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‘Are You Gangsters?’ ‘No, We’re
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The *Brother* Films and the Question of
National Identity in Russia

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Since Aleksei Balabanov’s films *Brother* (Brat, 1997) and *Brother 2* (Brat 2, 2000) came out, they have achieved cult status in Russia. *Brother* was the biggest box office hit of 1997 and the biggest grossing film since the end of the Soviet Union (Beumers 2003). Its sequel *Brother 2* was even more successful, in part thanks to a huge advertising campaign, an extensive website and a soundtrack featuring some of Russia’s most popular artists. Partly because of the *Brother* films, Balabanov is considered to be one of the most important figures in Russian cinema. The actor who plays the protagonist in *Brother*, Sergei Bodrov Jr., was already famous prior to the movies’ appearance but became a truly national star in the years that followed. His death in a freak accident, a landslide in the North Caucasus in 2002, helped reinforce the films’ cult appeal.

The popularity of these films has often been attributed to their concern with Russian national identity and their portrayal of a national hero. While explaining their success in these terms, however, Russian reviewers have strongly criticized the exclusive nature of the nationalism portrayed in the films and viewed the public’s enthusiastic reaction to them as a symptom of a disturbing national malaise. Debates occasioned by the films have gone beyond the world of cinema to address the moral values of Russia today and

the kind of society Russia should become.

In this article I analyse the critical discussion of the films before looking at viewer responses to determine whether they substantiate some of the critics' fears, namely that a maladjusted Russian population is interpreting the hero's actions as a justification for an excessively narrow kind of national ideal. Having nuanced the idea that the *Brother* films exploit the divisions in Russian society to inculcate a very exclusive type of national identity, I then examine the films' portrayal of a 'gangster hero' to suggest that it is the films' depiction of the criminalization of Russian society that allows them to play a role in the construction of national identity in Russia.

A Post-Soviet Blockbuster

Aleksei Balabanov has been described as a key figure in Russian experimental cinema and – along with Nikita Mikhalkov – as the most commercially successful and influential director of Russian cinema (Larsen 2003, p.492). Yet Balabanov's oeuvre has proven hard to characterize for reviewers and viewers alike. This is partly due to the diversity of Balabanov's films: he has written and directed films based on the works of Daniil Kharmis and Franz Kafka, and his hugely popular film *Brother* was followed by the auteur film *Of Freaks and Men* (*Pro urodov i liudei*, 1998). Balabanov's somewhat ambiguous attitude towards his most popular film, *Brother*, has made it hard to infer his rationale in making the film or the ideology behind it. In an interview Balabanov explained that 'some find *Brother* immoral, some find it moral, but I don't actually care' (Montgomery 2000).

A dilapidated post-Soviet St Petersburg is the backdrop for

much of the first *Brother* film. The alleyways, decaying squares and claustrophobic apartments are portrayed as places in which life goes on but lawlessness reigns. Danila Bagrov, the protagonist played by Bodrov Jr., a fresh-faced youth, has just been demobilized from the army and travels to St Petersburg at his mother's insistence, seeking to reconnect with his successful elder brother. There are a number of instances in which Danila protects the victims of corruption or bullying, becoming a self-appointed defender of the poor or the weak. For example, he helps a meek Russian ticket collector extract a fine from two people of generic Caucasian origin who flaunt the fact that they are on the bus without a ticket, or knocks out a middleman about to extract a bribe from an elderly market seller. Danila eventually meets with his elder brother Vitia, played by the well-known actor Viktor Sukhorukov, and who is, unbeknownst to his mother, employed as a hired killer. By bringing Danila into business with him, he allows the latter to administer his brand of justice much more extensively.

