

*Andrey Zvyagintsev's Loveless
as the remediation of Mikhail Bulgakov's
The heart of a dog.
Towards the question of cultural memory*

ABSTRACT. Waligórska-Olejniczak Beata, *Andrey Zvyagintsev's Loveless as the remediation of Mikhail Bulgakov's The heart of a dog. Towards the question of cultural memory.* "Images" vol. XXX, no. 39. Poznań 2021. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 183–199. ISSN 1731-450X. DOI 10.14746/i.2021.39.09.

The article aims to examine the relationship between two texts: *Loveless* (Нелюбовь, 2017), the latest of Andrey Zvyagintsev's feature films, and *The Heart of a Dog* (Собачье сердце, 1925), one of Mikhail Bulgakov's most popular short stories. The studies are focused on finding the parallels showing the work of cultural memory, which is understood – following Aleida Assmann's and Astrid Erll's findings – as the process of continuous remediation, retranscription and negotiation of essential ideas in the space of culture. Consequently, the author is not interested in treating Zvyagintsev's text as the illustration of Bulgakov's plot, but rather in discussing certain topics which are deposited in Russian literature and constantly reused and reinterpreted, creating the framework for communication across 'the abyss of time'. The analogies between the selected texts are sought in the area of their structure, some thematic overlapping, the authors' approach to the issue of the authoritarian ideology and the role of technology as well as in exploring the function of space as one of the narrative mechanisms, in particular in the context of the category of home and anti-home.

KEYWORDS: Zvyagintsev, Bulgakov, *Loveless*, *The heart of a dog*, memory, Russian cinema

"Manuscripts do not burn" ("Рукописи не горят"). This famous quote from Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* (*Мастер и Маргарита*, 1966–1967) was recalled during one of numerous interviews given by Andrey Zvyagintsev following the premiere of *Leviathan* (*Левиафан*, 2014). He used it to support his opinion that a film director first of all should be faithful to himself and his artistic conscience, and not seek audience appreciation but rather emphasise his own standpoint, in spite of potential critical reactions and commentaries. Such sincere approach to art guarantees – as Bulgakov expressed in his canonical novel – that the work will be kept in the reservoir of cultural memory. The cases of Zvyagintsev's "soulmates" ("единомышленники"), i.e. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lev Tolstoy or Andrey Platonov proved the genius of the opening metaphor.[1] This article is aimed to examine the relationship between the latest of Zvyagintsev's

[1] *Andrey Zvyagintsev: Strakh – eto yazyk d'yavola*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUOnVCsY8q4>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

works, *Loveless* (*Нелюбовь*, 2017), and one of the most popular of Bulgakov's short stories, namely *The Heart of a Dog* (*Собачье сердце*, 1925), through the prism of the aforementioned problem of cultural memory. The planned juxtaposition should lead to noting the role of literature and culture in the performative construction of the cultural heritage. Consequently, the main focus of the article will be on the interactions between the selected texts to explore "the processes by which a culture [...] continually rewrites and retranscribes itself [...]" [2] The dynamics of those processes will be sought *inter alia* in the aspects of thematic overlapping of the two works, which might be recognised in the authors' approach to the issue of the authoritarian ideology, as well as in referring to the role of technology, the function of space as one of the narrative mechanisms, in particular in the context of the category of home and anti-home, and the analogies found in the structure of the film and the story.

The premiere of *Loveless* took place in Cannes on May the 17th, 2017. After two weeks, it was screened for the first time in Zvyagintsev's homeland. The film – contrary to *Leviathan* – was not supported financially by Russia's Ministry of Culture. Nevertheless, the Russian coproduction with Germany, Belgium and France received a lot of recognition and very positive reviews both in the domestic and international environment. The most prestigious awards included the Jury Prize at Cannes Film Festival, the Silver Frog at Camerimage, César Awards, European Film Awards, and trophies won in London, Munich, Belgium, as well as a vast number of nominations, e.g. for the Academy Awards and Golden Globes. The film screenplay was prepared by the well-established tandem of Andrei Zvyagintsev and Oleg Negin, who collaborated on three previous films: *The Banishment*, *Elena* and *Leviathan*. The loyal director's supporters included also the production team, comprised of Alexander Rodnyansky, Sergey Melkumov and first-time contributor Gleb Fetisov. Apart from the cast, which was dominated by the actors debuting with Zvyagintsev – Maryna Spivak, Matvey Novikov, Marina Vasilyeva, Andris Keišs – a lot of publicity that the film received was attributed to Evgueni and Sacha Galperine's music, which was highly appreciated by press. Its commentaries contained descriptions such as "one of the key elements of the storytelling", "overpowering postmodern soundtrack contribut[ing] to the moody work of art", and a "heart-breaking cry for help." [3]

An uncomplicated storyline and open ending, which are considered Zvyagintsev's signature marks, can be found in this movie as well. The plot centres on the relationship between Zhenya and Boris Sleptsovs, a divorcing couple trying to start their family lives anew with different partners. Their dreams of easy transformation are mo-

[2] R. Lachmann, *Mnemonic and intertextual aspects of literature*, [in:] *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. A. Erll, A. Nünning, Berlin – New York 2008, p. 301.

