Coming to Terms with the Soviet Myth of Heroism Twenty-five Years After the Chernobyl' Nuclear Disaster: An Interpretation of Aleksandr Mindadze's Existential Action Movie *Innocent Saturday*.

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Abstract: This essay presents an analysis of the Russian director Alexandr Mindadze's feature film *Innocent Saturday*, released precisely 25 years after the Chernobyl' accident in Ukraine. In a comparative study between the Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking reception of the film, I will show that the philosophical dimension, depicting Chernobyl' not as a "great" historical, technological event, but in terms of how it affected peoples' minds and feelings, constitutes the main theme in the Russian reception, but is more or less absent in the non-Russian-speaking reception. Building upon this divergence in reception, I will further explore the theme of Soviet heroism in a hermeneutical analysis of the film. My conclusions are that Mindadze, in depicting a hero who "does not escape", points towards the existential impossibility of "escaping from your own self", thus challenging not only the rules of an action movie, but also the Soviet myth of heroism, still a politically intense debate in the former Soviet Union.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Soviet Union, film, reception, Chernobyl', nuclear accident, Mindadze, Innocent Saturday, myth of heroism, existentialism, Bakhtin, non-alibi in Being

Precisely twenty-five years after the Chernobyl' nuclear accident in Ukraine, the Russian scriptwriter and director Aleksandr Mindadze released his film *Innocent Saturday* (*V Subbotu*), which, according to the producer Aleksandr Rodnianskii, is the first Russian feature film on this topic ever produced (Rodnianskii, 2011).[1] When the film had its international premiere in February 2011 during the Berlin festival, where it was shown as part of the main program, reactions among critics were mixed and the film received no awards. In general, Russian-speaking critics have been much more positive in their judgments and a week later, when the film was shown at the west Siberian film festival in Khanty-Mansiysk, it was awarded first prize by the Special International Jury and Svetlana Smirnova-Martsinkevich received special award for Best Female Debut. The film had its Russian national premiere in March 2011 and should have been released in Belarus that same month, but was removed from Minsk cinemas at the very last minute with no official explanation. In Ukraine the national premiere took place for some reason as late as the beginning of May while voices in the Ukrainian media expressed disappointment about the fact that Ukrainian state television had not bought the necessary license, unlike Russian television, to show the film in connection with the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl' disaster (Tirdatova 2011).

In this article, I will present an analysis of Mindadze's film beginning with a comparative study between the Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking reception of the film, in which I conclude that the non-Russian-speaking reviews express great frustration watching an "action" film in which the hero does not escape from the nuclear zone, while the Russian-speaking audience has no problems in accepting the film's philosophical dimension, exploring the impossibility of "escaping from your

own self". Next, I will point to the fact that the release of this "existential action movie" not only ties in with the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl' accident, but also coincides with the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As to the fact that the Chernobyl' accident often is described as a wake up call – which is also frequently claimed in the Russian-speaking reception – pointing towards the acute need to abandon the totalitarian system of irresponsibility, I will in a hermeneutical analysis of *Innocent Saturday*, suggest the hypothesis that Mindadze is depicting Chernobyl' in terms of an "existential zone", revealing the need to take personal responsibility.

Rooting my analysis in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "non-alibi in Being" – expressing the need of taking personal responsibility in a world full of irreversible events – I will argue that Mindadze does not depict Chernobyl' as a "great" historical, technological event, but uses it as a symbol of an irrevocable event with great impact upon the characters' thoughts and feelings, finally forcing the hero to acknowledge the ethical need of taking personal responsibility. My final conclusions are that Mindadze in his film not only challenges the rules of an action movie, but also the Soviet myth of heroism, which still constitutes a politically highly intense debate in the former Soviet Union.

