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Sergei Taramaev, Liubov' Lvova: *Metamorphosis* (*Metamorfozis* 2015).

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Maksim Semenov is not kind to *Metamorphosis* in his review in *Seans*. He accuses it of lacking tension and conflict, comparing it to the pre-revolutionary films of "Russia's Golden Series." Produced between 1909 and 1915 by Paul Timan (Thiemann), an ethnic German who was exiled in 1915 to Ufa during the anti-German campaigns, and Friedrich Reinhardt, the films of the Golden Series were based on literary adaptations and depicted the life and concerns of the bourgeoisie. They were cheap, popular films where the anxieties of the upper class were exposed as "a longing for something big" (Semenov 2015). Semenov's question is why, in 2015, we see a return of such a cinema. Has nothing happened in the hundred years that have elapsed?

Certainly, a good part of the century has been taken up by communism and a strong incitement to reverse the progress (or regress) of the bourgeoisie, but still there seem to be more trembling sentiments in Semenov's question. Can the world handle beauty and serenity today without falling into dire irony? Why the repetition of such escapism? I tend to agree with Semenov that there is something missing in this Chekhovian portrayal of the contemporary Russian countryside: it is almost too clean. *Metamorphosis* is a dacha drama restaged for contemporary audiences, but it lacks elements that contrast its aesthetic search for purity.

Sergei Taramaev and Liubov' L'vova made a clear impact with their refreshing film *Winter Journey* (*Zimnii put'*, 2013), about an introvert but talented opera singer, who ventures outside his immediate circles in search for love. *Metamorphosis* also has a tormented but gifted artist as its hero and the search for love is also central to the plotline. However, in *Metamorphosis* is not homosexuality that is discovered, as in *Winter Journey*, but a tendency to pedophilia or what borders on sexual feelings for children. This shift in focus, from homosexuality to an unlawful relationship with children and incest, should be seen as a continuation in the artistic auteurship of the two filmmakers. Scriptwriting as well as directing their films, the duo's development between the two films might indicate a growth of sorts in their artistic intentions.



Metamorphosis tells the story of Aleksei Senin (Egor Koreshkov), a gifted and talented pianist, who is being coached for stardom and protected by people around him. He lives in a little bubble, forced upon him by his mother, nanny and manager. Even the wealthy neighbor and sponsor of Aleksei have influence on and ideas about the artist's piano-play. Everyone somehow controls the talented pianist in his or her own way. As a hapless victim, Aleksei is driven around to give concerts at prestigious and classy events, without really engaging with his audience or his entourage. He lives mostly in his own mind, which is carefree from the daily chores that might otherwise disturb his genius. Mentally he is cocooned off from the rest of the world and as a consequence, he is socially inept like a little boy in a grown man's body.



This becomes apparent when he meets the neighbor's daughter, who is eleven years old. These two neglected souls, child and artist, are on the same wavelength and they form a special bond that evolves into what can be described as love. The forbidden love-relationship reaches a peak when the two lovers run away, but they are captured eventually by the henchmen of a local mafia boss, who also has a stake in the famous pianist. Aleksei is beaten to pieces and left floating down the river, immovable on a raft. Artists of a certain breed, seems to be the message from Taramaev and L'vova, are broken to pieces by society for not conforming to certain norms. The irony is that, in this society, the standard of decadence is as if taken from the pages of Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (*Den' oprichnika* 2006), but without Sorokin's strong satire attached to the scenes. The decadence somehow

remains grotesque without any commentary or contrast.

The theme of the hardship and incomprehension of the artistic soul is obviously dear to the two filmmakers. As a society, the filmmakers remind us, we do not take kindly to artistic minds that seek the purity of absolute beauty. We scorn such efforts as ignorance of the “real” world or see it as a certain form of vanity that sets the artist aloof from others. We are mentally unable to reach the things that these individuals pursue and thus we reject their inner world as irrational, childish or, even worse, as unreal. Taramaev and L’vova argue that we need to understand these people, and that they can teach us something about pure love, regardless of what norms are created by society.