[3] <<http://galperine-galperine.com/>>, accessed 12.10.2020.

mentarily shattered by their 12-year-old son, who after overhearing yet another contemptuous and hateful quarrel between his parents, planning how to get rid of him, disappears and is never found. Neither elaborate searches conducted by the group of volunteers nor the shocking visit to the morgue and hospital bring about any results regarding the fate of Alyosha. The ascetic scenery of the Russian film, which mostly presents the everyday activities and conversations of the married couple, motivated a great number of reviewers to link it with Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* (*Scener ur ett äktenskap*, 1973). This cinematographic association was often commented on by the director, who confirmed that the Swedish movie was his deliberate inspiration. Apart from that, the critics pointed out the parallels to Michael Haneke's thematic repertoire, in particular to his *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band – Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*, 2009) and *Hidden* (*Caché*, 2005), Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Adventure* (*L'avventura*, 1960) and – as always – to Andrei Tarkovsky's and Alfred Hitchcock's artistic solutions connected with the category of time and suspense. In addition, “forceful and deliberate socialist-realist Hitchcockian style [...] recalls the most celebrated films of the Romanian new wave (*4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*; *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*).”[4]

The almost banal plotline, though, does not deter academics and film critics from making abundant attempts to interpret the film. The prevailing tendency in this domain is to see it as the work about both dysfunctional family and dysfunctional state, “an unsparing portrait of an emotionally, ethically and physically ravaged country,”[5] whose condition is shown less openly than in *Leviathan*, which was considered a picture of “the gangrenous corruption pervading the Russian political system.”[6] Benoit Pavan describes the film as “a pitiless look at the intense egoism of a modern society overflowing with information, through which individuals keep their heads down, unwilling to examine their own flaws,”[7] subjected to “the social media prerogative of selfies and self-affirmation.”[8] Oleg Gleiberman calls *Loveless* “a meditation as much as [...] a relationship drama”, claiming that “almost anyone who sees it is sure to recognize the virus it diagnoses, which is hardly limited to Russia. The forces that conspire in the fraying of love are now everywhere”, accompanied by – as Peter Bradshaw noted – “intensely conservative social norms of Christianity, conformism and

[4] O. Gleiberman, *Cannes Film Review: 'Loveless'*, “Variety” 2017, <<https://variety.com/2017/film/news/loveless-review-andrey-zvyagintsev-1202430108/>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[5] S. Pond, ‘*Loveless*’ Cannes Review: Gripping Russian Drama Delivers Gut Punch to Launch Competition, 17.05.2017, “The Wrap”, <<https://www.thewrap.com/loveless-cannes-review-gripping-russian-drama-delivers-gut-punch-launch-competition/>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[6] B. Pavan, *Nelyubov (Loveless), portrait of a dehumanised society*, 2017, <<http://az-film.com/en/Publications/290-Nelyubov-Loveless-portrait-of-a-dehumanised-society.html>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[7] Ibidem.

[8] P. Bradshaw, ‘*Loveless*’ review - eerie thriller of hypnotic, mysterious intensity from ‘*Leviathan*’ director, 17.05.2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/may/17/loveless-review-leviathan-director-andrei-zvyagintsev-cannes-2017>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

nationalism.”[9] Zvyagintsev himself emphasises the fact that the latest film is not so much about propaganda, as some recipients may suggest watching the closing pictures of the Ukrainian war, but rather reveals a universal message about the everyday life of ordinary Russians, which is inseparably intertwined with the military actions of the state. Gleiberman does not perceive those events as a background, but comes up with the thesis that in the film “a society rooted in corruption becomes a petri dish for a loveless marriage that spawns a family in which a child isn’t loved”, which brings about tragic consequences, presumably deriving from patterns repeated from one generation to the next.[10]

In one of the many interviews given on *Loveless*, the director states that its core problems are conflicts and loss of hope, which can refer both to the situation of the presented family and the country; therefore, the movie is often described as apocalyptic.[11] He turns his attention to the fact that the film begins in 2012 – which is announced in radio prophecies about the supposed looming end of the world in December – and finishes with the 2015 reports, after the annexation of Crimea. According to Zvyagintsev, the date marks the time of the dramatic drop in the moods of the Russian society, who held their expectations very high during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Unfortunately, the doping scandals, the overrun budget and the war with Ukraine, which started shortly afterwards, caused the state to be plunged into chaos and confusion. As per usual for the author of *Elena*, this external condition is first of all expressed through the visualisations of degraded space – as can be observed in the repetitive pictures of the fallen tree or the devastated building of the recreational centre – the choice of lighting and dark chromatographic palette, as well as in the fate of the flawed characters who deserve less blame than the system surrounding them, making no intimate bond safe.[12] Consequently, some commentators are of the opinion that it is emptiness – noticeable in many different layers of the film – that constitutes its main issue, which in turn might lead to sociologically-oriented interpretations, allowing us to see the whole Russian nation as a generation of abandoned orphans, exhausted by a painful and tragic history.[13] The apocalyptic dimension of the film is often associated with the atomization of the

[9] Ibidem.

