IMAGINATIONS
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE · JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES

IMAGINATIONS
JOURNAL OF CROSS_CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES | REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy and instructions for contributors:
http://imaginations.csj.ualberta.ca

"In Search of Authenticity: Time and Space in Russian Horror Film"

Volha Iskava

August 27, 2013

To Cite this Article:

Iskava, Volha. "In Search of Authenticity: Time and Space in Russian Horror Film" Imaginations 4:1 (2013): Web (date accessed) 35-50. DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.scandal.4-1.6

To Link to this article:

http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE. scandal.4-1.6

IN SEARCH OF AUTHENTICITY
TIME AND SPACE IN RUSSIAN HORROR FILM

VOLHA ISAKAVA

The paper looks into recent Russian horror films, exploring how the genre conventions associated with Hollywood are transformed and upheld in Russian cinema. The paper argues that the use of space, particularly urban venues, in horror films establishes a sense of authenticity and marks otherwise derivative generic productions as uniquely Russian. The films examined are Night and Day Watch duology (2004, 2006), Trackman (2007) and Dead Daughters (2007); all are set in contemporary Moscow.

Cet article est une investigation des récents films d'horreur qui cherche montrer la façon selon laquelle les conventions hollywoodiennes ont été à la fois transformées et maintenues dans le cinéma russe. On y propose que l'emploi de l'espace (surtout les lieus urbains) dans les films d'horreur établit une authenticité et confère à productions autrement considérées génériques et non originale son caractère spécifiquement russes. Les films étudiés sont les deux « Night and Day Watch » (2004, 2006), « Trackman » (2007), et « Dead Daughters » (2007) : tous ont été tournés dans le Moscou contemporain.

In this paper, I will look at the representations of time and space in recent Russian horror films, investigating the correlation between horror genre conventions, imported via Hollywood films, and what I see as an attempt to "modify" them to suit unique local sensibilities and create an authentic popular Russian product. The paper argues that one of the most significant aspects of understanding Russian horror is its dependency on generic conventions that are associated with Hollywood genres. The Russian cinema industry, like many other national film industries, is positioned vis-a-vis "Hollywood hegemony" (Shohat & Stam 1994) in popular culture. It competes with Hollywood films at the box office, and must appeal to an audience whose tastes are shaped by Hollywood genres. At the same time, the domestic films need to differentiate themselves from Hollywood or, simply put, provide a reason why an average movie-goer should choose to watch a Russian horror film as opposed to a North American horror film. The replication of Hollywood genre tropes is, therefore, couched in a certain degree of reflexivity and self-awareness that complicates the effort to make a faithful copy of a Hollywood model. I argue that the effort to showcase this distinction manifests itself, among other things, through the engagement of time and space. Drawing on analyses of several recent horror productions - *Trackman*, *Dead Daughters* (both from 2007) and the fantasy-horror duology *Night and Day Watch* (2004 and 2006) - this paper explores how these horror films re-imagine familiar cultural spaces and re-interpret recent Russian history in an attempt to "russify" the foreign genre formula. By focusing on the films' particular appropriation of the Soviet past and the nostalgia associated with it, I hope to demonstrate that the horror films, despite their seemingly derivative nature and low cultural status, showcase the ambivalence and complexity of the current cultural and political landscape in Russia, addressing issues of memory and identity, and engaging competing historical narratives.

The horror genre has a very limited presence in the history of Russian cinema. One example that stands out is the 1967 film *Viy*. The film is not strictly a horror film. It is an adaptation of a nineteenth-century short story by Nikolai Gogol that contains Gothic supernatural elements and is based on Ukrainian folklore. Being part of the Soviet state-controlled film industry, the film does not have many of the horror genre's usual attractions, such as excessive violence, shocking imagery, or sexuality. These elements, among other conventions of the genre, would obviously not pass the censors, and that fact very likely contributed to the absence of horror in the Soviet tradition in general. As Josephine Woll (2005) mentions, horror "...contradicts almost every major tenet of Marxist historical materialism, of Soviet doctrine, and of socialist realist dogma..." (344), making the genre an outcast of Soviet filmmaking. This situation changed as the Glasnost reforms of the late-1980s lifted many of the cinematic taboos of

the Soviet film industry and allowed an unprecedented exposure to all things Western, including horror films. Included in the newly-accessible cinematic products were various B-list films, such as martial arts movies, crime thrillers, exploitation films and pornography, and horror films of all varieties (from cult classics like *Nightmare on Elm Street* to obscure grind-house productions). They became accessible to the Russian viewer chiefly via local "videosalons" and cable television networks that became widespread in the 1990s (Condee 2009). It is in the 1990s that we see the first Russian attempts at the horror genre. *The Touch* [Prikosnovenie] from 1992 dealt with the supernatural, providing some ingenious innovations, like the dead talking from beyond the grave through a train-station PA system in lieu of special effects. *The Vampire* [Upyr'] from 1997 was more of an action thriller, in which vampires were a thinly veiled allegory for the ubiquitous 1990s gangsters. *The Snake Well* [Zmeinyi istochnik], also from 1997, was the first Russian slasher horror. Rather mild in both the gore and teenage sexuality typical of the genre, but high on suspense and murder mystery, it is undoubtedly indebted to Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