When the film was shown on Russian *Channel One* on the evening of April 26, 2011 during Alexandr Gordon's TV show *Zakrytyi pokaz*, it was introduced and concluded by an emotionally intense panel discussion between nuclear experts, Pripyat-witnesses, film critics, authors, directors and the film's main crew, including Mindadze himself. Just before the film was to be shown, Gordon felt obliged to warn sensitive viewers: This is a film with "its own rules" he said, and continued: "If you accept and believe in these rules from the very beginning, it will be much easier for you to watch the film to the end." (Gordon 2011).[2]

In order to understand what "rules" Gordon is talking about, and why the TV audience had to be warned about these laws, it is necessary to take a closer look at the dramaturgic rules of an action movie. Mindadze was previously known to Russian audiences as the director of the action movie *Soar* (*Otryv*) but above all as the scriptwriter of Vadim Abdrashitov's disaster movies from the Soviet era such as *When the Train stopped* (*Ostonovilsia poiezd*). Given this reputation, plus the fact that Mindadze had now tackled a real catastrophe, considered to be one of the world's most devastating technological disasters, it is not surprising that the Russian-speaking audience expected *Innocent Saturday* to follow the dramaturgy of an action movie. These expectations are more or less fulfilled by the one-minute-and-forty-second-long trailer, depicting scenes from the thrilling first 20 minutes of the film—a screaming party boss who wants to cover up the accident, fire-fighters outside the burning reactor building, a desperately running hero and the almost beautiful still pictures of the burning nuclear monster—but then, about 20 minutes later, the action is interrupted in a drastic and rather curious way.

At the beginning of the film, the audience follows the desperate actions of the main character, Valerii Kabysh, a young engineer and party official who overhears a heated conversation at the nuclear plant between engineers and local party bosses. He is forced to keep silent but runs back to Pripyat, about two kilometres from the plant, and tries to escape with Vera, who the viewers at first expect to be his girlfriend. However, the escape is soon interrupted, but not by an exterior enemy, as we might expect in an action movie (border guards, party bosses, nuclear radiation), but because of some vague inner force taking control of the main character's mind. The rest of the

film depicts anything but the brave actions of mankind fighting against an exterior catastrophe. Instead, the audience meets ordinary people, struggling with their complex thoughts and feelings, seldom transferred into words and actions.

So, why did the Russian television audience need to be warned before watching the film? Probably in order to be prepared for this odd dramaturgy without innocent victims eager to be rescued, and without brave heroes, eager to fulfill their given task. Instead, *Innocent Saturday* depicts victims who have only themselves to blame and heroes who dive into the fire, not with the brave intention of rescuing other victims, but rather with a total lack of the survival instinct. Broadcast on Russian state television *Channel One* on the evening of the 25th anniversary of the world's most extensive nuclear accident, which took place in the former Soviet Union, it is not surprising that this anti-heroic film depicting action that suddenly came to grief was expected to generate strong reactions among viewers.

An Existential Action Movie

The odd dramaturgy of *Innocent Saturday* has evoked various reactions in the reception of the film, and one interesting difference can in fact be noted between the Russian-speaking and the non-Russian-speaking reception. For obvious reasons the reviews that appeared outside the Russian-speaking area are less extensive, but thanks to the competition at the Berlin Film Festival, the film has received considerable international attention and a comparison is therefore possible. This clearly shows that while the non-Russian reception is to a larger extent *frustrated* by the hero's inability to escape, the Russian-speaking reception is more inclined to forget about the dramaturgy of an action movie and dive into the existential depths that the genre now opens up before the viewers. This difference in reception may well be the result of the various connotations surrounding the myths of heroism in the respective language areas. Nevertheless, in an interview in *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, Mindadze discusses the similarities between an American action hero and the concept of heroism in the Soviet Union, manifested in socialist realist films: "This cultivation of the brave hero with a fantastic ability to overcome any tragic circumstances was also present during the Soviet film era. What we referred to as socialist realism was actually a kind of Hollywood method, featuring 'positive examples'" (Mindadze 2011). Despite the similarities, the differences between the concept of heroism in socialist realism and Hollywood action films should of course be underlined, and this becomes evident when we consider the many disparities between the western and Russian-speaking reception. When Mindadze, in his depiction of the events that took place in Ukraine on 26 April 1986, breaks with the dramaturgic rules of an action movie, the Russian-speaking audience immediately connects such aesthetics with the director's possible intention to challenge the Soviet myth of heroism. This cluster of associations is not activated, as we shall see, in the non-Russian speaking reception. References are of course made to the Soviet and post-Soviet context, but mostly in order to state the impossibility of fully understanding this specific context.

