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**Gennadii Ostrovskii: *Dumplings Brothers* (*Pel'meni*, 2013)**

**reviewed by Lars Kristensen © 2014**



Gennadii Ostrovskii's second film, *Dumplings Brothers*, has been well received by critics despite its quirkiness and its indefinable genre. Overall, the film seems to have struck a chord with audiences, which—just as with Ostrovskii's TV drama *Captains* (*Kapitany*, 2010)—seems to point in the direction of “doing the right thing,” i.e. what is morally the correct thing to do. In short, Ostrovskii urges us to respect differences, because roads to sameness and homogeneity

lead to the destruction of individual lives. Predominately known as a scriptwriter with several well-crafted films behind him, such as Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Life with an Idiot* (*Zhizn' s idiotom*, 1993), Pawel Pawlikowski's *The Stringer* (1998), Filipp Iankovskii's *In Motion* (*V dvizhenii*, 2002), Valerii Todorovskii's *The Lover* (*Liubovnik*, 2002), and Sergei Dvortsevoi's *Tulpan* (2008), Ostrovskii has a broad color palette with a wide range of brushes at his disposal: he seems to be equally good at absurd comedy and serious art-house films. Maybe it is this mix that adds to the success of *Dumpling Brothers*, because the film stands out from other attempts at making palatable films on serious topics.

Where Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* (*Jiao zi*, 2004) was about class, capitalism and Hong Kong's increased reliance on mainland China, Ostrovskii's version of pelmeni (*dumplings*) are stuffed with mature human flesh—in the vein of Vladimir Sorokin's play (*Pel'meni*, 1984–1997)—and deals with Russia's neurotics relationship with its Other, in this case a homosexual Other. *Dumpling Brothers* is not a critique of capitalist Russia, but rather an attempt to embrace different types of national identity. The image of the brothers hauling bags of pelmeni through the forest resembles Ilya Repin's painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1873), but where Repin focuses on the sameness of the haulers and their inhuman task, Ostrovskii's brothers are marked by their individual differences. Where Repin's haulers are indifferent to their cargo, the dumpling brothers are inexplicably interlocked with their baggage and national constructions. There are three themes I should like to highlight in this review, viz homosexuality; canine elements; and musical motifs.



## Homosexuality or heterosexuality

Oscillating between a cinema of the absurd and the grotesque, but going as far back as Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin (Evseev 2013), Ostrovskii's film is not easily defined. *Dumpling Brothers* begins at the funeral of Commander Georgii. His grieving widow, Zoia Aleksandrovna, is flanked by her two sons, Vladimir and Andrei. Vladimir is visibly in tears, while Andrei is more composed; this already points to their contrasting behavior, their differences. Zoia Aleksandrovna loses her will to live, but she finds comfort in making pelmeni for Vladimir and Andrei. Soon the two protagonists are flogging pelmeni left, right and center. As with any favorite food, the endearing part is to eat it in sizeable quantities, otherwise it will lose its attractiveness. This is what happens with Zoia Aleksandrovna's pelmeni; they are appreciated at first, but soon they are unbearable, and later they are overwhelmingly despised. How the two brothers deal with the situation and how they come together in their desire to please their mother carries the narrative for the rest of the film. However, the film's *raison d'être* lies somewhere else, since the two protagonists have different sexual orientations: Andrei is a successful banker and homosexual, while Vladimir is heterosexual, with a beautiful wife, and father of two children.



These two sexual orientations are at the beginning of the film constructed as contrasting values; for example, after the funeral, Andrei in a very un-Russian manner refuses to drink vodka with his younger brother Vladimir, because he has to work the next day. At the same time, Vladimir is the (stereo)-typical Russian husband who cannot stop drinking although his wife keeps telling him that enough is enough. This divide between gay living and living the norm is

upheld through the mise-en-scène of the two protagonists. While Andrei lives with his partner, Sasha, in a refurbished flat decorated in light colors with a bathroom taken out of an IKEA catalogue, Vladimir resides with his family in a dark-grey apartment with half-finished DIY exposed on the walls, where people congregate happily to sing and dance. This setting contrasts tradition with modernity as seen through the eyes of heterosexual normality.

