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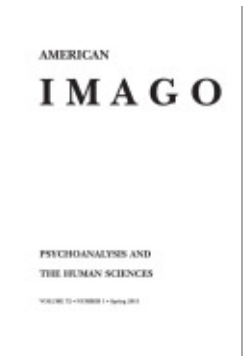
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## Identity Signifiers in Contemporary Russian Films: A Lacanian Analysis

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JANET SWAFFAR

## Identity Signifiers in Contemporary Russian Films: A Lacanian Analysis

The claiming of an essential identity is a common psychological mechanism human beings use to characterize themselves. For Russians in the last decade of this century, searches for the meaning of the self are endemic. Much of Russia is engaged in re-writing the narrative of community and re-constructing history in an effort to fill the identity void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its monolithic Ideological State Apparatus.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary Russian films are both symptomatic of and a productive force in this process of identity reconstruction. In the last ten years, Russian film production has frequently focused on problems that originated with the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Film producers, liberated from the ideological constraints of the Communist Party, have embraced the search for alternative ideologies as a primary narrative. The protagonists of new films are often in the position of confronting old values that are no longer realizable and so distort those values in their search for viable social and personal standards. In order to explore the limits on traditional signifiers, they look for alternatives and find them in chimerical discourses such as pre-Revolutionary Russia (e.g. Stanislav Govoruchin's controversial documentary, *The Russia That We Have Lost*).

Three films made in the early 1990s characterize this quest for alternative identities: Pavel Loungin's *Luna Park* (1991), Vladimir Khotinenko's *Muslim* (1994), and Nikita Mikhalkov's *Urga* (1991). Each movie addresses issues of post-Communist Russia in different locales—in Moscow, in a Russian village, and in China. Each film works through problems of identity, concentrating on one particular conflict in discourses that threaten the identity of the protagonists. Thus *Luna Park* stresses the conflicts arising from racial and gender

stereotyping; *Muslim* focuses on the difficulty of achieving religious tolerance in a traditional rural community; *Urga* depicts the intrusion of Western commercialism on a remote, idyllic Eden. The reception of these works, as well as interviews with the directors, suggests that each of these films attempts to find an essential Russian identity, to reassess traditional signifiers of what it means to be Russian in the era of post-Communism.<sup>2</sup>

Our interpretation of these films is based on psychological theories developed in the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan rejects the understanding of identity as essential and transcendent. Rather, he views it as constructed through the play of signifiers within a socially produced symbolic order. In his work, Lacan distinguishes between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real—three sites which are important for understanding an individual as well as his or her universe. The imaginary is established in early childhood, when the infant experiences the reflection of his own body as a unified and unproblematic whole in the mirror. This mirror stage constitutes a basis for that subject's sense of "I" as a center of the universe where the surroundings—the Others—are made whole in the optic of one's own imaginary order. If individuals share premises from the symbolic order of their era in their own imaginaries, the Other and the "I" can have successful interaction.

Such acts of relating through a social set of signifiers promote an individual's entrance into language and into identity. Yet Lacan views the realization of one's own identity in language as constructed in absence and lack because no signifier is ever adequate to its signified. Words remain the surrogates of desire. The human subject experiences this sense of his or her own lack as measured against the symbolic order. That subject uses language or other sign systems (e.g. behavioral norms) to create a relationship between his or her imaginary and the symbolic order of the exterior world. At moments of successful communication, when perceived desires appear to be fulfilled, the subject believes that his or her identity is complete and autonomous.

This transient illusion of success is inevitably permeated with the reality of individuals' unfulfilled desires. In order to cover this sense of lack, the symbolic is constructed around the

primary signifier—the phallus—which is the point of departure for the whole chain of community signification. As Lacan describes it, the phallus is a fantasy that had to emerge in order to hold the symbolic together and to cover the individual's primary trauma of experiencing lack: the inaccessible real, a fulfillment and wholeness beyond signification.<sup>3</sup>

Reading contemporary Russian films as case studies in a Lacanian search for self, we will focus on their shifting master signifiers. We will show how these discourses in the films deconstruct images and events in which the protagonists are embedded. Criticizing contemporary Russia, these films create fictions in which people seek a coherent identity and are confronted by signifiers that have lost their ability to create an illusion of the real world.

### ***Luna Park* and Deconstruction of the Body**

Pavel Loungin's film *Luna Park* presents a narrative about a group of young people who call themselves "The Cleaners." Living in a ramshackle gym in Moscow's Luna Park, the goal of these homeless young men is to cleanse Russia from "alien" bodies such as Jews, homosexuals, Communists, punks, and other "undesirables." The cleaning is interrupted when Andrej, the protagonist of the film and leader of the Cleaners, is told that a well-known Jewish musician, Nahum Heifitz, is his father. Intending to kill his ostensible father, on the way to Luna Park where the murder is planned, Andrej actually develops a personal relationship with Nahum Heifitz and decides to accept his own identity as a Jew. Now persecuted by his old friends, Andrej leaves Moscow with Nahum. In the last sequence in the movie, Andrej puts a picture of his mother on the table. Nahum, not recognizing her, bursts into laughter, leaving everyone—Andrej as well as the viewer—wondering whether he is the real father or not. By showing how Andrej's search for his biologically "real" identity is undercut by images and statements that cast doubt on that reality, *Luna Park* offers only ambiguous answers to Andrej's search.

Overall, Andrej's social identities are constructed through the play of negative signifiers and phantasmatic projections

onto an age of disorder. The Cleaners create an identity for its members through an ongoing process of repudiation and abjection of the social order that has failed them.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Cleaners were born during the Brezhnev era, a fact that is repudiated or denigrated by these young people, as are all possible courses of identity manifested by the symbolic order of the now defunct Soviet Union. Different comments and images in the film reinforce this repudiation: in the prologue, Andrej wears a Russian flag on his body—an image in direct juxtaposition to the red Soviet flag next seen in the office of Andrej's aunt in the factory.

