

CHAPTER 5

‘Window to Europe’
*The Social and Cinematic Phantasms
of the Post-Soviet Subject*

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The following article analyses cinematic representations of post-Soviet subjects marked by the collapse of the Socialist economic and political system, the loss of former ideological reference points and the introduction of a market economy and consumer values. It focuses on the film *Window to Paris* (Yuriy Mamin, 1993), which explores projections and anxieties related to the problem of access to Europe. The film narrates a phantasmagorical story of a direct transfer to Paris through a window, leading to a love relationship between a Russian man and a French woman. The cinematic narrative encodes various strategic modes of relationship with Europe, which fall into the two sometimes overlapping categories of ‘disinterested love’ and ‘profitable exchange’.

After the Wall: Encounters with Europe in Post-Soviet Cinema

The process of European unification was central to the political and economic debate in the 1990s. In this debate, cultural production, including the mass media, played the role of mediator and interpreter, seeking to mobilise public opinion, sway people’s emotions and provoke discussion on key issues relating to Europe’s present and future. The reintegration of the two Europes became a central theme in European cinema of the last decade. In this process, film functions as an experimental site for exploring and testing new transnational and multicultural models of European identity.¹ National cinemas reacted to the new political reality by articulating their societies’ expectations and anxieties in

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relation to the attempt to forge a shared European identity. For the countries of Eastern Europe, this has involved a sense of returning to Europe as a cultural home. This essay will explore how post-Soviet cinema commented on this opening up of borders with the reunification of Europe, and will investigate what 'Europeanness' might mean for those excluded or left 'outside' Europe politically while belonging to it geographically and culturally.²

It should be said at the outset that this cultural 'belonging' is complicated by the almost complete lack of knowledge of post-Soviet cinema in the West. This has less to do with artistic quality or cultural untranslatability than with the political and economic factors governing the distribution system. An additional factor is the existence of an established discursive frame that posits 'Easterners' as 'subalterns' who cannot speak for themselves. The term 'transition', widely used during this period, is significant in this respect because it supposes a defective subject whose goal is 'normalisation' in terms of a Western capitalist model. In the 1990s, the Western media represented the 'East' almost exclusively in terms of poverty, prostitution, illegal migrants and the Russian mafia. As Michael Kennedy has argued: 'the West wanted to see in Eastern Europe proof of its own universality', while 'East Europeans wanted to confirm that they were really part of the West'.³

Thus, in the post-Soviet media – East European cinema is a key example – Europe tends to be referred to with admiration and respect. Svetlana Boym notes that this relationship to Europe has taken the form of a romance, mixed with resentment and disenchantment: 'unlike the Western legal or transactional relationship to the idea of Europe, the "Eastern" attitude used to be affectionate. The relationship with Europe was conceived in a form of love affair in all its possible variations – from unrequited love to autoeroticism'.⁴

The fall of the Berlin Wall made a greater impact on post-Soviet citizens than on their Western counterparts, since it was perceived as offering the promise of a better life, the beginning of new era. Even today, the opening of borders – no matter how partial – can be seen as the most positive achievement of the last decades. Despite the complexity of the process, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany seem likely to remain in the memory of millions of people as a staged media event, as if 'television was the main actor of the historical mutation'⁵ and Communism had fallen instantaneously under the camera's gaze.

Vestiges of such a view can be found in the film that will be analysed here, *Window to Paris* (Yuri Mamin, 1993), whose plot does not seem so improbable after what happened in Berlin. The ease and rapidity of the 'transfer' to Paris, as portrayed in the film, normalises the freedom of moving back and forth, crossing borders (rendered 'invisible') whenever one wishes and in an instant. And yet there is a paranoid fear that the magic 'hole' will be closed up again for the next two decades or centuries: the film's protagonists feel as if they are seeing Paris for the first and the last time. This perception remains a recurrent

motif in the media; each time, when new restrictions on the visa application at the French consulate are announced, Russian newspapers are likely to run the following headline: 'The Window to Paris Has Once Again been Barred'.

Communism may have collapsed as a political system, but states of mind and ways of life do not change overnight. People were still returning home to small over-crowded apartments, doing boring, badly paid jobs (if they were not unemployed) and waiting for a better life. Indeed, new walls and new borders appeared. This bitter sense of yet another disillusionment permeates 1990s post-Soviet cinema, particularly in the case of those films recounting mishaps befalling those who set foot on European soil.

In this respect, the opening sequence of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *White* – a film to which we will return – is symptomatic: the desperate attempt to conceal the shabby shoes, the uncertain gait and the feeling of intolerable shame, as though everyone looks down on you – even the birds. This film articulates eloquently the massive inferiority complex that Europe's poor Eastern relatives have toward their newly recuperated 'family'. Something similar is found in almost every post-Soviet film that depicts the encounter with Europe. The majority of films dealing with this issue were produced between 1989 and 2000. There were, however, a few films of the 1970s and 1980s that touched on the topic. Some of these were rather successful, for they served as a window into a world that remained largely unknown to Soviet people: for them, the 'West' existed as an imaginary land that could be accessed only through literature and cinema.

Two important films made in the 1980s set the tone for contemporary interpretations of the theme, namely, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* (1983) and Petr Todorovsky's *Intergirl* (1989). Both films served to construct a dramatic vision of Europe as a place of exile, implying that it is by definition impossible for a Russian to live in the West, regardless of the motives for attempting to do so. The two films differ in their specific class and gender perspectives: Tarkovsky's film tells the story of a cultivated man, a musician, whose personal story evokes two centuries of cultural dialogue between Russia and Europe. As Anna Lawton comments, Gorchakov – like his eighteenth-century predecessor, the Russian composer Pavel Sosnovskii – 'finds himself at a crossroad of two civilizations, unable to reconcile their opposite values'.⁶ His nostalgia is a result of profound alienation from the world and from himself.