Danila never acknowledges having been involved in combat during his service, but his dexterity with firearms and his 'take no prisoners' mentality belie his claims to have merely served as an administrative clerk in the war. His involvement with the war in Chechnya remains unspecified, although the war there is the film's obvious subtext. For example, one of the people his brother is hired to kill is a rival known simply as 'the Chechen'. As the film progresses, the distinction Danila makes between the kinds of people he will protect and those for whom he has no sympathy and will not defend becomes progressively clearer. The latter include Jews, people of Caucasian origin, and Americans. The ethos of Danila's system of

justice very much has to do with protecting disadvantaged Russians, that is ethnic Russians. It is in this context that not only brotherhood takes on a new and meaningful significance but ties based on belonging to an ethnic group do as well. And yet, Danila is consistently presented as a hero throughout the film, capturing the audience's sympathy, making us agree with his actions in each individual case. We are also instinctively repulsed by the bullies who refuse to pay their fine on the bus, for example, although the fact that they are from the Caucasus is simply incidental to some viewers and a deliberate directorial provocation for others.

Like many sequels, *Brother 2* loses much of the moral ambiguity that exists in the first film, making the division between good and evil much more obvious. The plot begins by referencing Danila's experience in the war, when he is described as the 'most invincible' by one of his comrades. Kostia, who served with Danila in the war, explains how his twin brother Mitia is being cheated by American gangsters of the revenue he earns playing hockey in the National Hockey League. After his own attempt to avenge his brother ends with Kostia being killed, Danila leaves for America to retrieve Mitia's money and avenge his friend. Despite the depressing nature of the Russia they leave behind, the America Danila encounters seems much more morally corrupt. The sequel can be understood as a starker portrayal of some issues underlying the first film but never quite made explicit. Put very simply, if the enemies in the first film are people of Caucasian origin, the enemies in the second film are Ukrainians – especially the Ukrainian mafia – American capitalism and values, and African-Americans in particular. The negative portrayal of African-Americans is particularly overt: they are

represented as violent and ‘primitive’, in the words of one Russian character. Larsen (2003, p.20) has rightly referred to some of the characters in *Brother 2* as ‘seemingly plucked directly from Hollywood’s blaxploitation flicks of the 1970s’. If all this seems a bit crude – Danila rescues a Russian prostitute along the way and has a one-night stand with an (African-American) TV presenter – the film ends on a note that hearkens back to the ambiguous nature of the lessons of the first *Brother* film. In an encounter with the man responsible for sequestering Mitia’s money and the personification of American capitalistic values, Danila makes his philosophy explicit. Danila speaks in Russian to the uncomprehending American, thereby accentuating the divide between the two cultures. He says:

Tell me, American, what is power? Is it really money? [...] I think that power comes from being right. Whoever is right is more powerful. And you’ve deceived someone, and made a lot of money, but so what? Have you become more powerful? No, you haven’t. Because you’re not in the right. It’s the person you deceived who’s in the right, and he’s more powerful. (Brat 2 2000)

That Danila invokes a universal criterion for moral action shows how important it is to resist a simplistic interpretation of the *Brother* films as a neo-fascistic paean to a crude Russian chauvinism. At the same time, by failing to articulate what is ‘right’, Danila leaves open the question of whether simply feeling that others are ‘wrong’ is enough to justify the use of force against them.

Art or Reality: The Reception of *Brother*

In addition to being very popular among Russian audiences, the

films have also had a certain international success. *Brother* was part of the Official Selection of the Cannes Film Festival in 1997 and received positive reviews in publications from *The Guardian* to *The New York Times*. Roger Clarke (1999) of *The Independent*, for example, referred to Balabanov as ‘one of the world’s great contemporary film-makers’ and ‘Russia’s David Lynch’. In turn, Philip French (2000) of *The Observer* described *Brother* as ‘one of the most impressive Eastern European films of the past decade’. Inevitably, some critics mentioned the nationalistic aspect of the films: for example, *Kino International* (2004) called *Brother* a ‘fiercely patriotic political statement’. However, by and large, they have argued that Balabanov’s portrayal of the chaos of Russian life is an important break with a moralistic tradition of Soviet film.

