

‘Russia and Postcolonialism?’ Surely, It Should Have Read Neo-colonialism: Aleksei Balabanov’s *Brat 2* (2000)

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In 2003, when I was doing research on Aleksei Balabanov, I went to Moscow to interview Professor Evgenii Gromov, who teaches at VGIK (State Institute of Cinematography). When he inquired what theory I subscribed to, concerning the analysis Balabanov’s film, I replied that I was looking into postcolonial theory. He looked perplexed and asked, how? I explained, to the best of my abilities, that the postcolonial subject tried to form the nation anew out of the pre-colonial and the colonial/postcolonial, presenting the example of the Steel drums of the West Indies. At this point Professor Gromov grew quit agitated and said that such an approach would suit the former Soviet republics, but not Russia. Being new to the academic game, I found myself somewhat surprised by the Professor’s response; after all he had kindly invited me to his house, and the last thing I wanted to do was to offend him. But it also aroused my curiosity: Why did this highly distinguished scholar react in this way to a theory which is taught throughout the universities, and which has proven successful for post-independent nation states?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that postcolonial theory in Russia is associated with Third Worldism of the political left, which aligns Russian culture, in this case post-Soviet Russian cinema, with the cultures and cinemas of the developing countries of South America, Africa and Asia. This relegates Russia from Second to Third, when, in the eyes of the Russians, Russia should instead be promoted into a First World country. If we look at Eastern Europe, then the same mechanism is at work, which might explain the mute reception of Anikó Imre’s 1999 article, ‘White Skin, White Mask: *Mephisto* Meets *Venus* in *Screen*’. Imre is one of the few film scholars I have found who tackles the postcolonial and Eastern European subjecthood in cinema (not including Russia here). Her writing is therefore important for my analysis here.

I will briefly state Aniko Imre’s argument and move to a more general discussion on the post-colonial in a post-Soviet context, before ending with (hopefully) a few illustrative clips from Balabanov’s film.

Frantz Fanon in Eastern Europe

In her article, Imre analyses two films of István Szabó, *Mephisto* (1981) and *Meeting Venus* (1991), according to the postcolonial inferiority complex, which she takes from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967). It is Imre’s claim that, like Fanon’s Black intellec-

tual, the Eastern European intellectual, traveling to Western Europe masquerades as or mimics the Western intellectual to subvert his or her self-contempt as an Eastern European.

Although Imre's argument is multi-layered and includes many important assertions on issues of sexuality and gender, I will here focus on two scenes that she highlights in her article, and which, when compared to moments from *Brat 2*, will reveal similarities and differences in the two very different film-makers' attitudes towards postcolonial power structures and, in particular, race and ethnicity.



In *Mephisto*, the protagonist Höfgen (Klaus Maria Brandauer) has a mulatto lover, Juliette (Karin Boyd), who is also Höfgen's dance teacher. In Imre's opinion, this relationship is embedded in a colonial discourse:

Juliette's eroticism [...] justifies Höfgen's wish to learn to act naturally from the most natural creature of all: the black woman.¹

Not only will the 'colonial' aspects of an inter-racial relationship find resonance in Balabanov's film, but it is equally important to note that, for Szabó, there is created an analogy between the icon of suffering, the black woman, and the white male Eastern European artist. However, according to Imre, where the Black woman's suffering is fixed and metaphorical, the suffering of the Eastern European intellectual is reified and transparent.²

In *Meeting Venus*, the protagonist, Szántó (Niels Arestrup), a Hungarian conductor, travels to Paris to set up Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. The whole film centers on the Hungarian conductor overcoming the obstacles, largely caused by Western democracy and labour unions, in re-establishing the old opera house, "Europé". Of course, Szántó succeeds in getting all the nationalities to act together, but only after becoming a natural Western man through a romance with "the white, blond, emancipated phallic woman [...] the Swedish diva, Karin Anderson (Glen Close)".³

Arriving at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, Szántó is regarded with suspicion by Immigration and Custom officials. In voice-over, he comments to himself: 'Is it my face that irritates them? Or just the smell of Eastern Europe? They make me feel like a man entering a drawing room with dogshit on his shoe'. While in this scene it is the body of the protagonist that is identified by the boarder officials as Eastern European, the artistic or intellectual mind of the protagonist is already – and always has been – 'universally' Western. The postcolonial consists in Szántó's negation of his Eastern Europeanness, masquerading as a universal Western intellectual.

