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REVIEW: 4

Dir: Ilya Khrzhanovsky, 2005

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One usually thinks in numerical/numerological terms when one is going to see a film simply called “4”. The beguiling simplicity of the title pervades the irony that is central to the film and the bland, moribund mode in which the film unfolds through visual metaphors that often articulate an obsession with ‘four’. It does not really have a central hero and the notion of protagonism is dissipated. The bleak and almost obscenely frank portrayal of a dystopic Russia discounts and obliterates any idea of the centrality of character. Ethos is called into question and ethics is severely jeopardized.

Marina (Marina Vovchenko) is a prostitute. Oleg (Yuri Laguta) is a meat trader. Volodya (Sergey Shnurov) is a piano-tuner. They meet in a bar and get talking. They play roles: Marina passes herself as a marketing executive; Oleg as a water-supplier to President Putin; and Volodya, most interestingly, pretends to be a geneticist. The ill-assorted quartet is completed by the silent bartender who has difficulty staying awake.



The long bar scene manifests at the same time the supreme fiction-making capacities of the characters and their inability to identify themselves to one another and the disintegration accelerates, in the film, after they part.

Marina leaves for the country after she receives the news of the death of her sister, Zoya. The journey - reminiscent of Tarkovsky's *Stalker* - from the city to the village is as psychological as it is physical but the *déjà vu* flavoured sequences and the blank, expressionless expression that Marina wears hinders direct access to the workings of her mental goings-on. We follow her like a cur through the tipsy jerks and stumbles of a hand-held camera. With her we journey into the mysterious land of half-words, quizzical incantations of old women with their skins wrinkled like parchments crumpled - a village whose inhabitants live by the profession of making dolls out of chewed breads. We follow Marina to her sister's funeral where she is greeted by her other two sisters whose filial resemblance evinces more than mere sorority: all the three sisters look similar, almost identical. We are given a brief glance at the dead girl's picture that hangs on a cross: she looks exactly like Marina. We remember Volodya's story about cloning. What sounded as science-fictional mumbo jumbo now appears fraught with ambivalence and distantly probable. In the bar scene, Volodya talked about cloning in the guise of a geneticist: he works in a secret cloning laboratory where the genes are laid down; there are incubators where the 'doubles' grow; they grow up in society, orphanages, kindergartens; there are special programs managed by special departments like the KGB, the defense ministry; six months ago there was an article in the newspaper entitled 'Twins Village', somewhere in Mordovia that abounds with twins, triplets, quadruplets and they all suffer from some kind of internal disease; four kilometers

away from this village is Soyuz 4 – one of the first Soviet incubators; there are three types of doubles – M-type, F-type and Type-4 – amongst which Type-4, which involves putting four chromosome complexes in one cell thereby producing four clones, has least errors and optimal survival rate. Are Marina and her sisters the products of Type-4 cloning? The question is answered with further questions.

“Who’ll shape the dolls for us now? Zoya’s gone.”



The presence of old women, though vulgar and somewhat deadpan, often performs a choric function. Indeed, it is a subversive parody of the choric stratagem in Greek plays of the old and the incantatory, monotonous utterances remind us more of the hags in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Marat (Konstantin Murzenko), apparently Zoya’s boyfriend, is sneered and jeered at for sewing a penis in place of a nose on a doll and the scene turns into a burlesque of horrific mirth where the old women throw disembodied parts of dolls at each other with a senile playfulness that is beyond comprehension. One of the sisters get sick and we wonder if she is going to die: if Volodya’s presumption about the longevity of the Type-4s is, after all, wrong. Marat assumes the role of the savior of the dolls and carries several of them, ‘rescuing’ them from the old women’s obscene tampering. He mutters to himself ‘metal scum’ several times before arriving at a place which looks like a cellar, a stable, a garage all rolled up into one. He lays down the family of dolls to rest and before falling fast into a drunken slumber, says to one of them ‘Everything will be okay Zoya’. Upon waking up he finds them ripped off and eaten away by dogs.

From a conversation that the sisters have we come to know that Marina never forgave Zoya but we aren't given sufficient information as to what exactly took place. She says she could not forgive "for me being in the hospital for three months... for me rotting at the station... abortion, worse - they cut pieces of the baby out". Much like the rest of the film this section is doused in incomprehensibility. She talks about a dream she had the night before of Zoya where Zoya handed her a jar full of earth when she asked her to give the jam-jar. She dismisses the theory that it was a guilt-induced dream but in the next scene we find her weeping "Zoya, Zoyanka... Forgive me".

The old women, the masticators of bread, lament the death of the doll maker Zoya who died with the secret of how to craft the doll's faces. Marat cries out that she left the secret with him.

