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Svetlana Baskova's Response to Russian National Neoliberalism in *For Marx...*

Lars Kristensen

Svetlana Baskova's film *Za Marksa.../For Marx...* (2012) re-tells Sergei Eisenstein's famous strike story. It centres on a nameless trade unionist, played by Sergei Pakhomov, who attempts to set up an independent union together with his fellow workers to counter the union created by the factory owner. This leads to conflict between the independent workers and the factory management. Eventually, the union activists are killed one by one and Pakhomov's character turns into an informer, betraying the cause of his friends. In a final confrontation, late at night on the rooftop of the office building, the boss and the unionist kill each other. In this rather simple narrative, new and old Russia are pitted against each other; old Soviet unionist ownership of production is contrasted with the new management of the nouveau riche, a post-Soviet oligarchy, which has come to signify Russia's economic transformation from socialist planned economy to neoliberal market economy.

In this chapter, I will examine Baskova's filmmaking as an alternative to the mainstream cinema in Putin's Russia and the world at large. In order to do [so](#), the chapter will apply the concept of 'non-cinema', as elaborated by William Brown (2016: 104–130). Non-cinema is a response to what Brown elsewhere has termed 'supercinema'; a special effects cinema that relies heavily on digital technology (Brown 2013). Non-cinema opposes not only such mainstream cinematic forms, but also the use of digital technology. 'Non-cinema' seeks out subversive elements in low-budget digital filmmaking. These two concepts, supercinema and non-cinema, are in this chapter applied to dissect the post-Soviet Russian film industry, arguing that Baskova's filmmaking belongs to the latter. In other words, it is the features of non-cinema that make *For Marx...* so difficult to contextualize as a Russian film, but which equally help us to understand why *For Marx...* can be viewed as a (non-)cinematic response to a particular nationalist neoliberal condition that has evolved in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Russian cinema and neoliberalism

When, in the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced economic reforms, they were more forced than desired, which is evident from the fact that Perestroika came before Glasnost (Rutland 2013: 341; Holmes 1997: 105). The economic reform took place before political reforms, but it was ultimately the political situation of rising nationalism that transformed society from communist to capitalist. Nationalism was key to the fall of the Soviet empire, as the republics, particularly the Baltic states, were calling for independence.

Nationalism can also be seen as key to the reforms that post-Soviet Russian cinema went through during the 1990s and 2000s. This nationalistic development can be seen as coinciding with neoliberalism's introduction into Russia.

Rather than gradual liberalization, shock therapy was introduced in Russia in 1992 as the best way to handle the transition from planned to market economy. Privatization of state property and state industries was introduced a few years later, with the consequence that a new nomenclature was established: the oligarchs. This new economic elite was able to keep Yeltsin in power throughout the 1990s, before Vladimir Putin was appointed as his successor. Some see the introduction of neoliberalism in Russia as the cause of all evils, while others argue that the 'planning system had broken down by 1991, before the launch of real market reforms' (Rutland 2013: 345). In other words, the Russian case gives fuel to both sides of the argument over neoliberalism, with supporters saying that too little was done and critics pointing out that the implementations went too far.

The critique of Russian 'marketization' in the early 1990s falls into several categories (Holmes 1997: 209), but one continues to be relevant to the contemporary climate, namely bending to the demands of the West and implementing that oppressor's ideology. This has been a red thread running through the post-Soviet period and something that accelerated alongside Putin's ascent to power, which also had a bearing on film production. Russian neoliberalism is tightly connected to nationalism, which means that neoliberalism cannot be mentioned without reference to the building of the post-Soviet nation. During the Cold War, the Soviet economy was the 'arch-enemy' of neoliberalism (Hirt, Sellar & Young 2013: 1247), but neoliberalism in post-Soviet Russia is best described as national neoliberalism. Peter Rutland concludes: 'we can see a [Russian] variety of national neoliberalism emerging from the reforms of the 1990s' (Rutland 2013: 358), which points to the paradox of a strong, authoritarian state guaranteeing individual freedom and private enterprise.