¹ Imre, Aniko, "White Man, White Mask: Mephisto Meets Venus", *Screen*, 40:4 1999, p. 413

² Ibid: 413

³ Ibid: 418

These two scenes from Szabó's films support Imre's case for labelling the Eastern European intellectuals 'the new European black', who disguise themselves in order to negate their Eastern Europeanness, their bodies, which are still detectable to the boarder officials.⁴ This clearly suggests that the postcolonial is applicable to the post-1989 Eastern Europe trying to close the gap between the West and the East. But can we with the same certainty say that the 'post-' in 'post-Soviet' is the same as the 'post-' in 'postcolonial', as David Chioni Moore (2001) has asked, paraphrasing Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991).

Post-Soviet Postcolonial?

If there is a connection between the postcolonial and the post-Soviet, then it is in the crisis that the fall of the Soviet empire inflected on postcolonial thinking. Ella Shohat, in her seminal essay, 'Notes on the 'Postcolonial'' (1992), states that the term 'Postcolonial' has been drained from its political connotations, meaning that it is no longer the preserve of a Third World where the political left used the term to connote the anti-colonial. Third World euphoria, i.e. the First World left merging with Third World guerrillas, has given way to a politically depleted postcolonial term, because of the collapse of the Second World and the crisis of socialism.⁵ The post-Soviet postcolonial takes the prefix post- literally; post-Soviet postcolonialism is the movement, historically, beyond both the progressive anti-colonial and the authoritative colonial. As such it becomes a First World pastoral term that participates in a new form of colonialism. This neo-colonialism involves, as we shall see, the same forms of racism and exploitation as its predecessor.

This perhaps explains Gromov's reaction to the term postcolonial: Russia is not a nation that is rejecting a colonised past, but, on the contrary, it is a nation reasserting itself internationally as a neo-colonial (if no longer Soviet) force. While this perceived neo-colonialism is not without its problems, it also highlights a Western tendency through the discrepancy between Russian and Western attitudes: if Russians, like Gromov, don't see themselves as postcolonial, are we Western academics not guilty of neo-colonialising the Russian mind by defining its culture and cinema according to a pastoral postcolonial? By turning to Balabanov and *Brat 2*, in which the old struggle between Russia and the neo-colonial hegemony of the First World is foregrounded, we can perhaps re-invigorate the postcolonial debate through a more radical anti-colonialism or counter-colonialism.

Combating neo-colonial power structures is not new to cinema. The term 'Third Cinema', which is loosely interchangeable with other terms such as Imperfect Cinema, is the parent of the present postcolonial cinema and was formed as a political cinema on the left. Third Cinema fought, often from the exile in the West, both the bipolar political structures of the Cold War and the dictatorial systems of post-independent Third World countries.

The original proponents of Third Cinema were Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who, in their essay from 1969 *Towards a Third Cinema* (1985), argued for a guerrilla-cinema that should counter the first cinema (Hollywood) and the second cinema (the European *auteur* cinema). Third cinema is politically anchored in the left's criticism of the economic hegemony of the First World, although it also refuses a direct engagement with the Second World's