[10] B. Scharres, *Cannes 2017: The Fest Opens with ‘Ismael’s Ghosts’, ‘Loveless’*, 2017, <<https://www.roger-ebert.com/festivals/cannes-2017-the-fest-opens-with-ismaels-ghost-loveless>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[11] A Tatarska, *Andriej Zwiagincew o ‘Niemości’: Zrobiliśmy film, który widza boli i porusza niewygodne emocje. Interview*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 2018, <<https://wyborcza.pl/7,101707,22971773,andyriej-zwiagincew-o-niemilosci-zrobilismy-film-ktory-widza.html>>, accessed: 12.10.2020; K. Litvinenko, *Bozhestvennaya ‘Nelyubov’*, <<http://az-film.com/ru/Publications/314-Bozhestvennaja-emNeljubovem.html>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

accessed: 12.10.2020.

[12] E. Kohn, *Cannes Review: In ‘Loveless’ Russia Is the Place Where Families Go to Die*, “IndieWire” 2017, 17.05.2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/05/loveless-review-andrey-zvyagintsev-cannes-120181885/> accessed: 12.10.2020.

[13] A. Solntseva, *Obshchestvo broshennykh detey*, “Gazeta.Ru” 2017, 11.06.2017, <<https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/solnceva/10711961.shtml>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

hopeless society, which is overwhelmed and overburdened by consumption to the degree that it loses the ability of natural community interactions and is doomed to loneliness.

Not all the opinions, however, are so pessimistic in their character. Anton Dolin, discussing *Loveless*, concentrates on the formal categories of the genre.[14] According to the critic, the film is a social family drama, which could also pass for a psychological thriller. He characterises it as compact, energetic and precise in all its aspects, beginning from the actors' backgrounds and finishing with their motivation. The expert praises Zvyagintsev for his perfectionism, noticeable in his talent for combining depth with simplicity, complexity with availability and formality with showing everyday reality, which – not surprisingly – places him as the only Russian director in the BBC shortlist of the authors of the best 100 films of the 21st century. Dolin calls *Loveless* a film-search (“фильм-поиск”), which takes place internally, within the human being. Considering the family as the main focus of the movie, he also emphasises the role of volunteers, which epitomises the birth of civil society in Russia. Their proactive approach to life becomes a point of reference for Vladimir A. Kolotaev and Elena V. Ulybina, who treat it as an element of metaproductive identity, functioning in opposition to the productive (Zhenya's) and reproductive (Boris's) ones.[15]

The separate groups of film studies constitute those based on religious assumptions and the analyses centred on the tradition of Russian and world culture. Some authors representing the former approach try to prove that Alyosha should be treated as the embodiment of a young Jesus, listing a number of events which could be potentially perceived as analogies of the biblical narratives, although Zvyagintsev himself considers this interpretative line a bit far-fetched. The latter group of interpretations, however, seems to represent an important point of view, which could justify the methodological framework of this article. Apart from the associations with films and directors mentioned above, the reviewers point out the Bruegel-like landscapes, Anne Leibowitz-stylised sex scenes, the presence of satellite doubles (Zhenya-Masha; Boris-Anton; Zhenya's mother-Masha's mother), meaningful surnames, bringing to mind the texts of Denis Fonvizin, and the protagonists, which could be easily placed in the artistic world of Nikolai Gogol or Fyodor Dostoevsky.[16]

As the state of the art shows above, there are many potential problem areas which could be referred to in both Zvyagintsev's and Bulgakov's works. This article is based on the rather subjective assumption

[14] A. Dolin, 'Nelyubov': *fil'm o pustote...*

[15] V. Kolotaev, E. Ulybina, *Khudozhestvennoye prostranstvo fil'ma Andrey Zvyagintseva 'Nelyubov' kak sreda formirovaniya identichnosti*, "Articult" 2017, 4 (28), <<http://articult.rsuhr.ru/eng/issue-28-2017-4/articult-28-4-2017-kolataev-ulybina.php>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[16] A. Dolin, *Pustoye mesto. 'Nelyubov', Rezhisser Andrey Zvyagintsev*, "Iskusstvo Kino" 2017, 4, <<https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2017/04/pustoe-mesto-nelyubov-rezhisser-andrej-zvyagintsev>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

of the author of this text that *The Heart of a Dog* may constitute multi-layered material, which in a sense is interrogated and updated in the film of the Russian director, although one cannot pinpoint, and should not seek the documented sources of inspirations or citations adapted from the story of the creator of *Master and Margarita*. In accordance with the introduction, this part will present *Loveless* as a text in which Bulgakov's story is indirectly deposited, remediated and reinterpreted, following Aleida Assman's understanding of cultural memory, further developed in Astrid Erll's concepts:

Over the last decade, the conviction has grown that culture is intrinsically related to memory. Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij have defined culture as "the memory of a society that is not genetically transmitted"[17] but, we may add, by external symbols. Through culture, humans create a temporal framework which transcends the individual life span relating past, present, and future. Cultures create a contract between the living, the dead, and the not yet living. In recalling, iterating, reading, commenting, criticizing, and discussing what was deposited in the remote or recent past, humans participate in extended horizons of meaning-production. They do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of giants whose knowledge they can reuse and reinterpret. As the Internet creates a framework for communication across wide distances in space, cultural memory creates a framework for communication across the abyss of time.[18]