The Russian economy is highly concentrated on the state and thus hardly competitive. It supports a powerful elite of wealthy tycoons as well as state-run conglomerates like Gazprom, illustrating the neoliberal state as a 'contradictory political form' (Harvey 2005: 64). Neoliberalism hinges on the rule of law and the guarantee and protection of the market, but Russia has, since the transition, had a complicated relationship with the rule of law. Looking at the concept of justice in post-Soviet Russian cinema, Helena Goscilo asserts that 'Russia throughout its history has been inhospitable of both reason and liberalism' (Goscilo 2010: 140). Emily Schuckman Matthews suggests too that in Russian cinema 'entrepreneurship is associated with freedom, but not necessarily the political-democratic freedom the West values so overtly' (Matthews 2011: 218-219). Freedom in Russian cinema is

perceived through the prism of patriarchy and patriotism, even if produced independently from state support. Thus we can argue not only that the turn towards neoliberal economy was fully accomplished, but also that exceptions were implemented, such as a new elitism founded on the statist (bureaucrats) and oligarchs (wealthy elite) and an authoritative state built on patriotism and national unity. It is these exceptions to the theories of neoliberalism that can be mapped onto the development of post-Soviet Russian cinema.

State support of film production has a long history in both US (Willemsen 2005: 102) and European cinema production (Forbes and Street 2000: 17; Eletheriotis 2001: 135). What sets Russian film policies apart from other supporting schemes is their close proximity to the building of a Russian national identity. Russian national cinema reached rock bottom in the mid-1990s, with film output resembling war-time production levels (Beumers 1999); by the turn of the millennium, Russian cinema had become associated with nation building and with 'an explicit national agenda' (van Gorp 2011: 254). State authorities sought to promote a film industry that serviced the continuation of state policies, and to be eligible for support from the state, films had to meet certain 'social' criteria, one of which was the ability to enrich the spiritual life of Russian society (van Gorp 2011: 253). Furthermore, popular genre films were prioritized as a means of winning back audiences, and there were more specific calls for films about Russian history, especially Second World War films, which coincided with 'Vladimir Putin's concurrent uses of the war to build patriotism' (Norris 2007: 164).

The trend towards national neoliberalism in Russian film policy in the 2000s mirrors more general economic development and the country's exemptions from pure neoliberalism, as noted above. Thus, Russian national cinema can be framed as nationalistic and neoliberal in that it accepts the premise of competition (quantitative bums-on-seats), but the content and narrative have to fit a certain national spirit (state elitism). While these two features should be mutually exclusive – at least according to Andrew Higson's (1989) classical definition of national cinema – they do work together in the case of national-neoliberal Russian cinema, as long as the majority of filmmakers toe the line. In the case of Russian cinema, popular national cinema is in need of protection from mainstream foreign film and from homemade art-house cinema, which is anti-national and socially liberal. Consequently, Russian art-house cinema has to seek alternative funding schemes to survive. The West German cinema of the 1970s was likewise considered an art-house cinema that was highly anti-establishment and radically left wing, but it was nonetheless heavily supported economically by continuous centre-right-wing governments (Thomsen 2004: 56). Russian national neoliberalism reverses this pattern by placing emphasis on supporting the nation's goals and a populist line, while also referring to evaluation schemes such as economical soundness and popularity in terms of bums-on-seats.

If everything is financialized and given an exchange value in a neoliberal economy (Harvey 2005: 33), then in the nationalistic version of neoliberalism, as practiced in Russia, everything, including cinema, is measured on how well it contributes to the well-being of the state. Economic profit from filmmaking comes second to national concerns, but the idea is also that a national film must have national concerns in order to do well economically. National state neoliberalism adds national virtues into the equation, which means that filmmaking that is anti-national cannot be supported through the system. My subsequent argument is that Baskova's film is not anti-national; rather, it is national but in a 'non-cinematic' way. In the prism of supercinema versus non-cinema, Russian state-funded cinema is the supercinema that the aesthetics of non-cinema seek to oppose.

