SELF/OTHER REPRESENTATIONS IN ALEKSEI BALABANOV’S ‘ZEITGEIST MOVIES’: FILM GENRE, GENRE FILM AND INTERTEXTUALITY

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Contents

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... 6
DECLARATION ........................................................................................................................................ 7
COPYRIGHT STATEMENT ..................................................................................................................... 7
THE AUTHOR ........................................................................................................................................ 8
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................................................................................................................... 9

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 11
1.1 Background, Rationale, Aim and Structure of the Introduction ............................................. 11
1.2 Why Balabanov? ................................................................................................................................. 13
1.3 Why Balabanov’s ‘Genre Films’? ........................................................................................................ 16
1.4 Balabanov’s Genre Films in Russian and Western Criticism .................................................. 19
1.5 Contributions of the Study .................................................................................................................. 28
1.6 Aim, Objectives and Research Questions of the Thesis .......................................................... 29
1.7 Primary Sources .................................................................................................................................. 31
1.8 Structure of the Thesis ......................................................................................................................... 32

Chapter 2: Methodology ......................................................................................................................... 35
2.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 35
2.2 Why Genre? ........................................................................................................................................ 37
2.3 What is Film Genre? ............................................................................................................................. 41
2.4 Theoretical Genres .............................................................................................................................. 45
2.5 Historical Genres ................................................................................................................................. 47
2.5.1 Genre Evolution, Variety and Hybridism ...................................................................................... 47
2.5.2 Genre Movie versus Art-House Film and Auteur ................................................................. 50
2.6 Reception, Expectation and Verisimilitude.......................................................... 52
2.7 Genre, Ideology and Representation.................................................................... 54
  2.7.1 Genre, Ideology, Ritual and Myth................................................................. 54
  2.7.2 Genre and Representation: Stereotypes versus Social Types.............. 58
2.8 Conclusion........................................................................................................... 60

Chapter 3: Brother (Brat, 1997)
Gangster Neo-Noir Representations of Russia’s Self and Others.................63
3.1 Introduction.......................................................... ........................................ 63
3.2 Synopsis........................................................................................................... 65
3.3 Gangster Genre and Neo-Noir Style: An Overview................................. 67
3.4 Gangster Neo-Noir: Iconography, Characterisation and Themes......... 68
3.5 The Film’s Two Beginnings.............................................................................. 73
  3.5.1 Establishing Shot and Opening Credits....................................................... 73
  3.5.2 The Portrait Episodes: Introducing Russia and Raskolnikov........... 81
3.6 Conclusion........................................................................................................... 90

Chapter 4: Brother-2 (Brat-2, 2000)
Western/gangster Carnival (‘‘Good Bye America’, Farewell Ukraine’).......93
4.1 Introduction......................................................................................................... 93
4.2 Synopsis............................................................................................................ 96
4.3 Brother-2’s Beginning and Ending................................................................. 98
4.4 Western/gangster Satire or Parody?: Genre Overview and Intertextuality.......................................................... 101
4.5 Brother-2’s satiric and allegorical self/other Re/presentation................................. 106
4.6 Brother-2: A Western/Gangster Story............................................................ 113
4.7 Chapaev and Cement: Brother-2, a Parody of Socialist Realism?...........116
Chapter 5: War (Voina, 2002)
An Eastern-Docudrama Critique of Mainstream Media Representations.....122
5.1 Introduction...............................................................................................122
5.2 Synopsis....................................................................................................125
5.3 Docudrama and Documentary Modes: Metacinematic Complications of War’s Surface Narrative...............................................................127
  5.3.1 The Docu-Mode of Representation: War’s Opening Sequences....127
  5.3.2 Documentary, Docudrama and ‘Nightmare in Chechnya’..............129
5.3.3 Documentary Modes and Metacinematic Double-Coding: Who is Ivan?..131
5.4 The War Genre..........................................................................................135
5.5 Istoriia and Historically Inspired Narrative: Genre and Intertextuality.....139
5.6 The Ending................................................................................................145
5.7 Conclusion.................................................................................................146

Chapter 6: Dead Man’s Bluff (Zhmurki, 2005)
Neo-Noir Gangland Comic Strip Subversions of ‘The Gangster as Tragic Hero’............................................................................................................151
6.1 Introduction................................................................................................151
6.2 Synopsis......................................................................................................155
6.3 Neo-Noir/Black Gangster Comedy and Comic Strip...............................157
6.4 Intracultural Dialogue with Antikiller, Brother, Assa and Tycoon..........160
6.5 The Beginning and Ending: Theme and Mode of Representation............168
6.6 A Neo-Noir Comic: Ex-Komsomol Criminals Turn Into Gangster Politicians.................................................................................................170
6.7 Conclusion..................................................................................................176

Chapter 7: It Doesn’t Hurt (Mne Ne Bol’no, 2006)
The Melodramatic End of The Post-Soviet Gangster and His Mistress........180
7.1 Introduction................................................................................................180
7.2 Synopsis......................................................................................................184
7.3 Gangster, Melodrama and Symbolic Narrative..........................................186
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Revisiting the Thesis Objective

8.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

8.2.1 Research Question 1

8.2.2 Research Question 2

8.2.3 Research Question 3

8.2.4 Research Question 4

8.3 Contributions of the Study

8.3.1 Balabanov Studies

8.3.2 Post-Soviet Cinema and Russian Genre Film and Film Genre Studies

Bibliography

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses the prism of genre to explore the character of self/other representations in five ‘genre films’ made by the Russian filmmaker Aleksei Balabanov and released between 1997 and 2006. It provides the first book-length study of Balabanov and aims to shed new light on the complexity of genre films and their representation techniques in an influential area of post-Soviet Russian cinema. The thesis aims to deconstruct the widespread perception of Balabanov as a populist director of ‘mere genre movies’, which are replete with xenophobic self/other representations. The films under investigation are linked through their developments of genre, evolving themes, an overarching narrative and multiple dialogicity among themselves, with their audiences and with Hollywood. They are shown to reflect the changing post-Soviet Russian Zeitgeist and its historical context. They do so by self-consciously deploying Hollywood genres and blending them with transgeneric modes/styles under the influence of renowned cinematic and literary inter-/transtextual works. The study examines the relationship between Balabanov’s articulation of post-Soviet Russian identity vis-à-vis representations of dominant others, such as America, the Caucasus, Western Europe, Ukraine and, importantly, what the films portray as society’s ruling criminal elites (primarily the New Russian ‘gangsters’).

Combining the concepts of film genre with inter-/transtextuality within close film-textual analyses, the thesis focuses on the filmic texts and their visual, sound and narrative elements, which together indicate particular genre blends and their parabolic/allegorical potential. The analytical chapters investigate how these impinge upon the ideological orientation of Balabanov’s approach to self/other representations. Film genre thus provides a method for exploring the articulations of an evolving post-Soviet Russian identity in Balabanov’s work. The thesis reveals the director’s self-consciously ambiguous perspectives on Russia’s self, its own otherness in a globalised/ing world and the corrupting influences of the country’s state-Socialist militarist past, previous and current military conflicts and the country’s capitulation to the capitalist market.

