

A New Russian Film

Loveless, a Russian film released over the winter, depicts relations among a married couple, Boris and Zhenya, and their twelve-year-old son, Alyosha. The parents, who are quick to erupt in fights and cast insults at each other, are dissolving their marriage; the son actually plays a small role in the film and disappears—runs away—early in the story. Boris, played by Aleksey Rozin, is an office worker in early middle age who has already found a lover to replace his wife and spends as little time at home as possible. Masha, Boris's mistress, is pregnant and frets over the stability of her connection to Boris. She confesses that she fears winding up alone. As nondescript as his job, Boris has anxieties of his own, and in particular whether his divorce will affect the security of his unidentified but apparently uninteresting job. Other men might have been more concerned about the welfare of their children. Sitting in a company cafeteria, he asks a co-worker whether he should worry; the company chief executive is a staunch believer in the Orthodox Church and "family values." Boris's colleague isn't sure, but remembers that an unmarried co-worker once "rented" a wife and daughter to show up by his side at a company function. Boris considers this option with dismay; where does one find a family that can be rented, and in any case, how can one make a story like that stick? For some in post-Soviet Russia, the Orthodox Church has replaced the church of Marx, and some employees have to abide by the terms of clean living.

Zhenya, Boris's estranged wife, is played by Maryana Spivak, an attractive woman with lovely legs who has been keeping her eyes open for a man to replace her husband, to whom she was never seriously attached anyway. She, too, got pregnant before they were married and saw marriage as a means of escaping from the oppressive life she was sharing with her mother (who is also a religious believer). Zhenya has found a man who is about ten years older than she but

who looks much older, an aging figure who has attracted Zhenya the way men in the West have been doing so for centuries, by offering her money, security, and opulent surroundings. With a clean, spare, chic modern look, his apartment (or condo) is several notches above the one Zhenya is leaving, which is dowdy and cluttered and reminiscent of my own dwelling place when I lived in Moscow. Apparently divorced, possibly widowed, Zhenya's new lover communicates via Skype with his pretty, young daughter, who is studying in Portugal. Her sparkling smile offers more evidence of money: Orthodontia and modern dentistry are relatively new to Russia, accessible only to people of means. (In the Soviet era, dental patients needing an extraction paid extra for Novocain and often did without.) The father appeals to his daughter to visit him, but she puts him off and says perhaps later. She's living it up, there's no time for dad, and as the father wistfully closes the screen he wears the bereft, regretful look of an older man whose family has fallen apart. Zhenya, so good to look at and share a bed with, may just be another woman drawn to his money and ready to move on if he ever runs out of it. She'll offer an interval of companionship between spells of loneliness.

Contemporary Russia in all its sodden splendor. We're not quite sure where we are in this country, apparently in Leningrad though we know the film was made in Moscow. It does not matter--conditions like this can be found in other Russian cities; in fact, they're the same throughout the developed world. Nearly all of the characters have cell phones, which they're using constantly; Zhenya in particular can hardly take her eyes off her phone, even in upscale restaurants. The young people are taking selfies. In the Soviet era, the morning radio reports might have focused on the production of pig iron or the wheat harvest, but this is modern Russia, and we listen instead to a weather report (just like in the West) and forecasts of an apocalypse from "the Mayan calendar." Characters in the movie, assimilating bits and pieces of a remote

culture, then begin asking one another if it's true: Are we on the verge of an apocalypse? The broadcaster indicates conditions in the "Leningrad area," and it is curious that the screenwriter would use that name. Russians have been calling it Petersburg for nearly thirty years. No matter; the shopping centers and grocery stores are what you'd find anywhere in modern Europe.

Checking leads (uselessly, as it turns out) on their runaway son, the couple drive to Zhenya's mother's home near Moscow. To drown out his wife's complaints on the way back from her wretched country hut, Boris turns up the radio to a high volume. In the Soviet era this might have brought forth a blaring passage from Tchaikovsky, but today it only produces hideous acid rock. (He ultimately throws Zhenya out of the car on a country road, when they're in the middle of nowhere.)