The Production of *For Marx...*

In accounting for the production of *For Marx...*, the intention is to show how Baskova navigates the field of Russian national cinema. I will here point to the way in which she breaks away from her previous film productions by playing down the urge to shock viewers, while at the same time playing up the aim of accommodating wider audiences. This break with her previous production methods can be seen as an attempt to incorporate her filmmaking into the national neoliberal system of filmmaking, as examined above. Key in this response to neoliberalism is the fact that the film received financial support from *Cine Fantom*, a film magazine that also functions as a film club in Moscow. *Cine Fantom* sprang out of a samizdat film magazine culture that promoted film history and theory during the latter years of the Soviet Union. The support means that Baskova was able to shoot her film on location, with a bigger cast, and get higher production values in the final film. The production costs, stated as \$3000 on the *KinoPoisk* website, are still a fraction of mainstream production in Russia.

What was objective of Cine Fantom Film Production arm in supporting Baskova's project? One of the producers, Andrei Silvestrov, states that they had for several years tried to combine free cinema with the production of 'quality' films for wider audiences, and *For Marx...* was the clearest example of this kind of filmmaking (Silvestrov 2012: 3). In this way, backing Baskova is an attempt to get away from the notion of a 'parallel cinema', which connotes a cinema that exists outside mainstream Russian filmmaking and where mainstream and 'independent' cinema have no influence on each other. For Cine Fantom, producing Baskova's film offered them a chance to influence, or break into, the mainstream. In a special issue of the magazine published in connection with the release of the film, there are two interviews with Baskova, which happened two years apart. These interviews give a good indication of how the production of the film developed.

In the first interview, which was conducted during the shooting of the film, the focus is on the reason for making the film and the subsequent research that she conducted. The film's background story is the violation of the right of workers to form independent trade unions. This development is something that Baskova observes as increasing as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis, where big factories in provincial Russian cities sought to push workers into unions formed by the state in agreement with the factory owners. The law making it permissible to form independent unions was implemented during the mid-'90s by then-president Boris Yeltsin. The intention of the filmmaker is thus to illuminate the changes that have taken place since the transition period. As Baskova says in the interview, 'to talk about independent unions in the 90s – during the anarchy – was just laughable' (Maizel' 2012a: 4). The 2008 financial crisis accentuates the importance of the law in the new context of state neoliberalism, as several conflicts on the rights to form independent trade unions appears throughout Russia.

Baskova researched the topic of labour relations together with Russian labour unionist and activists, a process that resulted in the documentary *Oдно reshenie - soprotivlenie / One Solution – Resistance* (2011), which in six parts tells the story of workers' conditions and their activism in Russia. In the documentary film, the leading actors of the fiction film, *For Marx...*, appear in a scene where they meet the unionists to discuss organisational tactics. This demonstrates that Baskova's production method is closely related to digitally filming actual events and using this footage for staging in her fiction film. The meeting of her leading actors with the individuals that they are meant to represent is vital for the construct of drama in the feature filmmaking.

Baskova explains how she thoroughly researched the way the unions organized their meetings in order to stage it in her film. It is also evident that more scripting is involved in the production of *For Marx...* While the method in her previous actionist gore film consisted of filmmakers and actors descending on a space where they would eventually work out the drama, then this change with the staging on independent labour unionists. As Pakhomov tells Viktor Nekhezin, the shooting of *For Marx...* was 'more analytical and more tied to the script. It worked better for Svetlana and for us as actors. To a greater extent we used conventional acting tools' (Nekhezin 2013). It is about an organic existence between filmmakers in front of the camera and the ones behind it.

However, in the second interview, conducted in 2012, just before the release of the film, Baskova makes some concession to her dramatization. Important scenes have been cut from the film, among them a fight scene between the leading characters of Pakhomov and Vladimir Epifantsev, who plays the factory owner, gangster style. The two actors are central to Baskova's filmmaking. They appeared together in *Pyat' butylok vodki / Five Bottles of Vodka* (2001), but in *For Marx...* Baskova separates them – 'this time the

actors have different roles and tasks' (Maizel' 2012b: 5). Also, some dream scenes are cut from the film; in particular, one scene in which the hero is buried in snow and purported to indicate the historical development referring as far back as the Trouble period (smutnoe period) of the early 15th century, when Muscovite Russia was threatened by implosion from Polish occupation. These poetic scenes did not work, according to Baskova, and she opted for a more 'pure genre' statement (Maizel' 2012b: 5). In this we can see how *For Marx...* attempts to simplify the cinematic language in order to provoke a stronger response from the national cinema establishment.