Music also defines the repudiated relationship, the Otherness, between the present and the past of the Cleaners. Different songs in the film are written, according to the narrative, by Nahum Heifitz, who was considered a foremost Soviet composer. These melodies are familiar to the audience as Soviet-era songs. Yet Andrej speaks disdainfully of them, and the other Cleaners parody them. However, the film provides no contemporary music for Andrej or his compatriots. Positivity and presence, then, are displaced by negativity and absence—again, an empty place which is filled only through abjection, through a denial of the place for art in the world of the Cleaners as Other.

Significantly, Andrej uses abjection of another kind of Soviet-era Other, in this case Jews and homosexuals, to establish his own subject position in society. The Cleaners do not have rational explanations for abjectifying their victims, for propagating the denial of an existence already blotted out officially. When a restaurant owner attacked by the group pleads “I am not Jewish; it is a mistake,” Andrej answers, “We don't care. A rat is always a rat.” The designation “Jew” serves here only to demark the signifiers damned by their fathers' order; the master signifiers the Cleaners use to structure their own lives. “Jew” is beyond the pale of the acceptable; it means nothing in particular. The only reason Andrej and his colleagues give for their actions is their desire to be Russian in Russia, to clean Russia of all alien bodies, which now include the Soviets themselves.

The film depicts Andrej as he goes through a metamorphosis, moving from a conscious essentialist identification with

one group of the people (the Cleaners) to an equally essentialist identification with an Other (Jews). In other words, Andrej shifts from understanding the Cleaners to understanding Nahum Heifitz as the key to his “real” identity. He moves from an Other in his own imaginary to claim an abjected position in his own society, to become that society’s feared Other, and thus to move into a critical renewal of that society’s signifiers. To be sure, initially, after he hears that he has a Jewish father, he must face the fact that what he had earlier held to be abject is part of his own identity, of his genetic origin. In his mind, Andrej cannot be a Cleaner anymore if he himself is not clean. The film illustrates thus how the abject enters the subject’s conscious life, and threatens him with dissolution of the “I,” as non-meaning threatens his imaginary identity. To avoid this dissolution, Andrej starts to sympathize with Nahum because he can only avoid complete annihilation by identifying completely with what he now holds to be constitutive of his “true” self—he has moved from the symbolic order of the Cleaners to the symbolic order prefigured in the Jewish world of his father—into a world abjected by Soviet as well as post-Soviet Russia.

Not surprisingly, Nahum Heifitz’s self concept functions as the polar opposite of Andrej’s. Nahum rejects the notion of a fixed, “real,” identity. Although his Moscow apartment reflects a particular community, this community is not prescriptive. His living space is an open one, which all kinds of people and all social classes enter and exit. Offering access to a cross-section of Russian society, no one must belong to a special community in order to visit Nahum Heifitz. In contrast, the Cleaner’s gym at Luna Park is limited only to its members or to those they wish to punish.

Most strikingly different from Andrej, Nahum does not demand that his identity be essential. He is conscious of his Jewish origins—his jokes about “anti-Semitic mirrors,” or “anti-Semitism against prostate” reflect that—but he seems not to use his Jewish identity to exclude alternative symbolic orders. Nahum’s relation to music suggests his repudiation of a concrete norm, and instead a recognition that “official” signifiers change as do the symbolic orders of history. Now he is a Soviet composer and a self-declared “relic of Brezhnev”;

earlier he was also someone who brought jazz to Russia in the 1930s; he used his music to merge Russian, Jewish, and Tatar communities. Nahum's world is thus not Other to the real Russia, the Russia the boy had sought and defined in terms essentially established by the Soviet era.

In the film, the identity of the Soviet era class structure is coded through negativity, and by abjection, as happened for the Cleaners: people are Russians because they are not Jews or homosexuals. The Cleaners compensate for the absence of positive identification by projecting signifiers of power and control onto their bodies. The young Cleaners adopt behaviors and visual signs that signify full mastery of their flesh: the film viewer sees trained bodies building muscles, revealing the young men's exhibitionist obsession. By enabling them to reenact self mastery, their physical attributes compensate for the lack in their psychic identity. But the film illustrates how inadequate that compensation is.

The body of Nahum Heifitz plays a pivotal role in illustrating the fallacy of such reenactment. During the whole film Nahum, the key to Andrej's identity as he conceives it, is suffering from prostate cancer. Often he is incontinent. In the film's last scene, he loses his bladder control while in bed on the train in which the two are fleeing from Moscow. This moment of dissolution occurs immediately after Nahum sees the picture of Andrej's mother, a person he states he has never seen before, and precisely at the moment when Andrej expects an unequivocal answer about his real paternity. That final moment, in which the idea of the coherent identity Andrej has searched for is left as an unanswered question, is the same moment in which Nahum's loss of bodily control is highlighted. Just as the boundaries of identity represented here are porous, the body too is unstable. Neither ethnic nor physical identity is an identity in this world.

The stability of the body and the control of it are questioned throughout the film, particularly in its repeated scenes of the roller coaster at Luna Park. Trying to find the truth about his origins, not having a concrete mark of identification, threatened with becoming the abject himself, becoming nothing, vanishing from society, Andrej returns repeatedly to the

roller coaster. In the context of other signifiers in the film, that preoccupation can be interpreted as a place where the subject savors the loss of control over the corporeal self, but recovers a sense of the body at least. But this feeling of instability is deceptive; roller-coaster riders know that the ride lasts only for a limited time and then in the end, self-mastery will in fact be reinstated and the reality of the body will again recede behind the mental discipline of abjection in post-Soviet Russia.