Many reviewers focused on the absence of an authorial position or moral message behind these films, tending to see Balabanov as a dispassionate director, portraying the messy quality of Russian life without glorifying anything. Birgit Beumers, one of the most prominent Western experts of Russian cinema, notes that in contrast to Soviet directors, Balabanov refrains from ‘moralizing and preaching’ and, because he refuses to provide moral standards, ‘does not condemn or reject the amoral conduct of his protagonists’ (1999b, p.86). For them, this makes Balabanov a director who addresses many difficult issues in Russia – racism, lawlessness, and violence, among others – while simultaneously suggesting that these questions might simply prove irresolvable.

While agreeing that Balabanov tends to take a dispassionate stance towards the moral judgments of his characters, other reviewers have emphasized the challenges with which Balabanov’s art confronts

its viewers. They often see the film within a tradition that, rather than simply portraying an unashamed reality, takes an ironic or mocking stance towards it. It is in reference to this detached presentation of his subject matter that Balabanov has been compared to Quentin Tarantino, the Coen brothers, and David Lynch. According to this reading, it is not so much Russian reality, but rather the myths informing that reality that fascinate Balabanov, the idea of the Russian soul, for example, or the omnipresence of the criminal underworld (see Tsyrkun 2000, p.58). These critics see Balabanov's interest in the relativization of national stereotypes within the context of broader postmodern cinematic trends.

It will come as no surprise, therefore, that international reviewers have tended to see these films as much more benign than their Russian equivalents have done. By concluding that the questions raised by the *Brother* films are simply left open, or that they constitute an elaborate attempt to subvert Russian national stereotypes, foreign critics reveal how differently they see the function of cinematic art and the reviewer's role in assessing it.

In Russia, there has been a vigorous discussion with a sociological slant of what the success of these films means for Russia, how they should be viewed, and to what degree the views expressed in them reflect those held by society at large. In the pages of cinematic magazines such as *Iskusstvo kino*, *Seans* and various national newspapers, many Russian commentators have described the public's reaction to the films in relation to the broader context of the search of a Russian national idea. Sensitive to the fragility of Russia's national identity project and to the loss of moral reference points following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, critics have pointed to

the dangers of portraying crude and intolerant nationalism in film.

One idea that has appeared repeatedly in Russian reviews of the films is that Balabanov is trying to depict – or even inculcate – a new and very exclusive type of national identity. Russian critics have described the films as a calculated attempt to put forward a certain kind of ideology. Yurii Gladil'shchikov (2000) refers to the fact that in *Brother 2* 'nothing is random – everything is linked to one overarching concept'. Sociologist Daniil Dondurei (2000) has described the films as 'manifestos' and spoken about 'their very serious ideological programme'. And few have interpreted this programme as benign: Aleksei German, Balabanov's former mentor, has disowned him and accused him of popularizing anti-Semitic and xenophobic ideas. Dondurei (2000) has decried what he sees as the films' racist agenda and referred to them as 'propaganda for Russian fascism'.

While Western critics applauded Balabanov for breaking with a moralistic Soviet cinematic tradition, their Russian counterparts pointed to the dangers of this subject matter in a society where the audience has come to expect this guidance. Speaking as the President of the Association of the Cinematographers of Russia in 1998, Nikita Mikhalkov emphasized the long tradition of committed art in Russia, a tradition that posits obligations for the artists and determines the expectations of the audience, and made a clear plea for Russian directors to join forces in helping consolidate Russian national identity (*Iskusstvo kino* 1998). As Mikhalkov and others have argued, the Russian audience tends to understand its films symbolically. In a country without a strong cinematographic tradition of subversive films – in Soviet times state-sponsored film

was usually required to have an uplifting message and even dissident film sought to make a positive spiritual point (Beumers 1999a, p.891) – this desire prevents audiences from seeing the multi-layered quality of art, because they are simply not looking for it. Various reviewers saw proof of this in the loud applause in the cinemas at various moments during the *Brother* films: for example, one scene in *Brother 2* in which the hero's brother says to Ukrainian mafiosi 'you still owe us for Sevastopol' (*Brat 2* 2000) was often greeted with cheers in the audience.