While the influence of Cine Fantom is obvious in this breakaway from acting horror, or 'trash aesthetics' (Bozovic 2016: 113), which has been the central theme of Baskova's earlier chamber dramas, then it should also be noted that Baskova does not leave her base in contemporary art. Baskova's husband, Anatoly Osmolovsky, is listed as a producer; he is a leading artist and theorist in the Russian situationist art movement, also called 'actionism' (Sasz 2011). In the production of *For Marx...*, this element of Russian actionism points to a global trend within video art where artists are increasingly looked upon as documentarists (Weeks 2010: 59). In this way, Baskova includes filmmaking in actionism. It means staging interventions into public spaces, which can be mundane or highly symbolic. This staging leaves a trace in the final film that can be interpreted as the nerve or pulse of the film. Casting unprofessional actors together with trained ones and improvising with them is an important part of this practice, which is influenced from video art. Here, the performance is meant to yield results directly linked to the cultural intervention. What is different from the rest of Baskova's films is that the extras in *For Marx...* outnumber the professional actors. The shooting of the film was a kind of group work, where the different experiences feed into each other. The actors become the workers and the workers actors. Both Pakhomov and Baskova experience this as work, as something other than play-acting and as make the screen 'smell of sweat and blood' (Nekhezin 2013). The filming took place where the extras were, which is Cherepovets, Nizhny Novgorod, Yaroslavl, or Moscow. In Moscow, shooting took place at the factory ZiL, which made the famous Soviet limousine car, and in the building of *Fabrika*, which today is an art exhibition place. The production of the film shows this merger between workers and the creative class. As Vasilii Koretskii writes,

The film crew went to Cherepovets, Lipetsk and Togliatti to meet with the union activists. They got a real lesson from ordinary workers and realized that between the proletariat and the "creative class" there is a misunderstanding – a misunderstanding that workers are inert, disappointed, but most of all, that they are a revolutionary class. (Koretskii 2013)

It is obvious that Baskova seeks to connect these two classes within her film,

but it also means that the end product should not turn into an art project that is exclusively seen by the enlightened few. As she tells Evgenii Maizel'

I want to make a film about modern Russian people, with all its historical and cultural ties and traditions, with its bitterness and kindness. It is about an awareness of the people and their inter-generational kinship. I do not like how [mainstream filmmakers] are depicting the provinces, people, "spirituality", history, as if they are answering the question "what I am". (Maizel' 2012a: 4)

Mainstream filmmaking is serving its own goals and interests and therefore is unable to capture 'actual' Russia, having previously only portrayed the 'lumpen-proletariat' (Plakhov 2012). However, Baskova, as an artist, has the ability to translate this spirituality of the people through her small-scale production, but, in order to do this, she has to be knowledgeable in the ideas that she is translating. What should set Baskova's production apart from other independent or underground filmmaking in Russia is precisely the fact that she claims to speak for and to the people of Russia. Regarding the term Russian 'independent cinema', even if films are produced independently, they are still in an abject relationship to national discourse (Wilmes 2014: 218). This is not the case with Baskova, as she manages to break through the wall of national neoliberalism. The film has to be taken 'seriously', since it concerns the very foundation on which the economic situation is built: the loyalty of the ordinary Russians to the national project.