Throughout the whole film it is Andrej and sometimes his friends who use the roller coaster to celebrate, relive as it were, the experience of regaining control after losing their sense of their bodies. In effect, they simulate the phallic master narrative of Soviet-era Russia. The last person who sits on the roller coaster is Nahum Heifitz, whom the Cleaners intend to kill by having him use it without experiencing the final reassumption of control. Instead, it is the roller coaster that “dies” in a sea of flames, leaving the tangible stability of Nahum as survivor.

Other actions in the film show the tension between the Andrej’s desire to find a coherent identity on the one hand and the contradictions posed by his chosen symbolic orders (the various possible Russian pasts and their values) on the other. After Andrej has accepted his father and repudiated the Cleaners, he comes into Nahum’s apartment to accept his newly realized identity and to start a new life together. On his own initiative, one of the first things Andrej does is to begin cleaning the floor. He insists on putting the apartment in order. Nahum asks him to stop, saying it is too late to get rid of the mess. Andrej, however, is still obsessed with cleaning.

In Lacanian terms, the filmgoer can understand this scene as Andrej’s attempt to have a “clean” or cleansed identity, to understand himself entirely as a “Jew” in an ordered, closed way. In contrast, Nahum insists that chaos and disorder are his apartment’s natural state, as are any segments of the real. His apartment mirrors his fragmented identity in a country that does not acknowledge his place in it, except in fragment, and so his world is a “mess” whose admixture of signifiers cannot be consolidated into a “clean” symbolic order.

The train scene, the final episode of the film, connects different struggles and tensions within the film as a whole, to



confront the viewer with the real difficulties which must be met in the wake of Soviet dissolution. It shows the viewer the moment when nothing is fixed because the moment when Nahum loses control of his bodily functions is also the moment when Andrej's identity becomes utterly uncertain. The camera shows the white sheet that Andrej holds in his hands. This white, unsignified surface has replaced the Russian flag the viewer saw draped around his body at the beginning of the film. The roller coaster has been displaced by a train, in which the film carries its protagonists to an unknown destination with no promise of ultimate control—to a white flag of surrender, to a flag that is a clean slate, with no signs of the past, a slate that needs to be written on.

### ***Muslim as a Return to the Mother***

Taking on another facet of post-Soviet Russia, Vladimir Khotinenko's film *Muslim* turns from the symbolic order of a big city to that of a small village. This is a story of Nikolai's return to the place where he grew up, a return to the birthplace of an individual identity. He comes back after spending seven years in Afghanistan where he had been sent with the Soviet Army. Most of those years he lived at the house of an old man who saved his life. Nikolai converted there to Islam and assumed his new Muslim identity represented in Abdulla, the name he has adopted. After coming back to the village, Nikolai/Abdulla first receives an enthusiastic reception by the small community which, however, turns soon into hidden and then open hostility against this alien son of theirs. The conflict between Nikolai and the community arises in their failure to accept the Other. Nikolai's acquired values and behaviors are unintelligible and hence threatening to the villagers, including his mother and brother.

Alongside this main narrative of the film runs a parallel story—that of an unidentified stranger who stalks Nikolai throughout the film, a figure whose garb and demeanor usher up NKVD images of the Soviet past. At the end of the movie, when the conflict between Nikolai and the community reaches its crisis, the stranger

explains to Nikolai why he has pursued him: he was together with him in Afghanistan and was told by a dying friend that Nikolai is supposedly a traitor. Perpetuating the values from the recent past, the stranger wants to take revenge and kill Nikolai, which he ultimately does by fatally shooting him, albeit by accident.

Like *Luna Park*, this post-Communist Russian village is the site of identity conflicts marked by the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Nikolai/Abdulla, by returning to his village, ruptures its homogeneous life and provokes confrontations between now competing ideologies that had been stabilized during the Soviet era: Christianity with Islam, Russian with Western values. The resulting discourses reveal where the members of the village community invest themselves positively or negatively to maintain their imagined identities within the village's existing symbolic order—where the audience sees good and bad legacies of the Russian countryside.

Ultimately, even the villagers' processes of identification prove unsuccessful because the gap between the imaginary (the ego's fantasizing, yielding insights arrived at by independent analyses), and the symbolic order (the social constructs in which the ego perceives itself embedded) cannot be reconciled. The film offers metaphorical and metonymical images of tolerance and redemption (a recurring shepherd and his flock, a cleansing pool) as signifiers shared by characters in the film. In the villager's search for a whole and autonomous identity, Nikolai becomes an object of their desire—his imaginary world is somehow better than their own. Yet the young man's adherence to Islamic beliefs—his daily prayers in a foreign language, his alternative clothing, his refusal to drink alcohol or engage in dishonest activities, destabilize the symbolic order of the village by challenging its accepted practices. His behavior is non-Russian and so cannot be theirs.

To be sure, the fragment of Nikolai's life depicted in the film is imaginary in the sense of the phantasmatic, conditioned by religious and nature symbolism. The film commences with Nikolai's resurrection. Having disappeared in the war in Afghanistan, he is shown entering the village after experiencing near death and resurrection in the foreign country. The viewer learns that Nikolai was destined to be executed but was saved

at the last moment by an Afghan who had lost his own son in the war. For the members of his own village, his return, a resurrection from death, bears traces of the unreal, of a dream. That perception is reinforced by Nikolai's appearance—his unfamiliar clothes, behavior and religious practices. This unfamiliarity is particularly unsettling for Nikolai's brother, Fed'ka. Throughout the film Fed'ka thus challenges Nikolai's resolve in ways that lead to life and death confrontations—confrontations between two identities, two symbolic orders.

