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Mikhail Brashinsky is perhaps one of the most visionary contemporary filmmakers still at work in Russia today (Ksenia 2023). He constantly seems to be ahead of his time by making films that are released when most needed. This is despite the fact that he has only directed three feature films over the past two decades. Waves will only confirm the image of a filmmaker, who manages to place the spotlight on a sore point in contemporary Russian society, which, this time around, is like an open, infected wound. With Black Ice (Gololed 2003) and Shopping Tour (2012), Brashinsky subtly pinpointed issues of homosexuality and consumerism as features that sailed under the radar in Russian cinema, but, in Waves, the stakes are higher. The cinematic style is the same, but Russian society is not.

One thing that is admirable about Brashinsky’s filmmaking is his ability to locate these vulnerable spots. Another thing, and maybe more vital here, is his way of dissecting them with untraceable instruments, so that it is impossible to identify from where the soreness is located. That said, the current political condition, which limits possibilities to speak out against the regime, is also particularly timely for a film like Waves. In other words, we have returned to an Aesopian style of expression where reading between the lines is more important than what is depicted. Befitting, by the way, for a neo-Soviet condition.

Waves has been in the making over a long period, and its origin lies not in the present. In an interview with Vasilii Stepanov (2022) in Seance, Brashinsky tells us that the script goes all the way back to 2010, even before Shopping Tour, when he began writing on the story. But some stories, according to Brashinsky, take longer to get on screen; they grow like trees, and what was there at the beginning is not always compatible with what ends up on the screen. Through various complications, it was not until at the start of the pandemic that shooting began on Waves, which meant that the filming was conducted in different stages. This is evident in the film where we encounter different cinematographic styles, which, in turn, divide the film into separate narrative parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end.

This uneven use of styles unsettles the viewers, as we are never at ease with what happens on the screen or are sure about the narrative development. There is always a nagging feeling that something is not right, something that unbalances our experience. While some might decry this and debunk the film (Kichin 2023), I think this makes the film much more watchable, because it leads us to reflect on the meaning of the film, its expression and theme as an allegorical reference of the Russian condition. So, is Waves about the war? About the aftermath of Russia’s attack on Ukraine? Well, not directly, but, because of its timeliness, the film will be judged against the context in which it appears, meaning that audiences will read their contemporary lives into it. This makes Waves the best portrayal yet of the neo-Soviet condition that has engulfed us since February 24, 2022.

Future film historians will undoubtedly write about Waves that, with this film, we began to see the end of the era of Putin, just as we now talk about Little Vera (Malen’kaia Vera, dir. Vasilii Pichul, 1989) as the film that had all the hallmarks of a collapsing empire (it is perhaps not a coincidence that the lead heroine in Waves is also called Vera).

The film opens with a suicide in a bathtub. It is Oleg’s girlfriend, who has given up her will to live through mental illness, depression, and neglect. Oleg’s response to this loss is to escape, to run away from civilization and into the wild. Oleg jumps an elektrichka out of Moscow, he steals a hiking rucksack from a couple that argues on the train and wanders into the forest. He finds a little hut, where he settles for the night. However, he struggles to adapt. It is cold at night; he has no food; and the bag he stole lacks hacking equipment. But he is resourceful and gets a fire going, and he makes a slingshot from an unused condom to kill squirrels with. So far so good—we as audience members are engaged and interested, even if we are missing pieces of the puzzle. It is here, however, that film takes a turn for the first time. Once Oleg has satisfied his basic needs—an Agambenian bare-human needs—he starts to melt into his environment. In fact, nature starts to look at him differently. As he drinks water with a deer, he looks at and is looked upon by the deer in a strange feeling of togetherness. Here the film could have proceeded into naturalistic escapism totally oblivious of the surrounding society.
Instead, a boy, who is being chased by the police, runs into Oleg’s field of vision. Oleg intervenes and helps the boy (named Anton) and follows him to a campsite, where Anton is staying with his mother, Vera. It turns out that this campsite is a commune of people, who are all seeking to coordinate their “waves” with the outer world in order to reach a state of timelessness, a state of immortality. The desire to reach this level of immortality is led by the Guide (played by the psychic television celebrity Alexander Sheps; see BBC 2015), who appears on screen in classrooms where children are taught about a synergy of waves, which will save the world.