The recurring question in the reviews outside the Russian-speaking area is: "Why does the hero not escape?" A true disappointment concerning the film's dramaturgy may be noted, as well as the fact that the technological accident itself does not play a more important role in the film. The American film critic Deborah Young expresses her disappointment regarding Mindadze's decision to show the "banality of human reactions to a threat" instead of depicting the intensity of this tremendous catastrophe: "While the audience wants desperately to find out what's

happening outside with the town and the nuclear meltdown, the band plays on, drinking and fighting with each other to the end" (Young 2011). Her conclusion is that the film did not receive any rewards in Berlin because "the script takes a suicidal dive into ennui, throwing away a film that could have been a major contender in this year's Berlin competition" (Young 2011). Other western critics refer to the film's depiction of the catastrophe "as a metaphor for the impending collapse of the Soviet regime" (Romney 2011), or they suggest that the film "mulls over a facet of the Soviet psyche that non-Slavs may struggle to comprehend" (Felperin 2011). Film critic Leslie Felperin interprets the main idea of the film as Valerii being trapped in the bonds of community, something she substantiates with reference to the many close-ups of faces, legs and other body parts: "The idea is that Valery literally can't see past his friends, which is a clever idea, but too on-the-nose to be fully effective" (Felperin 2011).

The Russian-speaking reception rejects the negative reviews in the West with reference to their inability to understand the specific Soviet and Russian context of the film. In the Russian newspaper *Vzgliad*, Kseniia Reutova reports directly from the festival in Berlin:

> Here in Berlin they have neither understood nor accepted the film. At the press conference with Mindadze, they tried to clarify why the characters drink so much and, most importantly, why they don't escape from the city. In the festival press *Innocent Saturday* is presumed to represent a specific genre, a "catastrophe film," and many critics lament that there is so little of Chernobyl' in the film and so much music and dancing. (Reutova 2011)

Valery Kichin writes from Berlin: "the common reactions were, just as I had assumed, —confused" (Kichin 2011). According to Kichin this confusion stems from western critics' inability to understand the characters' sudden emotional outbursts and, above all, their inability to escape.

The question is: Why do western critics choose not to see beyond the dramaturgy of the action movie depicting a great catastrophe? One reason why they miss the obvious target of this film, which deliberately breaks with the dramaturgy of an action movie and has *no* intention of depicting Chernobyl' in terms of the great technological accident, is related to their lack of awareness of the Soviet context and the long tradition of Soviet heroism, a myth still alive in the former Soviet Union. They simply don't get the *political* message evoked by a film depicting a great (however terrible) event in Soviet history, and choosing to focus on the "little man", who is not at all heroic, instead of on the great historical event itself. When Mariia Tomak in the Ukrainian newspaper *Den'* (9 April) laments the fact that the film will be shown on Russian but not Ukrainian national television, she refers above all to these political barriers in post-Soviet society, and the widespread lack of willingness to accept the fall of the great empire and the decline of its cult of heroism:

> In the Ukrainian media there is a place for the catastrophe, but not for the Human being. Isn't this sufficient evidence to draw the same final conclusion as the chief editor of the Russian newspaper *Novaia gazeta*, Dmitrii Muratov: "All of us today are still walking in Stalin's overcoat and smoking his pipe?" (Tomak 2011)

Moreover, Mindadze repeatedly underlines the fact that his film does not depict Chernobyl', but the people of Pripyat, a town situated two kilometers from the nuclear station. Before shooting the film, he undertook extensive documentary research, and read hundreds of testimonies of Pripyat citizens who remembered the hours before and after their evacuation from Pripyat on 27 April 1986. On the webpage of Russian state television *Channel One* Mindadze, says in an interview:

> Basing my standpoint on the extensive documentary material, I have concentrated above all on the question: How do we react, in the philosophical sense, towards a situation of catastrophe? The real, technological catastrophe is only an excuse to explore a human being's deep emotional calamity, and *Innocent Saturday* is not so much about Chernobyl' as about the Russian character. The accident represents only the given premises for this study. (Mindadze 2011)