Baskova is a self-taught filmmaker, as Gleb Aleinikov writes: she does not have a filmmaking education; instead, every film that she makes is an education, a discovery of self-education (Aleinikov 2012: 3). In an interview posted on YouTube, she states that she is not going to sit around waiting for the money to arrive (Gagay 2015). She would rather shoot films, and if her scripts do not attract money from state financiers, she will shoot them on the cheap instead. I would argue that Baskova shares this attitude towards cinema with non-cinema filmmakers. She is asking who are the hard-working ordinary Russians on which the state depends. Following Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the 'faulty' citizen, Nicolette Kakovichy argues that the new postcommunist elite has often looked at the postcommunist man as damaged goods, or as the loser in the war of transition. She writes that postcommunist 'faulty' citizens 'are presented as indelibly marked by socialist paternalism because [of] their age or lack of (re-)education, a predicament evident in their inability to find employment in the economy, an attraction to political populism, and a penchant for clientelism, and corruption' (Kakovichy 2014: 9). It is these 'faulty' or 'non-cinematic' people that Baskova highlights in her film. It is these people who are given light and space in the ecology of cinema through non-cinema (Brown 2016: 109).

Non-Cinema: Darkness in *For Marx...*

William Brown's intention in drawing up the concept of non-cinema is not to separate it from more mainstream cinema. Rather, he seeks to highlight a cinema that is often overlooked, disregarded, or misjudged, as in the case of *For Marx...*, because it does not adhere to the same rules as other cinemas. *For Marx...* asks of its audience that they see the film as they would see any other mainstream film, but also in the process discover how they have grown accustomed to overlooking certain groups of people and their struggles. Non-cinema 'deliberately embraces the non-cinematic – the overlooked of society', thus calling attention to the economy of looking at films (Brown 2016: 121). While supercinema calls attention to its spectacle of special effects, which can be turned into capital, non-cinema emphasizes 'lo-fi images, location shooting, regularly amateur or amateur-ish acting, an emphasis on darkness, and [...] a simultaneously self-conscious and realistic treatment of the role of work in cinema' (Brown 2016: 110). Baskova's filmmaking asks us to reflect not only on what we are watching, calling us to co-perform the labour of 'producing' the film, but even more so on how we are watching cinema. Non-cinema 'makes its own labour clear – through its use of 'shaky cameras, overt acting, a lack of continuity edits' (Brown 2016: 125). Thus, it is a reflection on representation and reality through a particular rawness in the images, which 'is a rawness that is precisely not indexical in nature, even if, paradoxically, it points to reality' (Brown 2016: 115). Although the digital image has lost its indexicality, its rawness makes it more 'real' and thus more unsettling to watch. It urges us not to look away but to act on what we see. This is where Baskova's film diverts from Russian independent films (Wilmes 2014) or the Russian 'social horror film' (Condee 2012). Where her other films went 'under the radar' in terms of attention from audiences and critics (Koretskii 2013), *For Marx...* demands to be taken into account. The point is that national identity film is part of the mainstream supercinema that is promoted by the state, which leaves space for non-cinema to revolt against and, since 'class difference remains the Great Unspoken of contemporary Russian filmmaking' (Condee 2012), there is no better territory to recover than the classic style of class conflicts, of factory workers against factory owners, all shot with grainy, handheld digital images and in a 'non-cinematic' way in order to highlight that these workers are otherwise absent from screens. That is, they are left out of the discourse concerning national identity that permeates both the national blockbuster and the 'independent' film.

Baskova's previous films can be seen as working within the tradition of 'necro-realist' filmmaking, which has its origins in the later Soviet period. Her debut feature was the low-budget film *Zelyoniy slonik/Green Elephant* (1999), about three army soldiers who are arrested and confined in a very small cell. The men play various power games with each other, including sodomy, which led to this violent chamber drama being banned from being screened publicly. Getting attention from fans of extreme horror films, she has been

characterized as an artsy filmmaker from the underground, albeit one who places too much emphasis on symbolism and meaningless dialogue (Toledano 2015). According to Carmen Gray, the characteristics of the necro-realist film are 'black humour and grotesque slapstick, and absurdist surrealism in the form of the senseless repetition of random, savage attacks and suicidal acts' (Gray 2017). More important, though, is the fact that these features were taboo for the socialist mindset. *Green Elephant* is made with the same radical art in mind – as Nele Sasz writes, in *Green Elephant*, 'there is no object other than shocking the viewer' (Sasz 2003). *For Marx...*, however, does not break taboo, and this is where Baskova departs from her previous work in order to formulate a response to the particularities of national neoliberalism. Where the necro-realist film could be rejected as unintelligible and intellectual, *For Marx...* cannot be discarded as such. It is as 'real' as any other film produced under national neoliberalism. This is the effect of the non-cinematic form, as we shall see shortly.