Those who have traveled to Russia are familiar with the country's attractions. There are splendid images to be captured in Petersburg and Moscow, including the Neva River, the Bronze Horseman, the Winter Palace, Red Square and the Kremlin and the sculpture of Peter the Great in the Moscow River (should your taste be ample enough include such objects). But you won't find any of these in *Loveless*. The viewer is presented with images of nondescript buildings, hospitals, schools, subway corridors, abandoned structures. The colors of the film are an oppressive blend of dull blues and greys, and scenes are rarely brightly lighted. The season is fall, but Andrey Zvyagintsev, the director, has no taste for autumnal, sylvan colors. The nearby woods are filled with snow, dead trees, lifeless ponds, creeks--Chekhov at his most resolutely dreary. The language and the dull blocks of apartment buildings, uniformly twenty stories high, laid out in grids, which house most of the population, inform viewers that this part of the deprived East at least has changed little from the Soviet era. Once occupied communally, these properties are now often privately owned by families. In an early scene, when Zhenya is showing off to potential buyers the apartment that she and Boris are vacating, she remarks that the

neighborhood is in an environmentally preferred region of the city. The exchange reminded me of the description I was given during my year in Moscow of a colleague's domicile in an elevated, northern region of the city. Because of the fresh winds blowing in through the area, it was termed "ecologischke," or environmentally safer than other neighborhoods, because the winds were clearing the air of pollution.

Boris and Zhenya remain self-absorbed people long past their teenage years or their twenties, when people habitually act that way. They have started a family with no forethought, and when they grow mutually disenchanted, they forget their marriage and even their son. Spending a few nights with their lovers, they discover that Alyosha has disappeared; they learn that only when the school he attends calls asking why he has not been in class for two days. He has fled his "home," well aware that he is the unwanted accessory in an accidental marriage. (We learn later in the story that Zhenya agreed to it only after learning she was pregnant and decided it would be a useful method of escaping an odious life with her mother.) The disappearance of the boy brings into the film a detective who recommends a volunteer group that helps track down missing children: This community-minded group is one of the few remaining characteristics of an older, perhaps even pre-Soviet Russia. Even in the age of money, consumerism, and self-worship, a shred of communitarian feeling persists, and the volunteers in fact seem more concerned about the boy's welfare than the parents.

The police and volunteers search neighborhoods, forests, and abandoned buildings, but they never do discover the whereabouts of Alyosha. In a late scene, the director pulls a cheap trick: The parents are ushered into a morgue to try to identify the corpse of a boy that has been found. When a technician draws down the sheet and exposes the body, Zhenya lets off a piercing scream: The audience imagines that Alyosha has been found, but not alive. It seems to be the corpse of another child, and Zhenya has only cried out at the horror of the image. On the other

hand, the audience is granted no more than a partial image of the body, and it is possible that it truly is the boy, something the parents refuse to acknowledge; they decline a DNA test. Is Alyosha still alive? Scrounging a feral existence in the city—or in another? Has he fallen into the hands of a child molester, or is he a suicide victim? The audience never does find out, and the ambiguity is deliberate. We are interpreting a dissolving, disarticulated society, and the whereabouts of family members is a mystery. Maybe there are no families anymore, just loosely connected people bound together by blood relations that no longer matter. They take no serious interest in anyone other than themselves.

At the end of the movie, we are taken about two years beyond the scene at the morgue. Boris is now living with Masha, perhaps married, and the father of a very young son. Zhenya is with the man she had been having an affair with. The two are watching TV news, which is carrying a story on the upheaval in the Ukraine. Petro Poroshenko, the Ukrainian president, is attempting to suppress the uprising in the east, supported by the Russians. They had already seized the Crimea and are moving into eastern Ukraine, perhaps a preliminary step to recovering control of the whole country (which of course was formerly part of the Soviet Union). The news report reflects Moscow's official point of view, and refugees are pleading with Poroshenko to abandon his campaign, which most in the West would consider a justified effort to maintain control of the country. Zhenya and her mate gaze at the screen with a certain vacant interest, and it is not quite clear how a viewer is supposed to regard this. Is this news as entertainment? Something to fill one's mind because there is so little else to think about? And further evidence of how westernized a certain strata of Russian life is? (The loss of life in the conflict included hundreds on an international passenger jet destined for a medical conference in Melbourne; the plane was shot down by Russian missiles from a battery in a part of the country under Russian control.) Is this meant to suggest the insignificance of life in a condition of unremitting political

violence? Corpses are strewn everywhere. How do we weigh the disappearance and unknown fate of a twelve-year-old boy against these calamities? After taking in these images of destruction, Zhenya rises from her sofa and retreats to a treadmill on the balcony of her apartment, wearing a jacket with “Russia” spelled in the Latin alphabet on prominent display.

Let me conclude with some thoughts of a Spaniard from the “class of ’98,” one of the more important figures Iberia has given to modern philosophy. “Given over to itself,” write Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*, “every life has been left empty, with nothing to do. And as it has to be filled with something, it invents frivolities for itself, gives itself to false occupations which impose nothing intimate, sincere. Today it is one thing, tomorrow another, opposite to the first. Life is lost at finding itself all alone. Mere egoism is a labyrinth.”

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