Such fears are better understood if one considers the topicality of issues such as xenophobia and racism in post-Soviet Russia. The identity void at the end of the Soviet Union gave rise to a debate about whether a new Russian identity would focus on Russia's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional heritage or privilege that of ethnic Russians (who represented approximately 80 per cent of the country's population following the dissolution of the Soviet Union). At the same time, Yeltsin's tenure was accompanied by an unprecedented decline in living standards, an alarming decrease in life expectancy, and a sense of national humiliation. In this context, the frustrations of the Russian population sometimes translated into resentment of the country's ethnic minorities and immigrant population, resulting in a surge in membership of right-wing political movements.

The 1990s witnessed the rise of ultra-nationalist parties such as Russian National Unity, the National Bolshevik Party, and Zhirinovskii's Liberal Democratic Party, as well as neo-fascist ideologies associated with political figures such as Aleksandr Prokhanov and Aleksandr Dugin. Much of this discourse focused on

Russia's humiliation vis-à-vis foreign powers and the possibility that internal enemies could undermine the prospects of Russia's renewal. As displays of xenophobia and national chauvinism increased, the first Chechen war (1994-1996) heightened the fragility of interethnic relations and was accompanied by a wave of anti-Caucasian sentiment. Other groups traditionally at risk from nationalistic discourse include Central Asians, Jews, Chinese and Africans. Indeed, the portrayal of African-Americans in *Brother 2* must be considered within the context that Russian society is generally intolerant of people of African origin, who are sometimes the victims of violent racially motivated crime.

The susceptibility of the Russian audience to racist ideologies along with the fragility of the national identity project has, therefore, given the discussion of these films in Russia an urgency that it has not had abroad. By seeing Balabanov as actively propagating the myths he deals with rather than subverting them, Russian critics have made them an important part of a larger national debate. They perceive the success of the films as testimony to a situation in which a maladjusted Russian population is interpreting Danila's ideas as a justification for the espousal of the national ideal sketched in above, one in which ethnic Russians require protection from enemy outsiders – people of Caucasian origin, traitorous Ukrainians, and foreigners generally. Dondurei (2000), for example, bemoans the fact that 'everybody is divided up into two categories – us and them'.

Positive and Negative Identity: Viewer Responses to *Brother*

The testimony of Russian viewers confirms the insights of both

foreign and domestic critics that the films reflect a current Russian reality and participate – intentionally or unintentionally – in the search for a new Russian idea. Evidence from blogs (an extensive website accompanies the *Brother 2* film and contains reactions to the film) and the media evinces a wide variety of responses, even from viewers implicated in the xenophobic outbursts in the *Brother* films. This diversity demonstrates that the description of an audience that absorbs a specific Manichean worldview is too simple. The films appealed to a far wider audience than just the stereotypical ‘good guy’ Russian, including people from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Ukraine.

In this respect, part of the appeal of the *Brother* films stems from the fact that their portrayal of identity ultimately centres on what Russians are not, rather than the essentialist characteristics of what they are. Gladil’shchikov (2000) sees *Brother* as proceeding through ‘negative examples’: the film tells us ‘we are not Caucasians. But who are we? Only the devil knows’. At the same time, while Americans are defined as ‘the other’, people from the Caucasus can very well join the Russian side and jeer at the Americans. This helps explain the fact that even though *Brother* is a film that does portray people from the Caucasus in a negative way, there were viewers who identified themselves as from the Caucasus, with Muslim names and using Islamic expressions, who wrote in to the films’ blog to praise the films. For example, Yusup (2005) writing from Makhachkala, Dagestan says: ‘Thanks to this film I fell in love with Russian – russkii – rock and started to watch Russian films... Thank you’. Someone from Azerbaijan wrote in to say how much the people of his country loved the films. He notes that watching these films he felt

as if Danila is referring to 'a common Motherland'. And further on: 'I feel like I am his fellow citizen' (n.a. 2002).

