NIHILISM FOR OLIGARCHS

For a century, Russian and then Soviet culture electrified the world. From Tolstoy to Tarkovsky, by way of the Ballets Russes, the Constructivists, Eisenstein and Babel, Russia and its successor reworked and destabilized poetry, the realist novel and the short story, post-figurative art, orchestral music, dance, cinema, theatre, science fiction. During the Cold War, writers like Pasternak, Shalamov, Brodsky and Sinyavsky/Tertz reminded foreign readers that Russian literature had not lost its vitality, even as *tamizdat*—dissident Soviet works published abroad—was wielded as an anti-communist cudgel. What is the position of Russian culture today? In quantitative terms, Russian cinema still produces some two dozen ‘international festival’ films a year; comparable numbers of contemporary Russian novelists and poets appear in translation. Russian musicians, dancers, and choreographers headline the world’s elite concert halls and ballet theatres.

In the 1990s, the old landscape of cultural trade unions and government commissions was subjected to brutal shock therapy. The cultural infrastructure of the Soviet period—universities, orchestras, theatres, museums, film schools, fine-arts academies, research institutes, publishing houses—survived in skeletal form, unevenly supported by private funding, to produce new generations of the artistic, literary and cinematic intelligentsia.¹ Russian cultural producers desirous of money and prestige scrambled to reinvent themselves. Now one had to cater to the market, play up to the new private cultural prizes, cultivate an online following, find a patron—or resign oneself to scraping by in what was left of the old system.² Meanwhile the Russian Ministry of Culture
remained a crucial funder for the arts, with the attendant problems of political pressure.

A small subset of writers and artists has spurned the market entirely, living in principled economic precarity. The poet Kirill Medvedev, for instance, has renounced the very idea of copyright. These writers populate radical poetry readings and small left-wing bookshops and have attracted the admiration of academics visiting from abroad, who have brought work published in journals like *Translit* to the centre of their study of contemporary Russian literature. Such asceticism, unsurprisingly, is rare. Russian liberal cultural production has a somewhat higher profile and an audience large enough to crowd-fund a publication like *Colta*, a site offering high-quality cultural criticism. Russian liberal writers—for instance, novelist Lyudmila Ulitskaya and poet, essayist and novelist Maria Stepanova, founding editor of *Colta*—often revisit the Soviet past and explore the workings of historical memory in contemporary Russia. Many have sidelines in journalism and are vocal about their opposition to Putin. This segment of the intelligentsia is in high demand at Western European and, especially, American institutions; the *tamizdat* trail is still well-travelled, though now it is a two way street; writers return to Russia with increased cultural capital, which translates into support from mainstream Russian institutions.

Russian cinema is funded largely by the state, with money coming from two entities: the Ministry of Culture and the Fond Kino, a government production company and distributor founded in 1994. The Cinema Foundation was conceived as an investor that would support projects likely to earn back money spent, while the Ministry of Culture would be a European-style soft-money funder. This is not how things have turned out: both fund expensive blockbusters, as well as *auteur* cinema. Government-funded blockbusters have obvious political intent. Many are ‘patriotic’, especially since the Bolotnaya protests and the annexation of Crimea, and focus heavily on Russian victory in the Second World War (*Stalingrad, T-34*) and international sporting competitions

1 This reproduction also occurs at the level of the family: to a higher degree even than in the US and India, film-makers in Russia tend to be the children of cinema people, writers to come from literary backgrounds.

As in Soviet times, the government is willing to spend lavish sums on cultural propaganda; while much of the Soviet-era cultural infrastructure is withering away, state-sponsored Russian cinema gets glitzier every year.

With censorship tightening, the centrality of government funding to Russian cinematic production has led to some high-profile dust-ups—as in the case of Andrei Zvyagintsev’s 2014 film *Leviathan*, which received a third of its funding from the Ministry of Culture and became a global success thanks, in part, to what was interpreted as its anti-Putin message. The notoriously reactionary and ill-informed then-Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky attacked the film for its negative portrayal of Russians, and the Ministry proposed new guidelines to safeguard the nation’s honour. It is rare that an oligarch is the primary funder of a film, apart from the occasional vanity project. But last year Roman Abramovich declared his ambition to become a player in Russian and world cinema, with the opening of a $100 million private film foundation called Kinoprime. Rumour has it that Abramovich was going to finance Zvyagintsev’s new film—until it emerged that the film was about an oligarch living abroad who is kidnapped, brought back to Russia and executed.

Would-be *Kulturträger* have the backing of the Russian government, which has supported the shift to market ‘partnerships’ in the arts with tax incentives and annual Ministry of Culture awards for Patron of the Year. Russian oligarchs dabble in the literary world, for example by funding prizes; the eponymous foundation set up by the banking/metallurgy billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov supports a whole stable of cultural journals, including *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, which is directed by Prokhorov’s illustrious older sister Irina. The world of art and architecture is particularly seductive for Russia’s ultra-rich, who snap up Manets and Warhols along with yachts and football clubs, but some are not content to be mere collectors. The most ambitious have set out to

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1 In the 2019 blockbuster comedy *Peasant (Kholop)*, one of the highest-grossing Russian films of all time, a Moscow playboy’s rich father re-educates him with the help of an elaborate, immersive movie set that convinces the young man that he has travelled back in time to 1860 and become a serf. Wholesome floggings ensue.