The heroine of Todorovsky's *Intergirl*, Tanya Zaitseva, could not be more removed from the high cultural and moral concerns of Tarkovsky's protagonist. She is a hard-currency prostitute who entertains foreign businessmen at an *Intourist* hotel in Leningrad, until the appearance of her fairytale prince: a Swedish businessman who falls in love with her and marries her. Tanya leaves for Stockholm with him and settles in a capitalist paradise.⁷ She too becomes consumed by nostalgia for her homeland and decides to return, but on the way to the airport she is killed in a car accident. As Lawton observes, the film sug-

gests that the 'harsh, dehumanizing, everyday Soviet reality that drove her to prostitution seems preferable to the comfortable but dull life of the Swedish upper classes'.⁸ If, in the first case, exile is interpreted as a metaphor for the human condition (the 'universal' point of view of an intelligent man), in the second it is portrayed as the result of a pragmatic choice conditioned by concrete social and economic factors. In both cases, the return home is impossible, implying that one can cross the border only once and only in one direction.

Izabela Kalinowska has noted that 1990s cinema, and not just in Russia, stages 'all kinds of returns "home"'.⁹ This produces a dramatic change in the cultural landscape: going to the 'promised land' is fraught with various anxieties that are symptomatic of the post-Soviet experience, but it ceases to be an exceptional occurrence.¹⁰ The popular Soviet expression 'See Paris and die' gave way in the early 1990s to the similarly popular but more optimistic post-Soviet joke: 'Not that I want to stay here (in Russia) or move to Israel, but what I like about moving is that the connection is via Paris.'

It is useful to relate *Window to Paris* to another East European film released in the same year (1993), which is also concerned with the notion of Europe as 'home': Krzysztof Kieslowski's French-Polish production *White*. Although the two films convey different messages, both provide a commentary on the immediately preceding era. Both transmit a bitter sense 'of rupture, loss, fragmentation and nostalgia',¹¹ but also a sense of revitalisation and hope for a new life.

In Kieslowski's film, the return home to Poland can be read as the consequence of a failure of communication with the Europe that has been a home for many Polish *émigrés* over the last two centuries. It is the story of a 'perpetual foreigner', who remains an alien in the West and in the East. As Kalinowska comments, it draws our attention 'to the problems of an individual removed from the cultural context of the community which formed him'.¹² *Window to Paris* also pays tribute to the eternal nostalgia of an East European (Russian) intellectual longing for his European cultural home, but nevertheless choosing to return to his country of origin. Other characters in the film – representing different generations, social groups and professions – also consider emigrating, but in every case they are bound by a seemingly irrational patriotism to a country that is falling apart.

The two films depict a love affair between an Eastern European man (Polish and Russian, respectively) and a French woman, linking the narrative of lost identity to the concept of romantic love. Love provides an opportunity, creating the conditions for a recovery of identity and providing a form of relationship between East and West Europe. However, what at first appears to be mutual love turns out to be based on a tragic misunderstanding based on different cultural and political experience. A similar situation is found in the film *Casanova's Cloak* (Alexander Galin, 1993), in which a middle-aged spinster who goes to Venice as interpreter for a Soviet delegation falls in love with an Italian who works in the hotel. At the end of her stay, the lover politely asks

her to pay for his services – he is a gigolo. But he too has gotten things wrong, having mistaken her for a wealthy, high-society lady.

Aspirations and disillusionment, failures of communication and mutual misrecognition in the context of the recently opened up possibilities of an encounter with Europe are the subject of this essay. I will discuss two principal strategic modes of the relationship with Europe as articulated in post-Soviet cinema, taking *Window to Paris* as a case study. The first, which I term 'disinterested love', designates a nostalgic love for Europe and its culture, reinforced at the level of cinematic narrative by a romantic attraction (often unrequited) toward a European man or woman. The second mode consists in what I will term 'profitable exchange': in this case, Europe is again the 'promised land', but it is so in the sense of a consumer paradise rather than a cultural home. For many post-Soviet economic migrants or tourists, going to the West is a purely pragmatic matter of achieving a better lifestyle, which is understood in terms of material benefits.

***Window to Paris* as Cultural Palimpsest**

The story begins in a gloomy Russian city, later identified as St Petersburg. The central character, Nikolai Nikolayevich Chizhov, is a music and dance teacher at a Business School for teenagers. Having lost his job, he cannot afford to rent an apartment, so he sleeps in a school sports hall. He thus feels fortunate when he acquires his own attic room in a communal apartment, inhabited by the boisterous, vulgar Gorokhov family, who work at a music factory.

One night the communal apartment is visited by a ghost: that of an old woman, presumed dead, who previously inhabited the room. The amazed residents, who have been drinking all night, follow her, climbing out of the window and staggering down the fire escape to the street below, in search of entertainment. In their drunken state, it takes some time before the magical truth dawns on them: the city through the window is not St Petersburg, but Paris.

The enterprising Gorokhov and his family quickly become daily commuters devoted to the pursuit of whatever consumer items they can get a hold of in Paris: money, clothes, a satellite dish, an old Citroën. On their way in and out of their own apartment, the Russians have to pass through another apartment on the Parisian side belonging to a young French woman Nicole, an artist who earns a living by making luxury items (stuffed animals) for wealthy clients. She starts to get annoyed with the intrusive visitors who keep trudging through her apartment. One day, she chases the Gorokhov family back to St Petersburg, where she becomes trapped, finding herself in a nightmarish world of filth and mind-numbing greyness. She ends up arrested and spends the night at the police station, surrounded by prostitutes and delinquents. When Nikolai finds out, he rescues her from the police by claiming that she is Edith Piaf (and that

he is Elvis Presley) on tour in St Petersburg. Sick and tired, Nicole just wants to go back to her apartment. Since she has caught a cold, Nikolai takes care of her and a romantic relationship starts to develop between the two.