It is also important to note Mindadze's own definition of the film's genre, namely an "action of feelings" (*ekshen chuvstv*).[3] Mindadze thereby invites his audience to look beyond the actual chain of events, beyond the great catastrophe, turning instead to a close and careful study of the characters' faces—often pictured in close-up—trying to interpret their thoughts, emotions, wishes and fears. Instead of focusing on the actions taking place in the *external* world—the explosion at the nuclear station, the escape and the liquidation—the dramaturgy of the film points to the *internal* world of the characters, to their ambivalent feelings, emotional explosions, hesitation and regret. These characters are not fighting against an external enemy, but struggling with their own feelings, trying to cope with an apocalyptic future pointing towards the need to take *personal responsibility*. The main question, therefore, is not "Why can't the hero escape?" but "Why it is impossible, from a philosophical point of view, to escape from yourself?" As we shall see, Mindadze did not create yet another catastrophe movie, but an *existential* action movie, echoing Mikhail Bakhtin's early neo-Kantian philosophy and the concept of the human being's "non-alibi in Being." According to Bakhtin, this means that the human being is a "once-occurrent Being," living in a concrete place in time and space which is *irrevocable* and thereby provokes our "non-alibi" in life, a metaphor pointing to the ethical need to take responsibility for our own irrevocable actions (Bakhtin 1995, 40).

Coming to Terms with the Soviet Myth of Heroism

But why does Mindadze choose to break with the action-genre in a film depicting a *real* technological disaster that took place in Ukraine 25 years ago? Why not use a *fictive* catastrophe, as in his earlier films? In order to answer this question another important anniversary during 2011 should be noted, namely the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which also leads back in a complex way to the technological catastrophe five years earlier. When one of the "unbreakable Soviet reactors" actually exploded, the ultimate pretext for Soviet ideology—leading all the way back to Lenin's slogan of 1920, "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the entire country"—was shown to be no longer adequate, and the catastrophe was interpreted by many political analysts, authors, journalists, scientists as the final uncovering of a corrupt, totalitarian state, still present despite Gorbachov's recently-introduced perestroika and glasnost in 1985.[4]

The possibility of viewing Chernobyl' as foreshadowing the fall of the Soviet Union is noted in both the western and Russian-speaking reception of *Innocent Saturday*. In the latter, this foreshadowing is referred to furthermore as a commonly accepted metaphor, firmly internalized in the post-Soviet collective memory. Evgeniia Tirdatova writes in the Russian newspaper *Novye Izvestiia*: "Also in his second film as a director (after *Soar*) we meet with a catastrophe and people's reactions to this. But this time it is about Chernobyl', which has become an indelible part of our genetic memory and which, to a large extent, caused the fall of the Soviet Empire. (Tirdatova 2011).[5] Another and somewhat adverse aspect of this catastrophe is the fact that it became a final tremulous symbol of Soviet heroism. According to Dmitrii Dabb, one of the main explanations for why the film was removed from cinemas in Minsk was the obvious clash between the accident's mythological connection with Soviet heroism and the film's clearly anti-heroic theme and language: "The explosion of the reactor was followed by the liquidators' self-sacrificing deeds, and the film was prevented from having a national showing in Belarus, because it offended the memory of their heroic deed" (Dabb 2011).

The Chernobyl' accident of 1986 is often described as a wake up call, pointing to the acute need to abandon the corrupt and totalitarian system of irresponsibility. The Russian chief editor of *Pravda* at this time, Vladimir Gubarev, blames the accident on a system in which individuals were incapable of making independent decisions. In *The Sarcophagus* (1987), a drama in which Gubarev depicts Chernobyl', a character called "the Immortal" says to "the Physicist": "It was the system that switched off the emergency cooling. A system of irresponsibility" (Gubarev 1987, 55). Valerii Legasov, a nuclear physicist and member of the Soviet Government Commission convened to investigate the causes of the Chernobyl' catastrophe, claims in an interview with Iurii Shcherbak, an Ukrainian author, physician and former ambassador who came to international prominence for his expose on Chernobyl' and as a founder of the Ukrainian Green Party, that the accident could be traced back to the lack of moral principle among the generations raised during the Soviet era, disassociating them from earlier generations—"who stood on the shoulders of Tolstoi and Dostoevsky…" (Legasov cited in Shcherbak 1989, 148).