The application of a conceptual framework drawn from film genre studies enables the thesis to explore how these popular genre films become a platform for presentations of an internally divided Russian national self in its interactions with its various constitutive others, themselves characterised by diversity and inner heterogeneity. As a result, the thesis provides a long-overdue methodological interpretation of the most controversial segment of Balabanov’s oeuvre and challenges received bi-partite views of this hitherto largely misrepresented auteur.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning. It is all my own work, unless referenced to the contrary in the text.

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I graduated with a BA (Hons.) Linguistics and Russian from The Manchester University in 2001, which was followed by an MA in Russian Studies from 2005-2006. In 2007 I began my doctoral study at the University of Manchester. I have presented aspects of this doctoral work at a seminar at The University of Nottingham.
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To Richard
Heart of my heart,
Light of my life,
Always.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background, Rationale, Aim and Structure of the Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russian cinema has served as a platform for the expression of an emergent national identity challenged by Russia’s geopolitical troubles, by the advent of the capitalist market, and by the rise of the New Russian bourgeoisie. Unsurprisingly, many films have addressed weighty topics such as Russia’s imperial legacy and national self, the chaotic changeover from state-Socialism to a market society, and Russia’s relationship with America, Western Europe and the Caucasus.

The expectation that film directors carry a responsibility to help create, nurture and preserve post-Soviet Russianness corresponds to the traditional mission assigned to artists in Russia by its intelligentsia. At a time when capitalist economics were seen as ‘the second coming’, directors of profoundly non-commercial films were paradoxically expected to support Russia’s transformation into a market-led society. Yet, so-called ‘genre movies’ were, from the outset, much better suited to that task and, true to form, they have been eagerly consumed by Russia’s mass audiences. Aleksei Balabanov’s Brother (Brat, 1997), for example, was the most popular Russian film in 1997.1 Genre movies’ formulaic plots and popular commercial orientation have led orthodox critics to treat them as ideologically suspect and associate them with their ill-educated viewers’ worst prejudices. A cultural rift between the acquired tastes of a select aesthetic elite and the average movie-goers’ preferences for cinematic ‘fast food’ has emerged, replicating the mythical intelligentsia/narod divide traversing Russian cultural history.

Nonetheless, both art-house films and genre movies have, in their different ways, grappled with the ‘Russian Idea’, with Russia’s relationship to its Soviet past, and to its constituent others. Nikita Mikhalkov (a director who in some senses straddles the divide), for example, has been both criticised and praised for endorsing a quasi-imperial Russian identity and for indulging in national hubris and nostalgia for the state-Socialist, and even pre-revolutionary past. Others, such as Aleksandr Sokurov, have been hailed for their cinematically challenging art and existentially

complex portrayals of Russianness (though Sokurov, too, has not altogether avoided national hubris). Post-Soviet Russian cinema has certainly produced genre movies that partake of a certain form of patriotic populism (e.g. Egor Konchalovskii’s *Antikiller*, 2002). It has also created art-house films for intellectuals, such as Andrei Zviagintsev’s internationally acclaimed *The Return* (*Vozvrashchenie*, 2003).

Aleksei Balabanov is one of a handful of directors who fail to conform to the categorisation outlined. His films transgress cultural and genre boundaries. They refuse fixed genres and one-dimensional national identities, negating the viability of Manichean self/other representations. This is particularly true of Balabanov’s five *Zeitgeist* genre films – *Brother* (*Brat*, 1997), *Brother-2* (*Brat-2*, 2000), *War* (*Voina*, 2002), *Dead Man’s Bluff* (*Zhumurki*, 2005) and *It Doesn’t Hurt* (*Mne Ne Bol’no*, 2006).

These and other *Zeitgeist* films (I interpret *Zeitgeist* in its conventional sense of ‘spirit of the time’) explicitly engage with the contemporary mood and the ideas of their historical context/period rather than being merely passive reflections of them. The artistic refractions and reflections in contemporary *Zeitgeist* films broach topical issues and events and relationships, including those of national self and other. Balabanov’s exploration of the post-Soviet *Zeitgeist* began with *Happy Days* (*Schastlivye Dni*, 1991) and finished with *It Doesn’t Hurt*. His next film *Cargo 200* (*Gruz 200*, 2007) also describes a *Zeitgeist*, i.e. that of the late Soviet and Gorbachev years, but it does so in retrospect, from a historical standpoint.²

In his five *Zeitgeist* movies, Balabanov accomplishes an experimental wedlock of entertaining genre movie and conceptual art, thus bringing progressive, intellectual cinema to the screens of wider audiences. These films thrive on the exploration, manipulation, deconstruction and subversion of conventional genre hierarchies, mainstream myths, dominant ideologies and national stereotypes. Their critical, innovative deployment of genres is intrinsically linked to their counter-intuitive self/other representations and their apparently off-beam reflections of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. In conveying the vicissitudes of Russia’s rapidly shifting cultural identity, the first two of these films, *Brother* and *Brother-2*, successfully initiated post-Soviet cinema’s intercultural dialogue with its dominant other,

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² *Cargo 200* and also *Morphine* (2008), apparent art-house films, obviously also engage with popular genres (horror) and reflect their contemporary *Zeitgeist* despite the past setting.
Hollywood. Deploying the gangster and Western genres in complex hybrids, they portray the post-Soviet Russian self in its tense and contradictory relationship with an alterity of multiple dimensions.

It is the question of how Balabanov uses genre to portray the post-Soviet Russian self in its fraught relationship with alterity which provides the main focus of this study. By examining Balabanov’s self/other representations through the prism of genre, I hope to reveal the interlocking boundaries of cinematic representation and the contemporary Russian Zeitgeist, whilst continually challenging the art-house/genre dichotomy.

This introductory chapter starts with providing a brief background to the study. It then locates the thesis in its broad research context by providing a review of previous scholarship on Balabanov’s work. This, in turn, enables me to highlight the original contributions made by my study. Subsequently, I discuss the primary aim, objectives and research questions that I attempt to answer. The last two sections delineate the selection of primary sources and present the thesis structure. I do not attempt, here, to present the theoretical framework and methodology to be used in my investigation. This is deferred to the following chapter.

1.2 Why Balabanov?

Aleksei Balabanov was born on February 25, 1959 in Sverdlovsk (today Ekaterinburg). In 1981 he graduated from the Translation Faculty of the Gorky Teachers’ Training University. From 1983 to 1987, he worked as assistant film director at Sverdlovsk film studio and also studied on the experimental course, ‘Auteur Cinema’, one of the Higher Courses for Scriptwriters and Film Directors, graduating in 1990. In 1991, Balabanov’s breakthrough as director came with his first full-length feature, Happy Days, which he scripted himself. In 1992, he co-founded the STV Film Company, together with the producers Sergei Selianov and Vasilii Grigorev. STV has participated in the creation of almost all of his films.

