the point of view of its material world, *Voroshilov Sniper* is constructed as predominantly late-Soviet; changes are mostly episodic intrusions: they are perfunctory and odd rather than systemic and overwhelming. It is exactly this apparent singularity of (disturbing) changes that creates a structural and poetic possibility for Govorukhin's overall message: even a lonely avenger can protect his family and his dignity with pointed strikes. In *Voroshilov Sniper* wrong-doers are still localized in time and space; Zviagintsev's universal triumph of Evil has to wait for its hour.

The time capsule of the provincial idyll in *Voroshilov Sniper* is destroyed when one day Katia accepts an invitation of two male acquaintances from a high-rise next door to join 'a birthday party' of their friend, a young businessman. The birthday turns out to be a pretext: the 'party' quickly becomes a nasty gang-rape. The three young rapists present three social groups: a successful businessman – 'a huckster from the high-rise', as Ivan calls him in the film – a student of structural linguistics, and the son of the colonel who is in charge of the local police. The social division of the world presented by Govorukhin is indicative. The young *troika* of New Russian rapists symbolizes a peculiar mélange of money, intellect and state power, being juxtaposed to the group whose symbolic capital is nothing but a reminder of the vanished state, like the ribbons of the Soviet awards that Ivan continues to wear on his jacket. Explaining his ideas, Govorukhin pointed out in an interview, that the film was addressed first of all at the older generation, those 'robbed and humiliated' people whose 'biographies were undeservedly slandered, and who were presented to their own children as the object of hatred and contempt' (Iaropolov 1999).

In a sense, the rape becomes a trigger that turns the 'humiliated and insulted' Ivan into a lonely avenger, presenting him as a 'saviour' so predictable for the rape-avenge genre (see Makoveeva 2010: 149). This transformation does not happen right away, though. Govorukhin – himself a Duma deputy – is careful in showing how Ivan is actually pushed to take the law in his own hands by corrupt legal institutions, which rely on the mutual protection of their members. The beginning of the film even offers a promising, if false, lead. When Ivan turns for help to his friend and neighbour, a local policeman, the *troika* of rapists quickly gets arrested by a group of low-rank police officers who fully share Ivan's outrage and promise to punish the criminals 'according to law, and to justice'. Things get back on the predictable track very quickly, though. Justice cannot be restored. Family ties matter. The police chief of the town makes sure that his son and the two friends are immediately released, and the *troika* quickly resumes its flashy and loud parties in the high-rise.

Ivan's pleas to investigators and prosecutors for protection prove to be unsuccessful. Under the colonel's pressure, the criminal case is turned inside out; during an interview with Katia, a repulsive investigator explains to her that since there are no clues and evidence, he has all

the reasons to suspect that Katia herself could have seduced young boys in order to marry one of them, or to claim the high-rise apartment (or at least some money) as compensation later. 'In the absence of crime in the act', the case is dismissed.

It is symptomatic that, just like in *Elena*, the fundamental structure of the dramatic conflict is conceived in *Voroshilov Sniper* as a modern-day confrontation of two family clans. It appears that the logic of blood relatedness in both cases is perceived as reason and motivation requiring no further explanation: social, economic, political or aesthetic networks are only super-structural phenomena that are rooted in and shaped by the family basis. The 'call of blood' seems to undermine any other forms of rationality.⁵ Ivan, certainly, shares this logic, but with a twist. The opposite 'clan' is seen as an alien formation, as 'occupants', as he calls them. And the question that Ivan repeats in his conversations with state officials – 'Where have you all come from?' – reflects well this fundamental epistemological confusion about the origin of the new invaders.

The metaphor of occupation suggests a model for action: losing his hope, Ivan gradually realizes that he is in a state of war and therefore must act accordingly. Within a few days,