The motives for Nikolai's return after an absence of seven years remain somewhat obscure, but are implicitly religious in origin. He tells Vera, a young woman in the village who is attracted to him, that he heard a voice telling him to go back home. On another occasion, repeating the words of his Afghan mentor, he tells his mother that paradise, is to be found at the feet of the mother. The words home, paradise, and mother are connected to each other; the word mother is particularly striking because it is the first and the last word Nikolai utters in the film, Nikolai searches for Mother Russia, but, in Lacanian terms, also for the wholeness of being that exists before the child enters the symbolic order of the father.

Except for conversations with his mother and Vera, Nikolai says virtually nothing throughout the film. At regular intervals, the viewers and villagers hear his voice praying in a language not understood nor clearly audible.<sup>5</sup> The way the film constructs Nikolai's presence in the film, therefore, negates not only the values of the village but also its language. In place of verbal associations with his past life in his family and in the village, the camera assumes Nikolai's gaze, perusing the walls of the house and pausing at white-and-black photographs of Nikolai's and his family's past. Thus, the camera confronts the viewer with these images, but Nikolai/Abdulla does not articulate them in the modern context. The memory of his own history remains pre-verbal. Consequently, his return home is not experienced by the viewers as a return to a historical space, but as an ahistorical return to the mother. That return must consequently fail as a recapture of a viable identity.

Together with his general silence or his talking in a foreign language, the absence of a verbal history about his

rebirth as Abdulla, Nikolai has returned to the roots of his imaginary, to a pre-symbolic space where, in the sense of Lacan, the lack as a formative power of the subject and the trauma of this lack has not yet entered the subject's body. In this film, Nikolai becomes a metaphorical embodiment of the desire for return to this space; he is one who returns and therefore becomes an object of desire for the Other. His unreality or imaginary status is highlighted by the fact that he has died a virtual death at the beginning of the film, a death that is inevitably realized in the end.

The filmmaker constructs this play of real and unreal identities very carefully throughout the film. Metaphors and images construct for the viewer the identities of multiple characters in the village in pre-verbal ways as well. The camera structures the spaces in which various figures are characteristically found in open or closed realms, as an "inside" (enclosed space) and "outside" (outdoors). These two terms, the inside and outside, inform Lacan's theory of the subject as an ordering process. He writes: "I stressed the division that I make by opposing, in relation to the entrance of the unconscious, the two fields of the subject and the Other. The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject—it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear."<sup>6</sup> The space of the Other is the world outside of the inside of the self, and the meaning of this inside consists of the signifiers of the outside, as the film also suggests.

In the film the camera explores the consequences of Lacan's insight for individuals. Sequences of Nikolai/Abdulla show him praying in the open landscape next to the village. When he appears at the entrance to a closed space, the camera shows the open space of nature behind him. When he is inside of a house, the camera shows an open door with a view of the outdoors. The visual images represent his identity, his "Inside," with the signifiers of the outside, the world of nature. Thus the camera suggests that the investment of Nikolai's internal self lies in the signifiers of the natural outdoor world, not in any of the legislated spaces of a thoroughly paternal world (there can be no true return to the presymbolic mother *inside*).

For other characters of the narrative, the camera creates a system of parallels and contradictions to the imagery that characterizes Nikolai/Abdulla. Although a center of the film, the catalyst for speech and actions of other characters, the villagers' relation to Nikolai shifts with their desire to be like him on the one hand, and on the other, their desire for his absence—either in the guise of a reversion to the “old” Nikolai or in his death (a reverting to the symbolic order of the father). The death motif appears initially in the figure of the outsider who is stalking Nikolai. From the outset, the camera watches him, gun in hand, watching Nikolai. Significantly, before confronting and killing Nikolai at the end of the film this figure inhabits a curiously empty “inside” space in a series of disconnected scenes that interrupt the flow of the Nikolai/Abdulla narrative.

The stranger's space, however, cannot nurture identity. In the room in which the stranger lives, the camera finds few objects—only two mirrors, and a picture of Nikolai cut out of a newspaper and hanging on an otherwise empty wall. In one sequence, the stranger reads the bible aloud moving back and forth while his own images double in the two mirrors. Then, the image of Nikolai replaces the image of the stranger himself; it becomes the Other into which the stranger invests his identity. The visual crafting that replaces one is tantamount to murdering the self, to destroying the difference between the signifier for the self and the signifier for the Other.

This man, like the villagers, will reclaim a symbolic order of emptiness, unless he and they acknowledge Nikolai's new identity as Abdulla and its reasons for existence.

Nikolai's brother Fed'ka serves a function parallel to that of the stranger. The returned Nikolai/Abdulla is for him an object of identification and, at the same time a threat of displacement. His resulting ambivalence recurs throughout the film. Ostensibly ready for reconciliation with Nikolai, the rapprochement fails to occur because Fed'ka insists that he and his brother must share the act of kissing the same Christian icon. The camera shows Fed'ka moving from the mirror containing his own image to the icon and then kissing it. As in the stranger's hotel room, here again, the camera moves seamlessly from a mirror image of an individual to the image with which that person identifies.

In the next scene the camera shows Fed'ka holding the icon against Nikolai's face exactly as he held it before against his own face trying to force him to kiss the icon, *The Brothers*, however, cannot identify with the same central signifiers of their symbolic order. Nikolai/Abdulla is unable to share a symbolic identification with his brother through a religion that is no longer his. Fed'ka's attempted suicide underscores the psychic trauma experienced by an individual denied successful interaction with his or her symbolic order. Unable to find a location of his own inside in the world around him (a world whose public religious function is conflicted), Fed'ka turns to the internal space of the non-meaning, the abject signified by death and the end to manifest identity.