Severe economic crisis during the 1990s facilitated the collapse of the previously state-sponsored and tightly controlled film industry, as it tried to navigate its way towards a market-based economy. The Russian film industry almost came to a halt, and the number of domestic productions decreased dramatically.[1] Susan Larsen (2003) writes:

> The reasons for the decline of the Russian film industry are by now well known: the collapse of centralized distribution networks; a flood of low-priced foreign imports into the cinema, television, and video markets; the dilapidated condition and outdated equipment of Soviet-era cinemas; widespread video piracy; the much-maligned "darkness" (chernukha) of so many contemporary films; and the economic crises that decimated government subsidies for the film industry and made cinema tickets a luxury for the few rather than entertainment for the masses (491).

Consequently, 1990s horror did not thrive due to budget problems, outdated technology inherited from Soviet times, and the absence of generic tradition and its target audience. The 1990s horror films, which were few to begin with, were forgotten and seem to have had little to no impact on the development of the contemporary (2000 and onward) horror genre in Russia, which became increasingly exposed to and dependent on Hollywood horror models. Domestically produced horror still remains on the margins of the mainstream in Russia. And, indeed, to my knowledge, only about five or seven horror films were produced by Russian studios in the past five years. Similar to the Soviet era, when the horror genre was largely absent from the screen, but might resurface through elements of horror in the sci-fi genre, or in literary

adaptation with folklore overtones, such as *Viy,* in contemporary Russian cinema several fantasy and sci-fi films employ the conventions of horror. The most prominent examples of such genre-bending are the blockbusters *Night* and *Day Watch* from 2004 and 2006, respectively. In addition to mainstream horror, an avant-garde "necrorealism" film movement that experiments with horror conventions gained prominence after the fall of the Soviet Union. There are also several low-budget films by amateur directors that so far have not harnessed the success of *The Blair Witch Project.*

In this paper, I will look only at the mainstream productions that aim to position themselves as part of popular culture, a Russian take on what is seen in Russia as a typically Western (and mostly Hollywood) genre. My main field of inquiry lies in the domain of genre appropriation. I will examine films that consciously consider and sell themselves as horror, hoping to entertain and attract audiences and fill the horror niche in the Russian cinematic landscape. In contrast to the economically and socially turbulent 1990s, Russian national cinema has experienced a revival since the early 2000s as the economy has improved and audiences started showing interest in going to the movies again. Today, Russia has the fifth largest cinema market in the world with popular domestic films often dominating the box office, even if Hollywood productions still outpace and outsell Russian films (Beumers 2009). In the sphere of popular culture, I think, Russian mainstream cinema faces a dilemma that is particularly acute in an unexplored genre like horror: how to produce a popular film with a national sensibility, or a film that maintains conventional genre thrills and has a specific appeal to a Russian audience. In short, how does one go about making a "Russian horror"?

The first part of the "Russian horror" equation is its "Russianness." It has been argued in scholarship that the "Russianness" of film could be intimately connected with the (re)vision of history as one of the primary concerns in contemporary Russian cinema. Susan Larsen (2003) writes that cinema's national appeal explores "what it means to be Russian.., engaged – more or less explicitly – with the relationship between contemporary Russian life and the cultural traditions of the Soviet and pre-revolutionary past" (493). The reconfiguration and reconstruction of history in an attempt to create a linear comprehensive narrative instead of a patchwork of fragments or series of ruptures is of particular importance. If we accept Paul Ricoeur's argument in *Time and Narrative* (1990) that understanding history is embedded in story-telling, one can see the importance of the negotiation of various historical narratives that compete with and counteract each other in post-Soviet space. Popular culture, and cinema in particular, is part of these negotiations. The Soviet narrative of history vilified the pre-revolutionary past and glorified the Soviet present. However, it was followed by the critical Glasnost

narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, which exposed the Soviet vision of history as a monstrous lie, creating a traumatic rupture symbolically embedded in the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is often argued that the contemporary regime of "velvet restoration" (a designation coined by Lev Rubinshtein) headed by Vladimir Putin appeals to Soviet nostalgia, promoting the values of stability and nationalism embedded in the past, particularly the Soviet one (Lipovetsky 2004). Or, in other words, it aims at reconstructing the historic continuity and plausibility of the historic narrative, very likely with the political goal of ensuring the regime's preservation. While to present a political reading of Russian popular culture here is outside my scope, I am interested in how popular cinema engages these diverse *narrativizations* of history to create a product that appeals to the sense of national identity.