Balabanov is one of the most influential and controversial post-Soviet Russian filmmakers. Between 1987 and 2010, this versatile and prolific writer-director has made seventeen films, twelve of which have been full features.\(^3\) His

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\(^3\) This count excludes Balabanov’s mostly lesser-known films: his VKSR coursework short-films Earlier was a Different Time (Ran’she bylo drugoe vremia, 1987) and I Don't Have a Friend (U
oeuvre thrives on a variety of genre blends and interrelated themes primarily concerned with the emergence of the new Russian self and its state-socialist past. His films are marked by inspired musical choices that comment on their visual landscape and support the narrative. Whilst some of his non-genre films have been accorded the accolade of brilliant auteurism, his more popular genre movies have been attacked for their objectionable ideological underpinnings and suspect populist commercialism.

What is widely acknowledged is that Balabanov consistently uses film to discuss the theme of post-Soviet Russian identity and alterity. He began his career as a brilliant, idiosyncratic, and promising art-house film director with Happy Days, The Castle, and the short film, Trofin (1995), for which he received wide acclaim and numerous awards. After his initial, critical success, however, he appeared to turn in 1996/97 to catering for Russia’s mass audiences with his highly popular mainstream film, Brother. Balabanov’s popular narrative streak continues to this day and was interrupted only twice by the two art-house films, Of Freaks and Men (Pro urodov i liudei, 1998), and The River (Reka, 2002), finding its provisional end with the retrospective Stoker (Kochegar, 2010). Since Brother, Balabanov’s oeuvre has been exceptionally wide-ranging, complex and controversial and it has struck chords with a wide spectrum of audiences. These range from Great Russian chauvinists, via enthusiastic mass audiences, to baffled Russian and Western intellectuals, who have been scathingly critical or openly admiring. Reactions to Balabanov have been as ambiguous and diverse as the films themselves.

Balabanov not only directs but also (co-)writes the scripts of his films which, together with his partnership in their production, mark him as an independent filmmaker. It is hardly surprising that he has refused to be limited by orthodox genre formulae. Recognisable, overarching points of his signature style are his typically open-ended plots at whose centre there tend to be homeless strangers in unknown, often hostile, environments to which they must adapt. These anti-heroes are clueless but adaptable, lonely men and women trying to make sense of the world with/in which they struggle, sometimes rise and inevitably fall. Balabanov’s city –


modernity’s *id* – is both a mirror for the anti-heroes’ minds and a metaphor for Russia. Balabanov’s archetypal mise-en-scènes include recurrent props such as car wrecks, battered trams, vodka bottles, army shirts and guns. The action usually takes place in dingy claustrophobic backyards, communal flats, bars and mean streets populated by traders, whores, their pimps, other criminals and alcoholics. The family unit is dysfunctional. Characters are interlinked through apparently plot/genre-driven structures that give them little insight into their own and each others’ lives. Their wounds, illnesses and addictions provide metaphors for Russia’s ailments. The destructive mood which prevails in Balabanov’s films is established through his pessimistic, sentimental depictions of lies, brutality, societal atomisation, alienation and commercialism. From *Brother* onwards, the military theme has been a constant presence, reminding audiences of Russia’s apparently perennial state of war. These elements alone speak of a progressive cinema challenging the assumptions implicit in the very ‘movie genres’ it deploys.

Despite the originality of his filmmaking, its indisputably original contributions to post-Soviet cinema, and its undeniable popularity among a wide spectrum of cinema-goers, Balabanov’s work has not received the attention due to it from scholars in Russia or elsewhere. It is not that Balabanov has not been studied. But existing studies have not been based on close, theoretically informed readings applying rigorous methodologies across a film corpus. Rather, individual films have been given the ‘thumbs up’ or the ‘thumbs down’. Some of them have received chapter- and article-long attention, but Balabanov’s influential oeuvre has not been analysed as a whole. What has been written about the films, moreover, has usually been blended with remarks made by Balabanov, other directors, established critics and individual viewers. Balabanov’s films have thus tended to be reduced to the secondary discourses surrounding them, rather than treated on their own terms. ‘Common sense’ assumptions about the division of Balabanov’s work into its art-house and genre movie components have not been questioned. Genre as a method of analysis rather than a convenient labelling device has never been applied.

A single book-length study cannot do justice to Balabanov’s entire, voluminous output. This thesis will therefore focus on his most controversial (and most heavily criticised) films. The fact that *Brother* and *Brother-2* in particular
helped to inject new life into a moribund post-Soviet cinema industry\(^5\) by introducing popular Hollywood genres to the wider Russian audiences is, on its own, reason enough to subject this sub-section of Balabanov’s oeuvre to sustained, critical enquiry. There are, however, a number of other, more specific reasons why Balabanov’s genre films demand our close attention and examination.

First, the five films in question have been subject to numerous oversimplifications. Such one-dimensional readings, whilst not entirely without validity, tend to diminish the films’ artistic complexities and thus inadvertently collude with ill-informed, xenophobic audience misappropriations, even as they criticise Balabanov on precisely those grounds. The oversimplification that has most affected the reception of these films is the suggestion that they cynically reinforce Great Russian homeland ideologies and mainstream populist myths. I intend in my thesis to revisit this assumption by teasing out the complexities and hybridities of genre revealed in the films, along with the resultant ambiguities of their self/other representations, and their highly critical depictions of Russian national identification strategies. My study will thus restore these five genre films to their rightful place within Balabanov’s otherwise widely acclaimed work.

Secondly, and as a corollary to the previous point, Balabanov’s oeuvre has been read in fragments and, to date, there is no single book-length study devoted to it. My thesis will constitute the first full-length examination of a substantial portion of that oeuvre – one, moreover, which has its own internal coherence owing to its consistent and staged exploration of the potential that Hollywood genres offer for depicting the formation of the post-Soviet Russian self in its active dialogue with Russian audiences. This theme only gains in importance as a result of its recapitulation in Balabanov’s most recent film, *Stoker*.

### 1.3 Why Balabanov’s ‘Genre Films’?

Balabanov’s genre films were released over a ten-year period between 1997 and 2006. Shocked by wider audience reactions to *Brother*, Russian critics immediately sensed the dangers in its breaking with what is often considered by their Western counterparts the moralistic Soviet/Russian cinematic tradition. *Brother* was released

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five years after post-Soviet Russia had emerged from the torrents of history, at a
time when confusion and a national identity crisis prevailed. Only a few months had
elapsed since the first Chechen War, during the final stages of, and in partial
response to which Brother had been shot. The negative reverberations of Russia's
controversial market-oriented reforms were being felt by both the wider population
and the post-Soviet film industry. It, too, was in crisis.⁶ ‘The ‘land of plenty’ was
materialising only for those few, who more easily adapted to and exploited the
period of transformation.

