Post-humanism is a current trend in arts and humanities which looks at phenomena that are not focused exclusively on humans. As an anthropocentric discipline, the arts and humanities have failed to address vital issues that have arisen as a consequence of what humans do to nature and to the planet. The term “anthropocene” has been applied to describe a new geological era, where changes to the condition of earth are a direct consequence of human action, which paradoxically reinforce anthropocentrism. However, the effort to pursue a post-human understanding of the world concerns the way in which humans are “entangled” with the world, to borrow Karen Barad’s phrase (2007). In order to understand the environment we inhabit we need to get beyond human concerns by incorporating interests of non-humans. If we are to survive the climate changes we face, the fate of rocks, insects, animals and plants must be taken into account. It was with this in mind that I watched The Forest, Roman Zhigalov’s debut film.

At first hand, there is, of course, nothing post-human about the film. Rather, it is a very anthropocentric drama in the mould of a Greek tragedy, with conflicts and moral dilemmas that speak directly to the audiences about their very human anguish and suffering. In classical Greek tragedies, we encounter mythical characters, whose moral compass is in question and the culprit in the drama often comes in the form of an uncontrollable desire or immortal love. In The Forest, Zhigalov borrows from Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex about the mythical character who cannot evade the prophecy of killing his father and sleeping with his mother. The moral catharsis of Oedipus’ journey is that the Gods will punish him for trying to avoid destiny—man cannot stray from the path that has been set out. But cleverly, in his contemporary Russian tragedy, Zhigalov leaves the question of who the Gods are unanswered.

Danila is a 16-year-old loner, who mostly wants to be by himself. His father, Pavel, runs the local sawmill and his mother, Galina, works at the dairy farm together with the next-door neighbor, Katia. It is a tough family life in the vast forest that is shown in the film’s opening. Pavel is a hard working patriarch, who comes home after work to gobble down his meal, which mother Galina serves without passion or affection for husband and son. There is no love between the family members, and clearly Danila is the product of this honest but loveless family. As a quiet and submissive young man, Danila has difficulties in finding his way through the jungle of expectations and sexual norms of adolescent life in rural Russia, which an abandoned trip to the local prostitute reveals. For Danila, the obtuse sexuality of a prostitute does not go together with his ideal woman, Katia, on whom he secretly spies from nearby ramshackle house.

However, by falling in love with Katia, a woman his mother’s age, Danila also crosses the path of his father, who equally hopes to run away with the neighbor’s wife. Katia, unlike Galina, is caring and affectionate. Through Danila’s peeping-Tom’s-eyes, we see her hanging out the clean white washing, or feeding and caressing her rabbit. Katia is quickly established as the perfect woman with a good-for-nothing husband, Kolia, who is a complete drunk. Katia rejects Pavel’s advances on the grounds that he is married to Galina, but, controversially, she begins a sexual relationship with the schoolboy Danila. This underlines a tendency in Russian cinema to investigate characters of sexual purity—an uncorrupted and unadulterated heterosexual relationship (see Metamorphosis 2015). Needless to say, the sex scenes between Katia and Danila take place in Katia’s banya, a place of bodily cleansing as well as spiritual purification.

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Danila’s classmates are either mini-macho guys or mini-sex bomb girls, none of whom interests Danila. However, there is another force that drives the plot: both Danila’s school community and Pavel’s sawmill are threatened by external forces that are stronger than those in the village. The sawmill is approached by corporate gangsters, who want to take over the lucrative forestry business to cut down the trees and sell them for profit. The village mayor can do nothing about these mobsters and their violent methods, as they have more power than he does, and Pavel is helpless in resisting the offer. “This is not going to end well…”, as the mayor says, and eventually the sawmill is burnt down by the bandits.
around in the village picking up local girls, whom they rape and abuse. When
harassing the local disco, the village boys stand up to the outsiders and chase them
away, but only to see them return later in greater numbers. Ultimately, the village
boys are beaten up and the outsiders can again sponge on vulnerable victims for sex.
This is the case of Danila’s classmate, Sveta, who—just like Danila—is on the
threshold of looking and behaving like an adult. As she seeks to fit in, she throws
herself into the arms of a beastly outsider and ends up in hospital after being sexually
molested. Within this skewed norm of sexuality, it is paradoxically “legal” to rape, to “own” and buy girls and women for sexual
pleasure. No wonder that Danila is seeking love and affection elsewhere.

Behind the violence, sexual and corporate, stands a physical, psychological and financial power which dictates a certain line of
action, despite legal, emotional and personal objections which should respected and safeguarded for the sake of human integrity.
Both Danila and his father try to withstand these powers. They try to avoid their destiny but, as in Greek tragedy, the “Gods” are
unforgiving.

The film blames neither Danila nor Pavel for their desire to create their own
happiness; rather it is the absence of the Gods, whoever they are, which is at fault.
Furthermore, where Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and sleeps with his mother,
Danila is fully aware of his choice of love and his actions against his father. It is not
his mother he loves, but a woman his mother’s age whom his father loves. That he
knows—and still he believes that he can escape his destiny and live happily with
Katia, get a decent job, earn a living and provide for her. The tragedy of Oedipus and
Danila is the same, except for certain plot twists that I won’t reveal here, but both are
punished for their defiance of the Gods. Both think they do good deeds, but both end
up bedding for their own downfall. They choose what feels right but unknowingly do
what is wrong according to the norm.

What makes The Forest interesting is the parallel between sexuality and business, where both are associated with violence and
power. In the film, sex and business are dark and dangerous material that cannot be controlled, not unlike the mythical dimensions
of the forest. Perhaps it is that entanglement of society and nature which the title suggests: a human drama surrounded by forces
beyond the human world.

The Forest is a very strong debut film, which also presents new faces in Russian cinema. I only hope that the next Greek tragedy
to be given a contemporary setting will give female characters more depth and dimension. The film is at times heavy-handed with
loaded symbolism and suggestive music and sound-scapes, but overall that should not take anything away from the fact that it is a
well-crafted film.

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Works Cited


The Forest, Russia 2018
Color, 97 min.
Director: Roman Zhigalov
Scriptwriter: Roman Zhigalov
DoP: Iurii Sergeev
Music: Aleksandr Leonov, Ol’ga Gaidamak
Production Design: Vitalii Trofimov
Cast: Oleg Shibaev, Natal’ia Rychkova, Oleg Feoktistov, Mariia Avramkova, Vladimir Maliugin,
Producer: Roman Zhigalov

Roman Zhigalov: The Forest (Les, 2018)
reviewed by Lars Kristensen © 2019

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