The second part of the "Russian horror" equation is undoubtedly "horror." Today's generation of Russian moviegoers has ideas about horror genre conventions that are attached almost exclusively to the Hollywood cinematic "lingua franca," to borrow David Bordwell's term (2006). Furthermore, while Soviet cinema had a strong tradition in comedy, satire, and drama, horror presents a prominent case of a "borrowed" genre and, therefore, a more explicit example of negotiations in Russian popular culture between national authenticity and generic complicity. I argue that the construction of space and history in mainstream horror both showcases the formulaic approach to genre and provides a unique engagement with history and identity that preoccupies Russian cinema as a national cinema today.

Hollywood, Here We Come

Most of the horror films I have seen consciously engage Hollywood genre formulas and are very aware of their foreignness, sometimes playfully appropriating this exoticism. When the Russian blockbuster fantasy duology *Night* and *Day Watch* quotes *The Matrix, X-Men, Lord of the Rings* and a legion of other Hollywood films, the exuberance of this gesture produces a certain pride in the hybridity of the moment – as if its "Russianness" is achieved through excessive and defiant "in-your-face" foreignness. *Night Watch* [Nochnoi dozor], directed by Timur Bekmambetov, released in 2004, became an instant hit in Russia and one of the most financially successful Russian films of recent years, surpassed only by its sequel, *Day Watch* [Dnevnoi dozor] in 2006. Both films belong to the fantasy genre with a strong streak of horror, telling the story of the "others" – a special race of super-humans that is immortal and lives on human blood. Some of them, however, are "good guys" and are called the "night watch," and some are "bad guys," called the "day watch." They each keep an eye on each other, so that no side abuses its power over humans. *Night Watch* narrates a father-and-son redemption story. In the end the near apocalypse is averted,

the world is saved, and the protagonist finds both redemption and true love.

Despite the fact that the story is based on a series of best-selling Russian novels by Sergei Luk'ianenko, both films maintain a very distinct visual appeal based on fast-paced special effects and effective cinematic allusions. *Night Watch,* for example, explicitly alludes to the *Matrix,* fashioning the protagonist after Neo, and sporting a similar video-game style fast-pace editing and cinematography. Furthermore, the "others" of the two films possess superpowers, those unique gifts drawn from the comic book tradition of superheroes. They are also wizards, belonging to a fantastic and archaic world order, and decadent gothic urban vampires - all at the same time. *The Watch* movies seem to almost engage in a Socialist competition – the Russian blockbuster movie has to be bigger and better than Hollywood's. There is a sly sincerity to such an endeavour. On the one hand, the desire to appropriate Hollywood and make us aware of the well-known effects, images and stunts is a self-aggrandizing effort, presented as a continuous stream of visually aggressive sequences that barrage the viewer with allusions. On the other hand, an overwhelming level of quotations, with the occasional bit of irony and humour detaches the narrative from strict imitation, suggesting instead a playful appropriation. Thus, several references to *Matrix* transform into a humorous depiction of a Russian cultural comic trope – hang-over. The protagonist wears dark shades, not to emanate ultimate coolness as Neo does, but to conceal the effects of his heavy drinking. In short, sincerity and irony, allusion and its deconstruction, combine and arm the *Watch* films with a novelty and recognition that often catches the viewer by surprise.

In another recent horror film entitled *Trackman* [Putevoi obkhodchik] from 2007, directed by Igor Shavlak, the power of allusion provides a path for self-effacement in the film. Even in the posters and promotions, one can see that *Trackman* unambiguously points to the multitude of other horror films that employ the masked serial-killer trope (examples include *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Halloween*). Similar poster strategies are present in the *Watch* franchise (see fig. 1) *Trackman* is especially close to George Mihalka's Canadian slasher film *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), which was recently remade. Just like *Trackman, Valentine* deals with a maniac from down below (miner in *Valentine*, subway/sewer monster in *Trackman*) wielding a pick axe, wearing a similar mask and depriving his victims of specific body parts. In addition to the masked killer horror films allusions, *Trackman* also starts with a children's song reminiscent of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* horror series. *Trackman* follows a gang of bank robbers who plot their misdeeds at McDonald's (a marker for Western pop culture) and then, after a botched robbery job, go into an abandoned part of the Moscow metro system with two female hostages. The hostages are pencil-skirt wearing banking assistants, a strong and compassionate blonde and

a complaining brunette – just like in *My Bloody Valentine*. The blonde perishes in a shooting accident and is avenged by the Trackman, who develops an attachment to her similar to the famous storyline of *King Kong*. The brunette falls for the charming gang leader and the two escape after fighting off Trackman, a monstrous maniac, formerly a rescue worker at Chernobyl, who, for reasons unknown, collects the gouged eyes of his victims.