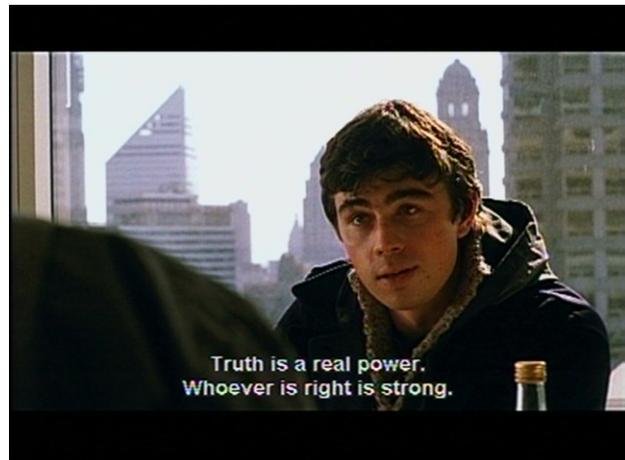
⁴ Ibid: 418

⁵ Shohat, Ella, "Notes on the 'Postcolonial'", *Social Text*, No 31/32 1992, p. 101

participation in the same critical practice. For Solanas and Getino a revolution was needed in order to ‘decolonise culture’, and in this context the camera was a weapon that shot 24 frames per second. What they saw was that where the former colonial powers had left, a neo-colonial power division was emerging, in which a formal independence was granted, but economical, cultural and social exploitation continued. Solanas and Getino discuss the distrust that is attributed to the intellectual and the artist in overturning this neo-colonial power structure:

When they [the artist and intellectual] have not been openly used by the bourgeoisie or imperialism, they have certainly been their indirect tools; most of them did not go beyond spouting a policy in favour of ‘peace and democracy’, fearful of anything that had a national ring to it, afraid of contaminating art with politics and the artists with the revolutionary militant.⁶ [They continue], our truth, that of the new man who builds himself by getting rid of all the defects that still weigh him down, is a bomb of inexhaustible powers....⁷

Here we see a resemblance between the Third World and the Eastern European intellectual, whom Imre found masquerading as Western. But Solanas and Getino’s brand of Third Cinema is not only instructive for understanding the Eastern European intellectual, but also understanding the Russian as portrayed in the work of Balabanov. If Third Cinema is not afraid of sounding nationalistic, nor of contaminating art with politics, and if it emphasises the inexhaustible powers of truth, then so does Balabanov’s *Brat 2*. The power of truth is illustrated when Danila at gunpoint lectures the Americans. Balabanov is fighting a neo-colonial system where the United States hold the economic power, the Russians – the power of truth. Third Cinema provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing *Brat 2* (and the nationalistic work of Balabanov in general), but Balabanov also provide a completely different political outlook to the left-leaning Third Cinema.



Balabanov’s Third Cinema guerrilla tactics mean that he is not afraid of making nationalist overtones. In fact, Balabanov endorses the rhetoric of nationalism and builds characters that do not possess the defects imposed, generally speaking, by Western decadence. In this way, Balabanov creates a cinema outside the binary opposition between the mainstream Hollywood and the European *auteur* cinema, but, where Third Cinema is on the radical left, Balabanov’s nationalistic film is on the radical right.

Aleksei Balabanov's *Brat 2* (2000)

Neither *Brat 2* nor its makers tried to hide the film’s mainstream credentials and aspirations. According to Miroslava Segida and Sergei Zemlyanukhin, *Brat 2* was “the first wide-open

⁶, Solanas, Fernando & Getino, Octavio, “Towards a Third Cinema”, Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movie and Method, Volume 1: An Anthology*, University of California Press, Los Angeles & London 1985. p. 52

⁷ Ibid: 63

(not to be confused with the popular) all-Russian film project,”⁸ with an influential video game (*Brat. Obratno v Ameriku / Brother. Back to America*). Susan Larsen also emphasizes its *Brat 2*-website in making the film into a modern post-Soviet Russian blockbuster⁹. From the outset, therefore, the aim seems to have been to produce a modern post-Soviet blockbuster, as confirmed by the film’s producer, Sergei Sel’yanov: “we want to beat all Russian records in video [sales]” (Sel’yanov, 2000: 12). There is no question that the STV film company (founded by Sel’yanov and Balabanov) was out to please as many people as they possibly could with the production of a sequel to the popular *Brat* (1996).