Against this background, Brother became a hit, infusing new life into post-
Soviet cinema through its entertaining mastery of the Hollywood idiom. It was the
first of five ‘genre movies’ which, all together, constitute an ongoing cinematic
narrative, self-consciously mapped onto the post-Soviet historical context from 1997
to 2006. For the combined purposes of reaching larger audiences and engaging with
developments in Russian society, this meta-narrative combines two primary genres:
the gangster movie and the Western. Broadly speaking, the gangster genre serves to
isolate the dark side of Russia’s self and its warped relationship with its community;
the Western provides a vehicle for describing post-Soviet Russia’s encounters with
its frontiers in the West and East. In addition, these primary forms are given
subversive slants through their variations in neo-noir, satirical, documentary and
melodramatic modes. As part of this process, these five films self-consciously cite a
number of specific intertextual works, both cinematic and literary. It is these
encounters of the Russian self with its own dark side as well as with its various
significant others, Eastern and Western, that Balabanov’s genre films establish as
their major concern. The films vividly convey the impact of Russia’s significant
others on a complex national self, as it was represented through the prism of the
Hollywood idiom. They offer a distinctive commentary on post-Soviet realisations
of the Russian Idea which was being hotly discussed all over Russia during that
period. In so doing, they actively reflect the contemporary Zeitgeist of which they
are the quintessential product.

By analysing the transformations, combinations and stylistic modifications to
which the genres in Balabanov’s films are subject, along with the specific
intertextual forerunners through which these processes are foregrounded, I build a

⁶ Beumers (1999[2006]: 2-4); and Anna Lawton (2004), Imaging Russia 2000: Film and Facts.
picture of a complex and ambiguous œuvre. Its unique amalgamations and subversions of hitherto readily assumed categories and dichotomies (art-house/genre; self/other) render these five films open-ended hybrids defying clear-cut aesthetic and ideological categorisation. This ambivalence enables them to represent the Russian self as a shifting entity, constituted by contradictory stances towards both its ethnocultural others, and its own past. I pay particular attention to Balabanov’s appropriations of Hollywood cinema as a means of commenting on the Russian self via the voice of its dominant American other.

There are three reasons why Balabanov’s art-house-genre-movie hybrids offer a particularly important object of enquiry. First, they make a significant and, so far unacknowledged, contribution to the perennial intercultural dialogue between Russian and Hollywood cinema as well as to a related intracultural dialogue within Russian cinema. Indeed, Brother was the first post-Soviet Russian film to deploy the gangster genre to challenge conventional wisdoms about Russian history. Its sequel, Brother-2, added the Western into the generic mix and together they ushered in a new trend in Russian cinema. The full impact of Balabanov’s genre film ‘sub-œuvre’ on post-Soviet cinema has yet to be realised.

Secondly, the corpus in question provides a unique example of an œuvre in dialogue with itself, and with its own audiences. In their constant, and impudent, ‘othering’ of the national self that they produce in anti-heroic terms by their particular genre deployment, Balabanov’s genre films deliberately and self-consciously set out to challenge the very ‘Russian us’ with which critics and viewers identified when engaging with them.

Thirdly, from Brother onwards, and together with Pavel Lungin’s post-Soviet output, Balabanov offers a vivid Russian cinematic critique of a global trend that the prominent French philosopher, Gilles Lipovetsky, has subsequently termed Hypermodernism. The latter term, according to James Brandon, ‘precisely defines the conditions in Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union’. My thesis is intended to stand alongside and supplement Brandon’s study of hypermodernism in post-Soviet cinema and thus to engender further research into the progressive and innovative currents running throughout Balabanov’s œuvre, ending once and for all

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7 Brandon (2009: 10).
the dichotomous presentation of that oeuvre as consisting of distinctive art-house and mass-market components.

1.4 Balabanov’s Genre Films in Russian and Western Criticism

Despite the indubitable proliferation of interest in Balabanov’s films, most studies have reacted to individual works as and when they appeared. Nancy Condee’s chapter-length study of Balabanov’s films as an oeuvre is the one exception to that rule. Her and other contributions have attempted to address Balabanov’s films, thematically, including the theme of the search for a post-Soviet Russian identity. These brief accounts have not applied methodologies derived from film theory but have rather assigned various ‘self-evident’ genre labels. They contain some intuitively perceptive indications of genre blends, which have not been supported by systematic analysis. Interpretations of eye- and ear-catching details have generally been influenced by Balabanov’s putative nationalism. The generally accepted canonic belief holds that, with Brother, Balabanov was transformed from a brilliant, if idiosyncratic, art-house auteur to a populist director of commercial, nationalist genre cinema.

Since all of these studies commented in one way or another on the ideological alignments of Balabanov’s films, it is necessary to recall the political factors that influenced their broader reception. Before looking more closely at those critical works which commented specifically on Balabanov’s self/other representations, I will discuss briefly how these factors shaped the interpretation and reception of Balabanov’s work. Some of them have been already signalled in the opening section of this introduction.

There is, with hindsight, little doubt that Balabanov’s unorthodox methods and dark themes were at odds with official calls, such as that of Daniil Dondurei, editor in chief of the Russian journal Film Art (Iskusstvo kino), encouraging filmmakers to promote a positive view of Russia. What nobody could question was Balabanov’s proven ability to attract wider audiences back to Russian cinemas. Paradoxically, the views of Balabanov adopted by his mass audiences and by liberal

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critics of his work have converged in their assumptions that they were dealing with conventional genre movies promoting Russian heroes and endorsing their right to save their community by violent means. These qualities were anathema for some affronted critics, manna from heaven to enthusiastic, younger audiences and the cause of puzzled controversy among a handful of more insightful scholars.