This idea that identity issues tend to shift quite easily also helps explain the popularity of the *Brother* films in Ukraine where there are numerous fan clubs dedicated to Sergei Bodrov. A Ukrainian journalist acknowledged the expression of nationalist prejudices in the *Brother* films and explained them by saying that Balabanov is writing about the 'really existing' tensions between Ukrainians and Russians, tensions that reflect the 'regret and sadness that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union' (Ivanov 2000). At the same time, some Ukrainian viewers went out of their way to assure Russians that a majority of Ukrainians liked the film, and one viewer from Kiev contends that Ukrainians reacted to insults addressed at them 'with humour' (Bonanza 2000). One said that despite the 'use of derogatory terms' with regards to Ukrainians, and 'the reference to Sevastopol, I still liked the film very, very much' as did the majority of the city from which he came (Aleksandr 2000). Moreover, Ukrainian viewers cautioned other Ukrainians about taking the wrong message from the film, assuring them that 'nobody wants to offend anyone' (Julia 2001).

The film's portrayal of Americans sheds light on similar tensions. A considerable number of blog entries contain racist remarks vis-à-vis African-Americans. In addition, some viewers have seen the films as justification for a Cold War mentality and responded with comments such as 'Americans are our enemies and that's a fact' (Nikolai 2001). This is explicable in light of the fact that a considerable number of Russian citizens and members of the Russian-speaking diaspora have negative attitudes to the U.S.

(occasioned by events such as the NATO bombings of Serbia). However, the appeal of American culture in the post-Soviet area is equally evident. Critics have pointed out that the anti-American content and blockbuster form of *Brother 2* exemplifies the attraction-repulsion relationship between Russia and America. It is in this sense that Larsen (2003, p.511) has described *Brother 2* as the quintessential post-Soviet blockbuster: 'simultaneously resisting and succumbing to the global dominance of American popular culture'.

Danila Bagrov: A Gangster Hero?

Having tried to nuance the idea that *Brother* exploits the divisions within Russian society to inculcate a very restrictive type of national identity, I now want to look in more detail at Danila as a heroic figure who has enjoyed lasting popularity, in order to shed further light on his particular appeal in Russia and the films' contribution to the discussion of national identity.

Spectators and reviewers alike have remarked on how his desire to operate outside the law to combat lawlessness places Danila within the tradition of Russian legendary heroes, or *bogatyry*, an equivalent of the western knight. There is a long tradition of these free but doomed rebels that constitutes almost a national mythology in Russia. References to them in the film itself encourage this interpretation; for example, a reproduction of Viktor Vasnetsov's famous painting of three of these knights, *Tri bogatyrya*, is hanging on the wall in Danila's girlfriend's apartment in the movie. Various critics have emphasized that the film's hero is 'deeply rooted in traditional Russian culture' and that his predecessors include popular Russian heroes, such as Dobrynia Nikitich or Vladimir Dubrovskii

(Krivulin 1998). Viewer responses have also noted the similarities between the structure of the films and these fables, describing Danila as a 'Russian *bogatyr* of our time' (Ruslan 2000) and a 'fabled *bogatyr* who punishes evil and restores to us the only thing that we have left – the Truth' (Igor 2000).