Another important interpreter of Chernobyl' who Mindadze also mentions in interviews is the Belarusian journalist and author Svetlana Aleksievich, author of *Voices from Chernobyl'*, based on hundreds of interviews with Chernobyl' victims. The subtitle of the Russian original, *Chronicle of the Future*, clearly underlines Aleksievich's interpretation of the accident as pointing straight into the future, towards the fall of the Soviet Union. According to Aleksievich, Chernobyl' prompted the end of a "war culture" (Aleksievich, 2006), indicating that the dominant myth of heroism was gradually being replaced by an *existential* understanding of life and death. In an interview with the Russian newspaper *Liudi*, Aleksievich claims:

> In the Chernobyl' book the author made her way from a social understanding of life towards an existential understanding. Our previous system of worth was oriented towards the state, ideas and so on. Now it became necessary to orient oneself towards a completely new kind of system. (Aleksievich 2011)

In an interview with Shcherbak, Gubarev also connects Chernobyl' to the birth of a philosophically oriented view on the world, which is why he decided to write *The Sarcophagus*:

> I wanted to show that we live at a completely different time than we imagine. That we live in the atomic-space age, which has its own laws, philosophy, responsibility for the actions of men and their effects. (Gubarev cited in Shcherbak 1989, 160)

Innocent Saturday depicts a catastrophe which changed people's lives in a profound way, or in Gordon's words published in *Zakrytyi pokaz*: "a catastrophe which did not only take human lives, but also changed the way we lived at that time in a profound way" (Gordon 2011). Therefore, it should not be surprising that the Russian-speaking reviews mainly revolve around psychological and philosophical questions such as: Who are we? What is our relationship to the Soviet myth of heroism, great suffering and lack of any instinct of survival? The Russian-speaking reviews are in fact strangely homogenous, all more or less positively inclined towards the film, accepting Mindadze's theme and admiring his standpoint. Dmitrii Bykov, a Russian author and journalist who is politically active in the recent democratic movement against Vladimir Putin in Russia, writes: "Mindadze has taken up the challenge, which no other post-Soviet director would dream of, namely of investigating the nature of Soviet myth, based on heroism and death."[6]

Discussions on the internet, however, have been emotionally fiery, and two distinct camps have crystallized: one camp expressing the need to come to terms with the Soviet myth of heroism and Russia's imperial ambitions, and the other accusing the director of smearing the Russian people and their heroic deeds, which mainly relies on the country's heroic past.[7] A similar kind of political polarization was evident during the panel discussion before and after the broadcasting of *Innocent Saturday* on *Channel One*. Aleksandr Kondrashov, a correspondent for the Russian weekly newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta*, belongs to the film's opponents, and defends the country's heroic past:

> For those who have taken the strategic decision to leave this country, I can recommend seeing this film. However, [for] those who stand close to the events connected with the liquidators' deeds, I don't recommend seeing this film because it brings too much disgrace on many, many people. (Kondrashov 2011)

An "Action of Feelings" echoing Dostoevsky and Chekhov

Among the western critics, there is one German film critic who takes a step further in her interpretation of *Innocent Saturday* than her colleagues, namely Barbara Wurm. Wurm actually criticizes those who claim that the characters "make little sense" and that the script suddenly performs a "suicidal dive into ennui" (Young 2011), instantly dismissing this as some "Russian ideas," which are difficult to explain. Wurm writes: "What might be the 'Russian issues' here is the fact that Mindadze uses the discourse level only for distraction and irritation only and delegates the 'message' completely to the language(s) of cinema" (Wurm 2011). Actually, this discourse level is the most interesting aspect of the film, presenting the *zone* as a kind of experimental field of feelings, while the catastrophe is used merely as a dramaturgic shock-effect in order to explore the protagonists' inner feelings, provoked by this catastrophe. This could be said to refer to Dostoevsky's use of what Bakhtin calls "threshold" situations; that is,

emotionally tense situations (in Dostoevsky's case often crime scenes), where he forces his characters into states of ambivalent feelings and ethical dilemmas, which finally bring out the "man in man," possible to depict only according to the method Dostoevsky referred to as "realism in the higher sense" (Bakhtin 1985, 61). As stated before, Mindadze chooses to focus on the characters' inner state of mind and not on the great catastrophe. In this break with the dramaturgy of an action movie, he thus forces the viewers to go beyond action and words, and to try to grasp the characters' hidden feelings and unspoken intentions. Actually, *this* is where the real action takes place—in their hidden intentions and unspoken words and wishes.