However, as the film progresses, the two brothers are increasingly finding themselves in the same boat, as their worlds seem to collapse into one. They both reject their "way of life." Andrei finds no comfort in Sasha's erotic novel, which he reads in a ski lift, and Vladimir finds no pleasure in his wife's sexual advancement, as she cannot love him as much as his mother. Overall, the pelmeni are to be blamed. The American Sasha is far from satisfied with being fed this peculiar Russian national dish, even if it is traditional "family cuisine;" and Vladimir's bespectacled son wants to feed them to his worse enemy at school, the "Spectrum Phantom," so that he would die of twisted bowels. In short, the pelmeni cease to function as the glue that should hold a family together.

Without giving away too much of the plot, the divide between the brothers is seriously reduced at the end of the film, when both are left without their families—gay or straight. But what should we make of this theme of diverse sexual orientations? Surely, it is a reflection on the homophobia in contemporary Russia and the laws against gay propaganda being implemented recently? Yes and no, because even if the film deals with established norms and



values regarding family and sexuality in contemporary Russian society, it is not a queer film that celebrates gay sexuality. For example, the gay club which Andrei and Sasha frequent is devoid of rejoicing in Otherness, even if queerness is visually on display. While a more celebratory account of gay culture in Russia is found in Sergei Taramaev's and Liubov' Lvova's *Winter Journey* (*Zimnii put'*, 2013), *Dumpling Brothers* mocks both worlds for their

inabilities to uphold “real” love. Despite this double-edged mockery, *Dumpling Brothers* has caused an outcry from the homophobic audience and critics (see Maslova 2013), which bears resemblance to the reception in 2003 of Mikhail Brashinskii’s *Black Ice (Gololed)*. But where the focus in *Black Ice* and *Winter Journey* is on the particularity of Russian homosexuality, in *Dumpling Brothers* the target is the spirit of Russian society rather than a particular sexual orientation. This, I argue, is achieved through the help of—dogs.

### Canine elements

The presence of dogs is strong in the film. Already the opening scene at the funeral contains a shot of a dog staring right back at the camera. Also, in Zoia Aleksandrovna’s courtyard, dogs are constantly devouring bones and other rubbish, and the statue which stands in the courtyard represents two indefinable animals—cows, horses or moose—but which are, more likely, huge dogs. As the story of the brothers’ ingenious way of getting rid of the pelmeni progresses, we start to associate the canine element with the plot line: that is, humans begin to behave like dogs and dogs like humans. Soon humans and dogs are almost indistinguishable, with fatal consequences; Vladimir and Andrei are reduced to dog-like characters. The fact that they are caged at the end of the film further suggests their reduction to bestiality.



Mostly we see dogs feasting on the pelmeni, which points to meat (*carne*) consumption, but also the *carnal* desire, which is common for both humans and animals. Despite our differences—homosexual or heterosexual, animal or human—we are bound together by our desires. Dogs eat pelmeni, humans eat pelmeni, and we all have desires for food, sex and love. Love is predominately associated with the consumption of other people’s bodies and a cannibalistic instinct

of devouring each other, literally and metaphorically. The overriding comparison between dogs and humans in the film should not be overlooked, as we can trace the links between society and the canine deeper in Russian literary history. Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Heart of a Dog* first springs to mind: a short story immortalized on screen by Vladimir Bortko in 1988 with Vladimir Tolokonnikov in the role of Sharikov, who is transformed from dog to human by the transplant of a human pituitary gland. Bulgakov’s satire contains a sharp critique of the new Bolshevik regime. In *Dumpling Brothers*, there is not the same class critique regarding Russian society, despite a golden opportunity to reflect on the brothers’ social status and whose or what virtues are celebrated.

In Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, we have the canine theme in the omnivorous Sobakevich, from whom Chichikov buys dead serfs to bluff his way to wealth and riches. The Russian characteristics of “dog eats dog,” the rush to riches and the endeavor of becoming successful at any price, even if it means devouring each other, are also targeted by Ostrovskii. Thus, the statues in the courtyard of the large dogs suggest a certain official celebration of the canine element. Just as military commanders and heroic events are celebrated through their immortal appearance on a plinth, two dogs are on display in *Dumplings Brothers*. The “dog eats dog” theme is on view for people to admire: see for yourself, this is how you behave.

### A Love Tune

The musical score well reflects the scope of Ostrovskii’s abilities as filmmaker, as well as the main theme of Otherness in *Dumpling Brothers*. The music moves quite easily through different styles, from Ravel’s *Bolero* that Vladimir is practicing with his orchestra to musical acts such as Dick Van Dyke’s dance with the penguins in *Mary Poppins* (1964) which Andrei imitates with Sasha. These themes of barbershop music versus classical compositions are associated with the brothers throughout the film, pointing at the different worlds they inhabit. It is obvious that Vladimir as a musician is compelled to practice with his orchestra, but it is also evident that he has increasing difficulties to connect to the music. Andrei, on the other hand, is linked to musicals and slapstick through his gayness. These two modes of appropriating

music are a central theme for the film, but one that diverts from the aim of collapsing worlds into one or bridging gaps between homosexuality and heterosexuality. While Andrei reworks the tunes from *Mary Poppins* in his own queer fashion, re-enacting the fantasy of dancing with animated penguins, Vladimir adapts through his orchestral work a musical piece that was denounced by its composer as being without music. However, Ravel's music is used in Russia's image of the self as evidence of the country's worldliness, since it was commissioned by the Russian ballerina Ida Rubinstein. On the one hand, we have the official adaptation that is to be exported abroad through a world tour and, on the other hand, the imported foreign musical act that is embodied through queerness.

How to appropriate things foreign has been a theme with long traditions in Russian comedies, but *Dumpling Brothers* adds finesse to these levels. Ravel's *Bolero* was also used in Iurii Mamin's *Window on Paris* (*Okno v Parizh*, 1994), but without the connotation of self-adulation. While Ostrovskii's film harks back at the comedy of the early 1990s, as has been noted by some critics (Maslova 2013), we also sense a progression. *Window on Paris* was chiefly concerned with the contrast between the foreign and Russian, but in *Dumpling Brothers* the difference is internal. It is a Russian-on-Russian comedy, which contrast and compares senses of national belonging, one official and cherished by the authorities (hetero-normative), the other personal and loathed in public discourse (gay-queerness).



The songs featured in the film range from "Old Maple" (*Staryi klen*), eternalized through the Soviet film *Girls* (*Devchata*, 1961), to its contemporary song "Teach me Tiger," which is predominately associated with the stardom of Marilyn Monroe. But it is through Ostrovskii's own song, "L'Amour," that the message of all-bearing love is conveyed most. As a trained musician, Ostrovskii has a fine ear for catchy tunes and the jazzy version of "L'Amour," sung by Sergei Manukyan, becomes a perfect composition to expose the inequality in which love is valued. The obvious disgust at the fact that love between same-sex people is demonized might be expressed only subtly in the film, but it is certainly felt from Ostrovskii's song, which emphasizes love as all-embracing. In the end, the film seems to say that we are all sinners: we all live messy lives, whether as homosexuals, bisexuals or heterosexuals. If there is a message hidden in the film, it is that there should not be just one (official) definition of love, because ultimately there is only love. Andrei and Vladimir seem to realize this at the end of the film; the question is whether Russia does, too.

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*Dumpling Brothers*, Russia, 2013  
Color, 90 minutes  
Director: Gennadii Ostrovskii  
Scriptwriter: Gennadii Ostrovskii  
DoP: Evgenii Tsetkov

Music: Igor' Vdovin

Cast: Timofei Tribuntsev, Artem Osipov, Tat'iana Maist, Odin Lund Biron, Andrei Fomin, Mariia Daniliuk, Nina Loshchinina

Producer: Andrei Kim

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**reviewed by Lars Kristensen © 2014**

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