The structuring of Fed'ka's space reinforces the restrictive nature of his identity. The camera never shows him in open areas. Early in the film he is seen closing a large door in on himself, leaving the viewer outside in front of the expansive gray surface of the door. No scenes in the film show him in the outdoors. No expansive Other is available in his world, no place for investing his own "I." He, too, is caught inside the patriarchal constructs of Soviet Russia.

Perhaps the most ambivalent figure in the film is Nikolai's mother. Her feelings for her son range from intense love to intense hatred, revealing that she is not the ultimate mother for Nikolai. In one scene, she puts on Nikolai's neckerchief which, in the symbolic economy of the film, functions as a token of his Islamic identity. Then the camera shows her with the neckerchief on her head, examining herself in the mirror. As in the case of the stranger and the brother, the reflected self in the mirror attempts to relate to and interact with Nikolai/Abdulla. But whereas the camera initiates the visually explicit connections in the sequences showing the stranger and the brother, the mother initiates a conscious act to identify with her son.

As the viewer sees, her effort to incorporate in her persona the primary signifier of her son's symbolic order ends in failure. After the scene with the mirror, with the neckerchief on her head, she vehemently upbraids Nikolai for being unwillingly to participate in stealing food for the farm animals—an accepted practice among the villagers, established in

the Soviet era. Although initially accepting and projecting her identity on her son, she becomes increasingly alienated from it in the course of the film as she reverts to the spaces constructed by the Father State instead of Mother Russia.

Desiring more than anyone else to identify with Nikolai, the mother is nonetheless locked into her symbolic order. The film externalizes the mother's psychological conflict by dwelling on her standing alone outside after she closes the door of the local store—strikingly unlike Fed'ka, who invariably closes himself inside. Since the store functions in the film as a public interior space where people, mostly women, exchange their opinions, the uniform appearance of customers and shopkeepers underscores their shared symbolic order. The filmgoer sees a row of women who say the same things and look virtually identical, seemingly frozen in their communal signification. Nikolai's mother is unaware of the inexorable demands posed by the village's symbolic order. Faced with the exclusion of her son, her desire to accept the Other collides with her desire to interact successfully with her community, and she returns to the old familiar identity strategies.

In these ways, the film presents Nikolai's new religious values as giving rise to confrontations between conflicting symbolic orders but not as the necessary or first cause of this conflict. In his home village Nikolai becomes an object of desire for what he is not, rather than what he is. Freed from his past, he is reborn into a new present. The villagers, in contrast, are subjects constructed according to entrenched symbolic orders, to various Russian pasts that resisted the Soviet era. Contemporary discourses conflict with discourses from their past. Whereas Nikolai exists in self-sufficient interaction between himself and an acknowledged Other, the villagers struggle in an unacknowledged past and present. The only discourse they jointly identify with is the empty ritual of drinking vodka. This ritual is raised to the value of the primary signifier of village life, the phallus, around which most activity is constructed in their world. When Nikolai refuses to join in this ritual, he deprives the villagers of that primary signifier, just as in the story told by Nikolai's Godfather about a man who dies

because his wife deprived him of vodka. The refusal to drink renders Nilolai non-Russian in their estimation.

Important for the complex of the film's signifiers, Nikolai is not the only figure in the film who exists outside a restrictive symbolic order. Two parallel characters, the Patriarch and the shepherd, are peripheral to the main narrative, but they articulate their views for the audience in the course of the film. The message of the Patriarch coincides with the message which Nikolai/Abdulla bears: there is only one God, but there are many ways to reach him. Like Nikolai, the Patriarch pleads for tolerance. Singing a hymn outdoors, the Patriarch is first viewed in the open space of the Russian landscape, a parallel to Nikolai praying in the open fields. Also like Nikolai, the Patriarch is young, belonging to the same generation as Nikolai and his brother. But unlike Fed'ka, he is never viewed at the places where discourses about vodka or commercial dealings are discussed, nor does he rely on icons. The film juxtaposes the Patriarch to Nikolai's brother by emphasizing that they shared a childhood symbolic order, attending the same school at the same time.

Another *outside* and unrestricted figure, the shepherd, appears in transitions between episodes in the film. The camera follows him in the company of animals—cows, sheep, goats. At one point, this admixture of livestock appears in the space between an Orthodox church and the praying Nikolai. The parallel to the main narrative is clear: the mixed herd of animals (a "Peaceable Kingdom" image) stands in a metaphorical juxtaposition to the competing symbolic orders and their religious practices. Like the Patriarch, the images of the shepherd with his motley herd acknowledge the validity of alternative symbolic orders.

In several particulars the shepherd is the most Lacanian figure in the film, the figure most outside the symbolic order. Like Nikolai, he is marked by difficulty in communicating. His mumbled dialect must be translated to be intelligible for others. Moreover, it is Nikolai's mother who translates his language to render it intelligible to the exterior world. The alternative natural space he inhabits is a tree. Even his most personal space is outside the social constructs of the villagers.



He is utterly removed from physical and verbal participation in the village's symbolic order.

In different ways, the Patriarch and the shepherd exist largely outside of the narrative action of the film. Notably, before the story line begins, the very first scene of the film follows the Patriarch walking through a wide field. In the very last scene, after the stranger shoots Nikolai, the shepherd is alone in a field. Both scenes frame the narrative of Nikolai/Abdulla's rebirth and death. If understood as a dream, as a fantasy, then the Patriarch and the shepherd signal for the viewer a reality that transcends the dream's symbolic order.

From the psychoanalytic perspective, these two figures exist in two different dimensions. The Patriarch, though distancing himself from the symbolic order of the village, is not excluded from it. On the contrary, he is much respected as a positive signifier, the phallic authority of God. The shepherd, lacking the ability to express desires, is inchoately self-sufficient. He and not the Patriarch is the last person to appear on screen, a representative of the desire which the film expresses: a desire to initiate the imaginary, to commence the search for the space preceding the experience of lack.