Eventually, Nikolai takes his students to Paris. For them, Paris turns out to be an unending sequence of parks, balloons and carousels. The teenagers refuse to go back to Russia. A debate ensues between Nikolai and Nicole (who sides with Nikolai) on the one hand, and the teenagers on the other, who reason that their parents would be only too happy to learn that they had stayed in Paris; they believe they will be able to survive in Paris by singing and dancing. Nikolai is faced by a serious dilemma, for he has himself been thinking of remaining in Paris. He poses a question that is addressed not so much to the teenagers as to the film's audience: is it right to flee to a land of wealth, or should one return to one's homeland and work to improve it? As he says: 'It's a miserable, bankrupt country, but it's your country. Aren't you willing to try to make it better?' The teenagers seem to agree. However, there is a problem: while they are saying goodbye to Paris and Nicole, the window closes. In their efforts to return to Russia, Nikolai and the teenagers, led by Nicole, hijack a plane to take them to St Petersburg. The magic dream is over.

It is a grotesque narrative, in which the realistic is oddly mixed with the fantastic. As Lawton notes: 'The events are presented as being normal, and the settings suggest the ordinary world. But characters, events, and places stand in an absurd relation to each other.'¹³ It may be noted that the Russian tradition of grotesque narrative was born in St Petersburg and was developed by Soviet poets and filmmakers whose creative work is inseparably linked to the city. First, there was Gogol, then Oberiuts, FEKS and many others; probably, it is because 'Leningraders are more inclined to use comics, épatage, shock therapy of the social consciousness ..., raising absurdity to a high degree of the absolute.'¹⁴ It is not surprising that many of the literary and cinematic motifs in the film, which make intertextual reference to this cultural tradition – and to everyday life in 1990s Russia, more carnivalesque than any absurdist representation – were overlooked or misunderstood by foreign spectators. One Western reviewer characterised the film as 'a noisy satire' whose 'story is incoherent while its blatant message is more bankrupt than the Russian economy. It has a fantasy plot that is poorly accomplished'.¹⁵ The gags were consequently felt to be primitive.

I suggest that the narrative of *Window to Paris* is so dense that it requires meticulous exegesis. Not only is it an encyclopaedia of post-Soviet life, but in many ways it is also a palimpsest of Russian and Soviet culture: a 'memory text'. It is therefore necessary to be familiar with multiple cultural references, as well as with the social context, in order to be able to appreciate the film's black humour. It is vital to be aware of Soviet ideological codes in order to interpret some of the visual images and to understand the work of estrangement and irony.

There is no space here to unravel the film's entire web of cultural references. I will limit myself to discussion of certain themes that touch on key sore points in the memory of the post-Soviet subject. These sore points indicate a failure to relate to the symbolic order, to a core identity. Both the individual and the traumatised community display a tendency to relive the wounding experience of the past;¹⁶ this is what causes the repetitive character of some of the cinematic motifs.

Let us start with the first two sequences, which evoke the dissolution of public and private spaces in the post-Soviet world. In the first sequence, we see the communal apartment and its inhabitants, who are speaking to a policeman about a lady who has vanished. The communal apartment is chosen as a site for unrealistic and bizarre events, even though it is endowed with very realistic features associated with this kind of housing. Communal apartments remain one of the most painful *topoi* of Soviet culture. From the time of the 1920s housing shortage, communal apartments became a powerful social institution that regulated the structure of living space, sanitary norms and modes of interaction between inhabitants. Housing was an instrument of social stratification in Soviet society – to have a 'personal' room in a communal apartment was a sign of well-being, compared to life in the dormitories – yet it was also an efficient way of erasing class boundaries: scientists and workers, poets and criminals would live side-by-side.

Ilya Utekhin, who conducted meticulous research on communal apartments in St Petersburg, notes that certain aspects of their inhabitants' behaviour, opinions and habits are markers of what have been called 'cultures of poverty', or 'deprivation societies'.¹⁷ People who live in such poor conditions, and are more or less equal in their poverty, believe that everything that is regarded as desirable comprises a closed system; wealth is a resource that can be accessed only through internal redistribution. The essential requirement is to gain access to this closed system of goods. Consequently, the communal outlook is characterised by obsessive attention to each co-habitant's individual share: when viewed from the outside, this can look like an expression of envy and greed.¹⁸ Hence Gorokhov, on getting to Paris, immediately sets up a redistribution system.

Such living conditions encouraged mutual hatred and envy. Privacy was a completely unknown concept. This is what most strikes Nicole when faced with the ongoing intrusion of strangers who seem not even to notice that they are disturbing her. It was normal for flatmates to spy on each other, and misfortunes suffered by one's neighbour would be relished since they might lead to the improvement of one's own living conditions.¹⁹ This is what happens to Nikolai in the film: he gets a room because of the old woman's disappearance, but on his arrival nobody looks pleased.

These communal apartments had a very distinct odour not unlike that of public toilets: their smell is impossible to erase from memory. *Window to Paris*

also refers to this. Nikolai meets up with his old friend Guljaev who had emigrated to Paris some ten years before. His friend keeps complaining (hypocritically, in Nikolai's view) about his new life, manifesting a sort of nostalgia for his communal apartment and the gossip in the kitchen. Nikolai takes him to St Petersburg through the window, blindfolded. As he descends the stairs, Guljaev joyfully recognises the smell.

If private space is portrayed in this way, how then is public space represented in the film? In an interesting sequence, a motley crew of musicians and street performers are seen trying to cheer up citizens in what appears to be a bread line – this was the period when food was distributed through a rationing system, and even that involved spending hours in a queue. It turns out to be a vodka line, and there is no vodka left. In order to prevent a fight from breaking out between the lucky few and their unlucky fellow-citizens, the musicians strike up the International – and it works. People who have queued for hours are immediately set in motion and start to follow the band, singing in hoarse voices the familiar words of the Marxist anthem. The singing of the International in this scene is highly symbolic: a nostalgic memory of the time when Communism was a utopia uniting the working classes of all nations, and not only those who are now fighting for cheap vodka.