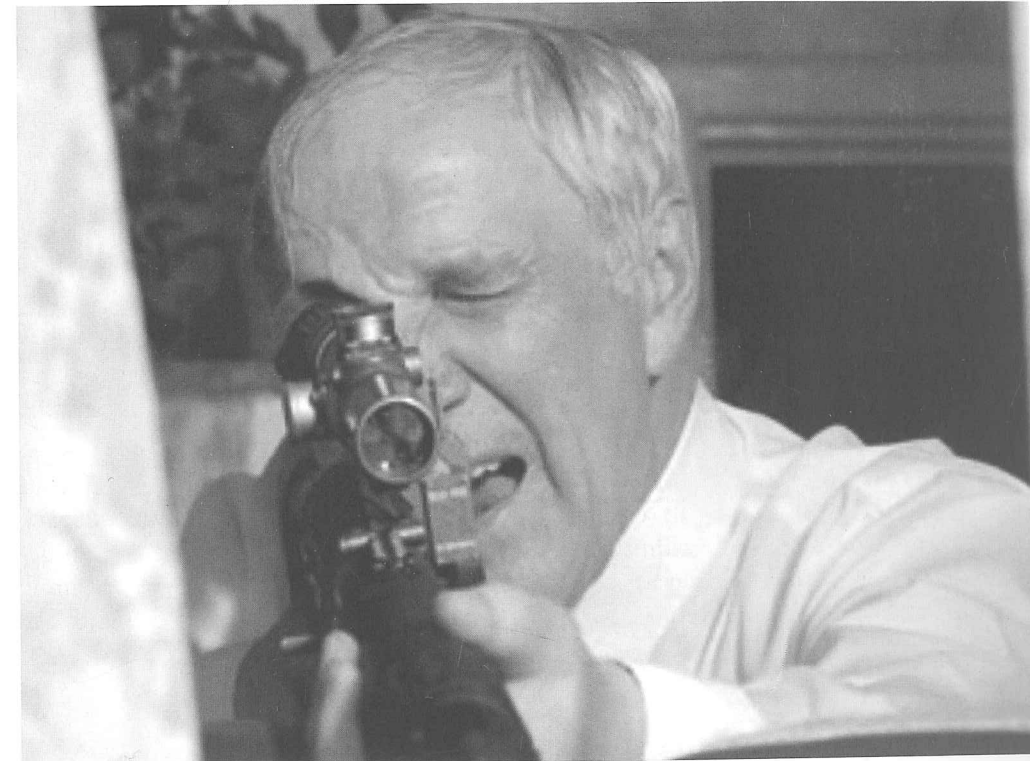


Figure 10.2: A lonely avenger. Still from Stanislav Govorukhin's *Voroshilov Sniper*.

he sells his small country house and buys a sophisticated rifle with a telescopic sight. The lonely avenger is finally born. However, Ivan's way of doing justice is carefully choreographed. He is not a typical murderer, his punishments are metered. Like in *Elena, samosud* here is a carefully constructed plan of action. Andrei Plakhov, a leading film critic in Russia, wrote in April 1999, right after the release of *Voroshilov Sniper*: 'Precision is important in the film – because Ivan is not just your average avenger; he is also a humanist. Just like NATO's pointed strikes on Yugoslavia, Ivan hits carefully. He does not kill the offenders; he just leaves them crippled for the rest of their lives' (Plakhov 1999). Thus, the student of structural linguistics is shot right in his groin at the moment when he tries to open a bottle of champagne. The huckster from the high-rise is punished even in a more sophisticated manner: with a detonating bullet, Ivan explodes the fuel tank of the businessman's BMW, severely scorching the businessman's buttocks. The last offender requires no external action: scared to death by the threat of this castrating vengeance, the son of the police chief loses his mind, and in a feat of paranoid self-defence shoots his own father (see Figure 10.3).



Figure 10.3: Targeting evil, locally. Still from Govorukhin's *Voroshilov Sniper*.

This series of punishments does not go unnoticed, but Ivan cleverly hides his traces and seemingly escapes public attention. In the end, justice seems to be restored, or at least the offenders are punished. Yet, the finale is framed in a melancholic tonality: Ivan's last question 'How should I live now?' is amplified by Katia's final song about a lonely accordion player who 'is searching for somebody in the darkness and is failing to find anyone.'

As a story about the lonely search for justice in the darkness, *Voroshilov Sniper* usefully articulates one of the major issues of Yeltsin's Russia. In a less than subtle way, the film raised questions about the emergence and exercise of frontier justice: the privatization of violence becomes a do-it-yourself protective tool in a situation of institutional corruption and legal collapse. Commenting on his performance as Ivan in the film, Mikhail Ul'ianov stressed in an interview the detrimental repercussions of the lack of structuring limits in Russia of the 1990s: 'When you travel outside Russia, you realize that life there is not that extraordinary; it is just another complicated life. But in that life, there are such things as logic, common sense, some legal barriers, which cannot be trespassed. We've managed to destroy all the barriers. But human beings are not perfect. Without a moral stopper, any person can go astray' (Kaushanskii 1999).