Similar to *Day* and *Night Watch*, *Trackman* validates itself as a horror-genre film by emphasizing its simulacrum nature towards the Hollywood original in hopes of harnessing popular appeal. It is no exaggeration to suggest, as did Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994), that Hollywood cinematic hegemony in the national cinema markets could be viewed from the point of view of imperialism and colonialism as sites of colonization and resistance. This perspective allows one to look at the Russian horror films as seeking validation through mimicry of the "better," Western model. This mimicry is not unproblematic. As Homi Bhabha famously suggested, the wish to mimic the colonial "better" model results in the "almost the same but not quite" bind for the colonized. Bhabha (1994) notes that mimicry "...in order to be effective... must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (86). I suggest that, while replicating horror models imported from Hollywood, Russian horror films could also be creating a site of "slippage" and difference that subverts the "colonial" conventional genre model and engages local discourse on identity, history and belonging.

Horror as the site of such difference and subversion should not surprise us, as the horror genre is historically known for channelling the subversive and the transgressive elements of cultural discourse through popular culture (see Robin Wood (1986), Adam Lowenstein (2005) and others). The horror genre has always been a bit of an *enfant terrible* of mainstream American cinema. Horror is often analyzed as a reflection of anxieties, repressed desires and traumatic ruptures of national consciousness or unconsciousness. Robin Wood (1986) in his analysis of 1970s horror films, states that horror experiments with intense graphic violence and shocking sexuality, while maintaining an "incoherent" narrative and unpolished, raw, low-budget look, as in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The transgressive discourse of horror in the 1970s exposes a cultural (namely capitalist, in Wood's opinion) veneer disguising the abyss of the politically and socially repressed, reconstructing the other as a monster and American life as hell or "...the sense of a civilization condemning itself, through its popular culture... and ambivalently celebrating the fact" (Wood 95). Horror, in other words, produces a certain excess and slippage that allows one to engage in cultural analysis beyond the graphic and exploitative elements of horror entertainment. Similarly, Russian horror films, by engaging Hollywood, also produce a certain excessive

response, a surplus of meaning that reveals the difference and subversion of mimicry more than it explicitly intends to. I argue that the construction of time and space in horror films proves to be crucial in producing that difference.

Russia, There We Stay

The Russian horror genre is often contemporary, with recognizable urban landscapes that in many cases belong to Russia's capital, Moscow. Similar to the mainstream American horror genre that is often considered to target the adolescent male audience, Russian horror film could be described as oriented towards urban youth as well. Moscow becomes the space that exemplifies contemporary, youthful, urban Russia. *The Night* and *Day Watch* duology is one such example, making Moscow an effective generic counterpart of cinematic New York or London, with spectacular apocalypse included. *Trackman* takes place in abandoned Moscow subway tunnels. The film I would like to consider now, *Dead Daughters* [Mertvye docheri] from 2007, directed by Pavel Ruminov, eschews the common and easily identifiable venues in the capital and shifts the spatial focus to the Moscow suburbs. It is these familiar spaces, which are laden with cultural context and recognition that become a bridge between the generic mimicry and local sense of authenticity.

Dead Daughters is a J-horror [Japanese horror], Russian style. The derivative nature of the story is transparent and its transparency is playfully encouraged by the film. The film makes enthusiastic nods to *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, Japan 1998), albeit in its American incarnation *The Ring* (Gore Verbinsky 2002). Similar to these films it builds its narrative around guilt, suspense and fate – staging a morality play of spiritual quest and a critique of the shallow young generation. A curse is set in motion by the last person who sees the victim of the vengeful ghosts of little girls killed by their own mother. By chance the curse falls on a group of five friends, young Muscovites with upper middle-class jobs and well-to-do lifestyles, and we watch them fall victims to the curse, until the "final girl"[2] assumes the identity of the dead mother and rules over the naughty dead children. The visuals in the film aim to justify its art-house claim, widely discussed even before the release of the film in Russian press. They feature a lot of hand-held camera and long shots, often relying on light and colour contrasts. The "artiness" of the film, however, is not what I would like to focus on, but rather the spaces that the film uses and what these spaces represent in the context of Russian horror.

Dead Daughters is a pronounced urban horror and it does an excellent job in turning ubiquitous urban spots like cafes, basketball courts and movie theatres into uncanny spaces of supernatural danger. The device that turns a familiar space into a threatening one is especially successful in classic slasher films like *Halloween* or *Nightmare on Elm Street,* where the most intimate space, like a

middle-class family home, becomes the site of deadly carnage. In the end the victims in *Dead Daughters* are also killed in familiar urban spaces – the children's park, one's own apartment, a basketball court in the suburbs. The film makes these spaces look generic by avoiding the obvious tourist highlights of Moscow, which is at once identifiable as the real city that the protagonists live in, but is presented as if it could be any city. The film's spaces are saturated with the everyday, showcasing a cafe or a parking lot rather than spaces of cultural prominence in Moscow that have a long cinematic tradition. For example, every time the heroes reconvene to discuss their predicament they meet in various cheap diners where they try to formulate a plan, sometimes observed by the camera as if from the outside like the "nighthawks" from Edward Hopper's painting. The film successfully conveys their increased sense of isolation and vulnerability when the camera allies itself with the invisible ghosts. The characters are not only watched by the vengeful ghosts but also can no longer integrate fully into the daily activities of the city, being constantly under the camera's gaze, isolated and voyeuristically observed in their predicament.