Consequently, both *Loveless* and *The Heart of a Dog* may be perceived as a pessimistic diagnosis of the social and political situation of Russia at a given point in time, whose elementary criterion of expression becomes the character of spatial interactions. Although Bulgakov's story in a vast majority of studies constitutes first of all a satire on the communist system and revolution based on the poetics of magical realism, the more contemporary readings tend to treat Sharikov not only as the embodiment of the evil forces in the society, but also as the victim of the imposed relationships. Analogically to traditional readings of Bulgakov's Sharikov, in *Loveless* the recipient can mostly condemn the egocentric parents bickering constantly about each other's blame, but Zvyagintsev tries to build up a broader perspective, as Eric Kohn argues:

Snippets of radio and television news broadcasts throughout the movie hint at a world coming apart at its seams: the Russian government assailing the media as a propaganda machine, apocalypse fears run rampant, stormy weather lurking just around the corner. While Boris and Zhenya never mention these events, it is clear that they internalized them long ago [...]. He [Zvyagintsev] also doesn't shy away from injecting black comedy into the occasional odd moment, such as when Boris refers to Zhenya's overzealous mother as "Stalin in heels"; and later we discover that the feisty woman lives up to the name.[19]

[17] J. Lotman, B. Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. A. Shukman, Ann Arbor 1984, p. 3.

[18] A. Assmann, *Canon and archive*, [in:] *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdiscipli-*

nary Handbook, ed. A. Erll, A. Nünning, Berlin – New York 2008.

[19] E. Kohn, *Cannes Review: In 'Loveless' Russia Is the Place Where Families Go to Die*, "IndieWire"

In this context, it seems important to remember that Zhenya, upon finding herself pregnant with Boris, gets married by and large to run away from the terror of her home, only to prove after several years that she does not love her own child either. While it would be hard to justify her domestic hatred and vulgarity, which is emphasised in the film *inter alia* in the frames showing her peeing and using toilet paper, one might easily imagine that her life could have been different, providing she had received more love and empathy from her parents. The influence of the external factors on the internal reactions of the human individual can also be observed in Boris's behaviour, in particular in the context of the dictatorship of his corporation. The Orthodox church, epitomised by "Beard", the boss of the company, seems to monitor both the professional and private lives of the workers, leading to the development of creativity in the sphere of keeping up appearances. In the comic scene of Boris's conversation with his closest colleague, Zvyagintsev seems to take advantage of the intellectual montage, showing that goulash of a rather poor quality, served at lunch in staff canteen, is taken for real meat without beckoning in the same degree as the fake wives and children pass for the families of the divorced co-workers at Christmas parties or other corporate get-togethers. People choose to pretend not to see things (analogically to not seeing bones in goulash) or not to risk personal engagement, which could be associated with the long tradition of accepting authoritarian power in Russia, in spite of the consequences.[20] In one interview, Zvyagintsev calls this almost genetically inherited quality "slave's consciousness" (рабское сознание).[21] Those features turn out to be exposed also in Bulgakov's text in Sharikov's set of drawbacks, although he egoistically tends to impose his standpoint on other people, rather than accept being subjected to somebody else's views.

Bulgakov's narrative strongly opposes any and all methods of violent enforcement of rules, which is intuitively read as the protest against the terror of revolution and the laws inflicted by proletariat, whose effects are – according to professor Preobrazhensky – chaos and crime:

By kindness. The only possible method when dealing with a living creature. You'll get nowhere with an animal if you use terror, no matter what its level of development may be. That I have maintained, do maintain and always will maintain. People who think you can use terror are quite wrong. No, terror's useless, whatever its colour – white, red or even brown! Terror completely paralyses the nervous system. Zina! I bought this little scamp

2017, <<https://www.indiewire.com/2017/05/loveless-review-andrey-zvyagintsev-cannes-1201818855/>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[20] *Andrzej Zwiagincew, reżyser „Niemilości”*: „Dzięki takim bohaterom mogę spojrzeć w głąb rosyjskiej chorej duszy”. *Z reżyserem Andrzejem Zwiagincewem rozmawia Mariola Wiktor*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”

2018, <<https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,157211,22941956,andrzej-zwiagincew-rezyser-niemilosci-dzieki-takim-bohaterom.html>>, accessed: 12.10.2010.

[21] *Andrey Zvyagintsev: Strakh – eto yazyk d'yavola*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUOnVCsY8q4>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

some Cracow sausage for 1 rouble 40 kopecks. Please see that he is fed when he gets over his nausea.[22]

[...]

But I ask you: why, when this whole business started, should everybody suddenly start clumping up and down the marble staircase in dirty galoshes and felt boots? Why must we now keep our galoshes under lock and key? And put a soldier on guard over them to prevent them from being stolen? Why has the carpet been removed from the front staircase? Did Marx forbid people to keep their staircases carpeted? Did Karl Marx say anywhere that the front door of No. 2 Kalabukhov House in Prechistenka Street must be boarded up so that people have to go round and come in by the back door? What good does it do anybody? Why can't the proletarians leave their galoshes downstairs instead of dirtying the staircase?