At this stage of the film, Oleg’s goals, elucidated during the film’s beginning, are erased, and we enter into an altogether different film. The turn that the film takes is helped by the photography, which changes style and form. When we are with the sect, the colors become beige and desaturated, which stand out from the opening, where we had a brightly colored palette.

Once inside the commune, or the zone, Oleg finds the space irresistible and cannot get himself to leave. Despite being told that he will not get it here and that he is free to leave, he remains attracted to the campsite zone. The reference to Andrei Tarkovsky’s film Stalker (1979) is obvious in the otherworldly zone and the search for eternal salvation. What invisible powers keep him there? Who controls human impulses and desires? As our hero gets more amorously involved with Vera, who seems as confused as Oleg, we find a possible answer to these questions: love.

The whole commune eventually dissolves in a great cataclysm of fires, caused by Vera’s son Anton, who has built a device that can shoot waves. Now the film turns for a third time and swerves into a post-sect state of mind. We receive onscreen statements from various sect members, who, in a direct address to the audiences, talk about their experiences and the absurdness of their participation in the sect. The blindness of their beliefs and their shame afterwards are underscored. They are ashamed of being caught up in a collective mass-psychosis, but who, they ask, is to blame, if not we all? The allegory of Russian reality is again obvious, and the question of who is to blame for denial and delusion are prevalent as survival mechanisms in Russia today.

The casting of Alexander Sheps as the Guide is an indication of this zeitgeist, which emphasizes a mixture of real-life politics, occultism, and popular entertainment. The allusion to necro-politics is another. The commune practices a belief that life is only reachable through death and that only through the commandment of death can the fullest potential of life be realized. This search for the metaphysical dimension to life again reminds us of Stalker, but Waves has a more distinctive story arc than Tarkovsky’s film.

The ending of Waves suggests that we are intersecting with another layer of time. Once audiences have witnessed the video confessions, as if recorded on Zoom, we are back in the city and in particular in the metro, where people are carrying out their everyday lives. No faces are distinguished, only a faceless mass on the metro. On the escalator, we meet Oleg and Vera on their way up as we pass them on our way down. In the final shot of the film, we see the two protagonists, hand in hand, disappearing into the distance, into the light aboveground. The championing of Love? Some would arguably point to such an interpretation (Chernova 2023), but it could also be read as if they, already dead, have entered a fuller, more complete life-world.

Their zombie-like appearance suggests an anticipation of the unknown, making it clear that movement into the light—into the next phase—is by no means certain. The future has an infinite number of possible paths that we can take, which surely makes Brashinsky’s film much more interesting than the vast majority of Russian feature films.

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Works Cited


www.kinokultura.com/2024/83r-volny.shtml
Waves, Russia, 2022
Color, 101 minutes
Director: Mikhail Brashinsky
Script: Mikhail Brashinsky, Konstantin Murzenko
Producers: Sabina Eremeeva, Gennadii Mirgorodskii
Director of Photography: Aleksandr Kuznetsov
Costume Designer: Irina Ochina, Ekaterina Khimicheva
Sound: Denis Antonov
Editing: Natal'ia Kucherenko
Cast: Vladislav Abashin, Viktoria Tolstoganova, Egor Popov, Irina Brazgovka, Sergei Umanov, Alexander Sheps, Kseniia Orlova, Roman Radov, Aleksei Bagdasarov, Dar’ia Sergeeva
Production: Film Company Slon

Mikhail Brashinsky: Waves (Volny, 2023)
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