The images that stubbornly reappear in the film and that are of particular interest to me are the sometimes long panning shots and sometimes still shots that appear as jump-cuts of the multi-storeyed apartment blocks. The shots serve no narrative function, neither are they point-of-view shots. Often they create a deliberate spatial disorientation. The view of the building will be limited to the rows of blank uniform windows that seem to have no beginning or end as the contours of the building; its top and bottom are excluded from the frame (see fig. 2). This imagery has a long cultural and cinematic history. The massive blocks of apartment high-rises are called in Russian *novostroiki* [new construction sites], residential neighbourhoods or Soviet suburbs, removed from the city centre both in prestige of living arrangements and in terms of accessibility to work and leisure. These suburbs are most typically associated with the stagnation era of the 1970s-1980s and the upward mobility of the Soviet middle class that starts as early as the late 1950s, manifested most aptly in the acquisition of a separate apartment for an individual family (as opposed to communal living). Apartments and the family members sharing them, exchanging them through divorces and marriages, the notorious Soviet lack of space and resulting multi-generational conflict, became one of the cultural tropes of late Soviet culture amply explored in literature and film.[3] Built virtually in every Soviet city, the *novostroiki* are cookie-cutter neighbourhoods with identical prefab architecture and structure. An average block includes a grocery store, a school, a day care, an inner yard with a playground, etc. As such, *novostroiki* represent both the bourgeois conformity of a more consumer-oriented lifestyle and oppressive Soviet uniformity.

In Soviet filmmaking the *novostroiki* were immortalized in the cult melodrama or dramedy *Irony of Fate* [Ironiia sud'by] by Eldar Riazanov, from 1979, tellingly made for Soviet television for New Year's eve celebrations — a film that the residents of the Soviet suburbs might enjoy as they celebrate in their own apartments watching their own TVs. In that popular film, the unfortunate sameness of the Soviet housing projects leads to a case of mistaken identity (of the city) and an unexpected romance. The film gently pokes fun at the unpretentious consumerism of the Soviet citizens who not only live in identical apartments but have identical furniture and dishware. The film also makes an oblique point about the graver consequences of totalizing uniformity that starts with the house appliances and ends with street views and brainwashed minds. *Dead Daughters* is far removed both from the Soviet context of the 1979 *Irony of Fate* and its melodrama genre. It nonetheless employs the same cultural trope, drawing attention to the uninspiring *novostroiki* facades in almost identical shots (most likely a conscious quote) and implying the similar critique of conformity, uniformity and anonymity. Only this time around these images of bourgeois conformism and comfort are packaged in the context of both the horror genre and contemporary Russian middle-class lifestyle.

The ubiquitous *novostroiki* are only a part of the film's obsession with the cookie-cutter living spaces: we meet all the friends in the apartment, one of the friends sells an apartment with a murderous history, another barricades himself in his apartment, the "final girl" faces the ghosts in her dark and barren apartment that looks a lot like a theatre stage by the time of the final showdown. The interchangeability of public and private spaces, in which neither is safe from the ghosts, hints at the merging of public and private in the culture of the Soviet Union and a certain transparency that is a necessary consequence of uniformity. The 1979 *Irony of Fate* highlights the complexity, opaqueness and diversity of human interaction as a counterpoint to the imposing conditions of uniformity and social conformity, creating a nuanced vision of society and human relations. The conclusions we can draw from *Dead Daughters*, however, are far more straightforward: the new "bourgeoisie" of Russia is as conformist as the Soviet middle class and its constricted housing bliss. The supernatural intervention is sort of a divine punishment for the banal and self-satisfied lives of the protagonists. While it is easy to see how the conclusions the film draws might be interpreted as an oversimplification, what interests me is the choice of metaphors and connections that the film makes.

The film suggests that both the old comforts of the Soviet stagnation era of the 1970s and the new comforts of the 2000s, the Putin era, share a continuity of values and risks. The values are the stability and abundance of consumer culture of prosperity, something that is experienced almost exclusively by

the post-Soviet generation portrayed in the film. The risks express the hidden potential of that stability to be fake, its other side being totalitarian oppression. Today's consumerist lifestyle has a calm surface that could dangerously erupt into the accidental chain of life-shattering events, or into a horror story. Space becomes a link that makes this connection specifically to a Russian viewer. By interspersing the shots of *novostroiki* without apparent relation to the narrative or consistent visual style, the film creates a metaphor that aims at both historical continuity and authentic "local" validation of the horror film. At the same time the *novostroiki* sequences feel disjointed and removed from the story. The film's desire to create a product allied philosophically and aesthetically with the tradition of art cinema manifests itself mostly via hand-held camera work, a cliche of the art house style. The film's disjointed storytelling, often aided by the out-of-place images of *novostroiki*, diminishes its genre potential, making *Dead Daughters* an ambivalent film that in Russia never quite reached the critical acclaim of the art house or the mainstream popularity of genre cinema.[4] This ambivalence is significant as it showcases the film's search for the cinematic solution that would produce "Russian horror," in which both the authentic Russian component and the generic horror component appeal equally to the audience. In search of this elusive combination the film re-visits history, re-imagines public and private spaces and aligns itself with both a familiar and much-venerated tradition of art cinema (represented by Andrei Tarkovsky, Sergo Paradzhanov or Aleksandr Sokurov) and the foreign tradition of horror genre.

