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Liusia Matveeva: *The Embroideress* (Vyshival'shchitsa 2014)

reviewed by Lars Kristensen © 2015

The Embroideress is a short film by Liusia Matveeva. It is divided into five sections, each containing their own separate stories, entitled "Helicopter", "Sunday", "Dog-Photographer", "Mausoleum", and "Apocalypses". Apart from an off-screen narrator, who is only visible through her hands that are stitching a red woollen thread through a computer screen, there are no onscreen characters that connect the individual parts.



The film was screened at the Berlin International Film Festival in the "Forum Expanded 2015: Unused Possibilities," which was themed around the quote "To the sound of the closing door" by Jean-Luc Godard. For the organisers of the Forum (Schulte-Strathaus), Godard determined sadness in the sound of a closing door, since it is a turning point that marks a disappointment with what one thought would happen, but what ultimately fails to happen. It is an opportunity lost and, if the selection of *The Embroideress* at this forum is anything to go by, the film expresses sadness about an opening that closes. The film's reassessment of the communist past is readily and proper, yet the lack of closure in the film is extremely tangible through a growing feeling of paranoia and claustrophobia. The opening for a re-interpretation of the past is already closing down—if not already closed.

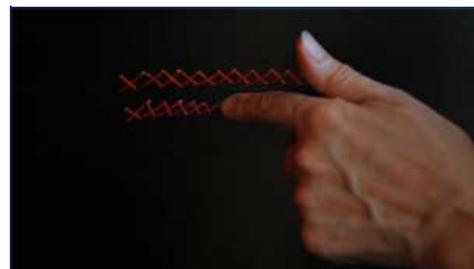
Prior to the first chapter, we are introduced to the laptop computer, the red thread and the hands of the narrator. The chapter begins with a helicopter crashing into the narrator's house. The narrator tells us that military journalists came to interview the narrator's father, but he tells them "to go f*** themselves". After this short story, the stitching on the laptop screen begins. The computer screen tells us that the hard drive is "starting up" and white Consolas text appears on the black screen. As soon as the needle goes through the screen, the text disappears and flickering light runs over the screen. Green, blue and white squares pulsate with white horizontal lines, indicating that the updating of the screen has been interrupted. There is no narrative to these reoccurring sewing scenes, only the actual sound of the sewing and the added sound of what can best be described as electronic scratching that accompanies the flickering lights. As the scene fades into black, we are introduced to the next story.

In "Sunday", the narrator tells about an Easter Sunday at the cemetery, where she encounters ghosts. She asks for forgiveness when scolding a former communist chairman of the district, who has risen from his grave. More sewing follows, after which we are introduced to the chapter, "Dog-Photographer". While out driving, the narrator spots a dog sitting high on the telephone wires. This is no ordinary dog, she learns, but a picture-taking dog, who lives in a hollow tree. The dog tells the narrator that, if only it had a new camera (different cameras are shown through rapid sequence of images), it would be able to realise the dream of become rich and famous. More screen sewing.

In the next story, "Mausoleum", we are introduced to Dania, the narrator's son, who the narrator thinks has stolen Lenin's body from the Mausoleum. She becomes afraid that the police will arrest them and listen carefully to the news on the TV. The narrator pleads several times with her son: "how many times must a say this. Please bury him!". The son, on the other hand, says that she is imagining things and that there is no Lenin. Back in her apartment, she discovers a big pile of bones marked with numbers. Cut back to the sewing, which has progressed to two rows of little red crosses on the now defunct screen. No residue flickering or scratching, only bird song from the garden outside.

The last act is entitled, "Apocalypse", and it is also the most dense in terms of narrative twists and turns. It begins with the images of an atom bomb exploding. The narrator wants to go peeing before the world ends. In the toilet, the narrator wonders how we are duped by sensationalism, but then the walls of the toilet start shaking. She escapes from the toilet and the shaking stops. In the streets, people are celebrating that the world has not ended. But why is it so hot? The narrator gets suspicious. It seems to get harder to breathe as well, as if there is less oxygen than before. The narrator asks: "Am I the only one who feel this?", which is the only time she address the viewer directly. The narrator is at a restaurant and an anxious man is sitting opposite her. They are both hungry but visibly nervous. The narrator cannot take this anxiety any more and she starts screaming at the others in the restaurant that they are doomed and that they will die soon. The outburst relieves the tension and chaotic happiness flows. Back to the sewing, which has ended. Nineteen red stitches on the black screen, which is now working and starts a count-down to 1974.