One could say that the failure of professor Preobrazhensky's experiment shows that "the method of the sausage" is equally harmful as "the rule of terror", as they both constitute external factors leading to unwanted and brutal changes involving different members of society. In this context, the transformation of Sharik into Sharikov is the unsuccessful variation of Faust's vision of seeking the recipe for eternal youth, which is turned into the act of creation performed at the cost of taking the freedom of the other being. Consequently, looking at Zvyagintsev's film through the layers of Bulgakov's story makes the reader reflect first of all on the role of technology in the process of power imposition, as well as on the problem of spatial relationships, which in both texts vividly express the results of involuntary transitions.

As Yuri Lotman pointed out, the symbolism of home and anti-home constitutes one of the most important principles organising the works of Bulgakov.[23] It seems that the same rule could apply to the artistic world of *Loveless*, with the difference that the factor revealing it in the film is the disappearance of Alyosha, whereas in the selected prose, the appearance of a new element, namely the dog turned into a human being, is the reason for life losing its stability. Olga Osmukhina and Yelena Korotkova, in their article *Khronotop kvartiry v maloy proze M. A. Bulgakova*, note that the story shows two parallel worlds: the world of Moscow street and the flat of professor Preobrazhensky.[24] When Sharik enters the latter, he takes part in the process of reidentification of his own self and the apartment, doing so with the mirror right in the hall. The dog's presence in the professor's flat and its contrast with the former street surroundings make him realise his new status. One could say that this look at the mirror is a kind of a founding gesture, by which the space also receives a new status for all its tenants:

[22] All citations come from the electronic version of the book: M. Bulgakov, *The heart of a dog*, trans. M. Glenny, <<http://www.masterandmargarita.eu>>, accessed: 12.10.2010.

[23] Y. Lotman, *O russkoy literature: Stat'i i issledovaniya (1958-1993): Istoriya russkoy prozy. Teoriya literatury*, Sankt-Peterburg 2005, p. 748.

[24] O. Osmukhina, Y. Korotkova, *Khronotop kvartiry v maloy proze M. A. Bulgakova*, „Filologicheskiye Nauki” 2016, 12, p. 36.

This I like, thought the dog.

'Come in, Mr Sharik,' said the gentleman ironically and Sharik respectfully obeyed, wagging his tail. A great multitude of objects filled the richly furnished hall. Beside him was a mirror stretching right down to the floor, which instantly reflected a second dirty, exhausted Sharik. High up on the wall was a terrifying pair of antlers, there were countless fur coats and pairs of galoshes and an electric tulip made of opal glass hanging from the ceiling. 'Where on earth did you get that from, Philip Philipovich?' enquired the woman, smiling as she helped to take off the heavy brown, blue-flecked fox-fur coat.

'God, he looks lousy.'

After a while, it turns out that the delicious food Sharik is treated to makes him believe that he holds a special position in the household, which is additionally confirmed in the scene when he is walked for the first time with his collar on. The gadget, which in the beginning is against his free nature and makes him feel ashamed, almost instantly becomes a sign of prestige, a metaphorical equivalent of the clerk's professional rank:

Next day the dog was given a wide, shiny collar. As soon as he saw himself in the mirror he was very upset, put his tail between his legs and disappeared into the bathroom, where he planned to pull the collar off against a box or a basket. Soon, however, the dog realised that he was simply a fool. Zina took him walking on the lead along Obukhov Street. The dog trotted along like a prisoner under arrest, burning with shame, but as he walked along Prechistenka Street as far as the church of Christ the Saviour he soon realised exactly what a collar means in life. Mad envy burned in the eyes of every dog he met and at Myortvy Street a shaggy mongrel with a docked tail barked at him that he was a 'master's pet' and a 'lackey'. As they crossed the tram tracks a policeman looked at the collar with approval and respect. When they returned home the most amazing thing of all happened – with his own hands Fyodor the porter opened the front door to admit Sharik and Zina, remarking to Zina as he did so:

'What a sight he was when Philip Philipovich brought him in. And now look how fat he is.'

'So he should be – he eats enough for six,' said the beautiful Zina, rosy-cheeked from the cold. A collar's just like a briefcase, the dog smiled to himself. Wagging his tail, he climbed up to the mezzanine like a gentleman. Once having appreciated the proper value of a collar, the dog made his first visit to the supreme paradise from which hitherto he had been categorically barred – the realm of the cook, Darya Petrovna.

It is important to note that once again the mirror becomes the key element allowing for the dog's identification. This time, however, dissatisfaction with his own image is somehow nullified by the reflection seen in the eyes of the other people and animals. Although the collar makes the dog the slave of its holder, Bulgakov's text shows it as yet another step towards the dog's omnipotence, gained with the simultaneous loss of his freedom. The culmination is reached at the moment of Sharikov's terrorizing and deceiving everybody, which metaphorically changes the status of the former "home" into a devils'

space, “anti-home”, or even “the grave”, the place of the dead, if we refer to Vladimir Propp’s terminology.[25] “Anti-home” does not allow for the ordinary functioning of the people occupying its space; therefore, it leads to the procedures literally turning it into Sharikov’s grave, the place marking his return to the dog’s appearance and the return to the temporal regularity and spatial order of professor Preobrazhensky’s existence.