Brat 2 picks up from its previous instalment. Danila Bagrov (Sergei Bodrov Jr.) is living the easy life in Moscow; he goes to the banya with his old army buddies and has the pop singer, Irina Saltykova (played by herself), as a girlfriend. This high life is disturbed when one of his war buddies is killed. Danila and his brother Viktor (Viktor Sukhorukov) has to go to the US in order to “get” the American Mafiosi boss, Richard Mennies (Gary Houston), who has cheated money out of a Russian hockey player, the twin brother of Danila’s war buddy who is now dead. In order not to be

discovered by the Ukrainian-American gangsters, the two Bagrov brothers fly separately to the US; Danila flies to New York and Viktor to Chicago. Chicago is where Mr Mennies, the new American Al Capone, is located. On arrival in New York, Danila is to buy a car in Brighton Beach and drive to Chicago.

There are two scenes that will help us to deduce whether Balabanov’s *Brat 2* has a similar postcolonial (or neo-colonial) paradigm as Imre found in István Szabó’s two films: firstly, I will focus on the scenes where the Bagrov brothers enter the United States, and secondly, on Danila’s relationship with Lisa (Lisa Jeffrey), the black American news reporter, who looks after Danila after accidentally running him over in her car. In the first scene, I want to recall how Szántó in *Meeting Venus* was encountered at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris by comparing to the two entries of the Bagrov brothers. In the second scene, Danila’s inter-racial relationship with Lisa can be compared to Imre’s reading of Höfgen’s affair with Juliette in *Mephisto*.

Entry to the United States

‘Look confident and smile’ is the advice given to Viktor and Danila when receiving the tickets and fraud passports from Danila’s remaining war-buddy in a Moscow restaurant. The advice allures to the postcolonial inferiority complex, which Imre found earlier in Szántó’s

⁸ Segida, Miroslava & Zemlyanukhin, Sergei, *Fil’my Rossii: Igrovoe kino (1995-2000)*, Dubl’-D, Moskva 2001, p. 14

⁹ Larsen, Susan, “The Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Mikhalkov and Balabanov”, *Slavic Review*, 62.3 (Fall) 2003, p. 510

voice-over. However, the two brothers are going under false identities (Victor plays the role of a computer specialist, and Danila assumes the role of someone going to a film festival – both performing, through false cultural capital, to have something to offer to the Americans) and for a short period, whereas Szántó endures the scrutiny of his ‘real’ identity and plans, as a European citizen, to stay for a longer period. On hearing that they are only meant to stay four days, Viktor says, ‘why so short?’ This is an early indication of Viktor’s desire to remain in the US, which is again enforced by his last remark before leaving the restaurant: ‘freedom to Angela Davis.’¹⁰ This latter reference places Viktor within the framework of Soviet rhetoric and explains both his fascination with the American Other and his desire to stay. Viktor’s desire to stay is never expressed explicitly in the film, which places negative connotations the Russian and Ukrainian Diaspora in the US. For example, Danila’s car breaks down despite the words of its salesman, a Russian Jewish émigré.



Instead Viktor’s desire to stay in the foreign land is contrasted with Danila, who, as a true Russian hero would never contemplate permanently leaving his homeland. In fact, Danila has already bid farewell to the US before entering the country, just as his favourite band, Nautilus Pompilius, and their song ‘Proshchal’noe pis’mo’ (Farewell Letter) with the famous refrain ‘Good Bye Amerika, Oh/Where I have never been/Farewell forever [...]’ The song is heard in several key parts of the film, but the chorus is made prominent and given a post-Soviet and pro-Russian meaning at the end of the film when it accompanies Danila’s flight home.