Before engaging with the reception of the film, though, I wish simply to add that, faced with the nationalist populism of the post-Soviet era, and in particular addressing the current Russian political climate of a macho-economy dependent on oil and gas (Matthews 2011: 217; Etkind 2014: 166), Baskova argues that the best response can be found in the past, because early revolutionaries faced the same set of issues, and yet also formed a coherent reaction to this form of capitalism (Yupilami 2013). In this way, as Condee asserts, 'Baskova's activism is a different kind of political engagement altogether, far removed from the middle-class' (Condee 2012). [According film critic Vladimir Lyashchenko, Baskova aim is to make films 'about the real problem for real people', but also to inform 'potentially interested spectators about the available methods of struggle for their rights' \(Lyashchenko 2013\).](#)

This in turn suggests urgency in her work to represent the unrepresented. According to Brown, the focus of non-cinema is to reveal people and spaces that otherwise are missing from mainstream screens; this is achieved through a focus on darkness. Non-cinema draws attention to its own image-making, investigating the relationship between representation and perceived non-existence (if something or someone is not visible, then what evidence is there that they exist?). As a result, it explores what we might call 'death spaces,' or the blind/black spots in our human vision machine. It thus asks us to consider not only what we see, but also what we do not see. Non-cinema recognizes the limits of cinema, thereby also inviting us to reflect on the ethics of cinema (what does cinema exclude and why?). It does this in particular not by excluding darkness (which is in some senses antithetical to cinema because in darkness one cannot see anything, i.e. there is no film as such), but precisely by including darkness within the frame and by asking us to look at it (Brown 2016: 127). But what does one get from looking at darkness? What kind of illumination do we get from discovering darkness? Looking at darkness makes sense if it is combined with discovery of how dependent we actually are on light for information. Cinema is light, but it is a selective light, one

which allows certain people or representations to be visible while others remain in darkness, unseen by audiences.

A key scene in *For Marx...* is the meeting of three unionists, where they perform their right to form an independent union. It is a scene that Baskova has researched in real life, as mentioned above, and it takes place on the day after the workers have seen Jean-Luc Godard's *Vent d'est/Wind from the East* (1970) at their self-organized film club. In this scene, the three characters are lit from above, which means that while the trio is in light, the rest of the square room is in semi-darkness – although we can make out an old poster for the film *Kalina Krasnaya/Red Guelderbush or The Red Snowball Tree* (1974). This self-conscious detail reminds us of how Baskova's own filmic practice is influenced not only by political filmmakers such as Godard, but also by Soviet melodramas such as this one, which were hugely popular with audiences at their time. As David Gillespie writes about *Red Guelderbush*, it can be seen 'as the tragedy of a lost soul, struggling to attain some meaning and substance to his life, but failing to the inescapable forces of modern history' (Gillespie 2007: 168). Indeed, in that *Red Guelderbush* is about a crook who is trying to go straight but whose past catches up with him, it veritably announces that one of the men in Baskova's film will similarly be stabbed to death later on – just as life promises to become bearable. Beyond being an arch self-conscious allusion, though, the poster being placed in semi-obscurity not only links Baskova's film to its cinematic precursors, it also asks us to think about the limits of cinema itself.

This self-conscious and aesthetic investigation into issues surrounding the representation of the unrepresented and unrepresentable is drawn out even more strikingly, however, when the scene cuts to a shot from outside the room. The three unionists are framed in a doorway facing the camera, with as much as one third of the screen not so much dark as totally black. The image is almost at a standstill, or frozen, as none of the characters move. As a result, it takes on a tableau quality, with the spectator invited to contemplate the image in a more conscientious fashion than they would a 'normal' shot inserted into the narrative. For Andrei Plakhov, the scene becomes 'a kind of proletarian "Last Supper" before the decisive historical battles' (Plakhov 2012), but this would emphasize the light in the scene. Equally underlying the light aspect is Marijeta Bozovic's reference to the icon painting Andrei Rublev, with regard to this scene (Bozovic 2016: 115), an analysis that is supported by Lyashchenko's review of the film (Lyashchenko 2013). In my view, these readings place too much emphasis on the light of the scene forgetting about the darkness, which has a more immersive presence. The image is repeated on two further occasions as the narrative progresses – each time with one less unionist in the frame. Finally only Sergei Pakhomov's character is left in the room, having by now betrayed the strike as a result of pressure from the management. The repetition means that the image gains in weight, it becomes more meaningful as the darkness seems to grow. Indeed, by isolating the