4 Unlike Saudi or Chinese collectors who purchase contemporary art ‘at volume’, Russians are not major buyers of contemporary art; intent on acquiring the trappings of old money, they buy Old Masters that don’t accrue significant new value. The market in Russian art, meanwhile, is rife with forgeries, particularly of 1920s avant-garde works.
redefine Russia’s identity in the global cultural marketplace. The Garage Museum of Contemporary Art was originally founded in 2008 by Dasha Zhukova and her then-husband Abramovich. The Garage collection was a tool with which to teach young Russians to understand the international art world, to become globalized cultural consumers. It modelled the function of a modern international museum, and in the years since its founding several venerable Russian museums have received modern makeovers. Meanwhile, Garage allowed Zhukova to accrue clout in the global art world by granting prestigious shows to her favourite up-and-coming artists.

In 2012 Garage moved to Gorky Park, whose renovation as a hipster pleasure ground was a centrepiece of Moscow’s urban reinvention, a joint project of government agencies, culturally minded oligarchs, and global stars of architecture and design. Dilapidated Constructivist gems and Brezhnev blah alike were remade as up-to-the-minute cultural attractions. The red-brick Red October chocolate factory complex, across the river from the Kremlin, became a pre-fab deluxe pseudo-bohemia, home to art galleries, design studios, and bars and cafes. Leonid Mikhelson, the natural-gas multi-billionaire, will soon open a massive new arts complex in Moscow, in a former power plant reimagined by Renzo Piano. The complex will complement Mikhelson’s exhibition space in Venice, with close ties to museums in London and New York. Vladimir Potanin (banking, natural resources) underwrites the cultural diplomacy of the Hermitage Museum and Tretyakov Gallery, and sits on the board of the Guggenheim.

These global links underline one of the differences between Russia’s robber-baron patrons and those of America’s belle époque. The Carnegies and Rockefellers funded cultural institutions and activities within the US, shipping European artifacts across the Atlantic to boost America’s cultural standing. Russian patrons of the arts are keen to position themselves with one foot at home and the other abroad; to make Moscow a global cultural capital while also winning goodwill and parking assets in countries where they may wish to resettle, if things get too rough at home. Despite the difficulties caused by sanctions, Russians continue to donate substantial sums to cultural and academic institutions in Western Europe and the US. The cultural production subsidized by the new Russian oligarchs inevitably reflects its post-Soviet and transnational context. What novel types of artistic production do Russia’s
new-minted Borgias promote, to what international reception? The case of Sergei Adoniev, patron of one of the strangest artistic enterprises to date, makes a telling study.

*Friends in high places*

Sergei Adoniev was born in Lviv in 1961 and trained in applied mathematics at the elite Leningrad Polytechnic Institute, where he taught in the late 1980s. The origins of his first fortune in the import trade are obscure. We know that by 1993 he and his friends had set up a company in Beverly Hills, using millions of dollars extracted from the public purse of Kazakhstan with the help of Nazarbayev’s chief of staff, supposedly as advance payment for Cuban sugar shipments; there would also be tales of cocaine smuggled from Bogotá to Vyborg in crates of ‘canned meat’. In 1998 Adoniev and a crony were sentenced by a California court to thirty months in jail for illegal cash transfers, though Adoniev was swiftly extradited back to Russia, with a green light from the Clinton Administration. He has since hired lawyers Alan Dershowitz and Anthony Julius to clear his name.

By 2006 Adoniev had shifted his capital from ‘fruit imports’ into telecoms, apparently through the good offices of Sergey Chemezov, KGB colleague of Putin’s in Dresden, subsequently Yeltsin’s head of Foreign Economic Relations and later CEO of the defence-industry conglomerate Rostec. With this type of help from above, his telecoms operation, Yota, soon became the country’s main 4G network provider and a leading cellphone brand. Meanwhile Adoniev, who wears zany glasses and a ponytail and has a portrait of Wittgenstein on his office wall, began devoting himself to higher things—giving free rein to his intellectual curiosity ‘at the nexus of art, science and philosophy’, as the website of his Phenomen Trust puts it. He has promoted the work of the late-Soviet idealist philosopher Merab Mamardashvili and the eighteenth-century thinker Salomon Maimon. He funds the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow, headed by experimental director Boris Yukhananov, and The Shed in Manhattan. He is a co-founder of the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design, its urban-theory programme designed by Rem Koolhaas. Located at the Red October factory, complete with a plush bar with a view, Strelka played a central role in the reinvention of Moscow as a glamorous, cosmopolitan city. Strelka’s consultancy bureau was later made responsible for executing a government campaign of
blagoustroistvo—transformation into a more beautiful, harmonious place—in a large number of other Russian cities.5

The other major beneficiary of Adoniev’s cultural largesse has been the project known as DAU. Its demiurge is Ilya Khrzhanovsky, a scion of Russian-Jewish cultural royalty. Khrzhanovsky’s father was a famous animated-film maker, director of The Glass Harmonica (1968), banned under Brezhnev because of its portrayal of bureaucrats liberated by music; his mother, Maria Neiman, is a philologist and film editor, while his paternal grandfather, Yury Khrzhanovsky, trained as an artist with Malevich and Petrov-Vodkin in the 1920s before dedicating himself to acting and musical theatre in the 1930s, later doing much-loved animal voice-overs for Soviet cartoons. Khrzhanovsky, who was born in 1975, has said that as a child he interacted mainly with his parents’ circle. Yet he is above all a post-Soviet product. As a teenager in the 1990s he was known as an inveterate clubber and a bold, unlikely pickup artist.6 He studied painting for a year in Germany before entering Moscow’s historic film school, now known as the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography.