Zoya was the only person who knew how to shape the doll's faces. The others can sew the dolls' clothes, limbs and masticate more bread. Marina suggests Marat to make a mould for creating the faces, using a kid. But there is no kid around. However, he does manage to find a child on the street. He asks the father whether he can use his son for a mask. The man hits Marat and Marat looks up at the sky and says 'so we live...look at us, Zoyka'.

The symbolism is unmistakable and at the same time elusive. Zoya or Zoyka, whom we never see and whose spirit pervades the narrative and haunts the story like a ghost, signifying a deity that looks over the world, inimical and indifferent to human happiness and suffering. The death/absence of God/gods is rendered more acute by the acknowledgement that God exists or at least existed once but now is disengaged. The English 'metaphysical' poet John Donne, in one of his Holy Sonnets, pleads with God: "domine mihi irascaris, irascaris mihi domine." (God be angry with me, be angry with me God) the reward and punishment are equally desirable in the face of divine indifference. The state of being left alone, the state of despair is the worst possible in human existence and is akin to an endless nightmare that is at the heart of almost every dystopia, from Huxley's *Brave New World* to Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. We are reminded, in a fit of literary cliché, of Picasso's *Guernica* where the shuddering gods take the visual metaphor of light-bulbs flashing, shrieking as it were - remnant of a conscience now lost. The old women, with their crumpled skins and inscrutability, are not unlike the Cumaen Sybil who has survived beyond meaning, who wants to die but cannot. They represent the torpid redundant values of the older generation that have exceeded their expiry date, that encroach upon the imagination of the young and a grave sense of discontinuity between the past and the present. With the death of Zoya, comes the erasure of the secret of creation. Human beings are like dolls with identical faces. Zoya, in this sense, represented god who had the exclusive power to impart individuality. Without that spiritual touch of distinctiveness humans are just dolls, indeed clones that are endlessly recycled to populate the factory of earth. In almost a Christian gesture of redemption, Marat attempts to find the truth but ends up committing suicide. Unlike the crucifixion, it does not salvage humanity from the terrors of ignorance and faithlessness, but is a

form of protest, resistance against the timeless mortality of perverse living and the horrors of science fiction existence: the danger lies not in fictionalizing science, but in the scientification of fiction and desiccating it of inspiration. But possibly Marat's last act is not one of freedom: at one point in the film, an unnamed, shadowy and rather prophetic Tiresian old man – something that is recurrent in several dystopias – opines that suicide is only a palliative, forced move in this game of existence where we are in a state of constant ontological flux in terms of identity, where we are more played with than playing. There is a choice, he says, but trails off before clarification. We wonder, like Volodya, if suicide – the palliative to the incurable disease called life – is a choice, but there is no definite answer.

A sense of tantalizing and yet never finalized sense of closure is brought about in the end. Marina burns the dolls at Zoya's grave. Volodya is sent to a war zone because "our homeland will give you the possibility to atone for your sins". Oleg loses control over his car and plunges into a car shed in a maneuver to save a dog on the street, and dies. A crook comes along and takes Oleg's watch (presumably expensive) off his wrist and runs away. The penultimate shot of the film has the hand-held camera following the man through grey smog, before giving up, running out of narrative breath, as it were.



The holocaust of dolls that Marina brings about is apocalyptic and refers implicitly to the need to escape the singular trajectory of history that burdens us with shame and guilt, often forgetting to teach us how to bear the same. The only analgesic, oblivion, is induced by vodka, demonstrated most notably in deliberately disturbing terms in a brusque parody of the *tableau vivant*, where

the old women throw things at each other and expose themselves. Memory and consciousness are reduced but not obliterated. The facile altruism which Volodya is engrafted into, in the form of fighting for the nation, is just another sop. Oleg's love of dogs and the persistence of canine imagery in his life remind us of the Russian performance artist Oleg Kulik whose works frequently corroborate the theme of communication breakdown. As the film draws toward its end, a grim silence falls and the end credits roll in the company of the sounds, perhaps, in the theatre – creaking of chairs, an occasional cough or a sneeze and other sounds. By this time the audience has become the part of the experience of the film or vice versa.

The film, which was based on a script by Vladimir Sorokin, evinces a general interest in pessimism and has, like Sorokin's 2006 novel *Den' oprichnika*, something quite fantastical about it which gives it its languid strength. Ilya Khrzhanovsky originally conceived it as a short story and its eventual genesis into a full-length feature film resulted in a lot of un-edited sequences that make the film more lugubrious and strangely moving. The film, in fact, does not make a claim for a cohesive interpretive 'meaning'. It relies more on visual and aural impact. In the end, however, the film is about life – life that is often used up in search of the self.

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