

# The Dead Among Us: Russian Films on the Zombie Apocalypse

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## **The Dead Among Us: Russian Films on the Zombie Apocalypse<sup>1</sup>**

Olga Artemeva

Over the course of recent decades—the same years when horror in Russian cinema became a more or less independent aesthetic structure—any discussion of the genre has boiled down to a conversation on the legitimacy of certain plots in the context of specifically Russian discourse. One successful vector of development in recent years has been horror transformed into an ostensibly folkloric tradition and involving a layer of semi-mythological plots and creatures. The aesthetics of horror slightly more oriented towards reality have developed on the whole less successfully. The protagonists of such works exist in an artificial, airless space where there is simply nowhere for true horror to be born. From this point of view, the genre of the so-called post-apocalypse (the causes of said apocalypse are not so important) represents the ideal field for creative reflection on the features of modern Russian society. It is in this context that Pavel Kostomarov's *To the Lake* (2019),<sup>2</sup> for whom this work would become a feature-length debut, became an unqualified phenomenon, though the trend had been mapped out some years before. In the Russian TV series *The Counted* (2018-19) (the project's working title had been *Infection*), by Artem Aksenenko, symptoms of West Nile virus are discovered in an unprecedented form in Northern Karelia. Having driven the virologist protagonists out into the Karelian landscape, the authors close the action on a semi-mythological space where time has stopped and the typical laws of life and death no longer apply.

The zombie-based apocalypse has proven to be a workable construct in short-form as well. In 2016, Rob Savage directed the 12-minute "Dawn of the Deaf," a nod to Romero's classic films not only in its title, but also in its penetrating look into human nature which, it would appear, began to putrefy long before the flesh started to rot.<sup>3</sup> That same year, Vasili Sigarev directed "Z," a short film about a zombie apocalypse in the form of an advertisement for a

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<sup>1</sup> The original text in Russian was published in 2019 in *Iskusstvo Kino* 5-6, pp. 140-45 (<https://fantlab.ru/edition257436>).

<sup>2</sup> A post-apocalyptic television series with the first season available on Netflix in the US and Canada.

<sup>3</sup> "Dawn of the Deaf" is currently streamable online from *Alter* on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/cziqkD7iO-g>) and on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/335024788>).

Moscow apartment complex called Zilart.<sup>4</sup> Sigarev addresses post-apocalyptic aesthetics employing the black humor characteristic of him. Nikolai Baskov reprises his habitual role as a symbol of the inescapable horror of modern Russian society, except that his arc is resolved with such all-consuming self-irony on the part of all participants in the episode that, generally speaking, it is obvious: he is a highly formal symbol of horror here. Sure, Baskov and the rest of "Z" are without a doubt bad here, but the director refuses to say what is good. The official shelter takes the form of Vasili's artsy apartment juxtaposed with a world on fire, but this world on fire remains for Sigarev familiar and legible. The Moscow City towers are smoking, the military and police operate according to the formulations "ma'am" and "no need to think," zombies are clambering naked or in sweatpants and only a stubborn mother (played by Yana Troyanova) buoyed by pure enthusiasm unsullied with self-awareness—the kids have school tomorrow!—will demolish all the barriers between her and her goal. The brush strokes here are of course rough, but the runtime and the advertisement framework do not require more. There appears at the same time in "Z" one of the most striking features of Sigarev's work—the self-identification of the Russian mentality as a chronic inability to be shocked by anything. Therefore, when the heroine at one point is greeted by a person engulfed in flames, her reaction is only natural: well, things happen.

An almost direct parallel can be drawn with another black-and-white comedy short on a similar topic, Ivan Plechev's "Dark Night" (2017).<sup>5</sup> Like Sigarev's short, "Dark Night" makes use of an advertising premise. It was shot as part of the experimental media laboratory of Yandex.Taxi. Accordingly, the apocalypse overtakes the protagonists as they are in a taxi, riding along on a dark road at night in the Moscow suburbs. Vitalii Khaev, who, since the time of *Playing the Victim* (Kirill Serebrennikov, 2006), has been performing in roles as a symbol of collective ideological disillusionment, essentially does the same thing here. This time, he is a taxi driver wizened by experience who performs the heroic act of tearing into zombie-infested Moscow not for some sacred purpose, but solely because the very act of movement—even absent a particular destination—is in itself already symbolic. The film's final frames are revealing: a panorama of the freeway, shot from above, over which the distant lights of Moscow City loom, dividing the two worlds as starkly as possible.

Pavel Kostomarov's film *To the Lake* also begins, in a sense, with the resolution of a formal problem: adapting Yana Wagner's famous novel into a

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<sup>4</sup> "Z" is currently streamable online on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/214057590>).

<sup>5</sup> "Dark Night" is currently available from *Bridge of Arts* on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/eo2rF0O01YA>).

TV series. At some point, the authors decided to make a feature-length film that could serve as the prologue to a future television project. Interestingly, of all the national "horror" traditions that exist, Kostomarov's film (whether intentionally or not) draws most strongly on that of Spanish horror. This is not, perhaps, all that surprising. The gold standard of Spanish horror arose some time ago as a reaction against the system of prohibitions and restrictions that endured to the final years of the Franco dictatorship. In the American tradition, horror is born at the moment of deviation from the generally accepted norm. In Spanish horror, it already exists on the periphery of the standard image of the world. For Russian horror such a balance of power is also at its most organic. When the so-called hero of a Russian horror film is suddenly accosted by something, the so-called viewer shrugs their shoulders. In this manner, the dream (Is it a dream? A fantasy? A premonition?) of a heroine (played by Viktoria Isakova) that begins the film seems not so much like an homage to the genre tradition but rather a statement of a fundamentally different kind of approach: the horror of the central megapolis in which modernity and the primitive, heathen genesis cannot accommodate any sort of rebirth, a horror that is always with you.