Graduating in 1998, Khrzhanovsky directed some short experimental films alongside commercial-advertising work and produced a portmanteau on Russian cinema for TNT TV. His first feature film, titled simply Four, appeared in 2004, partly funded by the EU-backed Hubert Bals Fund. An ambitious experimental work, it had an over-blown screenplay by the postmodernist novelist Vladimir Sorokin, featuring feral dogs, menacing construction machinery, unreliable narrators in a bar, rumours of cloning, frozen carcasses, conscripts leaving for a foreign war, and bacchanalian babushkas in saturated colour. It starred Sergei Shnurov, the shock-jock lead singer of the rock group Leningrad—and now a multi-millionaire himself, performing his expletive-laden anthems for Russia’s ultra-rich—as the self-styled geneticist. The film was well received abroad, winning film-festival prizes in Rotterdam, Athens, Seattle and Buenos Aires.7 Sergei Adoniev was also impressed.

5 Michał Murawski, ‘My Street: Moscow is getting a makeover, and the rest of Russia is next’, Calvert Journal, 29 May 2018. Strelka is said to have been conceived on a yacht at the 2009 Venice Biennale.
7 Praise for Four: ‘fearless and mesmerizing’ (Los Angeles Times); ‘grandiose study of barbarism and decay’ (Village Voice); ‘the terminally bleak meets the hypnotically beautiful’ (NYT).
Khrzhanovsky’s next project was a biopic about Lev Davidovich Landau (1908–68), the Nobel Prize-winning Soviet theorist of quantum mechanics. The kernel of the film was a memoir written by Kora Drobantseva, Lev’s wife, who bemoaned his belief in free love and would have preferred a more conventional marriage. The film promised to combine scientific genius with amorous adventure, set in a top-secret Soviet research institute. Building on the critical success of *Four*, Khrzhanovsky managed to interest the French producer Philippe Bober, who had funded Lars von Trier’s work and several Romanian movies, as well as raising money from his usual sources. Sorokin was once again commissioned to write a screenplay. Jürgen Jürges, Fassbinder’s cinematographer, signed on as director of photography and shooting began in St Petersburg and Moscow. But by 2008, the project was running into trouble. Khrzhanovsky had missed his deadlines and was under pressure to refund his backers—30 million rubles, roughly a million dollars at the time, to the Russian Ministry of Culture alone.

At this point, the chubby-cheeked *enfant terrible* of Moscow’s *beau monde* met the billionaire philosopher at a party, where Adoniev happened to mention to a mutual friend how much he admired *Four*. Khrzhanovsky made his pitch and was rewarded with €25 million, no strings attached. His new vision for the project involved moving operations to Kharkiv, on the north Ukrainian plain, the first capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, where Landau had directed the Department of Theoretical Physics in the 1930s, before moving to Moscow in 1937 to head the theoretical division of the Institute for Physical Problems; Kharkiv was also Drobantseva’s home town. It would be cheaper to film there, and the Ukrainian local authorities could be counted on to provide whatever was needed—use of the airport, babies from a local orphanage, prisoners from the city jail to play NKVD operatives—at bargain prices. The Mayor of Kharkiv, Mikhail Dobkin, a pillar of Yanukovych’s maximally corrupt Party of the Regions, dressed up in Soviet garb to play the role of his equivalent—First Secretary of the CPSU Kharkiv City Committee—in Khrzhanovsky’s movie. A former officer in the security service, Vladimir Azhippo, trained under the Soviet system and an enforcer at a pre-trial detention centre under the post-Soviet Ukrainian state, was given a leading role.
Dau, as the project came to be called, after Landau’s nickname, grew into something much larger and stranger once underwritten by Adoniev. A grandiose reconstruction of Landau’s ‘Institute’ was built on the site of an abandoned Soviet-era public swimming pool. Designed by artistic director Denis Shibanov, it became a semi-permanent place of residence for the project’s cast and crew. Khrzhanovsky saw the Institute as a social and scientific experiment of much greater interest than any two-hour film. People would live and work in a reconstructed chunk of the Soviet Union, never breaking character or changing into modern clothes. Over the next two years, all who came to the Institute—actors, assistant directors, camera operators, costume designers, celebrities, artists, rich people, Moscow trendsetters, the occasional journalist—were required to get into full costume upon arrival. They gave up their cellphones and other electronic goods, submitted to haircuts, had their glasses, their underwear and even their sanitary products replaced with 1950s Soviet models. Participants were instructed not to use words or discuss concepts that did not exist at the time. Soviet-style food and alcohol were sold at Soviet prices, wrapped in Soviet labels, and paid for in re-printed Soviet rubles. Even the authentic smell of a Soviet toilet was meticulously recreated, so that the odour would immediately trigger the sense-memory of anyone who had ever lived in the Soviet Union.