We can see how heterogeneous the crowd is, yet they are all marching, united in song, as if Soviet times had returned. However, it seems that all times have returned simultaneously: in one square, the crowd meets a group of monarchists; further on, we see marching anarchists, followed by people singing religious chants. Later, Nicole, wandering through the streets of St Petersburg, witnesses the frenzied activity of the awakening masses, enjoying their newly regained freedom of expression. It seems that all social groups have come out onto the streets to protest: some (mostly, women) chant 'Hands off Lenin!', while at the next corner, others proclaim liberal values. She is struck by the atmosphere of mounting aggression: shortly after, a man walking ahead of her suddenly commits an act of vandalism, destroying a public telephone. Having given vent to his aggression, he continues walking down the street.

Public space is transformed into a gigantic carnival site: everyone is here, ready to defend their values or political views, or simply to release negative emotions. But this site is also a gigantic flea market, for the demonstrators have merged with traders selling all kinds of items, old and new. Thus, the concepts of democracy and freedom of choice are linked to the notion of a market place that imposes its own rules, and where everything can be sold and consumed.

That this bizarre mixture of times and public parades should be staged in St Petersburg is no accident. The film's title is a play on the phrase 'a window onto Europe', immortalised in Pushkin's 1833 poem to the city, 'The Bronze Horseman', which became a standard metaphor for Russia's relationship with the West. It was Peter the Great who conceived St Petersburg as the meeting point of two cultures, the gateway 'through which technology and new ideas

could flow. St Petersburg was to mark the way for Russia to become modern'.²⁰ The city was meant to change the whole Russian way of life. Depending on the specific historical period and political regime, the 'window' would be more or less open or closed, but it never became a genuine gateway.

St Petersburg always functioned for the West as a projection: an ideal image of what Russia would become. Whatever the historical period, St Petersburg continued to be the most European Russian city – mostly on account of its architectural style, its noble 'northern' beauty. For two centuries, St Petersburg was a Mecca for the best Italian and French architects, sculptors and decorators, who were invited there to undertake their most daring projects. As a result, St Petersburg was often seen as an artificial copy of the West. The nineteenth-century writer and philosopher, Alexander Herzen, declared that St Petersburg 'differs from all other European towns by being like them all'.²¹ The similarity is indeed striking: the inhabitants of the communal apartment in *Window to Paris* would immediately have been able to distinguish Paris from any other Russian city.

The 'myth of Petersburg' generated a whole tradition of fantastic narratives in which it was portrayed as 'an unreal city, a supernatural realm of fantasies and ghosts'.²² It was home to the lonely, haunted figures who inhabited Nikolai Gogol's *Tales of Petersburg* (1835) and to murderers like Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866). The vision of an all-consuming flood became a constant theme in tales of doom relating to the city, from Alexander Pushkin's 'Bronze Horseman' (1833) to Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1913). Josef Brodsky believed that there was 'no other place in Russia where thoughts depart so willingly from reality: it is with the emergence of St Petersburg that Russian literature came into existence'.²³

The director of *Window to Paris*, Yuri Mamin, plays with the metaphor of a 'window onto Europe' by interpreting it literally. If there were an actual window giving access to Europe, it would have to be located in St Petersburg. Mamin also appeals to the ways in which the myth of Petersburg was constructed in Russian culture: Nikolai gets his class to perform Pyotr Tchaikovsky's opera *The Queen of Spades*, the role of the Countess being given to the old lady who previously lived in the communal apartment. The old lady personifies the damned city – both can drive one mad.

Neither has Mamin forgotten that it was in St Petersburg that the Revolution was born, without which the modern history of the city is unthinkable. The ghost of the Revolution, personified by Lenin, haunts the film characters both in Paris and in Russia. When they first get to a Parisian bar, they mistakenly pay for the beer with Soviet roubles. The barman stares at the coins, but takes the money: for him, it is a tourist souvenir. Lenin's profile on a coin becomes a symbol of Russia's bankruptcy – political and economic; inflation, not to mention political crisis, peaked in 1993. The omnipresence of the dollar and European banknotes (massively enlarged) on the walls of the business

school symbolises the arrival of the new ‘gods’ with whom the Russian rouble cannot compete. The historical irony consists in the fact that coins bearing Lenin’s profile become post-Soviet citizens’ only hard currency, and that the ‘Revolution’ is virtually the only brand that can be exchanged for consumer goods in the West.

The references to Lenin include an interesting intertextual nod to early Soviet cinema. When Guljaev, the friend Nikolai brings back from Paris, gets out of the taxi and is finally allowed to open his eyes, he sees the image of Lenin at the Finland Station and is greatly taken aback: all of his nostalgic sentiments vanish. The image of Lenin is like a frightening dream, a hallucination, as if nothing had changed during all of these years. The way the statue of Lenin is shot and Guljaev’s reaction to it are strikingly reminiscent of a sequence from *Fragment of Empire* (Friedrich Ermler, 1929), where the protagonist, sub-officer Philimonov, who has been suffering from amnesia for ten years, recovers his memory and immediately sets out for his native city, St Petersburg. The city, however, has changed, as has the country. He realises this when he suddenly perceives the monument to Lenin with its outstretched hand (pointing to the future, of course). He gazes at Lenin, desperately trying to recall who it might be. The intellectual montage techniques used in this earlier film represent the protagonist’s damaged psyche. In *Window to Paris*, this already established cinematic metaphor designates the ‘return of the repressed’: as Guljaev recovers his memory, he comes back to his senses. Guljaev’s point of view is used by Mamin as a defamiliarisation device, by making things look ‘strange’ in both Paris and post-Soviet Russia. If in *Fragment of Empire* Lenin stood for the coming of a new age and his statue embodied social progress, in *Window to Paris* estrangement is required to remind the audience that Soviet times are over, but there is a danger of their restoration.

For Gorokhov’s and Nikolai’s companions – the ex-Communist, the hippy musician and the ‘alcoholic anonymous’ – the party card, with its portrait of Lenin, becomes a means of payment in Paris, but this magic pass to solidarity and internationalism have lost their relevance in present circumstances (the French Communists, most of whom look Asian or African, seem embarrassed and yet behave very politely, even taking them on a coach tour of Communist memorials in Paris).