The category of “anti-home” is undoubtedly assimilated in Zvyagintsev’s *Loveless*; his use of the visual metaphor of the mirror is expanded in comparison with the film *Elena*, in which the abundant appearance of glassy surfaces marked *inter alia* different aspects of fake relationships with God and people. The 2017 movie seems to show further application of the artistic solution mentioned above as it is often the look with the eyes of the Other, the behaviour of the double – which will be analysed below – or the landscape that play the role of a mirror reflection, revealing the *status quo*. The examples which may be recalled in this domain include the opening frames of the school, which in a very short time transforms from a symmetrical, static and quiet building, governed by the regime of lessons, into the dynamic place of youth’s energy, enthusiasm and freedom after school. Not only do the pictures of the educational institution serve as the introduction of the situation of the young protagonist, their juxtaposition with the image of Alyosha’s lonely walk through the nearby park, which directly follows them, helps to identify the main problem of the film, due to the affective sphere built up by the contrast between the two sets of frames. The audial and visual intensity in the beginning leads to the recognition of the silence and spiritual emptiness, which accompany the twelve-year-boy in his apartment when he comes back home.

Besides, the above discussion of Bulgakov’s story makes the engaged recipient aware of the fact that the Russian director starts his film in an analogous way to the method of the author of *Master and Margarita*. The images of the park and the school could be treated as the equivalents of the street in *The Heart of a Dog*, which give way to the pictures of the apartment, allowing for the recognition of the identity of the characters. As a result, the external space is interconnected with the internal one, the functioning oppositions play the role of the reflection enabling to pinpoint the existing problem. Another meaningful parallel between the selected texts is also the nasty weather dominating the visual landscape of Moscow. Bulgakov’s freezing rain and strong winds are good partners for the darkness and melting snow in Zwiagintsev’s picture of the capital’s suburbs, which could support the thesis that Alyosha’s apartment in its emotional dimension resembles more a spiritual hollow than a family home. Anton Dolin calls the symptoms

[25] V. Propp, *Istoricheskiye korni volshebnoy skazki*, Moskva 2002, pp. 90–106.

characterising the behaviour of the boy's parents "the freezing of the heart" ("замороженность сердца") and considers it one of the chief thematic issues of the film, comparing it with *Leviathan*. He argues that *Loveless* starts when *Leviathan* finished, with winter arriving and setting in the hearts of the protagonists. "The freezing of the heart", the disease of Zhenya and Boris, in his opinion should be associated with the world of *The Snow Queen*.^[26]

Alyosha, devoid of his parents' love, is confined to his room with a computer on a desk and a big window overlooking the hill where children sled and run together. The view outside, often compared to Bruegel's paintings, once again emphasises the fact that there is an interesting life going on somewhere else, without the teenager's participation. Anthony Lane turns attention to the aspects of Alyosha's everyday reality, noting the striking network of oppositions and analogies describing the relationship between nature and the boy's life:

Twelve-year-old Alyosha (Matvey Novikov) is a creature of these twilight zones. He walks back unaccompanied from school through the leafless woods. His home is in one of the apartment blocks that wall in the landscape like the backdrop of a stage. There is a grassy hillside nearby, where others stroll and play, but he sits in his room and watches through the window, which weeps with rain. He is "constantly crying," his mother, Zhenya (Maryana Spivak), says, in a tone not of pity but of tetchy complaint, as if his tears had nothing to do with her.^[27]

Consequently, one could say that there is more empathy outside his home than in living with his parents, which could justify the assumption that Alyosha's disappearance should be treated metaphorically as the manifestation of his call for light, for open space, for being far away from the toxic relationship of his mother and father, in a way symbolised by the closed space of their comfortable apartment. Tadeusz Sobolewski is right in his observation that *Loveless* shows the world through the eyes of the absent.^[28] In fact, one could say that Alyosha's presence is noticed in the family only at the moment of his disappearance; before this traumatic event, he is treated as if he was a kind of excess baggage, a nuisance and an obstacle to a happy life. The moment when the parents lose the child marks their opportunity to create themselves anew, of becoming again understanding human individuals. Unfortunately, similarly to Sharikov, they are not able to take advantage of the paths of personal development which are offered to them. One could risk the statement that by turning attention to this issue, both Bulgakov and Zvyagintsev touch upon the problem

[26] A. Dolin, 'Nelyubov': film o pustote...

[27] A. Lane, "Loveless" and "Permission", "The New Yorker" 2018, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/loveless-and-permission>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[28] T. Sobolewski, *Znakomita „Niemiłość” Zwiagincowa: dostajesz czas na doznanie pustki i wypełnienie jej*, „Gazeta Wyborcza" 2018, <<https://wyborcza.pl/7,143363,22960972,niemilosc-wchodzi-do-kin-dostajesz-czas-na-doznanie-pustki.html>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

of the Russian society, which has lost its direction towards growth as a nation.