There are several reasons why Balabanov’s purportedly nationalist stance and populist methods have been fiercely attacked by influential critics and scholars. First and foremost, the notion that American-style genre movies can do anything more than conform to commercialist formulae is difficult to accept for many Russian (and some Western) critics. According to their rule book, it falls to art-house films to pick up the baton of Russia’s venerable literary tradition, whilst genre movies are mere expressions of the depths to which American consumerism has sunk. Critics like Daniil Dondurei proclaimed the need to create a new cinema and a national hero that would somehow reach wider audiences.\footnote{Daniil Dondurei (1992), ‘Cinema, Cinema! Turn Your Face to Film-goers’, \textit{Cine-Eye}, 1: 27.} What they envisioned was a clean break with the recent, bleak \textit{chernukha} trends of the mid/late 1980s to early 1990s and the advent of a kind of positive art-house filmmaking, which, however, as the earlier experience of the Soviet avant-garde taught, was never likely to appeal to mass audiences. Balabanov understood this, but refused to accept that entertaining genre films could not address serious issues in a sophisticated manner. Neither his mass audiences, nor the critical elite, however, seemed capable of seeing beyond the surfaces of Balabanov’s box-office successes.

assumptions made by Russian critics, such as Daniil Dondurei,\(^{16}\) Igor’ Mantsov\(^{17}\) and Evgenii Margolit.\(^{18}\) Some dismissive commentaries on *Brother*, such as Andrew Horton’s,\(^{19}\) Yana Hashamova’s\(^{20}\) and Anja Tippner’s\(^{21}\) were critical of the film’s enthusiastic reception by the wider Russian audiences, dealt only with superficial themes and details and fell into the trap of treating Balabanov’s protagonist’s remarks as his own. *Brother*, which appeared to present a killer as a positive hero, was portrayed as an ideologically dangerous populist genre movie beaten to the chase only by *Brother-2*. A number of more sensitive and perceptive Western responses to Balabanov, such as James Brandon’s,\(^{22}\) John Hope’s\(^{23}\) and Olga Klimova’s\(^{24}\) have been unable to stem the tide of scathing dismissals of the director’s retreat into nationalist populism.

The third reason for the broadly negative – at best controversial – critical reactions to Balabanov’s five *Zeitgeist* films is related to the director’s well-known propensity to give no more than cryptical non-explanations of his films in interviews. Balabanov had once mentioned his intention to make an ‘intellectual thriller’\(^{25}\) but his words fell on deaf ears. With nothing to go on other than their own conventional assumptions, critics tended to take the easy way out and treat *Brother* as a more or less straightforward *kriminal’ny boevik* (i.e. a Russian crime-action movie) and its protagonist as an uncomplicated or, at best, controversial positive


\(^{22}\) Brandon (Ibid.).


This generally uncritical but always unmethodological approach was applied, too, to subsequent Balabanov films. Balabanov chose to conduct his polemic with his audiences through his films.

In the following chapters, I aim to demythologise the notion of Balabanov’s genre films as those of a simplistic and opportunistic director who lines his pockets by preying on his audiences’ nationalist prejudices and need for a comfortably unambiguous post-Soviet identity banner around which to rally. The subsequent discussion of critical works dealing with the genre films in their chronological order will enable me to clarify the original contribution to scholarship that I make in this thesis.

One of the most influential reactions to Balabanov’s first, and definitive, foray into genre film territory was Daniil Dondurei’s article ‘Ne brat ia tebe, gnida...’, which referred to Brother as a ‘poor film’ (bednoe kino) and centred its interpretation of the film’s apparent nationalism and xenophobia on superficial details taken out of context. This view has influenced studies in Russia and in the West and shaped the overwhelmingly negative tenor of critical work on Balabanov.

Nancy Condee’s study addresses the theme of the city and makes many useful observations. She notes, for example, that It Doesn’t Hurt is a ‘not altogether successful’ melodrama influenced by ‘Dumas fils’s 1848 novel, La Dame aux camélias’. Like other critics she assumes a clear distinction between Balabanov’s art-house films and his genre cinema and, like her peers, does not analyse the generic affiliations of his films. Condee throws some doubt on notions of Balabanov’s cut-patriotism, but, nonetheless, calls Dead Man’s Bluff an outlet for ‘Balabanov’s

28 Condee (2009).
29 Ibid: 224.
30 Ibid.
nationalism’, and thus mirrors the controversy and ambiguity among Western criticism. Dawn Seckler criticises Dead Man’s Bluff for its commercialism, racism, nationalism and sexism as well as its poor execution of the comedy genre. Yana Hashamova notes without examining the film that Dead Man’s Bluff ‘exposes the stupidity and cruelty of the criminal world’. War, by contrast, presents a ‘true’ Russian point of view [full of] nationalistic fervour and ‘aims to destroy Chechen cultural and ethnic marks’. Post-Soviet Russian society’s psychological state was, for Hashamova, that of a mass-mediated, anxiety-driven, aggressive adolescent and Balabanov one of the willing conduits for Russia’s ‘wounded pride’ and ‘fears’. These contradictory notions defy the idea of an oeuvre. Driven by the profit motive, Hashamova argues, Balabanov exploited ‘Russia’s problematic relationship with the West’ with his xenophobic genre movies.

In two chapter-length studies, Birgit Beumers explores the two Brother films and their link with the concept of the Russian Idea. Like Condee, she makes several astute observations, without combining them into a holistic reading of the corpus, informed by a theoretical model. Beumers observes that ‘while Balabanov undisputedly promotes a Russian way of life, Americans and Russians are not schematised’. She regards Balabanov as a nationalist filmmaker trying to ‘find a connection with the audience’ through the action genre, creating an amoral romantic killer-hero, who became dangerously attractive for the disillusioned youth and national right of the 1990s. Beumers thus slips into the familiar pattern of ‘genre-mistakes’. Unlike the argument I shall make, Beumers holds that Brother rejected the defeatism of the chernukha model.

Susan Larsen investigates the question of national identity in Brother and Brother-2, which she terms criminal thrillers. She reveals an impressive awareness

34 Ibid: 49-50.
41 Beumers (1999[2006]: 83).
of the narrative complexities of Brother and identifies traces of mockery in Brother-2, providing the basis for my reading of the film as a satirical parody. Yet in claiming that the goal of both Brother films was to create ‘a new “hero of our time”’ and by drawing information from the film’s official website in support of her argument, she, too, joins conventional opinion. Her description of Brother-2 as a ‘fiercely anti-American film’ ‘eliminat[ing] most of [Brother’s] potentially alienating effects’ is a view I shall seek to refute.

Lars Kristensen follows Larsen in his brief account of Brother-2, describing the film’s rampant anti-Americanism, blatant racism and overall commercialism. He approaches Brother-2 through postcolonial theory, a method of which, he admits, he himself is unconvinced. Vanessa Rampton focuses on the Brother films’ treatment of ‘National Identity in Russia’. Without offering textual evidence, she assigns the two ‘nostalgic’ Brother films and their vigilante-hero to the gangster genre, which will be shown to be an oversimplification, and asserts that their purpose was to inculcate a particularly exclusive type of Russian identity. She bases her judgement on a survey of critical and domestic audience responses rather than on a film analysis.

Similarly, Anja Tippner claims that, with Brother and Brother-2, Balabanov exploited popular cinema to negotiate the legitimacy of violence as a tool of vigilante nationalist self-help (samosud) intended to undermine constitutional law. The films, she contends, offered Russian audiences a positive hero with nationalist values, who is in fervent support of the homeland and of the criminal ‘brotherhoods’, while negating all else. Without elaboration, Tippner treats the films as action films that follow ‘the logic of the genre’, with Brother-2 being a sequel defined by seriality rather than difference.