Let me take an example of how this is represented in the film's dialogue. In a key scene where Valerii and Vera's escape is suddenly interrupted because Vera's high heel breaks as they run to catch the train, Valerii furiously accuses her: "Why did you have to take those shoes?" Vera replies: "Well, it's Saturday". Vera's answer introduces a new logic into the film, which focuses not on the external enemy but on the choices we make every day, the trivial as well as the important. Vera chooses her best shoes without reference to the external catastrophe—her escape from a nuclear disaster—but because of everyday circumstances: today it is Saturday, a special day when you dress up and enjoy life. As we shall see in the following, "the escape that came to an end," so frustrating for most western critics, should be related to the film's change of perspective, which is an aesthetic turn, depicting everyday life in Pripyat instead of the catastrophe. Vera and Valerii decide to buy a pair of new Romanian shoes for Vera. Then they visit a wedding (Mindadze notes in an interview that sixteen weddings took place in Pripyat that day) where Vera is going to sing (she has already been paid for this and is compelled to fulfill her obligation). They drink a lot, sing, play and talk, fight and kiss each other. Vera and Valerii are both left in the zone. No one tried to prevent them from escaping. They missed the train, but could have waited for the next one. They are left in the zone, and it is their own fault.

Breaking with the dramaturgy of action movies, Mindadze thus introduces an existential dimension into the film, focusing on the individual human being's responsibility. In an interview in *Den'* Mindadze says: "But the woman breaks her heel in an existential way," and then explains his choice of words: "And what if she hadn't broken it? Then they would not have missed the train and their life would have turned out differently" (Mindadze 2011). In order to underline this existential interpretation, Mindadze obscures the actual chain of events, forcing the audience to focus not on the action itself, but on the underlying feelings (an action of feelings). With the help of the Romanian operator Oleg Mutu's shaky hand-camera, an interrupted sequence of actions and a dialogue constantly threatening to stop, Mindadze forces the viewer to interpret the underlying motives behind people's words and deeds. Dmitry Desiaterik comments on the Chekhovian aspect of *Innocent Saturday* in *Den*':

> In total chaos, unclear utterances, wild dances, drunken fights, an existential, that is, essential dimension of life, slowly emerges. In an almost Chekhovian way, people get drunk, fight, dance, kiss, loan money, come to terms with one another, while their destinies are silently falling apart behind the screen. (Desiaterik 2011)

Anton Dolin claims that all these trivial activities that take place in the film are not primarily motivated "by their content" (*soderzhatelno*) but according to their "emotional effect" (*emotsional'no*) on the audience (Dolin 2011). Anastasia Liakh

points to the fact that the only things that matter in *Innocent Saturday* are the main hero's emotions, words, deeds and glances. It is not a depiction of Chernobyl' but of "the human being's hermetically closed inner world" (Liakh 2011).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the film is that the explosion in Chernobyl' does not function aesthetically as a symbol of an intimidating apocalyptic future, but on the contrary, as a symbol of an ambiguous but primarily "positive" event, which forces people to recognize the need to make responsible choices in this "brave new world." We learn subsequently that Vera and Valerii are not a couple. Valerii's actual girlfriend is called Irina, and Vera is probably an old flame of Valerii's, from the time they played in the same band. Irrespective of how blurred Valerii's motives may be in the following quotation, it is of crucial importance that he breaks with the well-beaten track of his former life, thanks to the catastrophe. To Vera's recurring questions as to why Valerii picked her up and not his girlfriend Ira, he is caught more or less without an answer, but the fact remains: he did seek her out after having heard about the accident:

> **Vera**: Valik, answer me, why did you come to me all of a sudden? (Валик, правда, а чего ты ко мне вдруг?)[8]
> **Valerii**: I don't know myself! (Сам не знаю!)

A bit further on in the film, they have this dialogue:

> **Vera**: But why did you come for me? Why not for your Irka? (А за мной чего ж, не за Иркой своей?)
> **Vera**: Did I call for you? Tell me, did I? At the dormitory, when I came out of the shower, all naked! (Нет, вот звала я тебя? Звала, ты скажи? Что в общагу ко мне, из душа голую!)
> **Valerii** But you were wearing a bathrobe! (В халате!)
> **Vera**: But who pushed himself on me? Forced himself into my room? I couldn't get away from you! (А в комнате душил кто? Да присосался! Никуда вообще от тебя!)
> **Valerii**: Well, the reactor. (Ну, реактор).
> **Vera**: You and your reactor! You'll kill us all with your carrying on! Get lost then, why are you still here if it's all about the reactor? What about you? Come on! (Опять с реактором своим! Да забодал! Ну, ты всех уже! Так хиляй, чего ж ты, раз реактор? Сам-то? Давай!)
> **Vera**: You came running to me! But there was life before the reactor, you know! (Прибежал! А до реактора тоже жизнь была!)
> **Valerii**: I have seen your life. It wasn't a beautiful sight. (Видел я твою жизнь. С бородой она.)
> **Valerii**: If it hadn't been for the high heel…(Если б не каблук)
> **Vera**: It broke, Vadik. (Сломался он, Вадик)

Both the Russian verb "slomalsia" (broke) and the Russian pronoun "on" (it) can refer both to the high heel and to the reactor. In the last sentence quoted above, Vera states the irreversibility of the events in a highly laconic way—nothing can undo this event —"It broke, Vadik." Listening to the dialogue in Russian, it is hard not to think of the fatal, irrevocable explosion of reactor four at Chernobyl'. Whether it is a heel or a reactor that breaks, both events are irreversible, thus evoking the ethical need to acknowledge one's "non-alibi in Being." Therefore, according to the film's aesthetics,

the explosion at the Chernobyl' plant functions as an alarm clock, putting a final end to the main character's long, existential sleep.

Consistent with this interpretation, Valerii does not escape, but runs; furiously often and in different directions. These various and desperate "excursions" should be interpreted existentially, rather than a hero's attempt to escape from a clearly defined enemy in an action movie. Time and again he is thrown back to the starting point—the exploded reactor, shining over him like a moon, always visible regardless of where he stands on earth. The producer Rodnianskii says in a press release in *Kinokompaniia* before the premiere in Russian cinemas:

> The dramaturgic enigma in *Innocent Saturday* consists in the fact that he (Valerii) decides where he runs, to whom, and for what purpose. He is running, but not trying to escape, something is hindering him. At first glance these seem to be coincidences, but they actually conceal a deeper meaning, important in some way or another to all of us. (Rodnianskii 2011)

Maybe the patterns of Valerii's seemingly random excursions represent an image of an irreversible death from which no human being can escape.

A Happy Ending?

According to my existential interpretation of this "action of feelings," the accident does not primarily symbolize a totalitarian Soviet system, but the irreversible death from which, consistent with existentialist philosophy, no human being is able to escape. Hence the accident appears as a positive force in the film's aesthetics, giving Valerii insight into his "non-alibi in Being," which implies that he cannot escape from himself and the irreversible aspects of life. He thus becomes existentially aware of his own impending death: concrete, singular, painful and not at all collective, heroic and beautiful. Dmitrii Bykov writes in his review entitled "The Memory of a Future" that despite the fact that the film depicts Soviet life, where catastrophe was always part of the normal background and where the myth of heroism "helped" the Soviet people to find their true worth, the film contains a small ray of hope, pointing towards another path in a future post-Soviet society: "Kabysh does not only return to himself, but also comes across love and the meaning of life and, it is terrible to say, also hope" (Bykov 2011). Wurm (2011) claims that the film's main message is that, irrespective of what happens, "life goes on": "This is the incomprehensibility this film is about. Vitality *and* lethality are the two inseparable forces within the zone." But according to Wurm there is no positive force in the film's dramaturgic depiction of the catastrophe. Instead, she interprets the nuclear zone as symbolizing the Soviet people and their "total collapse of self-identification": "They are sucked up by the maelstrom of an environment that has become the system (and vice versa)" (Wurm 2011). While Wurm interprets this trap of everyday trivialities as the result of the Soviet system, preventing the characters from taking responsible actions, my reading suggests that the accident constitutes a dramaturgic force, helping the characters to get in contact with their own feeling of responsibility. The maelstrom should be seen as life itself, the irreversible chain of events, provoking the human being to take an active, responsible stand, no matter if a heel breaks or a reactor explodes.