enlightened few, the image asks us to think about the absent many – people upon whom cinema’s light does not fall, and who remain in darkness. Given the darkness of the image, absence comes to be recognized as lying at the heart of what cinema can represent.

Reception of *For Marx...*

In his schema of non-cinema, Brown focuses on production rather than reception. Non-cinematic films can often be distributed for free online, which offers unlimited access to the product rather than creating exclusivity that can be turned into profit for the filmmaker. In this sense, non-cinema exists outside the economy of mainstream or arthouse cinema. It is the making that is important. In a similar manner, nearly all Baskova’s films are available on her own website (<http://baskova.com>). However, since the argument advanced here is that *For Marx...* challenges the national neoliberal system of cinema production, it is important to trace the reaction to the film by audiences and critics. Since *For Marx...* was produced by Cine Fantom, it received a limited release through the company’s own distribution channels, which means that the filmmakers travelled with the film and screened it in cinema clubs throughout Russia. With digital technologies, samizdat is the current form of film distribution for independent filmmakers not only in Russia, but around the world (Braester 2015). However, *For Marx...* was also released a year later on DVD by Cine Fantom, made available in a handful of retailers in Moscow and with 30 copies for rental (Koretskii 2013). Whether it is commercially viable or not, it is worth remembering that Cine Fantom is strictly a nonprofit organization. As one of the organizers tells Vladimir Kozlov in an interview, ‘from the very outset, we stated it clearly that the club is not meant to make money but to spend it’ (Kozlov 2009). On the Russian movie site Kinopisk.ru, *For Marx...* has been seen by over 2,000 people, which would reflect the promotion of the film through Cine Fantom’s exhibition channels. In keeping with Cine Fantom’s principles of free circulation, it is available from several hundred online sites (although without subtitles).

It is evident that Cine Fantom promoted *For Marx...*, with Baskova’s film playing at various festivals, most notably Berlin, at which Baskova gave various interviews (see Kuzma 2013; Yupilami 2013). Other festival screenings took place in several Russian provincial cities. In Vologda, for example, the film won the prize for best produced film, which surprised the critics (Trofimenko 2012). At these festivals, the screenings included a question and answer session with the director, a pattern that has continued at other special screenings in a dozen other cities in Russia. This is all documented on Baskova’s website, with transcripts of responses from audience members. At the festival in Sochi, the post-screening discussion with critics led to a ‘dead end’, since the critics ‘could not get beyond their review format’ of their like or dislike of the film, their judgement of whether it was

boring or not boring, and had good acting or bad (Koretskii 2013). This inability to approach the film is evident from the Russian TV program *Magiya Kino*, which reviewed the film in a 15-minute slot in 2013. On the show, Baskova and lead actor Pakhonov are present in the studio, with the presenters comparing the film to Italian neo-realism, as well as Baskova to an 'underground' filmmaker. Clearly, the presenters struggle to grasp the film, describing the plot as thin. Highlighting the battle scene at the end of the film, one presenter even attacks the film as a mere art performance, pointing out that *For Marx...* is not cinema but rather an avant-garde or 'underground' film. However, in this rejection of the film as cinema, the *Magiya Kino* presenter only furthers the usefulness of non-cinema as a framework through which to understand the film.