Khrzhanovsky and his team traded heavily on the idea that what happened at the Institute was not theatrical but ‘authentic’. Scientists would conduct real research at the facility, making fresh discoveries. Artists would visit, finding inspiration, staging concerts or putting on a performance, pushing the experiment in new directions. Thanks to Khrzhanovsky’s social connections and Adoniev’s unstinting support, they recruited an impressive gallery of practicing scientists: theoretical physicists Nikita Nekrasov (at Stony Brook, via Princeton) and Andrei Losev (at the Moscow research institute, NIISI RAS), took on central roles, as did mathematician Dmitry Kaledin (Higher School of Economics, Moscow); neuroscientist James Fallon (UC Irvine), Nobel string theorist David Gross (Princeton), mathematician Shing-Tung Yau (Harvard) and theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (Pittsburgh, Aix-Marseille) all participated. Rovelli thanked the Kharkiv Institute for its hospitality ‘in October 1942’ in his 2011 *Journal of Physics* article on quantum gravity, which had evidently benefitted from his stay. Artists included the theatre and opera directors Romeo Castellucci and Peter Sellars, photographer Boris Mikhailov, composer Brian Eno and audio-visual artist Alexei
Blinov, founder of London’s Raylab, who played a scientist. Spiritual sustenance was provided by a rabbi, a shaman, an Orthodox hegumen and a Peruvian vegetalist.

To play Landau, Khrzhanovsky recruited the Greek conductor Teodor Currentzis, another of Adoniev’s protégés, on the grounds that, like Landau, Currentzis was a genius, and the quality of genius cannot be simulated. From 2011 until 2019 Currentzis was based in Perm, where with Adoniev’s help he restored the huge Soviet-era House of Radio and made it his headquarters. (This undertaking was of a piece with a larger, ultimately unsuccessful project, initiated by an enterprising Medvedev-appointed governor, to transform Perm into the Bilbao of the Urals, the unlikely Russian capital of contemporary art.) Currentzis takes a Gesamtkunstwerk approach to his orchestra, Musica Aeterna, that is not too far from Khrzhanovsky’s method, organizing concerts and festivals as theatrical happenings. The only professional actor in the cast, the Ukrainian Radmila Shchegoleva, played ‘Nora’, Landau’s wife. All the other parts were taken by ‘carefully selected willing participants’, as the dau website puts it: ‘artists, waiters, secret police, ordinary families’—more straightforwardly, those who needed a job, looked the part and were prepared to put up with Khrzhanovsky’s intrusive interviewing technique—questions about the applicant’s sex life posed at 1am, for example—and follow the Institute’s rules.  

The cast served as inmates of the Institute, subject to Khrzhanovsky’s idea of ‘totalitarian control’. To create an authentic aura of authoritarian surveillance, he hinted to some participants that there were cameras everywhere, monitored from his control room. The film-making itself was less thoughtfully planned. Scenarios were sketched out, but there were no scripts or lines for actors to memorize. Jürges filmed what was happening on an on-off basis, eventually shooting 700 hours of 35mm footage. Khrzhanovsky claimed that he was never ‘on set’ directing in a traditional way, though he sometimes talked to performers off set or introduced new characters to the action. By his own account, he controlled only the rules of the game, within which the participants would improvise dialogue and action—another aspect of the project’s

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8 See dau.com/en/about-us. For a participant’s account of a DAU audition, see Idov, ‘The Movie Set That Ate Itself’.  
'authenticity'. This stage of the project came to an end in November 2011: a KGB colonel played by Azhippo, the former regime torturer, takes over the Institute and orders a gang of skinheads to destroy it. Khrzhanovksy threw an all-night party amid the ruins.

**Mayfair to the Marais**

After the demolition of the Kharkiv set, the Dau operation relocated to London. An ex-BBC film editor, Masahiro Hirakubo, was taken on to cut and splice the 700 hours of rushes, and a Heideggerian video artist, Ilya Permyakov, was recruited as co-director; meanwhile the project strengthened its intellectual flank by hiring a cohort of young philosophy graduates. European stars—Hanna Schygulla, Isabelle Adjani, Gérard Depardieu, Isabelle Huppert—were recruited to dub the Russian dialogue into French and German. This phase ended in an explosive parting of ways, Khrzhanovsky reportedly sacking Hirakubo and most of the entourage. Post-production moved to a neo-classical mansion at 100 Piccadilly, overlooking Green Park, re-decorated as a kind of Stalinist haunted house, replete with silicon mannequins of characters from the shoot.10 There small teams worked almost as start-ups housed by the wider project, but set in competition with one another. By 2017 Khrzhanovsky and Permyakov had turned to organizing international colloquia on issues of the day, which drew in figures from the US military, Israeli intelligence, the German diplomatic service and a former Ukrainian head of state, with honorariums to match. Rooms were hired at the House of Lords and the Royal Society to accommodate their discussions. Asked by Le Monde how this related to Lev Landau, Permyakov replied that Dau didn’t limit itself to the mere production of films. ‘It is a living organism, it grows. These colloquia are one of its extensions.’11