A lonely avenger who relies on his gun to pointedly administer justice is only a partial answer to this lack of moral stoppers. As Govorukhin shows in the very end of the film, Ivan's spectacular success would not have been possible without a tacit but indispensable solidarity of the weak formed behind his back, saving him from crucial failures. Annoyed with their powerful and corrupt bosses, low-rank policemen become Ivan's unexpected ally. What is interesting about this alliance (that would fade away by the time of *Elena*), is that the solidarity of the powerless is being built not around the promise of law or systemic changes. There is no illusion about a commonly shared symbolic order any more: as Ivan puts it in the film, 'every state office is staffed with a scoundrel'. Rather, it is Ivan's violent intervention; it is his act of *samosud* that serves as the ultimate form of social bonding. Self-exercised punishments and acts of incursive justice are seen as a welcome corrective measure by those who are deprived of access to the law, but who still retain the will to do justice. Reflecting on this logic, one of the critics entitled (ironically) his film review 'A gun with ethics in sight' (Bogomolov 1999). *Samosud* emerges, then, as an effort to establish moral stoppers from below, as an attempt to prevent the complete 'going astray'. As Viktor Pronin, the author of the novel that served as the literary basis for *Voroshilov Sniper*, epitomized this self-regulating function of *samosud*, 'when law went sideways, people sorted it out themselves' (Kopulova 2008).

The initial title of the film would have pointed in a similar direction, too. Originally, the film was called *The Sicilian Defence* (Bakushinskaia 1999b), playing on two popular meanings of the term. First, the title drew attention to the chess opening that implies a very aggressive response to white's initial move, suggesting that a lack of initial advantage does not necessarily determine the outcome of the game. The second meaning evokes popular associations with the Sicilian Mafia and its code of honour, blood vengeance and clan feuds. Taken together, both meanings produce a peculiar post-Soviet version of the intransigent pushback from below spearheaded by the experience of humiliation and a desire for justice.

Govorukhin's romanticization of the lonely gunfighter and the ethical solidarity of the powerless encountered a mixed reaction. The broad audience loved it, and the film has been regularly shown on Russian television ever since. The reaction of critics and officials was less unanimous. The film's premier was an unusual event of sorts. For the first showing, Govorukhin invited only his colleagues, deputies from the Russian Duma, who apparently were enthusiastic about the film (Plakhov 1999). However, when in April 1999, the film festival 'Pravoporiadok i obshchestvo' (Law, Order and Society) decided to show *Voroshilov Sniper* at its opening ceremony in Moscow, the Ministry of the Interior that sponsored the festival vetoed the film as unacceptable (Bondarenko 1999).⁶

Critics were mostly negative. Some hated the film, describing it as 'glaringly undignified' (Medvedev 1999). Others saw in it a bleak copy of Hollywood films about 'dirty cops', with Ivan as a 'Stallone on pension' (Bakushinskaia 1999a). In their negative criticism, reviewers seemed to agree that the movie was nothing but a large-scale gesture of support for class hatred, violence, and *samosud*. Pointing out the logical flaws, some reviewers emphasized again and again that the film had nothing to do with 'real life'. Viktor Matizen, for instance, maintained that *Voroshilov Sniper* significantly 'lowered the bar of credibility' (Matizen 1999). Iurii Bogomolov went as far as to suggest that Govorukhin with his 'pathetic propagation of *samosud*' helped 'to raise further the revanchist sentiments among the Communists and the Fascists' (Bogomolov 1999).

More than a decade later, these charges look misplaced and myopic. Govorukhin's film was certainly far from being a masterpiece, and yet it did attract attention to the problem of social and legal vulnerability of those who were excluded from the circuits of power and money. In a sense, *Voroshilov Sniper* marked ground zero of the gradual privatization of violence in Russian cinema: from Ivan Afonin's 'pointed strikes' to Elena's 'quiet murder'. The range of exercises of judgement (augmented by self-executed punishments) mapped out by these two films demonstrates how violence 'trickles down'. Not unlike the transformation of power traced by Foucault, we see how spectacular explosions of vengeance in *Voroshilov Sniper* gradually evolved into a hardly noticeable microphysics of deadly violence in *Elena*.