The film *Trackman* does not have similar art cinema ambitions. *Trackman* was financed by Fox Searchlight and is more of a standard slasher horror film with very little to distinguish it from any other example of the genre done in the past few years in North America (the recent remakes of *Friday the Thirteenth*, *Last House on the Left* or *I Spit on Your Grave* are good examples of this streamlined and very formulaic slasher horror). *Trackman* has fast-paced editing, a haunting soundtrack and excellent visuals - the film uses various colour schemes that make the Moscow underground assume an entire palette rather than being simply dark. The film takes no risks and is squarely within genre conventions with a predictable storyline and reasonably sympathetic young protagonists. Where the films gets interesting is its use of space as the main attraction and the force behind narrative development. Shot in the vast Moscow metro system, the film takes advantage of its labyrinth-like spatial dimensions and its cultural clout. The Moscow metro has a long-standing reputation as the prize achievement of the Soviets in the Stalinist era, a symbol of technology, progress and power of the new Soviet state. The metro's lavish unique interiors make it a prized tourist attraction to this day. At the same time, the metro and its extensive network of tunnels is a space of thriving urban legends, stories of secret government

passages, nuclear war shelters and buried treasures. A case in point is a subculture of "diggers," (*diggery* in Russian) who engage in a kind of extreme sport exploring Moscow's underground tunnels, often in search of WWII artefacts and other secrets.

Trackman exploits this space, already rife with myths, by ensuring that a masked mutant monster lurks deep underground. The spaces in the film reinforce this impression by contrasting the initial robbery scene, filmed in a light, modern building made of glass, with the majority of the film shot in the actual underground, with a lack of light and subdued colours. The underground is presented not only as an unknown territory, where one might find unnamed dangers, but also as a space that combines the natural and cultural markers of an abandoned civilization (see fig. 3). Thus, the tunnels that the characters perpetually wander have both prominent signs of decay and of nature, which has overtaken the civilized space. The underground is filled with abandoned carts and tools, hanging wires, barely functioning or broken lamps. At the same time fog, dripping water, and rat infestations come in at crucial moments to create suspense around the appearance of the monster-Trackman and disorient the characters. Similarly, Trackman himself becomes the manifestation of this abandoned civilization par excellence. When we encounter him in his lair, it is filled with random technology, wires, tools and remnants of machinery. It looks like a laboratory, especially when we witness Trackman methodically dealing with the eyes he gouged out. However, all this technology is tangled up in a meaningless way that creates an impression of the lair of the beast, a cave lined with signs of the bygone civilization, whose meaning has been lost (see fig. 4).

What piqued my interest in *Trackman* was its promotion slogan "old nightmares get new face." The "oldness" of the *Trackman* narrative goes back to an alleged urban legend that describes Trackman as a Chernobyl rescue worker who has gone mad after being poisoned by radiation and was held prisoner underground by the government until he escaped (or, rather, the government, that of the Soviet Union, ceased to exist and left him to his own devices). The old nightmare of Chernobyl, in other words, comes back to haunt contemporary Russia, a careless prosperous civilization of sleek bank interiors, middle class professionals and chivalric robbers, all of which has forgotten what it is literally built on top of. Trackman, the monster, represents the rupture between the past and the present, the abandoned and forsaken legacy that is uncomfortable and dangerous. The space of the Soviet metro is particularly suitable for the confrontation with the forsaken past. In his analysis of the metro as the prized object of Stalinist civilization, Boris Groys (2003) writes:

> If classical utopianism, including avant-garde utopianism, wanted to construct a heaven on earth, then Stalinist culture constructed heaven

> underground, that is, in mythological terms, in hell... The conquering of hell simultaneously implies the conquering of the past. Not only the living, but also the dead - who were banished beneath the earth by the logic of historical life - were to be admitted to the totality of Stalinist culture... Thus the Moscow metro stations affirm the image of a never-existent, utopian, transformed, and saved past (117-118).