Apart from St Petersburg as a living architectural reminder of European culture, what other connotations does ‘Europe’ have in the post-Soviet cultural imaginary? As seen in this last instance, there is the memory of a common Communist past. There is also the memory of French culture, whose bizarre mixture of real and imaginary *topoi* is embodied in the figure of Nicole.

Nicole is strikingly different from the three Gorokhov women, who seem to incarnate the merciless caricature of what Soviet women were felt to have become: shapeless, loud and atrociously dressed. They serve to remind the audience of the Communist ideal of the robust woman barely distinguishable

from a man. This exaggerated caricature is required by the film's somewhat distorted representation of the Socialist emancipation project, but also by its narrative logic: the appearance and behaviour of these women have to create a sharp contrast with the elegant femininity of a French woman. When the Gorokhov women buy new clothes in an attempt to look smart, they appear all the more ridiculous. Having bought their kitsch clothing in Tati, the combined effect is that of a traffic light: the mother is dressed in red, her pregnant daughter in yellow and the grandmother in green.

By contrast, Nicole is an embodiment of ideal femininity, the personification of a dream shared by both Soviet men and women.²⁴ In Soviet times, the image of the 'typical' French woman was embodied by Edith Piaf. Thus, the policemen in St Petersburg immediately 'recognise' Nicole as Edith Piaf; they hold up the magazine with her image on the cover and, for them, Nicole looks exactly the same. In this respect, both France and Nicole as 'dream woman' represent an *obscur objet du désir*, to cite the title of Luis Buñuel's film. How then is the memory of Europe transformed by the characters' encounter with Europe in the form of Paris and a 'real woman'?

Disinterested Love or Profitable Exchange?

The encounter with Europe produces a culture shock, a genuine bouleversement, in all of the film's characters. The imago projected by Soviet culture breaks down; it does not correspond to the real state of things, producing a profound referential crisis. Having never been abroad, the characters know only what they could have gleaned from the Soviet mass media. They quickly realise that Europe is not quite what they had imagined, but, since they cannot change their 'ways of seeing' overnight, they continue to use their mental schemata to interpret what they see. Like bricoleurs, they have to fit new experiences into an existing interpretive framework. What we witness here is a process not just of adjusting to new 'civilized' codes of behaviour, but also of reworking of previous mental constructs and stereotypes into a new configuration.

Window to Paris reproduces virtually all of the major Soviet propaganda clichés about the West. The Soviet mass media elaborated a more or less apocalyptic mode of representation of the West, which consecrated the binary opposition between good and evil, socialism and capitalism. Whenever Western countries were mentioned in the news, it was exclusively in the context of ecological disasters, economic crises, horrifying crimes, unemployment and other negative factors.²⁵ No wonder that Nikolai's first 'vision', on initially deciding not to return home and stay in Paris, mimics the nightmarish images of Soviet propaganda and indeed is very scary: he imagines himself becoming a Parisian clochard, who lives on a rubbish tip, catches raw frogs to eat and walks alone through a rainy Paris at night, unshaven, dirty and dressed in rags. He is

glad not only to be awoken from this nightmare, but even more so to discover that the window is still open, allowing him the possibility of escaping such a terrifying fate. Clearly, Nikolai's nightmare expresses the fear of losing one's home in the metaphorical sense of 'homeland'. He could not be so scared by the prospect of not having a home as such: after all, his 'home' had previously been a sports hall. The principal fear here is that of finding himself alone in a hostile environment in the capitalist West.

In Soviet Russia, the West was imagined and constructed as the embodiment of self-interest, heartlessness, sexual decadence and immorality. This caricaturesque representation was rooted in the traditional Russian discourse on 'culture' and 'civilisation', according to which Europe epitomised 'civilisation' – superficial and oriented toward the cult of technology and formalised etiquette – whereas Russia was considered to be a 'culture' based on spirituality. Filmmakers such as Tarkovsky played a part in supporting the image of Europe as 'morally bankrupt' – a place devoid of spirituality. Such an opposition clearly reflects an inferiority complex at not having been accepted by the West and an unacknowledged awareness of the low level of material culture in Russia.²⁶

The motif of Western sexual depravity is articulated in Nikolai's and Gorokhov's second meeting with Nicole. Infuriated by their night time visit and the damage they have caused, she tries to explain to them exactly what they have done. Gorokhov is staring at her, and while she moves from one object to another, he starts to develop his own interpretation, based on popular Soviet jokes about sexually liberated French women. This turns out to be a primitive zoomorphic reading of her gestures. Decoding her message as an expression of sexual desire, he whispers to Nikolai: 'See how she wants you!'

The theme of the moral disintegration of the 'decadent' West is developed in the sequence that depicts Nikolai job hunting in Paris. He successfully takes part in an audition organised by Guljaev and is offered a job in an orchestra that performs for high-society audiences. There is, however, a strange condition: he is asked not only to refrain from smoking and to wear a tailcoat, but also to take off his pants. He resists and walks onto the stage as he is. There, he sees something beyond his wildest imaginings: a half-naked male orchestra playing for a completely nude audience. In fact, he should not have been so shocked, for he has already seen how his friend Guljaev is earning his daily bread – playing music in a restaurant on a violin that he clamps between his buttocks.

Thus, the protagonists' multiple misadventures in Paris correspond to the image of Europe from the official Soviet standpoint. In the course of the film, the image of another Europe gradually takes shape and these clichés lose their validity. Nor is this new image idealistic or idyllic. A picture emerges that is more diverse; the relationships between the film's characters correspondingly become more complex. Rich and poor, inequality and justice, coexist. Europe is a consumer paradise, but it is also a cultural 'home' for many Russians.

The diversification of attitudes toward Europe, as well as the multiplicity of subject positions, forms the symbolic centre of the film's narrative. This is articulated, firstly, through the theme of capitalism as a consumer society and market place; and, secondly, through the theme of love. Both strands are closely connected in terms of the strategic modes of relationship with Europe, defined by class and gender positions, which they suppose.