Vladimir Rybin, in his overview of the works of the author of *Elena*, reminds us about the tradition of Soviet literature, which has always supported belief in a nation represented by simple, ordinary people (*prostoj or malenkij chelovek*), who – in spite of their poverty and suffering – were perceived as the containers of the best moral values and fighters for the social justice in opposition to the wealthy.[29] Providing examples of well-known protagonists from the canon literature, he claims that in the 19th century, in order to reach social and spiritual balance, it was enough to limit the power of abusers and oppressors. *Elena* seems to question the established opinion about the potential of the lower layers of the society. One could come up with the opinion that *Loveless* continues this discussion started in *Elena* and developed in *Leviathan*, although the focus of attention is not so much on the conflict between the materially-diversified groups of the society as on the ethics of consumption and the results of the global material upgrade. In a way, it is a new, contemporary variation of the eternal problem of the impact of money on a human individual with the well-known question posed by the Russian literary canon: “who is liable?” and “what should be done?” (“кто виноват?” и “что делать?”[30]). Even though the director is not in favour of cinematographic screenings of classical literature, he regularly interacts with these texts by adapting various artistic references.

In *Loveless*, one of the recognisable strategies, which can be easily associated with Russian literature (obviously not only Russian), and most often with Fyodor Dostoyevsky, is the introduction of doubles as a method of character and plot construction. Alyosha has his counterpart in his closest friend Kuznetsov, the boy who responsibly gives away the information about their secret hideout because he was supposedly brought up in an atmosphere of mutual trust and love. His mature decision, which emotionally costs him a lot, makes a positive impression on the recipient of the film; he is one of the rare examples of a character – in addition to volunteers – showing a proactive approach to life, not motivated by personal benefits.

The central position among the polarised units of the film doubles is certainly held by Zhenya and Boris. Although they hate each other and blame for all their failures, strongly believing that new partners will make them happy, after the divorce the characters seem to repeat their past mistakes, following a path to yet another family destruction. Kolotaev and Ulybina, as mentioned before, see their problems through the prism of the relationship between artistic space and identity.[31]

[29] V. Rybin, *Smysl tvorchestva Andrey Zvyagintseva: opyt tipologicheskogo issledovaniya*, *Vestnik Permskogo Universiteta*, 2019, no. 3, p. 309. DOI: 10.17072/2078-7898/2019-3-305-319.

[30] A. Dolin, *Pustoye mesto. 'Nelyubov', Rezhisser Andrey Zvyagintsev*, “Iskusstvo Kino” 2017, 4, <<https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2017/04/pustoe-mesto-nelyubov-rezhisser-andrej-zvyagintsev/>>, accessed: 12.10.2020.

[31] V. Kolotaev, E. Ulybina, op.cit.

Zhenya is seen as the representative of the productive life approach, as she is focused on the creation of the ideal, i.e. perfect body, partner, apartment, which meet the standards set by the dictatorship of social media. Boris, as the reproductive opposite of his future-oriented wife, is interested in keeping the track established by former generations, traditions, Orthodox church and his corporation.[32] Characterised by passivity and conformity, he is not able to meet the expectations of either of his female partners. The final sequence of frames showing both Zhenya and Boris watching a TV broadcast on the Russian-Ukrainian war vividly confirms the fact that in spite of dreams and declarations they verbally expressed, the protagonists once again have reached a dead end in their lives. The only difference seems to be the material status of their new families, manifested in the designer's interiors of Zhenya's partner's flat and the cramped apartment of Boris's wife. The home has been built, but Boris's gesture of putting his child into the playpen to avoid the disturbing noise of the toys, and Zhenya's desperate-run-turned-into-march on the treadmill may be treated as the anticipation of its destruction, the symptoms of "the anti-home" mentality gradually taking over the space, confining them to its limitations. The other potential matching configurations of the doubles, i.e. Zhenya-Masha; Boris-Anton; Zhenya's mother-Masha's mother could confirm the above variant of the future scenario.

One of the breakthrough events in Zhenya and Boris's relationship is undoubtedly the visit to the morgue. The process of searching for Alyosha proves that the characters can be united by a common aim, and have the ability to transform themselves by abandoning egoism and taken-for-granted convenience of their daily routines. The highly emotional scene of body identification shows for a moment that there is still hope for their reconciliation, "rebuilding their home", closer physical presence to comfort each other. The language of their gesticulation, however, dominated by auto-oriented despair and desolation, immediately confirms that they prefer the rejection of this opportunity to the effort of the arduous reworking of their inner selves.

The remarks concerning the characters' identity construction may also motivate the reflection on the role of technological devices in the film, as they have crucial influence on this process. Reading Bulgakov's story in this context provides an interesting insight into Zvyagintsev's text, as the protagonists' attachment to mobile phones and social networks on the symbolic level could be treated as the equivalent of Sharik's collar: on one hand being the sign of his enslavement, on the other, constituting the confirmation of his high position in the dogs' hierarchy. In spite of the fact that the material conditions of his existence are vastly improved, e.g. he has access to expensive food and a cosy space in professor Preobrazhensky's apartment, subconsciously he seems to miss the freedom of the street, the space he truly belongs

[32] Ibidem.

to, which is proved by his recollections just before the breakthrough medical operation:

Right. This means the end of your galoshes tomorrow, Philip Philipovich, he thought. You've already had to buy two new pairs. Now you're going to have to buy another. That'll teach you to lock up dogs.

Suddenly a violent thought crossed his mind. Instantly and clearly he remembered a scene from his earliest youth – a huge sunny courtyard near the Preobrazhensky Gate, slivers of sunlight reflected in broken bottles, brick-rubble, and a free world of stray dogs.