The initial vision of the Moscow metro makes it the place of the Soviet utopian realization of the predictability of history, its incontrovertible march towards triumph of communism. The contemporary gaze of the horror film literally transforms the utopian teleology into a dystopian rupture. The unaware characters descend into the circles of a real hell, not the tamed hell of the Soviet utopian metro project. It is also significant that Trackman extracts eyes from his victims, as the ability to see, or to witness history has been taken away from him and from the people who live on top of the forsaken civilization. While being a visually sleek and narratively conventional horror film, *Trackman* channels ambivalence about the Soviet past and the interpretation of Russian history. While it is well documented by scholars (see Lipovetsky or Larson for examples) that Putin's "velvet restoration" taps into the Soviet nostalgia, films like *Trackman*, being unpretentious cultural productions, alert us to collective anxieties associated with a nostalgic vision of history. The Moscow metro, a pinnacle of cultural conquest of nature and subjugation of historical chaos into teleological order, designed as the symbol of the utopian golden era, in *Trackman* becomes a space built on blood and rife with peril. It forewarns about wilful blindness and the uneasy connection, contrary to what nostalgia have us believe, between the past and the present.

An even more articulate problematization of the Soviet past and the role of nostalgia is evident in *Night* and *Day Watch* duology. Mikhail Ryklin (2006) asserts in the collection *Watch as a Symptom* that the good and bad "others" are divided in the film by political markers. The "night watch" good guys are marked as Soviet: they drive an old car with a Soviet logo; their organization is disguised as a government agency with a typical Soviet abbreviation. The bad vampires are marked as "new Russians" - the generation of Russian nouveau-riches that prospered in the late 1990s. The "day watch" others lead a decadent luxurious lifestyle, and indulge in the latest gadgets and video games, unlike the modest "night watch" folk, whose equipment (magical and otherwise) looks like it was designed in the 1970s. The incorporation of Soviet nostalgia into the films became the ground for Russian critics like Ryklin to link the *Watches* specifically to Vladimir Putin's presidency and its pandering to Soviet nostalgia for political gain. Mikhail Ryklin also comes to the interesting conclusion that the "others," Soviet or nouveau-riches, are distanced from regular humans, who become essentially

"food" for superior beings of all moral orientations, who are preoccupied mostly with maintaining the balance of power between themselves. This is evident when one looks at the space in the films - the *Watch* films' world is not air-tight or separated from the real world, as could be the case in a more conventional fantasy. Instead, it is deliberately set in contemporary Moscow, in which ordinary people appear only as pawns in the games of superior creatures. Ryklin sees it as a metaphor of the grim political situation in contemporary Russia, in which, he asserts, moral judgement has become relativized.

I agree with Ryklin that the *Watch* films exemplify the balancing act between Hollywood thrill ride, nostalgic reference, and moral ambivalence. The films not only mark characters and situation as Soviet and post-Soviet, the distinctions between Soviet and new Russian are obviously there, but they are part of a larger narrative that the films construct. The two films are a continuous narrative, in which a "night watch" member Anton Gorodetsky, the "Russian Neo," (played by Konstantin Khabensky) makes a mistake back in the early 1990s that comes back to haunt him a decade later. By fixing that mistake, he turns the narrative around, going back in time and saving the world. He is shown returning to the brightly lit, spring-like 1990s, while he happily strolls down a boulevard and meets his romantic interest, long before they become aware of their dormant superpowers and the burdens that they will bring. It is truly a return to a state of innocence. Notably, the two rival leaders of the "day" and "night" watch sit right there playing chess, benevolently looking at the hero and his reversal of fortune. It is also important to note that the hero has reverted to his human state by amending the mistake, making the struggle between the good-Soviet watch and the bad-new-Russian watch irrelevant. In other words, I argue that the *Watch* films promote continuity and coherency of the historic narrative, reconciling the innocent nostalgic past with what is perceived as the decadent and westernized culture of today's Russia. The naive gesture of turning back time and fixing everything retroactively is, in a sense, a longing for closure. It provides the magic solution that closes the breach in historic contingency. The *Watches* do not only appropriate Soviet nostalgia, making sense of history, but also contain the times of crisis and transition, known in Russia as the "wild 1990s," in a safe retroactive package. The time of confusion acquires a linear timeline, its difficulties explained, despite being a period rife with economic struggles and crisis of identity. Even if such appropriation creates a fairy-tale vision, the important part is that these films provide us with a vision of history, and this narrative of history (unlike, perhaps, real history) makes sense.

Preoccupations with history, along with the desire to conform to the aesthetics of Hollywood genres, inform recent Russian horror films. While horror still holds only a marginal place in

Russian mainstream culture, I believe it explores and exemplifies the tensions that characterize contemporary popular filmmaking in Russia - the need to be authentic and the need to compete with Hollywood on its own turf, to create popular filmmaking that is accessible to today's audience. Considerations of time and space in the films play an important role in establishing horror's balancing act between national sensibility and generic plausibility.

Works Cited

Beumers, Birgit. *A History of Russian Cinema*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2009. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 85-92. Print.

Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006. Print

Carol J. Clover. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.