Some of Tippner’s views are echoed in Anthony Anemone’s contribution, which adds War as the third part of a ‘vigilante trilogy’. Focusing on self/other representations, Anemone notes that the two Brother films present anti-American

43 Ibid: 493.
44 Ibid: 511.
46 Kristensen (Ibid: 35-41).
47 Rampton (Ibid.).
49 Ibid.
reanimations of Soviet ideology, the cult of the motherland and myth of national fraternity. In a position similar to mine, the film War is presented as a sequel to the Brother films. But although he concedes that War revives some of Brother’s ambivalence, Anemone treats its protagonist, misleadingly as I shall show, as a barbaric Russian ‘Rambo’.

Mark Lipovetsky makes three contributions to Balabanov studies. One is a chapter written together with Daniil Leiderman, which repeats and adds to Lipovetsky’s Russian contribution, dealing with Brother-2’s representations of otherness, alongside those of two Western films featuring post-communist protagonists. Brother-2, they argue, produces the second-world man as a proud self in opposition to a demonised American other. Brother-2 is criticised for its ‘clearly fascist attitudes’ and being a vehicle for Balabanov’s and other Great Russian nationalists’ longing for the former certitudes of the cold war period. Without further examination, they mention the parody in the opening scenes of Brother-2.

Lipovetsky’s article sees War as a prototype for ‘Post-Sots’ works defined by ‘not try[ing] to expose the absurdity or violence hidden beneath Socialist Realist mythology [but] perceive[ing] Socialist Realism as a positive experience’. This paradigmatic war film, in his account, possesses a straightforward plot exhibiting binary good-evil oppositions and poeticising violence. Its war theme, military iconography and misogynist heroes exhibit male bonding habits in an anti-individualist call for a collective identity favouring ‘restoration nostalgia’. Lipovetsky mentions briefly the film’s deconstructive aspect, which, contrary to my argument, he believes happen ‘unwittingly, despite the author’s best intentions’.

In her reflections on the Caucasus in Russian culture, Verena Krüger examines Balabanov’s War as an action film featuring binary representations. She argues that the masculine and rationally superior Russian hero is the positive foil to effeminate, emotional Western characters and bestially barbaric Muslim men. War,

56 Ibid: 374. Original emphasis.
57 Krüger (Ibid.).
in Krüger’s somewhat reductive reading, which I shall contest, gives clear answers about (Russian) right and (non-Russian) wrong.

David Gillespie plunges rather unhelpfully straight into historical explanations and describes War as a racist film preaching that militarist nationalism was necessary to resolve the Chechen issue for the sake of Russian unity. Furthermore, he takes popular glorifications of Brother’s apparent messages as substantiation of the film’s xenophobic nationalism.

Adopting a view that I will corroborate and extend in the genre context, John Hope sees in War a withering reply to Sergei Bodrov Sr.’s overly humanistic film The Prisoner of the Mountains (Kavkazkii Plennik, 1996). He observes a deconstruction of the myths of a ‘much-vaulted Russia’ and a ‘free and authentic Caucasus’. Gerald McCausland includes a similarly perceptive reading of War’s complexities in his examination of post-Soviet Russian identity. Importantly, his Lacanian reading recognises the symbolic value inherent in War’s frame and embedded narratives – a position I shall develop more thoroughly in respect of all five genre films.

Another of the more nuanced readings of Balabanov comes from James Brandon, who, as we recall, argues that, beginning with Brother, Balabanov’s films represent early artistic reflections on what the prominent French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky later termed hypermodernity (a post-postmodern intensification of modernity). Brandon emphasises that Brother is not mere entertainment and deserves scholarly attention because the ‘conditions Lipovetsky described were already manifested in [the film]’. He also links the “history” film Dead Man’s Bluff with Gilles Lipovetsky’s theory of hypermodernity and observes that it is the film most similar to Brother in its artistic depictions of hypermodern times. But

60 Hope (Ibid: 69).
62 Brandon (Ibid.).
63 Ibid: 8.
64 Ibid: Abstract & 16-17.
65 Ibid: 16-17.
Brandon does not attempt to deal with the genre issue, nor grapple with the ideological controversies besetting Balabanov’s reputation.

Likewise, Jennifer Day (2004) implicitly challenges the art-house/genre dichotomy by thematically including *Brother* in her reading of the deployment of the St. Petersburg myth in *Happy Days, Brother and Of Freaks and Men*.\(^{66}\) The article examines Russia’s identity crisis through ‘the apocalyptic features of the Petersburg myth’,\(^{67}\) echoing Condee in her analysis. But the challenge remains implicit and without further genre analysis.

Denise Youngblood includes Balabanov’s *War* in her seminal study of Soviet/Russian war films.\(^{68}\) She notes *War*’s intentional irony, the absence of heroes, ‘complex portrayal of Chechen motivation’\(^{69}\) and ‘scathing indictment of post-Soviet Russian society [and] the... state’.\(^{70}\) She sees in *War* a film that ‘is more complex than some Russian intellectuals wanted to admit’.\(^{71}\) Youngblood indicates the outline of the territory that I will seek to map out in full.

Finally, *It Doesn’t Hurt*, largely received more positive reviews indicative of its particular genre deployment, especially from Russian critics. Savel’ev calls the film a ‘fully fledged’ melodrama with the structure of a classical melodramatic ‘triangle’.\(^{72}\) Oleg Sulkin’s view is similar but he adds that the film’s ‘ideological charge... shatter[s] the structure of the genre.’\(^{73}\) Mikhail Trofimenkov\(^{74}\) calls it the first post-Soviet melodrama and, like Condee, a variation on *The Lady of the Camellias*.\(^{75}\) Trofimenkov observes that Balabanov’s ‘play with genre... is extremely serious’ and that a melodramatic surface reading of the film’s structural dimensions and moral does not suffice.\(^{76}\) He presents the trauma of the Chechen wars as an

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\(^{67}\) Ibid: 617.


\(^{69}\) Ibid: 215.

\(^{70}\) Ibid: 213-14.

\(^{71}\) Ibid: 214.


\(^{76}\) Trofimenkov (Ibid.).
important subtext underlying this unconventional melodrama’s representations and foregrounded in two of the film’s episodes. Taking my cue from this insight I will develop it in terms of allegory. Olga Klimova\textsuperscript{77} focuses on two intertwined story lines in Balabanov’s ‘new masterpiece’ – ‘the story of a relationship with a terminally ill person’ and a ‘representation of the consequences of the market economy’. Here, too, I will unify and transpose these thematic insights into an allegorical context: the first provides a narrative mirror of, and metonymy for, the second, as do other cases of injury, illness and addiction in the film/s. Klimova’s review draws attention to the potential symbolic value of the mise-en-scène, props and soundtracks, as well as to the absence of conventional melodramatic villains and heroes – details which I will elaborate on in my own more substantive reading of the film.