No, it's no use. I could never leave this place now. Why pretend? mused the dog, with a sniff. I've got used to this life. I'm a gentleman's dog now, an intelligent being, I've tasted better things. Anyhow, what is freedom? Vapour, mirage, fiction... democratic rubbish...

Then the gloom of the bathroom began to frighten him and he howled. Hurling himself at the door, he started scratching it.

The scene above shows the true nature of the dog, which became very easily accustomed to the change of the external parameters of his life. Although it was not voluntarily, he fully accepted his alternative life for the offered privileges. It could be said that the parallel mechanisms are exposed in *Loveless* when we see Zhenya's addiction to Instagram, the ladies taking a selfie in the restaurant while making a toast to love, Masha asking Google Assistant about her night dream with a lost tooth. Each of these cases involving the use of new technologies offers an immediate reward in the form of an answer, a number of virtual "likes", the nice vibrations of sharing your feelings online. It allows one to produce an alternative "self", parallel to the physical being. Zvyagintsev makes here a point that the telephone constitutes a contemporary mirror, which – as was observed above in reference to the artistic world of Bulgakov – helps to recreate or select the identity, in particular in a new environment. The time spent on the Internet seems to be a much more attractive option than a face-to-face conversation, as presented by the examples of the relationships between Zhenya and Alyosha or Anton keeping in contact with his daughter by Skype.

Boris's case, in turn, shows how easily "Sharik's collar" is accepted. The uniformity of lunches, the design of corporate space, the aligned position of the workers in the elevator, the moral code of the company everybody pretends to obey, confirm in fact the existence of the very same mechanism as the one analysed in *The Heart of a Dog*. The most effective and desired mirrors are the eyes of the others, in which people seek recognition, admiration and tolerance. Additionally, they function as the perfect means of controlling groups or societies. Obviously, it is a well-known tool; the power of one's look has fascinated many philosophers and theoreticians of culture, such as *inter alia* Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. One could probably say that Zvyagintsev adds a spatial dimension to the existing discourse, which is expanded by him not just in *Loveless*, but beyond. The recipients of his films are used to his symmetrical, mirror-like surfaces, which in-

clude furniture as well as natural water reservoirs. Although in the 2017 movie, phone screens partially took over the function of the furniture mirrors, the engaged process of its analysis motivates the reflection on the meaning of a large number of film frames, in which we see the characters or the outside world through the window glass. In this context, there are few images repeated as their own variations, which is very characteristic for the poetics of the director of *Banishment*.

One such case concerns the visit of the potential buyers of Zhenya and Boris's apartment. After a short overview of the flat, the couple enters the bedroom, from which the pregnant woman admires the landscape and then cheerfully looks at her partner. The close-up of her hopeful face, expressing optimism and belief in their happiness, is shown twice, from the inside and from the outside of the room. The commentary to this repeated image seems to be provided later on, when the camera shows Zhenya as if from out of the window, naked and satisfied after intercourse with Anton, revealing a similarly expectant face, which is also emphasised when she comes back home, dozing off in her partner's car. A strong visual contrast may be built by the juxtaposition of those frames with the gaze of Alyosha looking through his window while sitting by the desk in his room. His blank eyesight expresses not only the pain of his lonely childhood, but can be also linked to the empty space of his room during the renovation in the closing part of the film. In this final sequence, we can see Alyosha's window, but all the signs of his former presence are removed, as the apartment changed owners. In the process of interpretation, this image could be associated with the gesture of the boy's former teacher, erasing the school blackboard after a meeting with his classmate Kuznetsov. Both scenes, due to the contrast between the natural cyclicity of weather changes outside and the outright changes in the (class)rooms emphasise the atmosphere of painful loss, as if the boy deliberately planned his death, allowed himself to be erased from life. A similar impression is created by the introduction of the pictures of the devastated recreational centre. The dynamics of the search is highly contrasted by the statics of the abandoned building, which may be linked to the wish-fulfilling room at the centre of the zone in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*.^[33] Unfortunately, it does not bring any answers or solutions; further on, the room materialises in the form of the morgue, but in the final count, the world comes back to its former status with no place for Alyosha. As in Bulgakov's short story, the temporary chaos is forgotten: "One thing, though, was certain: there was silence in the flat that evening – total, frightening Silence".

To conclude this analysis, one may say that the category of *home* constitutes one of the central issues contemplated in Bulgakov's and Zvyagintsev's works. Spatial relationships are exposed in both texts; *home* is considered first of all as a metaphysical category, a notion which

[33] See for example V. Kolotaev, E. Ulybina, op.cit.

is shaped by moral values, personal engagement and sincere emotions. The above discussion showed a number of similarities between the selected works, which were noted on the level of structure, theme, character construction or symbolism, proving that *Loveless*, apart from presenting an essential social message, derives from canonical texts of culture, emphasising the relevance of the concept of cultural memory, in a way overwriting the change of historical, political or sociological factors. Consequently, the Russian film could be seen as an example of the convergence of ideas, which are continuously updated, interrogated or assimilated in all areas of artistic creation. Further studies could reveal that *Loveless* and *The Heart of a Dog*, by presenting a world where there is almost no place for Christian values, make the recipient seek them inside him/herself, and contemplate the signs of the absence in order to retrieve what was lost by humankind.

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