Condee, Nancy. *The Imperial Trace*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

Groys, Boris. "The Art of Totality." *Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Neiman. University of Washington Press, 2003. 96-122. Print.

Larsen, Susan."National Identity, Cultural Authority, and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: NikitaMikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov." *Slavic Review* 62.3 (2003): 493-511. Print.

Lipovetsky, Mark. "Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48.3 (2004): 356-377. Print.

Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. Print.

Ricouer, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Volume 1. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990. Print.

Ryklin, Mikhail. "Hollywood Inside Out. Interview with Anna Al'chik" [Gollivud naiznanku. Interv'iu s Annoi Al'chik]. *Watch as a Symptom* [Dozor kak simptom]. Saint Petersburg: Seans, 2006. 36-49. Print.

Shohat, Ella and Stam, Robert. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Woll, Josephine. "Exorcising the Devil: Russian Cinema and Horror." *Horror International*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005, 336-358. Print.

Wood, Robin. "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s." *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 70-94. Print.

Filmography

Blair Witch Project. Dir. Myrick & Sanchez. Haxan Films, 1999.

Day Watch [Dnevnoi dozor]. Dir. Timur Bekmambetov. Bazelevs Productions, 2006.

Dead Daughters [Mertvye docheri]. Dir. Pavel Ruminov. Praktika Pictures, 2007.

Friday the 13th. Dir. Sean Cunningham. Paramount Pictures, 1980.

Halloween. Dir. John Carpenter. Compass International Pictures, 1978.

Irony of Fate or Enjoy Your Steam-Bath [Ironiia sud'by ili s legkim parom]. Dir. El'dar Riazanov. Moscow Film Studio, 1979.

My Bloody Valentine. Dir. George Mihalka. Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1981.

Nightmare on Elm Street. Dir. Wes Craven. New Line Cinema, 1984.

Night Watch [Nochnoi dozor]. Dir. Timur Bekmambetov. Bazelevs Productions, 2004.
Psycho. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Shamley Productions, 1960.

Ringu. Dir. Hideo Nakata. Omega Projects, 1998.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Vortex, 1974.

The Matrix. Dir. Wachowsky Brothers. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999.

The Ring. Dir. Gore Verbinsky. Dreamworks SKG, 2002.

The Snake Well [Zmeinyi istochnik]. Dir. Nikolai Lebedev. Gorky Studio, 1997.

The Touch [Prikosnovenie]. Dir. Albert Mkrtchan. Studio Trans-F, 1992.

The Vampire [Upyr']. Dir. Sergei Vinokurov. Gorky Studio, 1997.

Trackman [Putevoi obkhodchik]. Dir. Igor Shavlak. Importfilm, 2007.

Viy. Dir. Konstantin Ershov & Georgy Kropachev. Moscow Film Studio, 1967.

(Endnotes)

1 Susan Larsen (2003) mentions that "...in the first post-Soviet decade, Russian filmmakers have watched their domestic audience, their international renown, and their cultural authority shrink and all but disappear, as the annual production of feature films sank from an all-time high of 300 films in 1990 to a near all-time low of 28 in 1996, then rose again to hover between 30 and 50 per year between 1997 and 2000" (491).

2 The "final girl" is a term coined by Carol Clover (1993) in reference to the slasher horror trope of a last-standing female survivor.

3 Housing provided a rich ground for exploration in both censored Soviet literature such as *Our Circle* [Svoi krug](1979) by Liudmila Petrushevskaia and published works, such as Yuri Trifonov's *Exchange* [Obmen] (1969).The thorny issue of housing is also subject in many films of the Soviet and early post-Soviet era, ranging from innocuous melodramas like *Singles Are Granted a Dormitory Room* [Odinokim predostavliaetsa obshchezhitie] (Samsonov1983) to the satirical *The Fountain* [Fontan] (Yuri Mamin 1989).

4 See Russian reviews of the film that stress (and often object to) the combination of art cinema and mainstream conventions in the film. As in this review by Roman Kulanin for online journal KinoKard (February 4, 2007): http://www.kinokadr.ru/articles/2007/02/04/deaddaughters.shtml

Volha Isakava is a Replacement Assistant Professor of Russian at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Her research interests include contemporary Russian and post-Soviet cinema and culture, transnational cinema and the critical junction of cinema and history. She recently graduated from the University of Alberta where she wrote her doctoral thesis about the cinema of perestroika and how its historic transition has been reflected in Russia's arguably bleakest cinematic trend - "black films" or chernukha.

Volha Isakava enseigne à l'Université d'Ottawa comme professeure adjointe. Ses recherches portent sur la culture et le cinéma post-soviétique, sur la contemporanéité russe, sur le cinéma transnational, et sur la coalition critique entre le cinéma et l'histoire. Elle a obtenu son doctorat de l'Université de L'Alberta avec une thèse sur le cinéma de la perestroïka, qui se concentre sur la réverbération de cette transition historique dans les « chernukha », parfois considérés comme les plus sombres films de la Russie.