This mixture of story and moving images, which fluctuates between real-world perception and impossible storytelling, is quite captivating. It holds the viewer in its grip, because we constantly have to decipher codes in order to make meaning, despite the fact that there is no obvious meaning narrated through the story. Although the structure of the film is classical in five acts, there is no obvious plot. There is no real conflict and, consequently, there is no climax besides the absence of the apocalypse and the outburst of the narrator in the end. But this is far from a resolution that creates a denouement. Neither is there any indication of a conflictless structure in the tradition of anime, as the tension in every chapter is tangible, created out of the observation made by us through the narrator. Key to make any sense of the story is the narrator: the director Liusia Matveeva. But not even she is for real. Liusia Matveeva is the pseudonym for Liudmila Zinchenko, who is a photographer teaching at the Rodchenko School of Photography and Media Arts in Moscow.



Zinchenko's photographs, as displayed on her website (<http://lzinchenko.com/>), often evolve around the city. The images function not as documents of the city's underbelly, which is usually the case with art photography of the city, but rather as traces of escape routes away from the city. There are very few people in her images and the search for the right light seems to be paramount. Zinchenko was a nominee for the Kandinsky Prize in 2011 for her series on alcoholism in the provinces, which shows that Zinchenko deals with social misery. *The Embroideress* is somewhere in between aestheticized city light and a display of society's underbelly. The film's visual style is documentary with handheld DV camera, which is far from visually beautiful. The choice of camera aesthetics points to the search for an urgency in the image and a questioning of the aesthetics of the moving image. Throughout the film, still images are inserted to illustrate the narrative, which exposes the function of images in narratives, invoking the French New Wave, for example, Jean-Luc Godard's *The Soldiers (Les Carabiniers, 1963)*. Bordering on the spiritual, and with strong religious undertones, the question of realism is always present in the film's crossing between fiction, actuality and re-enactment. *The Embroideress* is a film that leaves the viewer more confused by the end than at the beginning. The viewer needs to construct his or her own realism in relation to the film.

The criticism streaming from the narrative cannot be missed, even if it is loose and incoherent. The militarisation for economic vantage, the ease of condemnation of others, the hollow craving for realising one's dreams, the paranoiac feeling of being watched and the desire to believe in media lies, their spin and campaigning—these are the elements that make the film uneasy about the current climate in Russia. These themes are certainly what the Berlin curators found sounding like a closing door. To them and to many others, this is exactly what Russia sounds like today—a lost opportunity.

At a recent conference entitled "Rethinking 20th Century Art History," held in Mala Tzarkva, Bulgaria, Kirill Razlogov argued that censorship is beneficial to the arts. Art, he said, thrives on adversity as it seeks alternative ways of expressing opposition. By implementing rules of what can and what cannot be represented, an authoritative government creates a powerful setting for artists to create works that defy the rules and regulations. Razlogov's argument came to mind when watching *The Embroideress*, because the film's seemingly Aesopian language and imagery are woven into a story world that at first glance has no meaning, but is evidently critical of the story world it depicts. The moving images are both politically and ideologically fuelled, asking if we are happy with the way things are.

The Embroideress is conceived through imagery that is closer to fine art than Russian blockbuster cinema as we know it. Zinchenko's filmmaking is low-budget, low-resolution non-cinema, but because it is personal and private, it can touch us in ways no blockbuster film can. We cannot dismiss it, as it is sincere, springing from genuine personal feelings and observations. But does it change us? In my view, *The Embroideress* is a strong examination of the post-communist Russian condition dealing with iconography of the past, but also a film that can be simply taken as events strung on a red woollen string, one after another, in a nonsensical imaginary story world. In this way, the film hides itself in iconoclasm rather than reveal personal truths about this particular condition. The fact that Zinchenko needs a pseudonym only reinforces the layering of voices and meanings, but also a filmmaking that is paranoiac.

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Works Cited

Schulte-Strathaus, Stefanie. "[Forum Expanded 2015](#): Unused Possibilities".

Embroideress, Russia, 2014

Color, 21 minutes

Director: Liusia Matveeva

DoP: Liusia Matveeva, Mikhail Maksimov, Ira Tsykhanskaia

Voiceover: Liusia Matveeva

Visual Effects: Mikhail Maksimov

Consultant: Nastia Dergacheva

Cast: Daniil Zinchenko, Sebastian Kiefer, Igor Samolet, Dog Richa

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