On their way out of Russia, Viktor is shown leaving customs control and then buying duty-free whiskey, whilst Danila simply sleeps on the plane to New York while listening to his Discman. As Danila sleeps, we hear the announcement from the plane’s steward: ‘We’re starting the inflight, information on filling out immigration forms can be found in your entry visas. It consists of two forms...’ This information is unnecessary for the new all-Russian hero, who, as an ardent Nautilus fan, would never dream of emigrating. Viktor’s positive attitude towards leaving Russia does not save him from close scrutiny at the immigration desk in Chicago. The immigration officer asks, ‘what is the purpose of your stay in United States?’ And Viktor, who does not speak any English, replies, ‘what?’ A translator arrives and asks the same question in Russian. This time Viktor replies, ‘it’s...a conference on new computer technologies,’ as he has been told by Danila’s friend who forged his passport and visa. ‘How

¹⁰ A reference to the American communist Angela Davis, who was imprisoned on charges of been involved in the killing on Judge Harold Haley by three members of the Black Panther movement. Davis was later criticised by exiled Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who encourage her to stand up to the political prisoners in Czechoslovakia. Davis refused stating that they should remain in prison

long will you stay in the USA?’ and ‘where will you be staying?’, asks the immigration officials. To which Viktor answers, ‘it’s written there, in the invitation. Here is the return ticket.’ The immigration officer gives the stamp with a ‘welcome to the United States.’ Viktor, now in heavy accented English, replies, ‘thank you very much!’ and, as he smilingly walks off, utters ‘such morons!’ (vot urody).

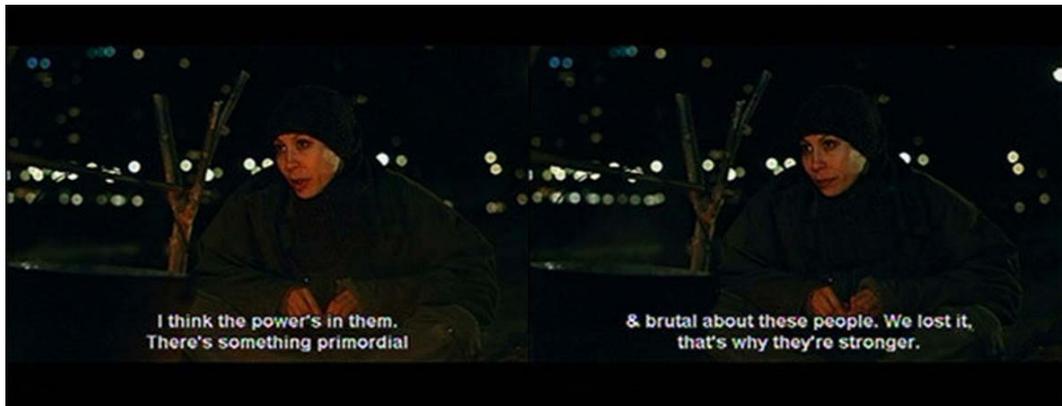
At the baggage claim, Viktor is scrutinised further. An official asks him in Russian, ‘do you have fat (salo) or apples?’ To which Viktor replies, ‘don’t they sell them here?’ The official responds, ‘you don’t understand. This is quarantine!’ ‘Are you ill?’ is Viktor’s reply and he is subsequently winked through with an overbearing attitude.¹¹ This system of post-Soviet Russian identity scrutiny stands against Danila’s oblivious sleeping on the plane. Viktor’s entry is far more important than Danila’s in regard to the post-Soviet neo-colonial system, which interrogates Russians as Third World subjects. While Danila passes through immigration control painlessly – he just replies that he is going to the New York Film Festival and receives his stamp – Viktor calls the customs official freaks, implying that they are stupid on account of their failure to discover his real identity. Furthermore, he negates the potential of a further scrutiny when, upon being asked whether he has any fruit, he naïvely and comically retorts: ‘don’t you sell fruit here?’ Here the West’s presumed neo-colonial superiority is undermined by Viktor, who ridicules the power structures. In this way, the neo-colonial situation, in which America asserts a form of cultural imperialism over the rest of the globe, is acknowledged, but made to look foolish and is thereby subverted. It is this neo-colonial structure of American cultural imperialism that Balabanov tries more generally to defeat in *Brat 2*. Although Szántó, too, acknowledges the West’s cultural imperialism in *Meeting Venus*, he is passive and expresses his ‘inferiority’ not directly but only in voice-over; Viktor is active and progressive in ridiculing the immigration system.