Just as commentators were beginning to doubt that any films would emerge from all this, plans were announced for multi-media Dau extravaganzas to unveil the project in Paris and Berlin. The latter event—which

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would have involved the re-creation of a section of the Berlin Wall, as well as a reconstituted DAU-style ‘Institute’—divided the German art world and the civic authorities: though the Volksbühne was supportive, permission was refused. Khrzhanovsky was not prepared to compromise, and the show was cancelled. Irony, épatage, and self-declared genius received a warmer welcome in Paris. Mayor Anne Hidalgo was enthusiastic, the director of the Théâtre du Châtelet, Ruth Mackenzie, enraptured—‘a unique and unprecedented phenomenon’. (Perhaps they hoped to preside over a second Rite of Spring.) At the Pompidou Centre, Caroline Bourgeois hosted a Soviet-style communal apartment in which DAU performers took up residence; visitors to the show could observe them through one-way mirrors. Macron’s spokesperson announced that DAU had the Elysée’s support.

Despite a chaotic opening, the round-the-clock Paris event attracted a large number of visitors. Cheap vodka and cognac flowed freely, served in Soviet-style mugs. In lieu of tickets, visitors received ‘visas’ and a handheld ‘DAU-phone’ device that would guide them through the show, based on their responses to a psychometric questionnaire. They might be invited to take part in a scientific experiment, attend a conference or seek spiritual counsel from a priest, rabbi, shaman or imam. There was a pop-up sex shop and a Soviet-themed Georgian restaurant, entered through a pink hallway designed to resemble a vagina with a soft, yielding floor. On the whole, it was these theme-park aspects and the presence of celebrities that attracted most attention. But thirteen DAU films were also on show, and visitors could watch sequences of unedited footage from private booths. Two of the films, Natasha and Degeneration, were selected for the Berlinale Film Festival in February 2020, just before coronavirus put a halt to public screenings. Several have been bought by international distributors.

The films are now being rolled out for public consumption on DAU’s website, along with notes on those still in production and dossiers on the fictional characters. Each film costs $3 to rent. They have not been released in chronological order and a diligent viewer will find only the tendrils of an unfolding narrative. The film supposedly set in the earliest period, 1938–52—the Terror, the War, the Bomb; it is titled

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13 The Putin government, meanwhile, has banned some of the films as ‘pornographic propaganda’. Khrzhanovsky is suing.
DAU. The Empire—has not yet been released. Instead, each film follows a small group of people or focuses on a particular incident, with Landau himself de-centred or absent in many of the films. Different co-directors worked on editing Jürges’s rushes, giving the films their individual stamp. Each DAU movie begins with an entry ritual, a kind of incantation: a guest is lectured about the Institute’s secrecy rules, required to sign a Soviet-style non-disclosure agreement, and then shown around. The visitors, like the viewers, are often foreign; through the visitors, the viewer is inducted into the closed, alien community. The Institute set quickly becomes intimately familiar: the neat café that is approached by steep steps, like a Mayan temple; the dim kitchen area behind it, where the café staff drink and play strip dominoes; the hair salon; Landau’s cavernous apartment, where a statue of a horse often serves as a perch for visitors; the more modest communal apartment shared by other scientists. After watching a couple of films, even small changes in the decor become noticeable. The effect is similar to that of an early graphic-adventure video game like Myst: the set is always the same, but each film traces a different path through it, and much of the interest comes from exploring new spaces.

Set in 1953, a month after Stalin’s death, Brave People features real-life physicist Andrei Losev and his real, much younger wife Darya Berzhitskaya, also a scientist. Co-directed by Alexei Slusarchuk, this is one of the strongest of the DAU films. The paranoia of Stalinism still reigns and the Jewish Losev, a sweet, uxorious man, is in special peril due to the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. The dread is palpable. When Losev is called in for interrogation by the Institute’s NKVD/KGB boss, played by Azhippo, his fear and humiliation seem agonizingly real. But Stalin is dead, the power structure is in flux and Losev is released. He is left to a different kind of hell, the relentless debauchery and marital discord of life in their communal apartment. Losev and his wife seem to love each other deeply, and enjoy the authentically awkward, aesthetically unappealing, resolutely amateur sex that the film depicts. But no couple could be happy in an apartment full of depressed, egotistical alcoholics. The Losevs have long, drunken fights with each other and their housemates. Darya has a breakdown, screaming and crying uncontrollably after sex. This could be a moving depiction of a marriage cracking under the stresses of Soviet life in 1953. But knowing DAU’s backstory has an estranging effect, weakening the film’s hold on the viewer, diluting its cinematic and historical potency. Was it the strain of the DAU set that caused Darya to break down?
Three more films, this time co-directed by Jekaterina Oertel, are set in roughly the same period. *Nora, Mother* and *Three Days* take up the story of Dau’s relationship with his wife. In the first, Nora’s mother—played by Shchegoleva’s real-life mother, Lidia Shchegoleva—comes to visit her daughter at the Institute, apparently to see whether she is happy in her marriage. Dau, played by Currentzis, brings his lovers home so that Nora can serve them dinner, fining her for her bad moods, while Lidia, who at first seems a refreshingly down-to-earth small-town Ukrainian, turns out to be a manipulative sadist. In *Three Days*, Dau meets up with an old flame, a Greek actress named Maria, hoping to rekindle ‘lost harmony’. This involves auditioning housemaids, who are asked to change into pastel slips and read Pushkin while holding bunches of grapes—but Nora returns home to interrupt the idyll. A fourth film, *Natasha*, focuses on two waitresses in the Institute’s canteen, the cynical young Olga and the more trusting Natasha, who has a fling with a French scientist (played by the real-life French astrologer-mystic Luc Bigé) visiting the Institute. For consorting with a foreigner Natasha is hauled in for interrogation by the Azhippo character, violently berated and humiliated, forced to sodomize herself with a bottle, and released on condition that she report ‘to us’ in future.