During the discussions that followed the broadcasting of *Innocent Saturday* on *Channel one*, Mindadze pointed out that according to him, there is one moment of

hope in this gloomy film, namely when Valerii wakes up on a boat on the Pripyat river, staring right into the exploded reactor and, for the second time in the film, lifts his fist towards this monster. The question is why this scene should be viewed as positive. Is it because Valerii is challenging the Soviet system (the reactor symbolizing the Soviet system), or because he is at last standing face-to-face with death itself, unfolding the falseness of the beautiful, heroic and collective death depicted in the Soviet myth of heroism? Given the fact that Valerii eventually challenges the Soviet myth of heroic death, which for many decades prevented the Soviet people from having an existential understanding of life and death, both assumptions are relevant.

There is yet another important aspect to this last scene supporting an existential interpretation. Valerii is sleeping on the floor of the boat, surrounded by his laughing so-called friends. In his sleep he hears their laughter, and when he suddenly opens his eyes, he faces the reactor above him. The Russian-speaking reception has observed the film's *carnivalistic* depiction of death, not least of all in this scene where the threat of death is ignored, joked about, drunk to and laughed at (Dabb 2011, Plakhov 2011). The laughing collective surrounding Valerii, lying alone, could be interpreted as a carnivalistic device, turning the concept of a heroic death upside down. Valerii is *not* facing death together with other brave soldiers, or fighting for a great idea among a brave collective. Instead, he is facing his real death, all alone, surrounded by his furious, drunken, laughing and "inverted" friends.

Conclusion

Once again, cultural differences between Western and Eastern Europe have led to misunderstandings and mutual frustration, of which the reception of *Innocent Saturday* is a clear example. Referring to a widespread lack of both knowledge and interest regarding the specific Slavic cultural context, the Russian speaking reception rejects the Western European reception of the film, and in view of my analysis this rejection in this particular case seems legitimate. Judging by the Russian speaking reception, this film is extremely politically up-to-date, provoking the sore debate of Russian identity, questioning the myth of a great Empire and Soviet heroism, a highly important debate, which should not be restricted to the Eastern part of Europe only.

Breaking with the dramaturgy of an action movie, Mindadze introduces a "new logic" into his film, stressing the depiction of everyday life instead of great historical narratives, ambivalent feelings instead of solid heroic deeds. Mindadze thus challenges the myth of heroism and opens up for an existential reading, in which the main character is exposed to *real* death instead of *heroic* death. What makes the film particularly interesting is that it exposes the need for personal responsibility in a system devoid of such personal responsibility—hence it actually interferes with the collective memory of Chernobyl', interpreting the nuclear accident as foreshadowing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of a new, existentially conscious era. The fact that the film was distributed to coincide with two important anniversaries in Soviet history—the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl' accident and the 20th anniversary of the Soviet Union's collapse—both highly relevant to the film's interpretation, makes *Innocent Saturday* without doubt a significant event in post-Soviet—and European—cinema.

[1] It should be noted that *Innocent Saturday* is a Ukrainian-German-Russian co-production.

[2] In the following, all the translations from Russian sources are my own.

[3] See the interview with Mindadze in the Ukrainian newspaper *Den'* by Mariia Timasheva. (Mindadze 2011). This is an extract from Timasheva's interview with Mindadze in Berlin, broadcast on *Radio Svoboda* the day before.

[4] One of the many is Zhores Medvedev, a biologist who analyses the environmental, agricultural and health impact of nuclear accidents both in the Soviet Union and Britain. Medvedev is convinced that an open and co-operative society is much better protected from serious industrial accidents than closed societies. He also points to the fact that other nuclear accidents took place in the Soviet Union before Chernobyl', but these were concealed from the Soviet people: "We have known so little about accidents in communist countries because in the past even trivial problems were kept a secret. /…/ And true *glasnost'* began to emerge gradually after the Chernobyl' accident" (Medvedev 1990, x).

[5] See also Mariia Tomak's article in the Ukrainian newspaper *Den'*: "Last night the director of the film claimed in an interview for *Radio Svoboda* that art has an obligation towards history and that the explosion in Chernobyl' was a distinctive token of the future fall of the Soviet Union" (Tomak 2011).

[6] See, for example, the review by Andrei Plakhov in the Ukrainian newspaper *Kommersant* (Plakhov 2011) and Vasilii Koretskii's review in the Russian film magazine *Seans* (Koretskii 2011).

[7] See the discussion on the webpages: http://www.ovideo.ru/субботу and ruskino.ru/mov/forum/12849

[8] Valik and Vadik are both nicknames for Valerii.

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