Other than the Patriarch himself, few positive signifiers of phallic authority exist: villagers lack a functioning belief in God, and the men are represented as alcoholics who do little, if any, work. Like the symbolic order of *Luna Park*, then, the world of *Muslim* operates with negative signifying systems. The desire to find more productive signifiers for their lives is best represented in the villagers' superstitious belief that a local lake can cleanse anyone who can reach its bottom. In fact, the lake would be the Other that the villagers need in order to be introduced to a new beginning, a reconstituted symbolic order for their imagos, if they would ever risk truly exploring it instead of fearing the consequences of plumbing its depths.

### **Identity and National Past in *Urga***

A third film from the end of the Soviet era tells a story parallel to *Luna Park* and *Muslim* but from the peripheries of

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established Russia. Nikita Mikhalkov's film *Urga* tells the story of two families living in China but representing two different cultures: Gombo is a Mongolian shepherd who lives in the steppe with his family, outside of the Chinese society; Sergey is a Russian worker who came to China to earn money. Thus, the film depicts two discourses—that of Western capitalism and that of Mongolian tribal practices. Gombo pleads for the lifestyle of his ancestors—Genghis Khan's tribe. His wife Pagma, in contrast, has been raised in a city and accepts modern Chinese customs, such as wanting her husband to use condoms so that they will have only three children. Sergey, who came to China only to earn money, now feels entirely alienated and estranged from his traditions and his native landscape. The film ends with a terse sequence that calls the traditions of both into question as a legacy of the East Bloc: the fourth child of Gombo and Pagma talks about his family's subsequent history as the camera looks at the mutilated steppe, the way it looks "today" after being desecrated by capitalism.

The narrative intention of the film is to explore identity anchored in nature when that identity is disrupted by changes in the natural world. Like Nikolai, Gombo is a positive hero who still has access to a satisfying symbolic order and to discourses with which he identifies. He has lived his entire life in the steppe, in the same yurt, living a frontier existence in the middle of a vast, untouched corner of the world. The desire that Gombo repeatedly talks about during the film is for a rebirth of Genghis Khan and with him the rebirth of the old Mongolian traditions.

His family has transmitted this legend about the great Mongolian past from generation to generation, so that the Mongolian past is the social Other of Gombo's identity in which he invests his "I." At the outset of the film, Gombo is shown as possessing an absolute sense of the "I" within a single stable symbolic order based on a truthful past. Displaced by his wife, the voice of Gombo's Mongolian mother is increasingly muted in the course of the film. With her urban desires, Gombo's wife threatens to destabilize Gombo's relationship to the Mongolian and the symbolic order it represents. Central to

this relationship is the steppe, the tangible Other which constructs Gombo's identity.

Like images of the shepherd and his flock in *Muslim*, the steppe functions here as an autonomous metaphor, as a space seemingly outside the symbolic orders of the known world. Many episodes commence showing a landscape devoid of people or their artifacts. The life in these vistas is the steppe's birds and wind. Only after establishing the dominance of the natural environment does the camera move on to dwell on the members of Gombo's family. When the camera slides through the infinite space of the steppe, it is usually accompanied by an absolute silence or sometimes by a musical leitmotif. The steppe does not have a superimposed "language" in the verbal sense. Pre-verbally self-sufficient, the steppe suggests neither lack nor displacement. Images of Gombo's family, viewed periodically in the fields of the steppe, never violate the harmony of this world. In this way, images of the steppe convey a transcendent natural world, the same vast expanses conquered by Genghis Khan.

The steppe, however, is actually Other, for it has its own symbolic order, rejected by the present course of history. Pagma, Gombo's wife, rejects the Mongol traditions by challenging their status as the dominant phallic signifier of Gombo's symbolic order. Having been raised in a city, she identifies herself with another phallic order, one determined by commercial relationships and contemporary discourses of convenience and technology. The struggle between Gombo and Pagma is more than just a struggle about the trappings of lifestyle. This struggle involves gender and class differences, the fundamental parameters of their identity. Pagma functions in the film as a "civilized" woman. She wants to change the "natural" order of things and introduce modern conveniences and birth control. Her desires are signified in objects such as a television set for their yurt and condoms to prevent pregnancies.

For Gombo, acceding to his wife's wishes will cost him the power of his phallus, the symbolic power of his Patriarchal steppe. This threat to his imago or self concept starts when he agrees to go to town to make purchases and ends with a powerful dream. In depicting Gombo's nightmare in the

middle of the steppe, the film melds dream and reality. Gombo encounters Genghis Khan and his retinue, among whom is a warrior-queen who looks very much like Pagma. Khan upbraids Gombo for riding a bike instead of a horse, for buying the television, and for failing to wear the Mongolian national costume. Khan and his warriors then destroy the objects Gombo has just purchased, a rejection of the city symbolics by the country one. Significantly, Gombo himself is sentenced to be killed because of his failure to obey the Mongolian tribal law. It is at this moment that he awakens and sees that the two systems are actually in conflict.

The filmmaker cautions against glorifying Mongolian norms. One of the most striking and repetitive themes in the dream is Gombo's inability to physically approach Genghis Khan. Every time the camera shows Gombo trying to reach the Mongol leader, Khan juxtaposes a long spear between himself and Gombo. A visually highlighted gap remains between them. That gap is metaphorical as well as physical. Gombo's gestures and facial expressions show that instead of being afraid, he is utterly amazed by what he hears Genghis Khan saying. Gombo is amazed, for instance, when Genghis Khan asks him how he can understand himself as a Mongol, if he does not wear traditional Mongolian clothes and go to the city to fight? The camera shows an absolute incomprehension on Gumbo's face: he literally does not understand such questions, for he does not really inhabit the traditional symbolic order of the great Mongol tribes. Khan is not saying what Gombo would have expected him to say had they met in real life. In this dream, therefore, Gombo realizes that the definition of the word "Mongol" has a different signification for him than it has for Genghis Khan.