1.5 Contributions of the Study

Previous work on Balabanov contains several useful pointers to guide me in accomplishing what will be the first book-length analysis of Balabanov’s genre films. Since my framework employs concepts drawn from film genre studies, the thesis also constitutes the sole reading of the pop-genre Zeitgeist corpus that is grounded in a comprehensive, systematically applied theoretical model. It is this, I contend, which allows me to produce what I hope will be a persuasive explanation of Balabanov’s hitherto largely misunderstood approach to questions of identity and alterity. Thus, the study makes an original contribution not only to Russian cultural studies and to scholarship on Balabanov as well as post-Soviet Russian cinema, but also to theoretically informed cinema studies more broadly. It provides what I believe is a compelling demonstration of the value of reading filmic texts through the prism of cinema’s prime mover – genre – as a means of situating those texts in their full historical context.

Due to its complexities, I shall refrain from giving an outline of my methodology at this point. The following chapter engages more closely with scholarship on film genre studies and how these theories and findings can be bundled to provide a single theoretical framework and a methodology suitable for investigations of self/other representations in Balabanov and, indeed, elsewhere. What follows below is an overview of my broad approach to textual analysis.

\textsuperscript{77} Klimova (Ibid.).
1.6 Aim, Objectives and Research Questions of the Thesis

The main objective of this thesis is to provide an analysis of the character of self/other representations in Balabanov’s five *Zeitgeist* films through an examination of the films’ deployment of genre (and inter-/trans-)textuality. This objective will be achieved in three ideal yet overlapping stages. First, I intend to identify the genres deployed by these films. For this a close textual reading is required without drawing rash conclusions about the films’ historical dimensions or being unduly influenced by previous interpretations. After all, as one shall see, fundamental to genre analysis is the detailed excavation of a film’s iconography – its visual thematics. The question of themes overlaps with character presentations and plots. Close attention will be paid to the role of metacinematic devices, which includes the synchronisation of sound and image. I will also attempt to identify influential works of the individual films’ cinematic and/or literary intertext, as these will help indicate the film’s genre and (counter)cultural alignment. I expect the films under investigation to share the genres of these forerunners, which they emulate or even reference directly.

Secondly, I will explicate the deployment of genre by interrogating the findings from my close readings via the theoretical apparatus drawn from film genre studies. At this point, genres and their blends will be identified together with their ideological alignment. Historical explanations are plausible now, since they will be grounded in genre methodology, and since genre is, at root, inherently social and historical in its construction.

Thirdly, I will combine my findings with the insights of previous work in Russian cultural studies concerned with post-Soviet identity in order to pinpoint the key features of Balabanov’s envisioning of the heterogeneous Russian self in its interrelationship with its others. Here, I wish to demonstrate the efficacy of a genre-based methodology to the task of assessing the importance of the oeuvre of a Russian director concerned with the issue of post-Soviet Russian identity and alterity, and for investigations of post-Soviet genre cinema as a whole. Here, Nancy Condee’s ‘Introduction: Custodian of the Empire’, which concisely and lucidly discusses the question of Russian identity, is of invaluable help and merit. Its
existence left me enough space to develop my own methodology in necessary and chapter-long detail.\textsuperscript{78}

My staged approach to the realisation of my objective will require me to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the self/other representations embedded in Balabanov’s \textit{Zeitgeist} films and their deployment of genre?

2. In what (supportive or subversive) ways do these films’ self/other representations interact with mainstream ideologies, myths and cultural tropes in post-Soviet Russian society?

3. What do the historical implications of the interplay between genre and representation tell us about the received, bi-partite, view of Balabanov’s oeuvre?

4. How can the genre method of analysis enhance our approach to self/other representations in post-Soviet Russian cinema more generally?

These questions are posited with an awareness that the application of genre theory to the post-Soviet cinematic context might be considered problematic owing to a) the stubborn durability of typologies based on the art-house/genre movie distinction; b) the fact that genre theory has yet to be applied to post-Soviet cinema, setting aside Youngblood’s outstanding work on Soviet/Russian war films and Seth Graham’s paradigmatic article on \textit{chernukha},\textsuperscript{79} means that it may still raise methodological questions, particularly that of whether its terminology needs to be adjusted to the


specifics of the Russian case; and c) the relative lack of Soviet forerunners around which to centre the intertextual aspect of the genre model (this is a function of both the peculiarity of post-Soviet cinema’s ruptured relationship to its immediate past, and the pioneering, innovative brilliance of Balabanov).\(^{80}\) The risk I am taking, however, is a calculated one and I address the above issues in the next chapter, where I provide a detailed discussion of cinematic genre theory and how it might be used to examine relations of identity and alterity under conditions of historical and social turmoil.

1.7 Primary Sources

The primary sources used in this study are five of Balabanov’s narrative films. They form a discrete sub-section of his oeuvre through their shared, and carefully sequenced, use of Hollywood genres as a means of engaging with contemporary Russian self/other relations. These Zeitgeist films are linked to the remainder of the director’s oeuvre both thematically and cinematically (if this were not the case, my contention that the art-house/genre divide in Balabanov is misleading would be open to immediate challenge). But the films in question differ from Balabanov’s other work through their idiosyncratic blend of two particular Hollywood genres, the gangster and the Western, as a means of expressing their common concern with post-Soviet Russia’s fraught attitude to alterity and selfhood. Furthermore, the scenarios of four of these five films, together with those of Balabanov’s other narrative films up to 2005 (and thus exclusive of It Doesn’t Hurt), were published by the director himself.\(^{81}\) While this did not determine the films selected for this thesis, the existence of the four scenarios has been of help in analysing them.

The sequencing of the analytical chapters follows a diachronic-chronological logic and is imposed by the oeuvre and its shifting representations of an ever-changing post-Soviet Russia. Each of the five analytical chapters examines one film. The Zeitgeist cycle did not, in my opinion, start with Brother but rather with Happy Days and also includes the art-house films The Castle and Of Freaks and Men. However, the ‘genre movies’ represent a discrete sub-corpus within Balabanov’s oeuvre, one suitable for analysis within a single doctoral thesis which largely ‘brackets out’ the more obviously art-house films, referring to them at those strategic

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80 This is not to suggest that Soviet-Cinema did not produce and show genre films (e.g. melodramas, musicals, war films and, for example, the Eastern; a blend of war and Western).
points crucial to my contention that they form a unity with the genre movies. With *It Doesn’t Hurt*, I shall argue, Russia finally rids itself of its leech-like *post-Soviet* modifier, making room for a final assessment of, and settling of scores with, its burdensome Soviet past.

### 1.8  Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is divided into six chapters – one conceptual and five analytical – and ends with a conclusion.