A couple of films, *String Theory* (co-directed by Slusarchuk) and *Nikita Tanya* (co-directed by Oertel) feature the Stony Brook theoretical physicist Nikita Nekrasov, playing a fictional 1950s Institute scientist named Nikita Nekrasov, who expounds upon his theory of free love—first to his three girlfriends and then to Tanya, his wife. There are two films about homosexual affairs, both co-directed by Oertel. One involves a drunken tryst between two Institute janitors (*Sasha Valera*), the other an affair between a librarian and a journalist (*Katya Tanya*), predictably interrupted by Azhippo. DAU’s most extreme cinematic products, however, are co-directed by the Heideggerian Permyakov. *New Man* introduces Maxim, played by a neo-Nazi thug, who has been recruited as a subject of a eugenicist experiment that aims to create sociopathic supermen. In *Regeneration*, an Institute mathematician (eponymously played by the HSE’s Dmitry Kaledin) makes the mistake of experimenting with ayahuasca to unlock the secrets of the quantum universe, resulting in a nightmarish trip. The six-hour *Degeneration*, set in 1968, is intended to represent DAU’s cinematic climax. Scientific research at the Institute has ground to a halt amid quarrels and debauchery. A group of young ‘Komsomol members’ (played by neo-Nazi skinheads) take part in experiments being conducted by a visiting American (played by the New York
performance artist Andrew Ondrejcak). The Komsomolists rebel against the ‘degenerate’ culture of the Institute. Azhippo seizes control and directs them to slaughter the scientists and destroy the place.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Patina of the avant-garde?}

Adoniev’s bottomless purse has helped to nurture a bizarrely inflated project, rapturously received by some of the West’s leading cultural institutions. How should the DAU project be assessed? There is nothing novel in Khrzhanovsky’s turn to the Soviet past: this is among the most popular subjects for Russian filmmakers and has been since perestroika.\textsuperscript{15} The international appeal of DAU lies rather in its grandiose scale and mysterious, scandalous nature. It sets out to capitalize on the enduring, sordid mystique of the worst aspects of the Soviet Union, enhanced by (supposedly) meticulous replication, which is in turn legitimated by the notion of Romantic genius and the transvaluation of values that permits. For Khrzhanovsky, this naturally extends to the humiliating treatment of women, represented as libidinous liberation, and by all accounts practised in auditions and off-screen as well as in the excruciating scenes with Azhippo or the brutish Institute director, Trifonov.

The DAU extravaganza in Paris was greeted by feminist protests at the treatment of women in the films. When Natasha was picked for the 2020 Berlinale, five Russian film critics (four of them women) wrote

\textsuperscript{14} According to Permyakov, ‘DAU should have ended with a transition from one scientific generation to the next. But the young remained passive, they were frightened of taking power. That’s why Khrzhanovsky turned to the opposite extreme’: Tonet and Salino, ‘A Paris, “DAU” sème le trouble et les roubles’.

\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps the clearest influence on DAU is the work of Aleksei German Sr, in particular his Khrustalyov, My Car! and My Friend Ivan Lapshin, both set during Stalinist times. DAU re-deploys elements recognizable from German’s films: claustrophobic camerawork, wilfully indistinct dialogue, use of non-actors, an atmosphere of hysteria and brutality—but the artistic results are travesties of these originals. On German, see Tony Wood, ‘Time Unfrozen: The Films of Aleksei German’, \textit{NLR} 7, Jan–Feb 2001; Fredric Jameson, ‘Gherman’s Anti-Aesthetic’, \textit{NLR} 97, Jan–Feb 2016. Other examples of post-Soviet films about the Soviet past, across a range of genres and periods, include: Mikhalkov’s \textit{Burnt by the Sun}, Todorovsky’s \textit{Stilyagi}, German Jnr’s \textit{Paper Soldier} and Dovlatov, Serebrennikov’s \textit{Summer}, Balagov’s \textit{Beanpole}, Idov’s \textit{The Humorist}, Konchalov’s \textit{Dear Comrades}. The cavalcade of patriotic blockbusters dealing with Russia’s twentieth-century wars form their own genre, as mentioned above.
an open letter expressing their concern. How, after the exposure of Harvey Weinstein’s numerous crimes, could the Berlinale show a film with scenes of ‘real psychological and physical violence against non-professional actors, as well as unsimulated sex between people under the influence of alcohol’? Would such a project have been selected if it had been made in ‘the so-called First World’? The Berlinale directors pointed out that Natalia Berezhnaya and Olga Shkabarnya, the two female leads in Natasha, had rebutted allegations of coercion and abuse. Oertel noted that the performers had pre-arranged exit strategies if they were uncomfortable with the scenes. If they looked straight at the camera, filming would stop immediately. They could speak to a nominated ‘friend’ onset; Oertel herself was one of those playing the role of confidante. ‘Of course, there are many difficult scenes’, she told Le Monde, ‘but filming happiness doesn’t get you anywhere’. DAU benefitted from the exculpatory patina of the avant-garde: by protesting, one risked looking like a philistine as well as a prude.