The calamity in *To The Lake* descends upon a world already hostile and ready to snap at any moment. Formally, this is announced in the exposition with the presentation of the protagonists, two families that seem to mirror each other. On the one hand, there is Sergei (Kirill Käro, lead actor of *To The Lake*, who has recently firmly embodied the "self-reflective middle class"), who left his wife and son for his psychologist (and her teenage son on the Autism spectrum). On the other, there is Leonya (Aleksandr Robak), the "master of life," for whom, according to the astute observation of his daughter from his first marriage, everything is just the same except that he has swapped the psychologist's office for a strip club. For some time, they all heatedly squabble in various configurations while the director chooses a special angle for each character, filming some from the top-down and examining others more closely.

Once upon a time in the (2007) film *[Rec]* by Spanish horror masters Jaume Balaguero and Paco Plaza, a group of firefighters, accompanied by a female reporter and her cameraman, arrive to a call at an apartment block. Someone appears to have gotten sick.

In the scene after which the action goes off the rails and straight into hell, the firefighters enter a room and discover an old granny, smiling strangely. Kostomarov pulls a similar trick in *To the Lake*, substituting the apartment block for a school (inspiring rather obvious associations), the firefighters for the military, and the old woman for a little girl huddled in a corner. Her smile in the next frame becomes a formal anchor denoting that the protagonists' reality has

finally transformed into something macabre, although it is clear that the rupture occurred much earlier (and certainly before the incident on the playground at the beginning of the film). It has simply always been there.

Together with *[Rec]* (and *Dawn of the Dead*, though the Zack Snyder version more than George Romero's), Kostomarov's film also has that moment when the pace, having accelerated, grabs the viewer by the throat and releases them only at that moment when there is a chance to breathe, to grab a little respite and stop believing. To maintain this pace, Kostomarov somewhere along the way sacrifices the accuracy of his characters' motivations. Sergei, Káro's hero, heads to quarantined Moscow to save his ex-wife and son just as soon as his wise father, with whom his relationship leaves much to be desired, alights on him with a judgmental finger. The moment, however, fades into the background when the protagonist finds himself in the capital anyway (characteristically, he's required in some sense to represent a piece of meat) which suddenly turns out to be exactly what many imagine it to be in the depths of the collective consciousness. That is, a frightening space, free of fools, majestic and ominous at the same time, where the optimistic city lights still penetrate the smoke but it is already completely impossible to differentiate strangers from familiar faces and to guess from which corner the next danger will appear. Meanwhile, helicopters circle the city and the nearest suburbs, shot completely Coppola-style, conscripted to exert control over the world, control which has long been lost.

It is interesting that at the moment when the action in the second half of the film finally moves from the capital to the Moscow region, the authors avoid the canons of social horror which are exceedingly obvious for the Russian genre. Easily half the residents of the megapolises will happily believe that one need only drive a few hundred kilometers past the Moscow Ring Road for true darkness and the macabre to assert themselves (this belief was once exploited to varying degrees of success by Denis Neymand's debut film *Junk* [2006]). Instead, Kostomarov chooses existential horror: it starts from the moment when, loaded into cars, the heroes drive out onto a street illuminated only by their painfully fiery headlights.

The motif of the road is perhaps fundamental to the post-apocalyptic genre, whether it involves zombies, epidemics, or something else. Romero arrived at this point in his sociological search through genre and his main classic. Starting in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) with the heroes' attempts to barricade and isolate themselves from a hostile world, he would eventually come in *Diary of the Dead* (2007) to an attempt at salvation through movement. It is

unimportant where, towards which illusory somewhere that might be less horrible, unimportant which nonexistent goal to strive towards.

The goal here is the movement itself, and the best contemporary examples of the genre (such as Colm McCarthy's *The Girl With All The Gifts* (2016), or *Ravenous* (1999), the piercing film by Canadian director Robin Aubert which, by a strange coincidence, passed the Russian box office by) employ it in different ways.

Kostomarov films his road with a stunning top-down shot. Later, you realize that no other angle would be possible for this story. This whole long episode turns out to be frightening not solely because the heroes are not alone on their path. True, sticky, painfully familiar horror grows from understanding: the characters have moved from the habitual space of mundane relationships—finance and trade, sociality, romance—into the space of primitive, fundamental concepts. And yes, there is no way back. In the most literal sense, the way back is cut off to them and fatal. In this context, the film's finale takes on an entirely different meaning which, at first glance, one might easily suspect of religious rhetoric that would be alien to this story. It rhymes the motif of the road that might lack a destination with the words of a prayer (spoken by those it is most difficult to imagine as having religious sentiment) that might not have an addressee. This is no conscious choice here. The protagonists of *To the Lake* continue to move forward without thinking about where they might arrive and pray without thinking about whether they will be answered. And what if, after everything, there is still no response? Well, things happen.

— *Translated by Felix Helbing*

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