In *Winter Journey*, the troubled male hero found love and sex in a violent homosexual relationship with a petite-thief at the bottom of society. The love affair between the singer and the loafer ended in tears and a broken heart, as these relationships do, but while there was an optimistic tone in *Winter Journey* about the characters’ struggle with everyday life and with each other, this struggle is nowhere to be found in *Metamorphosis*. The struggle in *Winter Journey* gave the film its edge and forte, which surely was accentuated by the fact that the topic of homosexuality in Russia was high on the public agenda at the time. *Winter Journey* proved to be a controversial film because of its portrayal of homosexuality, which meant that it had a limited circulation. According to the filmmakers, this was completely unintentional. As they saw it, the issue of homosexuality was not central to the film, but served more as a backdrop that framed the artist-protagonist. With *Metamorphosis* the filmmakers have taken the issue of love a step further by depicting it in a more clearly marked taboo frame, namely pedophilia. The question is whether we can see past the framing, beyond the taboo, and detect the beauty of love.



Pedophilia is not homosexuality, even if ‘P’ is the next letter in the abbreviation LGBTQ. But by drawing this line, the filmmakers have clearly advanced the investigation of love. This effort should be seen as a bold move, but it also proves difficult. The incestuous relationship between Aleksei and his mother, as portrayed in the film, is obviously wrong and meant to contrast the unlawful affection that Aleksei harbors for the minor next door. Furthermore, where the mother’s act is clearly sexual, Aleksei’s relationship with the girl is not, or at least it is not constructed as such by the film. Motherly incestuous love contrasted with childish innocent love; wronged mature love versus supposedly beautiful and transparent immature love. Meanwhile, Aleksei’s relationship with the girl is portrayed as pure and transparent as glass, and glass-people is what the two claim to imitate.



However, the analogy of fragile artistic souls as glass-people is troublesome. Glass-people are fixed and unable to metamorphose. In the world of insects, metamorphosis means the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form in two or more distinct stages. Similarly, glass-people only have two stages. The glass-people are either intact and invisible or obviously broken, but only an outside force can metamorphose them and this makes them victims without agency. Glass-people cannot transform in and of themselves, which is a problem. They are invisible, fragile and vulnerable, and as soon as they transform (from one stage to another) they are destroyed forever.

Rather, I see Aleksei as a product of his time. He is a commodity that can be exchanged in return for social status and prestige. Thus, Aleksei becomes a superfluous man in a neoliberal economy where the only value of commodity is the exchange value. Without the exchange value, the commodity “Aleksei” is nothing, which is what happens in the end. He is reduced to nothingness in an effort to fence off the accumulation of capital. The love that Aleksei generates cannot be exchanged and so it must be crushed. Seeing *Metamorphosis* as an exposure of neo-liberalism, Taramaev and L’vova are hopefully girding up their loins for their next installment.

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Works Cited

Semenov, Maksim. 2015. “‘Metamorfozis’: Stolitsa i usad’ba.” *Seans*, 27 November.

Metamorphosis, Russia, 2015

Color, 103 minutes

Director: Sergei Taramaev and Liubov’ L’vova

Screenplay: Sergei Taramaev and Liubov’ L’vova

DoP: Aziz Zhambakiev

Production Design: Timofei Riabushinskii, Vladimir Nikiforov, Dmitrii Andreev

Music: Andrei Dergachev

Cast: Egor Koreshkov, Evgenii Tkachuk, Vasilisa Bernasconi, Iuliia Aug, Ela San’ko, Denis Shvedov, Ambartsum Kabanian, Sergei Russkin, Nikolai Orlovskii, Svetlana Stolarova

Producers: Vladimir Lelekov, Mikhail Karasev, Tamara Nikishina

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