The war of provocations

The normalization of *samosud*, the translation of violence from a language of public punishment into a language of domesticity, as I have been suggesting, is possible due to two main trends. The aestheticization and decontextualization of violence help to uncouple it from issues of morality and responsibility. Privatized and sanitized, violence becomes a technical tool and an artistic device; ethical concerns are saved for Dostoevsky. The second, important aspect is the increasing inability of Russian law in particular and Russia's political sphere in general to offer a usable and effective language for expressing social discontent and/or political disagreement. *Samosud*, a self-performed act of justice, is usually a forced recognition of the fact that the tools available for mediating social (or interpersonal) conflicts

here and now are ineffective. 'Despair', as Zviagintsev observed recently, results from realizing that people in power 'have no conscience; in principle, they could have been restrained by law, but law is not working. [...] hence, there is nobody to appeal to' (Solntseva 2011). From a different perspective, Govorukhin pointed in a similar direction when he described his film as a 'political manifesto' (Kaushanskii 1999). Indeed, to make a political statement, one has to rely on non-political tools.

I want to finish my exploration of the aesthetic privatization of punishment with a brief discussion of one non-cinematic example: the recent activity of the art-group Voina (War). Presenting its social provocations within the tradition of street art and carnivalesque reversals of hierarchies, the group relies predominantly on aesthetic tools to make their political critique visible and heard. The type of *samosud* practiced by Voina is located between Govorukhin's lonely avenger with his pointed strikes and Zviagintsev's microphysics of everyday violence. Spectacular yet diffused, Voina's actions conflate 'crime without punishment' with 'punishment without crime'. What I find indicative about this version of *samosud*, though, is its deliberate manifestation of the group's right and ability to judge the authorities. The act of symbolic punishment in this case is directed against the very system that is supposed to guarantee the efficacy of law. To push it even further: it is the (assumed) illegality of the legal system that Voina draws attention to in its actions. And it is precisely this refusal to submit oneself to the corrupting effects of the existing legal system that allows Voina to impose its extrajudicial sentences.

The site of the group explains that Voina initially emerged as a 'family business' of sorts: the group was created in Moscow in 2005 by Oleg Vorotnikov and Natalia Sokol, a husband-and-wife couple.⁷ A year later, Vorotnikov and Sokol met with Alexei Plutser-Sarno, an artist and a writer, who became Voina's main 'media-artist', chiefly responsible for generating the group's texts and for defining its conceptual tools (Plucer 2022 [sic]).

Perhaps like no other artistic group in Russia, Voina has been extremely effective in using new media for making itself known. In fact, the group's reputation is almost entirely based on its online self-presentation: very few art-actions performed by Voina were (meant to be) seen in real time. In a very idiosyncratic form, the group combines radical aesthetic gestures with an anti-establishment political critique. Since 2007, it has been staging what could be called artistic and political provocations in Moscow and St Petersburg, progressively getting more and more political. I want to draw attention only to a few provocations that attracted a lot of media attention in Russia.

On 29 May 2009, the group attended the final hearing of a controversial court case in Moscow: several religious organizations sued Andrei Erofeev, an art-curator from a major Moscow art-museum, for offending and disrespecting their religious feelings. As complainants claimed, Andrei Erofeev denigrated their religious identity by exhibiting caricatures of the Russian saints and distorted images of Russian icons at the show 'This is Religion: Be Cautious'. Voina had no particular connection with Erofeev, nor was it directly interested in the show that he organized. Yet Voina decided to use this celebrity trial as an opportunity to express its own political verdict. The group strategically occupied almost all the seats available in a

small court room, and when the judge expressed surprise at seeing so many young people, she was informed that the young people were law students who had come to the court to watch law-making in real life and not in textbooks. While the judge was reading the 150-page long decision, the group unpacked their musical instruments in the back of the room and interrupted the hearing by a punk-song with a chorus line: 'All policemen are bastards: Don't forget it'. After performing the song, the group quickly left the building. The action was taped and made promptly available on the Internet (see Plucer 2009).

By the summer of 2010, the group had become well known among the readers of the Russian blogosphere, and two major actions solidified Voina's reputation as the most creative author of political critique in contemporary Russia. On 14 June 2010 (Che Guevara's birthday), several activists of Voina painted an oversized phallus on one of the draw bridges in St Petersburg. The performance started at 1.30 a.m., shortly before the bridge was scheduled to be raised. It took the group only 23 seconds to paint a phallus that was 65 metres long and 27 metres wide. When this part of the bridge was erected, the phallus faced directly the regional headquarters of the FSB (see Plucer 2010a).

In his interviews, Alexei Plutser-Sarno, the main ideologue of the group, suggested that this action was the first mature gesture of the art-group. And yet, he dismissed any attempts to read Voina's performances in political terms. As he explained, 'we are not going to become political. We will continue to paint the portrait of the gangsterism (*banditizm*) that surrounds us by using exclusively artistic tools. The erected picture on the bridge is not politics; it is art. It is a portraiture of the hierarchy of power (*vertikal vlasti*) that we have in our country today' (Anon. 2010).