From the standpoint of post-Soviet citizens, consumer society is seen as the major goal of social progress. By contrast, the Soviet regime, being a 'society of labour', was built on the idea of the attempt to eradicate private forms of consumption. As Søren Damkjær notes: 'The principles of planned consumption had led to a rationed level of consumption for the majority of the population, who shared the relatively scarce consumer goods according to the criteria of political patronage and privilege.'²⁷ This was supposed to be an ideological alternative to the capitalist West. However, perennial shortages made people feel deprived. This explains why the Soviet state was so inconsistent in terms of its consumer policy, why its attitude toward consumption was always so ambivalent. In fact, communism failed precisely because of the harsh material conditions of everyday life. The conflict between the communist and capitalist systems took place in the sphere of consumption: as Ina Merkel notes in relation to East Germany, 'the Cold War was won in the market place'.²⁸

Hence, Europe's present is perceived by the film's characters as Russia's radiant future. Walking through Paris, Nikolai and Gorokhov are amazed to see supermarkets filled with all of the consumer goods they have never seen: they stare at the electronic equipment, cars, clothes and the variety of fresh fruits. All of this makes a striking contrast to Russia, where, on an everyday basis, people have to struggle to survive. A facile explanation of why France is so far ahead is given by Gorokhov: 'We fended off the Mongol hordes for them, while they were building their prosperity.'

Gorokhov joyfully throws himself into the lively process of exchange and smuggling; he sells everything – matrioshkas, pianos, Tchaikovsky's music – while other characters display an ambivalent attitude toward consumption. He is learning to embrace the capitalist system. The only thing that he does not put on the market, as he declares to Nikolai, is his motherland. In a nice irony, Mamin here reminds his audience of yet another Soviet topos: the theme of betrayal used to be associated with the idea of 'selling the motherland'. As a worker, Gorokhov shows no traces of the supposed asceticism of the proletariat. He seems to be unaware of the principles of proletarian internationalism, having no sympathy for his French counterparts who, for him, are merely market competitors.

The lure of consumer society generated what came to be known as 'sausage migration': the term commonly used to refer to the mass migration of the 1990s, triggered not so much by political necessity or ethnic conflict as by pov-

erty and economic need. *Window to Paris* reflects on the question of how and why former Soviet citizens migrated to the West. Various strategies of migration are articulated through different characters. These include the former musician, Guljaev, who had emigrated to Paris at an earlier stage and now works in a restaurant. With bitter irony, Mamin (himself an emigrant) highlights the duplicity of the emigrant's discourse. Claiming that all French people are greedy and nasty (while he sits in a French restaurant, drinks French wine, wears French clothes and tells of his travels around the globe), Guljaev sheds false tears, nostalgically recalling kitchen conversations and former times of frankness and authenticity. Then we have the old woman, the former aristocratic 'owner' of the magic window: her figure recalls the first-wave of emigration triggered by ideological dissent against the Soviet regime. Additionally, we have the teenagers, singing and dancing for tips in Paris, who have no wish to return home – as if for the younger generation, Russia has no future at all. Lastly, there is labour migration, represented here by the new phenomenon of 'shuttle business', personified by Gorokhov. Gorokhov's attitude toward Europe is pragmatic, confined to his class position and with no concern for European cultural values that do not form part of his cultural memory. Europe is on his mind (in his business plans), but not in his heart.

However, Mamin's lead character Nikolai does not fit any of these categories. On the one hand, he is a liminal subject, ready to migrate: he has lost his job, he has no family and even his city becomes alien to him. In addition, he falls in love with Nicole. Yet, he chooses to return home. Thus, there is some room in this consumer paradise for romantic feelings. This second type of attitude toward Europe is embodied in the love story between Nikolai and Nicole.

The representation of love in cinema is by definition related to the issue of gender identity. Recent Russian cinema is obsessed with recuperating masculinity, with female characters serving as a site for male fantasies related to power and sexual control. The renaissance of the notion of Russian identity is largely due to the appearance of new images of heroic masculinity. In practically every recent Russian box office hit, the conflation of national identity with masculine authority has been a key factor in the film's success.

Window to Paris evokes the difficult process of acquiring a new male identity. All of the main characters are ex-something and are in the process of becoming something else. For instance, Gorokhov is in the process of becoming a businessman. He is sexually active, energetic and has few qualms about the ethical aspects of his entrepreneurial activities. In his relationship with the three women in his family, he behaves in a very decisive way; as father, husband and son-in-law, he is used to dealing with women. He personifies the new hegemonic masculinity. Mamin cannot conceal his sympathy, tinged with shame, for this new cultural hero of our times.

Unlike Nicole, represented in the film as the ideal woman, Nikolai, for all his romanticism, is definitely not an ideal lover: middle-aged, not particularly

handsome and gauchely dressed. There is something pitiful in his appearance. In Kieslowski's *White*, Karol also lacks any sex appeal. There is, however, a crucial difference between the two men: firstly, we know nothing about Nikolai's sexual fantasies, to the extent that it is doubtful whether he has any; secondly, unlike the enterprising hairdresser Karol, Nikolai persists in his inertia.

Nikolai's weakness and passivity are closely related to the crisis of masculinity in late Socialist society and the beginning of Perestroika.²⁹ His tragic position is defined by two factors: he is a man and he is an intellectual – a social group whose status in the Soviet Union was always highly dubious, but that which in the 1990s lost the last remnants of its symbolic capital. Intellectuals do not figure among the heroes of recent Russian films, while characters like Gorokhov are frequent. *Window to Paris* comments on the position of intellectuals (particularly men) unable to adjust to the new economic realities and left feeling helpless.³⁰

Both sides of Nikolai's personality suffer an identity crisis. His not-quite-male behaviour, apart from his lack of sexual initiative, is marked by the fact that he faints three times, on more or less any occasion that requires a decision or a declaration of intent. He seems to be paralysed by a general state of social anomie and does not know what to do in a world that is falling apart. He is a typical 'hero of our times', a contemporary personification of the 'superfluous person' glorified by nineteenth-century Russian literature. The only thing that he still seems to possess is his pure love for culture and the arts. This is why he enjoys being in Paris, walking through the streets, recognising familiar places, seeing its beauty day and night, listening to its music, while his flatmates are busy smuggling through the window and selling everything they can find on either side.