It is in this sense that Danila has been compared to other cinematographic vigilante heroes interested in enforcing justice outside the conventional norms of law and order, without necessarily having to confront the ethical implications of their choices. The fact that vigilante films tend to be made in times of political confusion goes some way towards explaining the popularity of the *Brother* films. Critics have noted that the heyday of America's vigilante film era concentrated at the beginning of the 1970s (films such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Billy Jack* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974)), as well as their recent resurgence (films like *The Brave One* (2007), *Death Sentence* (2007), *Munich* (2005)), both coincided with times of domestic turmoil in America and anxiety about the government's ability to maintain law and order (Lichtenfeld 2007). In Russia, a number of vigilante heroes appeared in Russian TV series and films after the release of *Brother*, leading one critic to talk about the proliferation of 'contemporary Robin Hoods' (Stojanova 2005).¹

The sense of living in a society in which there was a danger of implosion seems to constitute a definite parallel between the context which brought about a boom in American vigilante films and the one that inspired movies like *Brother* and others in Russia. In Russia, moreover, the population's anxiety about the government's capacity

¹ See, for example, TV mini series *Law of the Lawless* (Brigada, 2002) and the blockbuster *Shadow Boxing* (Boy s ten'yu, 2005), as well as Pavel Lungin's *Tycoon* (Oligarkh, 2002).

to ensure their safety and security was largely borne out by the turmoil that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the first half of the 1990s, crime and insecurity increased steadily in Russia: from 1991 to 1993 the overall crime rate rose by almost 30 per cent, and crime rates between the beginning and mid 1990s doubled, with violent homicides constituting an increasingly important proportion of those crimes. Russia's economic system of the time has been described as 'gangster or bandit capitalism' (McCauley 2001, p.xiii).

Russian citizens, therefore, experienced tangible effects with regards to widespread increases in crime and the gangster underworld portrayed in *Brother* became temporarily involved with the lives of ordinary Russians. Many scholars have noted the ubiquitous nature of lawless behaviour at the time, observing that criminal lawlessness took place 'at the heart of Russian society' (Juviler 1999, p.525). Part of the reason for this is that society in general was not very neatly stratified after the shake up that followed the dissolution of the USSR, a phenomenon that allowed many people to temporarily drift into and out of contact with this underworld. Criminalization of this sort can be seen as the 'natural consequence of social uncertainties created by the institutional adaptation of old regimes and the establishment of new institutions' (Sergeyev 1998, p.x).

At the same time, the loss of the legal and moral reference points of the previous regime raised the question of the meaning of justice and deviant behaviour. Sergeyev (1998) identifies gray zones in which former legal and moral norms no longer apply and new ones have yet to be formed in order to explain the widespread criminalization of Russian society. Different perceptions of what constitutes 'wrong' or 'right' can be illustrated by tracing the changes

in public discourse with regards to crime. For example, as social norms change again, a word like 'businessman', more or less synonymous with 'gangster' in the 1990s, is just starting to retrieve its normal meaning in Russia.

The films' idiosyncratic version of justice struck a particular chord in a society that had lost the reference points that had existed for so long. The fact that the films blur the distinction between right and wrong corresponds with Russians' real, tangible experience that suggests that there is no one correct way to enforce justice. At the same time, the social disorder portrayed in the films can, paradoxically, be given a positive valence. Prokhorova notes that televised crime series of the 1990s owe part of their popularity to their ability to subvert the worst aspects of Russian life and present them as an idea of national uniqueness:

The very messiness of Russian life and the extremes of the Russian national character are presented as values in and of themselves. (2003, p.520)

It seems possible that movies such as *Brother* function both as a reflection of the turmoil in Russian society and a reminder that such a situation is uniquely 'Russian'.

Conclusion

The gangster world of the 1990s has very quickly assumed an imagery of its own, and taken on almost a mythical status whereby gangsters have practically become part of national folklore in Russia. Even as Balabanov made the first *Brother* film in 1997, the so-called era of high gangster culture was already a thing of the past. Today these films fulfill the role of a kind of nostalgic fairy tale, encouraging

spectators to idealize a time which was chaotic and lawless. Such a bleak portrait of Russian reality paradoxically allows Russians to simultaneously glorify having lived through this unique period. The fact that many viewers actually knew this world, survived it and even enjoyed some aspects of it, gives it immediacy and colouring that allows it to be defined as peculiar to Russian culture. The uniqueness of the gangster element in this decade allows it to become another element of Russianness and part of the national identity project in Russia.

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