Figure 10.4: Voina's 'portraiture of the hierarchy of power'. St. Petersburg, 14 June 2010.



Figure 10.5: Revolting the police-world: Voina's nine seconds of repentance and revenge'. St. Petersburg, September 2010.

Another performance of the group took place on 16 September 2010, on the Day of Judgment (*Sudnyi Den*), as Voina emphasized in its online postings. Called 'A Palace Revolt', it began near Mikhailov Palace in St Petersburg, the building where in 1801 Tsar Paul the First was killed during a palace revolution. The main (printable) slogan of the action, though, was 'Give us a place to stand on, and we will turn over the police-world'. And they did turn – if not the police-world, then, at least, some police cars. The performance had an elaborate scenario: a small child (Vorotnikov's and Sokol's son) would play with a ball near a police car; the ball would get under the car, and in order to pacify the crying kid, a group of men would turn the car upside down to release the ball (one of the slogans of the action was 'By Helping a Kid, You are Helping the Country'). Then the group would disappear with the ball. Over the course of several days, the group performed several actions around the city, each of which took only nine seconds.

The metaphors of revolt and turnover, as the group explained, were not entirely accidental: in Russian, the police are often known as 'werewolves [or shape-shifters] in uniform' (*oborotni v pogonakh*). Unlike its Russian equivalent, 'werewolf' lacks a crucial point – *oboroten* means someone who turns inside out, someone who turns around. Most of the cars that the group turned upside down were the cars of the road police. As Plutser-Sarno explained, 'the road police are fond of robbing drivers on the roads of our huge motherland. Vehicles are a

criminal tool that these werewolves in uniform use to achieve illegal goals. Therefore, these nine seconds were nine seconds of repentance and revenge' (Plucer 2010b).

Of course, Voina's attempts to present their actions exclusively in aesthetic terms are a ploy. Voina is not Christo. While being political, their actions are not politics, though. They are devoid of systemic effect, they are not institutionalized. But more importantly, they are not aimed at producing any alternative vision. Voina's 'protest art', the group's performative revolts, are a gesture of disagreement and judgement. They are an oversize prank aimed to demonstrate that suppression is not complete, that the authorities have no monopoly on exercising public judgement, and, perhaps more importantly, that the authorities, in fact, have no legitimate authority. Realized as guerrilla attacks, these exercises of incursive justice play on the margins of law.⁸ Yet by turning political judgement into an aesthetic act, Voina points to a gaping non-correspondence between the existing legal practices and institutions of law on one hand, and the popular perception of justice on the other.

Despite their significant distinctions, the quiet murders, pointed strikes, and performative revolts that I have been exploring in this essay, are similar in their motivational structure and mode of self-validation. At their core lies the fundamental 'disrespect of the laws', to use Voina's own description.⁹ It is not this legal nihilism that makes these cases interesting, though. Rather, in its own way, each case shows how this 'disrespect' becomes counterbalanced by do-it-yourself justice, with home-made evaluative judgements and privatized punishments. When law goes astray, people have to sort things out by themselves.

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Notes

- 1 This tendency of post-Soviet cinema to focus on objects as substitutes for people is described at length in Oushakine (2007) and Oushakine (2009).
- 2 See Volkov (2002). Aleksei Balabanov's *Zhmurki/Dead Man's Bluff* (2005) provides a perfect encyclopedia of visual clichés and narrative moves for representing random violence of the 1990s.
- 3 For a recent discussion of cinematic *samosud* see the cluster on the theme of retribution in contemporary Russian cinema edited by Vlad Strukov for *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 4.2 (2010).
- 4 For a discussion see Beumers (1999). Within a few years, this idea of 'the moral hero in immoral situations' was developed further in Balabanov's *Brat-2/Brother-2* (2000) and Sergei Bodrov Jr's *Sestry/Sisters* (2001).
- 5 This trend is discussed in more detail in Oushakine (2004).
- 6 In 2005 the festival changed its name to *Detectivefest*.
- 7 Different websites suggest somewhat different chronology of Voina's emergence and development. See <http://free-voina.org/about>. Accessed 15 July 2012.
- 8 Following the Palace Revolt, a criminal case was initiated against Voina. In November 2010, two members of the art group were arrested; they were released on bail in February 2011. See more details on <http://free-voina.org/arrest>. Accessed 15 July 2012.
- 9 See 'Kto takaia Voina?' <http://free-voina.org/about>. Accessed 15 July 2012.