Encounter with the African-American Woman

When Viktor does not show up at the planned rendezvous, Danila walks around aimlessly in Chicago. He is accidentally run down by Lisa, a local African-American news reporter, who takes him into the car in order to drive him to a hospital. Danila refuses hospital treatment and instead they go to Lisa’s apartment, where she again offers to get Danila to a doctor, but he says that there is no need because he is a doctor himself (another false cultural capital which is used conveniently). Danila goes to the bathroom where we see his bruised backside. It is these bruises that fascinate Lisa when she returns later from work. As she enters the flat, we see a second Lisa reporting from city hall on the apartment’s television set, and her image stays onscreen throughout the scene (see *Image 1* below). She takes off her jacket and sits on the bed where Danila is lying asleep. We clearly see the bruises on his backside, but Lisa has to lean over the sleeping Danila to touch them. Danila wakes and, as Lisa recoils with an ‘I’m sorry,’ he grabs her. Lisa utters a reluctant no, but Danila holds her back saying ‘what’s the fuss’ (da, ladno). Danila then pulls Lisa over himself and on to the bed. As Danila rolls on top of her, the film fades into black.

¹¹ The comedy of this situation is no doubt heightened by the comic skills of Viktor Sukhorukov, who emerged from the Leningrad comedy scene in the late 1980s to become one of Balabanov’s favourite actors.

The fact that Danila ‘conquers’ a woman of African-American origin could be read as similar to Höfgen’s relationship to his mulatto love, Juliette. But where Höfgen learns from Juliette in *Mephisto*, his suffering is aligned with hers, Danila’s conquest is that of being a champion *over* the black Lisa. This makes of Balabanov the perpetrator of the very racist and neo-colonial discourse that Imre found criticised in *Mephisto*. Balabanov’s own racism (as opposed to his critique of racism) is reinforced when Dasha (Dariya Lesnikova), the Russian prostitute that Danila saves from her black pimp, claims that the blacks assert power over



whites because they are still in connection with nature. Such a remark, made by an open fire on the shore of Lake Michigan, is of course deeply rooted in a racist colonial discourse, and it highlights how Balabanov not only reacts to that of others (the West), but also creates his own (Russian) neo-colonial discourse.

Although we find these neo-colonial attitudes in *Brat 2* - and this was also the basis of the criticism that the film received from the liberal film critics in Russia (e.g. see Dondurei, Lipovetskii, Mantsov, Sirivlya, 2000) – the film is, or tries to be, balanced. For example, Danila’s ‘conquests’ of Lisa is mirrored by his ‘conquest’ of Irina Saltykova, whose image, like Lisa’s, is projected in her living environment [Image 1]; the Metropol restaurant is to be found both in the US and in Russia, which also aligns the two cities and nations [Image 2]; the film also features two taxi drivers (New York and Moscow respectively), who are both Russians and who uniformly agree on the opinion that Gorbachov ”sold out” the Russians [Image 3].



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

Furthermore, Danila is aligned not with a US minority (African-Americans), but with the white majority, the simple white American truck driver, Ben Johnson (Roy Toler), with whom Danila forms a close relation, and who can be seen as representative of the American white majority. In other words, Balabanov tries to depict Russians as being equal to Americans, which in turn puts forward ('real') Russians (like Danila) as similar icons of the First World. The only problem is that this equality is not recognised by the American version of this First World, as we saw in the case of the boarder officials.



Conclusion

Brat 2 is by far a pretty sight with blatant racism played out in front of us, but if we are using postcolonial theory in analyzing post-Soviet Russian culture – and I am still not completely convinced – then we have to address issues of neo-colonialism, including both the neo-colonial that the Russians fight against and the neo-colonial that they bring about. As James Clifford has asserted, the prefix post- in the postmodern, the postnational, and the postcolonial, is always eclipsed by the neo- (1994: 328). And along these words I will argue that if the Hungarian Szabo stands in the light of the postcolonial, then the Russian Balabanov stands in its shadow.

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