Khrzhanovsky’s artistic case rests on a postmodern amalgam of reductive Pavlovianism—the unmediated experience of ‘authentic’ Soviet commodities and brutalized personal relationships will trigger examinable reactions among its participants—with pseudo-Nietzschean Dionysianism. Among his claims for the Institute was that the fantasy setting would help to overcome performers’ inhibitions, releasing inner truths: ‘Because it’s not real, things happen more quickly, and they’re less risky, in a way . . . in normal life you would be afraid to go that far because the cost is too high.’ In the DAU films, the two aspects—pastiche authenticity and coerced spontaneity—often serve to undermine each other. The films are hard to interpret, because it is never clear where artistic intent ends and reality begins. Should they be assessed by the aesthetic criteria of feature films, or of experimental documentaries, or of video installations? The performers often seem bored, speaking with minimal affect. This might be read as representing Soviet anomie and the tired recitation of rote language, for instance during a wan toast to Stalin. But it might also reflect the fatigue, depression or lack of conviction of the actors—in which case it says more about DAU than about the

Soviet Union. Yet it does so in a nonreflexive way, for the performers are never allowed to comment on their situation, to participate as conscious agents in the process of representation.  

The actors’ boredom infects the viewer, whose mind begins to wander. Sometimes it is obvious that the performers simply cannot think of anything to say. The improvised conversations are often numbingly banal and rife with anachronisms. In place of Lev Landau’s sharp mind and pointed wit, we have Currentzis’s maunderings on sex and soul. At the other extreme, displays of emotion are undermined by the viewer’s knowledge of DAU’s back story and its unintended estrangement effect—the suspicion that the abusive relationships are those produced and condoned by the 21st-century super-rich, rather than those of the 1950s or 1960s Soviet Union. How should we read the tears of the humiliated Institute employees, or the silent bowed heads of the male scientists as the skinheads break into the communal apartment and threaten the women? Are these actors inhabiting their roles, or are they dumbfounded at the realization that they are participating in an art project that is out of control? ‘Is this depravity or creativity?’ asks one of the actresses as she dances on the dinner table with the skinheads, everyone stripped down to their underwear.

The most nauseating aspect of Khrzhanovsky’s artistic quest for unmediated ‘authenticity’ is his weakness for figures experienced in inflicting torture and violence. Azhippo’s sadism is of a piece with the brutality of the neo-Nazi thugs Khrzhanovsky hired, though the neo-Nazis are far more volatile. The upshot, however, is to undermine authenticity with glaring anachronism—as in Degeneration, when the skinheads try to force Ondrejcak to confirm their theory that Black Americans are ‘parasites’. As ‘authentic’ Soviet history, this is risible: neo-Nazism of this ilk

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19 A useful point of comparison here is Peter Watkin’s six-hour La Commune (Paris, 1871), from 2000, in which non-professional performers role-play historical characters they have researched. This more successful project has the reflexivity and conceptual depth lacking in DAU.

20 Material details are also often anachronistic. Nude scenes reveal bodies blatantly un-Soviet in their depilation—one of the signs of DAU’s strong affinity with pornography, which regularly trumps pretensions to authenticity. One of the principal actors was recruited on the basis of her performance in online porn.

21 The gang and their leader, Maksim ‘Tesak’ [‘machete’] Martsinkevich, specialized in beating up gay men, drug dealers, migrant workers and the homeless. Martsinkevich received multiple prison sentences in Russia. Harassment of sex workers, drug users and LGBT people is consonant with government positions, but
was one problem the USSR did not have; these skinheads are symptoms of a distinctively post-Soviet social disease. The NKVD or KGB would have nipped such movements in the bud. This episode has nothing to do with Soviet times: what is on display is an uncomfortable, intimidated American artist trying to avoid an argument with a group of loathsomely racist, homophobic young men.

Privatized gigantomania

It should be said that the DAU films do contain some memorable cinematic moments—striking black-and-white shots of Shibanov’s Institute set, for example, or a weirdly riveting scene in Degeneration in which Ondrejcak conducts an ‘experiment’ on the skinheads, watching in his white lab coat as the belligerent young men are instructed to stand still in a chilly courtyard for ten minutes, then rip up a giant piece of paper. But on its own terms, DAU’s pseudo-communist dystopia in Kharkiv was more successful than the films it was built to generate. The Institute functioned as an exclusive theme park, a kind of haunted house built for the enjoyment of the rich and well connected. Luminaries from the worlds of business and art could experience real-life shivers as they were subjected to Khrzhanovsky’s communist ‘experience’, safe in the knowledge that this simulacrum had been built with an oligarch’s fortune. For visitors from the former Soviet countries this meant pretending to be an ordinary person again, paying three rubles for a sausage sandwich and wearing itchy Soviet underpants—as many of these Russian visitors had done before they struck gold in the rubble of the Soviet collapse. It was scary but exciting, perhaps even comforting; the pleasure of scary stories lies in reminding us of our relative safety.

