

Khrzhanovsky Is Not a Dirty Word

Wednesday, October 19, 2005

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It's night-time in an icy street. In the background, you can just make out a number of dolls -carefully arrayed on shelves -staring back at you from a large shop window framed by fairy-lights. Four german shepherds sit or lie, panting, tongues lolling. The road glistens and glimmers with reflections. It's quiet, almost meditative. And that's when the drills start.

Mayhem!

The drills pound the asphalt. The dogs flee, yelping. In their wake, four giant snow-ploughs sweep through the piled-up roads like gargantuan creatures from a mechanical hell. The number '4' appears onscreen. Ilya Khrzhanovsky's film has begun.

Banned in Russia, where the Ministry of Culture denounced it for its 'dirty language and inclusion of disgusting scenes,' *4* has been screened at over 100 festivals internationally, including Venice, New York's TriBeCa Festival, and, most recently, Melbourne. In the past year, Khrzhanovsky's debut feature has received critical acclaim, winning a Tiger Award for Best Film at the Rotterdam Film Festival.

However, although the official ban on the movie has now been lifted, there is no hope that the movie will receive anything but the most limited release in Russia. Most likely, a quick, little-publicised screening in one or two small cinemas will kill off the film in the local market and silence the voices of its supporters.

In Australia, too, there is no real chance that *4* will get a commercial release -but why? The repressive tendencies of Vladimir Putin's neo-totalitarian regime and its deep aversion to dissident thought are well-known; but what dark, mysterious forces will prevent this much-lauded movie from being screened for Australian audiences?



4 Director Ilya Khrzhanovsky

The film's three central characters meet in a nondescript Moscow bar, in which the narcoleptic bartender keeps nodding off between drinks. The three start to talk: they lie to each other about what they really do. Oleg, a meat-merchant, becomes a supplier of mineral-water to the Kremlin; he tells a

vaguely scandalous story about Putin's wife's fondness for imported French wines.

Marina, a prostitute, bills herself as a successful advertising manager, currently flogging some air-purifying happiness-inducing device from Japan.

But Volodia's story is the most finished, elaborate and convincing. He's a genetic engineer in a secret laboratory. Russia has been cloning people for years, he says, and after a great deal of work they've discovered that the optimum batch number is four. Four, says Volodia, is the universe's secret key.

So far so good. But why the controversy? Certainly, the characters' lives unravel in extreme ways after their meeting, but it's not exactly *Die Hard*. Why, wonders Khrzhanovsky, does everyone keep saying that he's made a savage movie? There is, he says, no blood and guts splashed across the screen, no children tortured, no heads cut off.

What is so hard, so confronting about watching 4?

There is no doubt the film is immensely uncomfortable. When Marina returns to the godforsaken village where she was born, we follow her for ten minutes. It's an eternity in cinematic terms. As she keeps walking, there's no music, no voice-over, just hard ambient sounds.

Khrzhanovsky uses this walk to let his viewers accumulate emotions, premonitions and anxieties.

Nothing lifts the weight for the audience, there are no flattened dimensions. This is what it takes to

get to that fucking village, and we need to know it. We need to feel it. You only get to the village by walking, and that is a difficult, protracted, unpleasant task. The scene is also distinctly non-psychological: we learn nothing about Marina's character through her 'emotions,' 'gestures,' 'thoughts.' There are no bits of a jigsaw puzzle to be pieced together; no release.

But this is nothing compared to what happens when we get to the village.

In these scenes -usually singled out as the movie's most unpalatable - a host of toothless old women (all played by non-professional actors) will drink themselves into a state of absolute animalistic excess. They will talk in the dirtiest language imaginable, take their tops off, and ravage a freshly slaughtered pig, named 'Borka,' in a way which, as film critics have pointed out, will turn many committed



A still from the movie

carnivores into new-born vegetarians.

If the women were young, attractive Cate Blanchett-types, their orgiastic nights would probably be described as provocatively sensual, cinematically striking, a walk on the wild side. As it is, dirty sagging bodies, terrible poverty, and documentary-style scenes of old age at its most undignified combine to trigger an almost physiological unease.



Toothless old woman in 4

'The old women in the movie were actually truly amazing,' says Khrzhanovsky. 'We became friends. They were the most remarkable actors, because they were so open to the possibilities that acting gave them.' A pause. 'What makes them into freaks,' he adds, 'is us. We are the savages; we are the animals, not them.'

At every interview Khrzhanovsky gave in Australia, one question was sure to be asked: 'Does the movie represent your bleak vision of contemporary Russia? Does it reflect your deep despair over what's happening to your people?'

Khrzhanovsky did not hide how sick he was of this question. 'The movie,' he said time and time again, 'has nothing to do with my vision of Russia. I set it in Russia, because it is one place I know. It is too easy and too false to treat it as a parable about contemporary Russia, to relegate all the unease to a vast, mad, distant country in the grip of yet another catastrophe. The truth is that 4 says as much about America, Egypt or Australia as it does about Russia.'

At once highly-stylised and hyper-bject, the film presents disjunctions so savage that they're difficult to reconcile. It meshes abstract ideas with the basest, most material experiences: the horror of meat-eating and vodka-drinking, the characters' faces smeared with fat and food-crumbs. There are endless muddy vistas, industrial environmental disaster, teratological mutations. Khrzhanovsky refers to the structure of his film as 'a binary bomb.' At every moment, there's a sense of being just one step away from losing your humanity altogether.

At the first screening of 4 at the Melbourne Film Festival, a steady stream of people made their way to the exit throughout the second part of the two-hour movie. 'Did people leave?' Khrzhanovsky asked. I

nodded. 'How many?' 'Around forty.' 'Forty?' he replied, visibly surprised, 'That's way too many for a civilised country.'

About the authors

Maria Tumarkin is a writer born in the former Soviet Union. Her book *Traumascapes: the fate and power of places transformed by tragedies* was published by Melbourne University Press earlier this year.

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