In effect, Gombo's unconscious confronts his fear that he no longer interacts successfully with his presumed symbolic order. That Mongolian symbolic order is no longer commensurate with signifiers in his altered world. In adapting to this changed order, Gombo has already lost his ties to the social constructs of his ancestors. Thus, at the outset of his dream, Gombo does not even recognize that the person he is confronting is Genghis Khan. He is faced with misapprehension or

*mesconnaissance* of his own identity markers. When, in the dream, he discovers this lack, Gombo is threatened with the dissolution of his “I,” that is, with his death. He is neither Mongol nor city.

Gombo awakens in order to avoid, to be able to ignore the Real or abject posed by his life circumstances.<sup>7</sup> The dream reveals Gombo’s identity as a phantasmatic projection of the gap between Gombo’s symbolic order and his imaginary—his identity is nowhere in the outside world. On awakening, the camera shifts to a rainbow on the horizon. Like the rainbow, Genghis Khan has appeared in his dream as an object of desire that Gombo is not able to approach.<sup>8</sup> Gombo, interpreting the dream, sees his alienation from his Mongol heritage signified in the objects “television set,” “bike,” and “condoms.” Returning home, Gombo tries to “correct” his alienation: he rejects using condoms, attempting to reconstruct his old Mongolian Patriarchal order by invoking its token practices.

To avoid experiencing the abject of his dream, Gombo denies the knowledge that a real revival of the past is not possible and continues to live in his misapprehensions as if they were still operational. To do so, he must avoid the symbolic order of his own day. Thus, although the camera shows the family sitting in front of the TV watching a program about Russian president Mikhail Gorbachov visiting China, that representation of contemporary life leaves the family untouched. They do not perceive or discuss the implications of events depicted on the screen in their living room. Instead, the television acts as projection of their own identities, replacing the old active signifiers of their lives—the horse races on the steppe, the storytelling, and the music making—with the passive immersion of voyeurism. The film’s *happy ending* ironizes the family’s happiness achieved through such escape from effective interaction with their symbolic order. The happiness of Gombo and his family is the happiness of limbo.

The moral of that story is carefully extended to other outsiders, not just to the Mongolians. The second conflicted individual of the film, Sergey, is also an alien in Chinese society. From Sergey’s conversation with Gombo, the viewer learns that the Russian truck driver was seduced by capitalism

and the possibility of earning large sums of money by working for Russia in China. But although his desire for money has been fulfilled, the realization of this desire did not result from a meaningful investment of himself. When Sergey shows his money to Gombo, he remarks that he really has no use for it.

Before the viewer learns of Sergey's past, the camera follows him as he drives through the steppe. After Sergey gets out of the car and walks around so that he will not fall asleep while driving, he suddenly comes upon something that frightens him and leaves him temporally speechless. As the viewer learns later, what Sergey sees is the dead body of Gombo's uncle, eaten by birds. Shortly thereafter Sergey returns to retrieve his cap. The camera's gaze in this scene gradually moves closer and closer to the particular spot where something has frightened him. But just as the viewer is about to finally see what Sergey has discovered, the camera moves away and follows a bird flying up from the spot instead. For the viewer, the camera literally offers an absence of the body, and an escape into a more harmless fiction of nature. That absence is particularly striking because as the film unfolds, the viewer learns that, like Andrej and the Cleaners in *Luna Park*, for Sergey the body is the locus of interaction between himself and his Russian identity that lacks connections to Mongolia.

Alienation has forced Sergey to search for corporeal ways to identify his Other as Russian in a place where those signifiers do not exist. Sergey's own body becomes one such projection: the first time he takes off his shirt, the camera dwells on the shocked face of Gombo's son looking at Sergey's back. His skin is completely covered with a tattoo consisting of notes from a popular Russian waltz. In this scene, Sergey seems to be ashamed about his tattoos; he almost apologizes to Gombo. Later, in a bar, however, his body becomes an externalized expression of his Diaspora. While the musicians on stage play notes they sight read from his tattooed back, Sergey and the bar fade away. Instead, the camera replaces the bar scene with a frame of Sergey's inner gaze: the image of an Orthodox church.

In the first such scene involving a flashback, Sergey discusses ancestors with his fellow Russian exiles. He insists on

remembering the names of their grandfathers and feels intense distress when his memory proves faulty, a failure reconfigured by the camera. As Sergey speaks of his past, the camera fades from the discussants at their table to the picture of a burned-out house in a Russian landscape.

In these ways, Sergey's speech, his visual perceptions, and his body serve as sites through which he reconstructs his relationship with a Russian past rather than the present. In the same way that the steppe signifies the phallic for Gombo, for Sergey the body and remembered structural images become the sites of the phallic signifier. The first image, that of a burned house, recreates the order of the father in World War II. The second image, whose snow-covered church conflicts with the actual history of the Soviet period—an active church would not belong to the usual repertoire of memories from Soviet history, but rather to the pre-Soviet period. Neither image, however, is drawn from the postwar past or the more recent Russian present. There is no place in Sergey's memory for the signifiers of Russia's more contemporary symbolic order. He, like his Mongolian friends, has identities that do not conform to the present at all.

### Conclusion

The analyzed films explore post-Soviet reality and address the issues of identity that Russian society as a whole has faced since the collapse of Communist ideology. Attempting to construct meaningful identities, the protagonists in these films are shown interacting with a symbolic order that has no stable signifiers. Each trying to maintain a viable "I," the characters in these films adopt discourses onto which they believe they can project themselves so that they can function within their respective worlds. In their struggles to stabilize a phallic signifier in their perceived symbolic orders, these films make frequent allusions to pre-Soviet Russia and, less frequently, to the Soviet Union as well. Thus, in the film *Muslim*, the Christian religion becomes a discourse that connects contemporary Russia with the pre-Revolutionary times. For the Patri-

arch and for Nikolai faith in a moral universe guided by a God is the precondition for a meaningful existence.