neo-Nazis like Martsinkevich alarm Russian authorities with their open reliance on violent crime, insurrectionary ethnic nationalism, and espousal of fascist views that directly contradict the cult of Soviet victory in World War Two, the centerpiece of Russian national memory. From this perspective, Martsinkevich’s most egregious transgression was his neo-Nazi video review of the patriotic Russian blockbuster Stalingrad. Khrzhanovsky wrote an employment reference for him, as he revealed in a mutually back-scratching interview with TV-anchorwoman-turned-liberal-presidential-candidate Ksenia Sobchak, another Adoniev protégé. See ‘Ilya Khrzhanovsky: ob Abramoviche, Tesake i Kurentzise’, 23 April 2020; available on YouTube. Martsinkevich died in prison in September 2020, reportedly by suicide.

22 In Degeneration, the skinheads attack Ondrejcak in front of several other actors, who attempt to defend him. The scuffle is brief, and what happens to Ondrejcak is not visible; he told Le Monde and other papers that he was ‘too traumatized’ to comment on what had occurred.
Foreigners liked the Institute, too—perhaps even more than Russians. Depictions of Soviet and post-Soviet misery have a strong track record in the international art world—another reason for DAU’s cachet. Boris Mikhailov, a Kharkiv native who appeared in DAU with his wife, rose to international fame with his large-format photos of splayed, decrepit Slav bodies set against a backdrop of snow and wreckage. His 1997–98 series *Case History*, shown at MOMA in 2011, included numerous pictures of older women, perhaps homeless, perhaps alcoholic, often naked, bloated or wounded. These images, perversely titillating, serve to confirm stereotypes about Soviet and post-Soviet space as a disaster area, a place of non-stop degradation.

The Russian film critics who wrote to the Berlinale suggested that the West’s embrace of DAU constituted a form of Orientalism. They had a point. The events that took place at the Institute would be unimaginable on a film set in the EU, where even dancing bears are banned. The killing and torture of animals, the use of orphans and prisoners, the unscripted and unplanned sex scenes with intoxicated participants, the presence of neo-Nazis who threatened homophobic violence against other cast members—any one of these would be enough to have a project shut down. But since DAU was filmed in Ukraine, it could be celebrated as a triumph of daring experimentalism and testament to the dangers of ‘totalitarianism’—and could receive high-profile support from public institutions. A project like DAU offered foreign audiences the pleasure of vicarious transgression.

For centuries, Russia has held an intimidating appeal as a stage for suffering and achievement at a scale that is no longer feasible in the compact countries of Western Europe. DAU capitalizes on this gigantomaniac mystique, with its inevitable phallic implications. Der Tagesspiegel called the project ‘Big art, above all, big!’ In an era when the myth of grandiose male artistic genius has come under sustained critique, Khrzhanovsky’s project carries a new frisson of excitement. The Soviets certainly engaged in works of monumental film: the USSR’s most expensive movie, Bondarchuk’s seven-hour *War and Peace* (1966–67), famously deployed more than 10,000 Red Army troops as extras to reenact the 1812 Battle of Borodino, the state mobilizing its resources. DAU has been called a project of Soviet scope; instead it testifies to a privatized gigantomania, produced by unfettered oligarchic capital.
Ultimately, **DAU** is a failure at the level of ideas as well as ethics. Its anti-communist clichés—dystopian empire, communism equals religion, ‘totalitarianism’—are not subjected to any new forms of critical examination but simply recycled, on a pumped-up scale. The term ‘totalitarian’ in particular is constantly applied to the **DAU** project, unquestioningly and without ever being clearly defined. **DAU**’s supporters cast it as an extraordinary experiment that recreates and documents the psychological and social effects of ‘totalitarianism’, transforming them into great art. Some of its critics have simply inverted this view, castigating the project as a form of sexualized masculine totalitarianism: abuse in the pursuit of kink. For many Russian liberals, the term is a straightforward synonym for state practices like surveillance and torture, despite the fact that these are deployed by many regimes that are obviously not totalitarian, such as the United States.

This constant misusage debases the term’s meaning, while calling **DAU** ‘totalitarian’ gives Khrzhanovsky too much credit. There is a parallel here with a banal strain of political rhetoric in which Putin’s Russia, for example, is routinely called ‘totalitarian’ in the US media. Corrupt and authoritarian though the Russian government is, it does not exercise the level of all-encompassing control over public and private spheres that constitutes the ideal type of totalitarianism. In fact, the use of the term is primarily strategic in function. The US media does not throw it around in relation to, say, Saudi Arabia. Emptied of analytical substance, it is no more than an abuse: us versus them. Here, again, **DAU**’s ‘totalitarian’ epic offers reassurance to the status quo. As a nihilistic parable, it is the unmistakable product of an oligarchic system in which a few people control the bulk of a society’s wealth, and a well-connected artist can purchase every kind of freedom. Small wonder, then, if it resonates in the West. Meanwhile, four Ukrainian oligarchs have appointed Khrzhanovsky to repeat the **DAU** experience at the Babi Yar Holocaust Memorial Center.²³

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