His love for Nicole seems to be as disinterested and pure as his love for European culture. One might want to ask whether Nikolai is really romantic or merely impotent. In the course of the film, he is transformed from a passive into an active subject: he rescues Nicole from the police and then takes care of her when she gets sick; he brings the teenagers to Paris and then manages to convince them to go home; he learns how to make decisions. His journey to Paris is a classical fairytale test – in this case, of his romantic outlook. He remains strikingly immune to the lure of consumer society. Nikolai seems to be the last man of Soviet culture – a 'fragment of empire', for there is no place for people like him in this new world, just as there is no time and place for romantic love. In his imagination, Europe is an embodiment of romantic love – a place where utopia remains alive.

The way love is represented in the film is interesting in its own right. The majority of the post-Soviet films of the early 1990s exploited the female body and featured explicit sex scenes. Sex became the major audience attraction. *Window to Paris* is a rare exception: it speaks about love 'in the age of permissiveness, when a sexual encounter is often nothing more than a "quickie" in

some dark corner of an office'³¹ – an age when, by 'love', people actually mean 'sex' (as illustrated by the popular post-Soviet proverb of the 1990s: 'Sex is not yet the reason for getting acquainted'). The film's erotic sub-texts are very subtle; it is, in fact, a very romantic film. By contrast with Kieslowski's *White*, the long-awaited moment of fulfilment is never realised and would hardly be appropriate. This is an 'impossible' love, which will never be consummated.

But it is not enough to say that the film represents love in an entirely chaste manner. The subtlety derives from the juxtaposition of words and unspoken sentiments. Just as we never see a sex scene, we also never hear words of love. Since the main characters experience constant difficulties in speaking to each other, their story develops primarily through visual narrative: gazes, gestures, colours, light and camerawork are more eloquent than words. As Koen Raes puts it: 'Love presents itself as covering the domain of the unspoken, as being beyond speech, as an emotion that cannot be uttered or expressed by words.'³²

I would not argue that love does not need words, nor that 'language can only be a poor expression of what love really is', but I would agree with Raes that love 'involves the promise of an encounter without codes, a communication without a grammar'.³³ Love happens when an emotional affinity between two people comes about: in the film, this is suggested by the peculiar circumstances that make communication and understanding between the two lovers possible. At first they seem too different, yet it is precisely this difference, as in the case of Karol and Dominique in Kieslowski's *White*, which excites them. In Paris, Nicole would probably never have even noticed Nikolai; she starts empathising with him and then falls in love with him at the point when her misadventures in St Petersburg seem to be over. She feels grateful to him for rescuing her, and she understands him better now. Love arises as an instantaneous flash and then everything gets transformed in its light. It is only at this moment that 'true love emerges': in Slavoj Žižek's words, 'we witness the sublime moment when eromenos (the loved one) changes into erastes (the loving one) by stretching his hand back and "returning love"'. This moment designates the "miracle" of love, the moment when "the real answers" appear.'³⁴ Nicole now sees people and things differently; she no longer personifies a radical otherness, with which no relationship of empathy is possible.

However, for this initial emotional arousal to mutate into something more stable and solid, there has to be a possibility of linguistic exchange. In *Window to Paris*, as in *White*, language starts to play a crucial role when the danger of misunderstanding appears and the protagonists cannot find a proper language to express their feelings. A desperate Karol sets out to learn French, after he has already failed once. Nikolai does likewise when he exhausts his limited vocabulary of a bizarre assortment of French and English words plus Italian musical terminology.

Nicole is ready also: when she gets tired of foreigners tramping through her flat all of the time, she decides that the only language these people can

understand is swear words. She buys a French-Russian lexicon and masters the entire contents. She takes the first step, initiating communication in an obscene variant of Nikolai's native tongue. It is only later that she comes to understand the meaning of these words, as well as the reality that stands behind them. Nikolai, a man who probably does not know the words of love in any language, expresses his feelings mostly through his deeds. However, he seems to need the French language in order to communicate his feelings to Nicole. We may recall that, in nineteenth-century Russian culture, French was the only language of love among cultivated people in high society. And together they carefully pronounce the words: *La fenêtre vers Paris*.

Thus, love turns out to be the most efficient mode of intercultural exchange, while the emergence of love is also the condition for becoming a subject. Nicole's love gives Nikolai a chance to view himself in a new light, to regain self-respect and, therefore, to be able to return home. Through Nicole's love, he becomes a subject, capable of making decisions and taking action. As Žižek puts it: 'the object of love changes into subject the moment it answers the call of love'.³⁵

On a symbolic level, the narrative suggests that the nostalgia for Europe is a longing for romantic love. The film communicates the utopian belief, grounded in the political climate of the early 1990s, that Europe is so close and that access to it is very open. This utopian belief would give way to disappointment – in the film as in reality – when the borders proved to be as material as they had been prior to 1989 and the dream of freely travelling back and forth turned out to be no more than a dream. In this sense, *Window to Paris* is a film about the historical imaginary of the post-Soviet subject, for whom access to Europe has turned out to be a kind of cultural neurosis.

Notes

1. Apart from the famous *Three Colours* trilogy by Krzysztof Kieslowski (1993–1994), films by Milcho Manchevski (*Before the Rain*, 1994), Wim Wenders (*Wings of Desire*, 1987), Agnieszka Holland (*Europa, Europa*, 1991), Lars von Trier (*Europa*, 1991), Emir Kusturica (*Underground*, 1995), and others have touched on the question of a new European identity.

2. The enlargement of the European Union involves careful and highly formalised procedures for making decisions on the terms of membership in the EU. It is thus predicated on exclusion at least as much as on inclusion, with the necessity of defining its eastern borders being crucial to the process.

3. Michael D. Kennedy, 'An Introduction to East European Ideology and Identity in Transformation', in *Envisioning Eastern Europe. Postcommunist Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael D. Kennedy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1–45, here 44.

4. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 221.

5. Dominique Wolton, *Éloge du grand public. Une théorie critique de la télévision* (Paris: Flammarion Champs, 1990), 253.

6. Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost. Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 126.

7. In 2003, the Swedish director Lucass Moodisson made the film *Lilya Forever*, which narrates the pitiful story of a Russian teenage prostitute who also finds herself in Sweden. This can be seen as an updated version of a familiar plot: a Russian woman is portrayed as a criminal or prostitute (or both). The early twentieth-century image of the beautiful, enlightened Russian woman seems to have vanished from the cultural memory of Europe.

8. Lawton, *Kinoglasnost*, 212.

9. Izabela Kalinowska, 'Exile and Polish Cinema. From Mickiewicz and Slowacki to Kieślowski', in *Realms of Exile. Nomadism, Diasporas, and Eastern European Voices*, ed. Domnica Radulescu (Lanham: Lexington, 2002), 107–124, here 107.

10. Several post-Soviet films explicitly address the topic of the encounter with Europe. Though I will not discuss them here, it is useful to recall some of them: *Hitchhiking* (Nikita Mikhalkov, 1990); *Restless Arrow* (Georgy Shengelaya, 1993), whose plot is based on the idea of a direct transfer back in time to the Soviet 1960s; *I Want to Prison* (Alla Surikova, 1998); *French and Russian Love* (Alexander Alexandrov, 1994); *Casanova's Cloak* (Alexander Galin, 1993).

11. Domnica Radulescu, 'Introduction', in *Realms of Exile. Nomadism, Diasporas, and Eastern European Voices*, ed. Domnica Radulescu (Lanham: Lexington, 2002), 1–14, here 3.

12. Kalinowska, 'Exile and Polish Cinema', 108.

13. Lawton, *Kinoglasnost*, 231.

14. Sergei Dobrotvorskij, 'The most Avant-Garde of All the Parallel Ones', *The New Orleans Review* 1 (1990): 84f.

15. See Dennis Schwarz, *Online Film Critics Society*, <http://ofcs.rottentomatoes.com>.

16. Kalinowska, 'Exile and Polish Cinema', 116.

17. See Ilya Utekhin, *Ocherki kommunal'nogo byta* (Moscow: OGI, 2001).

18. Ibid., 47.

19. Natalia Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' sovetskogo goroda. Normy i anomalii. 1920–30 gody* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo 'Dmitry Bulanin', 1999), 198.

20. Bruce W. Lincoln, *Sunlight at Midnight. St Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3.

21. Alexander Gertsen, 'Moskva i Peterburg', in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1954), 2: 30–37, here 36.

22. Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance. A Cultural History of Russia* (London: Penguin, 2002), 6.

23. Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One. Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), 76.

24. It would be useful here to recall a conversation René Étiemble had in 1957 when he visited the Soviet Union for the second time: "‘Ah!’ – me disait une Moscovite, elle-même très distinguée de visage et de manières – vous en avez de la chance, vous autres Français! Toutes les femmes chez vous sont minces, élégantes et jolies, bien différentes de celles qu'on voit dans les rues de nos villes: trop grasses, affalées, négligées.' The woman who says this adds, 'Parce que nous avons vécu trop longtemps coupés les uns des autres, nous vivons les uns et les autres sur des images légendaires, fabuleuses' ('Ah!' – a woman from Moscow was telling me, a very distinguished woman in appearance and manners – you are really lucky, you French! All your women are slim, elegant and pretty, very different from the ones that can be seen in our towns: too fat, slumped, sloppy.' The woman who said this continued, 'Because we have lived for too long cut off the ones from the others, and we both have mythical, fairy-tale images of one another'.) (René Étiemble, *Le Meurtre du petit père. Naissance à la politique* (Paris: Arlea, 1989), 229).

25. On this issue see Kristian Gerner, 'Soviet TV News. "Sobornost" Secularized', in *Symbols of Power. The Aesthetics of Political Legitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, eds. Claes Arvidsson and Lars Erik Blomqvist (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1987), 113–140.

26. See Mikhail Jampol'sky, 'Rossija. Kul'tura i subkul'tury', in *Novaja volna. Russkaja kul'tura i subkul'tury na rubezhe 1980–90-h gg.* (Moscow: Moskovskij rabochij, 1994), 40–55, here 45.

27. Søren Damkjær, 'The Body and Cultural Transition in Russia', in *Soviet Civilization between Past and Present*, eds. Bryld Mette and Erik Kulavig (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 117–132, here 127.

28. Ina Merkel, 'From a Socialist Society of Labor into a Consumer Society? The Transformation of East German Identities and Systems', in *Envisioning Eastern Europe. Postcommunist Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael D. Kennedy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 55–65, here 60.

29. In the early 1990s, the phenomenon of 'sofa emigration' appeared; that is, of unemployed, mainly educated men who, instead of adapting to new circumstances, preferred to stay at home, while their women would take on any kind of work in order to feed their families. Women became the breadwinners and owners of small business enterprises in the economic system of the transition period. They were particularly active in the 'shuttle business'. This issue has been extensively researched in recent studies of masculinities in Russia (for instance, see *O muzhe(n)stvennosti*, ed. Sergei Oushakin (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002)).

30. See Elena Kabanova, 'Postsovetskij period. Kino i zritel' v poiskah drug druga', in *Istorija strany. Istorija kino*, ed. Sergei Sekirinski (Moscow: Znak, 2004), 460–491, here 469.

31. Slavoj Žižek, 'From Courtly Love to *The Crying Game*', *New Left Review* 202 (November–December 1993): 95–108, here 95.

32. Koen Raes, 'On Love and Other Injustices. Love and Law as Improbable Communications', in *Love and Law in Europe*, ed. Nahhe Petersen (Dartmouth: Ashgate, 1998), 27–51, here 27.

33. Ibid., 45.

34. Žižek, 'From Courtly Love to *The Crying Game*', 105.

35. Ibid., 106.