Re-connecting with the pre-Soviet period, all three films seem at first to celebrate simple, rural life and to reject signifiers from the west or the Soviet past. *Urga* illustrates how the intrusion of capitalism alienates identities of people living in a pastoral idyll. *Muslim* shows villagers in uproar, chasing money that has been cast to the winds. Andrej, in the first scene of *Luna Park*, destroys a Coca-Cola can. Post-Communist Russia is awash with empty signifiers. Only pre-Revolutionary Russia, associated with simplicity and the agrarian life, offers meaningful alternative sign systems.

Any desire to borrow phallic signifiers from the Soviet period remains indirect or disabling at best. The striving of the Cleaners to be representatives of absolute power, for example, shows a communal group employing a phallic authority and speaking through one dominant ideology. Thus, even though the Cleaners abject all “Soviet” signifiers, their idea of identity within a symbolic order is marked by a rigid Soviet-like system of totalitarian practices.

Yet this turn to the past must prove inadequate for dealing with the present, as the films show. Representing discourses that their protagonists want to assume or reject, these films are also notable for discourses that are absent. No women play more than minor roles. Pagma in *Urga* is the only strong woman who can clearly express her desires and the film depicts her as a misguided individual, who, in order to be happy, has to return to the symbolic order of her husband. The only woman in *Luna Park*, Alyona, is hysterical and plays only a minor role. She seems to exert some influence over the Cleaners at the beginning, but the symbolic order she helped to create—the Luna Park itself—is destroyed at the end. The mother in *Muslim* is not able to articulate any of her desires and, like Alyona, reveals the degree to which she is overwhelmed by conflicting symbolic orders in her life by becoming increasingly inarticulate and passive in the course of the film. These films do not give women a voice and effectively exclude them from participation in the necessary search for new identities in the post-Soviet era. Thus, even the construction of



the films testifies to a remaining desire for reconstruction of a Patriarchal symbolic order, as true for pre-Revolutionary Russia as it was for the Soviet Union. These systems will fail, as do the solutions reached by the people in these films. They will die, or be rendered ineffectual in determining the new Russia.

Further, the absence of adequate verbal communication characterizes each of these films—these are movies about the inarticulate. Few exchanges succeed. Most of the time, negotiations end with figures expressing aggressive emotions. They respond to verbal challenges with silence or physical violence. Particularly in *Muslim* the viewer observes the failure of Nikolai to communicate with people successfully. In *Urga*, ironically, communication succeeds between Gombo and Sergey although they are talking in two different languages. More important than a common language, both men understand the mentality of a fellow exile—their shared signifier in otherwise disparate symbolic orders. In *Luna Park*, the Cleaners express themselves by means of their physical actions, not language. At the end of the film, instead of an explanation about Andrej's paternity, the viewer hears only laughter.

What these films share, then, is a vision of Russians in post-Communist society bereft of coherent sign systems on which to build their verbal expression and hence unable to realize their desires in a verbally intelligible way or in a way that will guarantee a future. No words exist adequate to inform, offer assurance, negotiate, or solve problems. Instead, the moviegoer sees multivalent, mute images that convey disfunction, indicating death or alienation: the body in *Luna Park*, the shepherd in *Muslim*, or the steppe in *Urga*. As filmic representations of a quest for identity, these movies depict a Russian society poised on the cusp of non-meaning, the abject or real death. As such, they testify to the trauma involved in identity construction in Russian society at the close of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes

1. Althusser, referring to Lacan, defines ideology as peoples' "imaginary relations to their real condition of existence." Ideology is reinforced through the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that works through personal interpellation

- functioning as a Lacanian mirror. See: Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," *Lenin and Ideology* (New York and London: Monthly 1971).
2. See, for example: Pavel Loungin, "Ja ochen' plokhoj evrej," *Iskusstvo Kino*, 2 (1993): 7-11. Victor Matizen, "Mezhdu existenzije I zhanrom," *Iskusstvo Kino*, 2 (1993): 11-13. Nikita Mikhalkov, "Ja snimaju to, chto ljublju," *Iskusstvo Kino* (1992): 89-93. Lev Anninskij, "Grustno zhiti Na etom svete, gospoda," *Iskusstvo Kino* 9 (1995): 5-8.
  3. This summary is based on our reading of Lacan's *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York & London: Norton & Company, 1977), and *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York & London: North & Company, 1981) See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1989).
  4. "Abjection" is Julia Kristeva's term described in the *Powers of Horror*. It refers to a region of non-signification, a potential region of meaning that is declared off-limits by the symbolic order.
  5. Again, an echo of the older Russia since the Orthodox Church used Old Church Slavonic for prayer, not modern Russian.
  6. Jacques Lacan, "The Subject and the Other: Alienation." *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York & London: Norton & Company, 1981): 203.
  7. We refer here to Lacan's interpretation of dreams as a site where the subject encounters the reality of his/her desire, or, the actual Real. For Lacan, the subject awakens in order to avoid the Real of his/her desire, because the actual reality masks the real, makes it not seeable. See: Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Miller, Jacques-Alain (ed.), trans. by Sheridan, Alan, (New York, London, 1981, 68-69).
  8. The rainbow functions as a metaphor for the desires of Gombo's son as well. Periodically throughout the film he begs his father to take him to its source.
  9. The author wishes to thank Katherine Arens for her insights and suggestions made in earlier drafts of this paper.

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