In the interview, Baskova is also asked what she would have done with a big budget and big stars. Even if Baskova has suggested in a subsequent interview that she would like to make industry films in order to reach wider audiences (Gagay 2015), she claimed in the *Magiya Kino* interview that she made the film that she wanted to make – regardless of the budget. In other words, even if the interview on *Magiya Kino* descended into an argument about the authenticity of the film, Baskova clearly embraces and refuses to see as a deficiency the low-budget look and feel of the film. Furthermore, the presenters of *Magiya Kino* argued that Russian workers do not behave as they do in Baskova's film, to which Baskova replied that her workers might seem unreal for the Moscow intelligentsia, but that this is because the Moscow intelligentsia (Baskova included prior to the filming, I suspect) does not know any workers. In other words, the working class lies in an obscure realm beyond the purview of society's upper echelons, whose only knowledge of that working class comes from nationalist neoliberal (super)cinematic – and unrealistic – productions. When faced with a different (non-cinematic) vision of the working class, they deem it unrealistic. Cinema has become the measure of reality under nationalist neoliberalism, such that non-cinema becomes the realm in which we get to that nationalist neoliberalism's hidden underbelly.

The 'realism' of the film is often what gets criticized, as in 'we know that workers do not speak that way' (Plakhov 2012). The closing scene is imbued with an excessiveness that bears resemblance to melodramatic characters in Althusser's analysis (1969: 136). Succumbing to a submissive device of the management, Sergei Pakhomov's character is led to the owner of the factory, and the two fight it out on the rooftop of the corporate building at night. In an overly dramatized manner, they kill each other as they roll around on the rooftop in their own blood. The scene seems to confuse and elicit criticism since this 'fratricide' lies somewhere between Bollywood and Shakespeare (Trofimenko 2012). My assessment is that it is not a mere 'symbolic' gesture (Dondyrei 2012), but an Althusserian melodramatic consciousness that is played out on the existence of real workers' conflict in Russian economy of

national neoliberalism. As the film closes on the rooftop and the two take their last breaths, the film cuts to Sergei Pakhomov's character walking past broken windows in a building which has seen better days. With no sounds, as if played in mute mode, he reaches a tower window and leans out, looking directly at the viewer, and starts to gesture animatedly with his arms, as if urging the viewer to rise from the chair. The camera zooms out, dwarfing his movements as well as the figure overall. Coming right after the blood-spilling fight-to-the-death scene on the rooftop, this mute agitation of the leading character exposes our melodramatic consciousness, which cinema has taught us to exercise. It is meant to wake the spectator, who is in a catatonic state (Koretskii 2013). The juxtaposition argues that cinema's realism is false, but that non-cinema can reverse cinema's myth of realism. It is non-cinema that is conscious of the function of melodramatic consciousness.

Giuliano Vivaldi, a blogger and critic, also queries the realism of *For Marx...* Is the film too intellectual for audiences to comprehend? Do the workers of the real Russia read Gogol or Berlinsky's Salzburg letter? Do they watch Godard's *Vent d'Est*, as the workers in Baskova's film do? Rather than dismiss the depiction of an intellectually engaged working class as romanticism, Vivaldi instead concludes that while he was working in precarious jobs in England, the conversations would be about Czeslaw Milosz, Daniil Kharms, or Dino Buzzati, 'something inconceivable in an office job' (Vivaldi 2012). If mainstream cinema has concerns over the form of Baskova's film, accusing it of being too intellectual for its targeted audience (the working class), then maybe it is because mainstream cinema is unable to visualize this class. The critics from *Magiya Kino* have a distorted view of class because it is not represented in the cinema that they evaluate. The workers in Baskova's film are intellectual, resourceful, and interested in fair working conditions – not unlike the people that Vivaldi has met in what might otherwise be considered unintellectual workplaces. The paradox maybe that it is in those supposedly unintellectual workplaces that intellectual engagement is found, with the neoliberal 'intelligentsia' in fact being incapable of intellectual engagement, as the *Magiya Kino* presenters demonstrate in their struggle to contend with the film. In the words of Pakhomov – Baskova's alter ego in the film – 'this film is a slap in the face of the [Russian] film community that thrives on certain rules' (Nekhezin 2013). The definition for filmmaking created by this film industry cannot be applied to *For Marx...* It is neither 'alternative cinema' nor art-house cinema, but much more in the way of non-cinema.

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