The following, conceptual, chapter introduces the overarching theory and methodological framework for the thesis. It discusses film genre and genre film as well as their relationship to intertextuality and representation, attempting a) to provide a comprehensive overview of genre studies, and b) to clarify which aspects of genre theory enable me to address the specific issues relating to self/other representations in Balabanov that I outlined in my research questions. I should, incidentally, make it clear that, in keeping with my theoretical focus on the primacy of the text, when I refer to Balabanov, I have in mind not the biographical director but the authorial voice as it is realised in the films themselves.

In the five analytical chapters I put my methodological toolbox into practice. The unifying thread running throughout every chapter is the refraction of issues of identity and alterity through the cinematic genres and modes of Hollywood. I will show that Balabanov is engaged in a dynamic inter- and intracultural dialogue with his historical context, with his audiences, and with Soviet and Russian cinema, all of which form part of an integrated narrative network. From his position as a post-Soviet Russian director, Balabanov actively chose to give expression to the contemporary *post-Soviet* *Zeitgeist* through the dominant medium of Hollywood genre film. It is this which accounts for the multi-layered dialogicity of his oeuvre.

The first film, *Brother*, examined in Chapter 3, introduces the gangster genre in its idiosyncratic Balabanov variant, blended with the neo-noir mode and modified for the post-Soviet context under the influence of Fedor Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866). The image of Russia which emerges from this synthesis is represented within an allegorical framework as an oedipal gangster-drifter and psychotic Raskolnikov-figure, who is in two relationships with,
on the one hand, a drug-taking, materialistic prostitute and, on the other hand, a sado-masochistic mother figure, resulting in a self-critical exposure of the ills of post-Soviet Russian society and deconstruction of the mythological figure of the Russian ‘hero’. While images of the other are crucial to the deconstruction of the self, the gangster genre focuses more on the internal other within the community than on the external, foreign other.

The second film, *Brother-2*, blends the gangster film with the Western, inflecting the resultant hybrid with the satirical and parodic modes. The Western is primarily concerned with the community’s (and thus the self’s) encounters at the frontier with its external others. The blend thus ensures an overlap of domestic and frontier issues. I read the film as, in part, a parody of its predecessor, *Brother*, and in part a social satire on Russia’s violent encounters with certain significant, and constituent, others (Ukraine, the Caucasus and the capitalist criminal elites it harbours within). These others are likewise subjected to Balabanov’s satirical gaze. The anti-heroes’ female counterparts are now a self-indulgent singer of meaningless pop songs and a crack-taking woman who followed the American dream and ended up as a prostitute in the West.

In the next chapter, *War* will be shown to blend the Western with the war and documentary genres, resulting in an Eastern docudrama and critically interrogating the boundaries which separate ‘fictional genre’ and ‘factual documentary’ films. In so doing, it launches a scathing critique of the contemporary mass media. The film focuses on representations of the second Chechen war and, more generally, Russia’s and the West’s struggle with the Muslim world. To achieve its aim, *War* uses a number of double-articulations which align it in part with those of Lev Tolstoy’s *Khadjhi Murat*’s (1912) and also of James F. Cooper’s tale *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). Both literary influences are, like *War*, historically inspired fictional accounts informing Balabanov’s film’s conventional genres and colonial theme as well as supporting the construction of the story’s surface and symbolic narrative levels.

The fourth chapter discusses the film *Dead Man’s Bluff*, which reanimates the gangster genre in a neo-noir comedy mode for the purpose of revisiting Russia’s 1990s from the contemporary viewpoint of a university lecture. Like *Brother-2*, the film is in part directed at perceived audience misreadings of *Brother*, while
readjusting the latter’s representations in a display of extreme sarcasm towards the Russian self and its now victorious ‘gangster leaders’, and adopting a quintessentially American ‘comic-book’ form to do so. One of the characters shares Balabanov’s fascination with the comic-book form. Indeed, by this stage in the genre cycle, Balabanov is representing the Western other not as such, but through the proclivities of his Russian anti-heroes, and through the self-consciousness of his cinematic form.

The fifth chapter examines the gangster melodrama *It Doesn’t Hurt*. I view the film as a sequel to *Dead Man’s Bluff*, which depicted the farcical rise of the Russian gangsters – Russia’s internal others - to political power, but stopped short of portraying their fall. *It Doesn’t Hurt*’s aged New Russian gangster makes his melodramatic exit after suffering the loss of his terminally ill courtesan to his non-violent bourgeois successor, who cons himself into the business of redecorating flats with her selfish support. She is the first anti-heroine of Balabanov’s oeuvre to die, as did her two intertextual forerunners, the melodramatic female main characters of Alexandre Dumas Jr.’s *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848) and Erich Maria Remarque’s *Three Comrades* (1936). With her death, Balabanov signals the symbolic end to the new Russia’s post-Soviet phase, and to his own ambivalent ‘tribute’ to the Hollywood genre film.

In the Conclusion, I revisit my research objective and questions, clarifying how they have been answered and elucidating the original contribution to knowledge made by the thesis.
Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The goal of the thesis is to investigate the character of self/other representations in five of Aleksei Balabanov’s *Zeitgeist* movies through the prism of genre. In this chapter, I will present a necessarily selective account of genre theory, and introduce those concepts of particular relevance to my analyses in the chapters to follow. I illustrate my discussion with references to Balabanov’s films where appropriate, but drawing on the work of other well-known directors elsewhere.

Let me begin with Andrew Tudor’s general observation that many film critics mistakenly ‘tend to assume that there is some body of films we can safely call the Western and then move on to the real work’.

In the case of Balabanov’s ‘genre movies’, in relation to which this observation is particularly apposite, the ‘real work’ has often been to pick out random surface details that happen to correspond to conventional assumptions about popular film genres. These details have provided the basis for common perceptions of Balabanov’s xenophobic mainstream and/or commercially driven motives and concerns. Such ‘evidence’ of Balabanov’s ‘formulaic nationalism’ has then typically been corroborated through statements made by the director in interviews and to the press. Such an approach, however, runs the risk of putting the cart before the horse. As much or as little as a biographical filmmaker’s statements and an empirical audience’s responses may tell us about these agents, their ‘focal beliefs’, their historical context, and their relative understanding of genre, they do not form part of the filmic text. On the one hand, audience perceptions of a film’s generic features may be limited and its representations mis-appropriated. On the other hand, a director’s assertions cannot provide the basis for an analysis of filmic representations, for they give us the false impression that we can know the director’s intentions, that what s/he says about those intentions is necessarily true, and that a film always obediently falls in line with them. To reduce a film’s meaning to the intentions of its creator, in short, is to fall victim to what the American New Critics called the ‘intentional fallacy’.

This does not mean that film analysis should focus on content alone. But Henry Jenkins’s suggestion that ‘historical explanations must start with the work

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itself and move gradually towards its most immediate contexts” holds true for film as much as for literature. Once received and appropriated by audiences, a work of art assumes a life of its own in their heads and on the paper of the reviews columns. It is not the goal of this thesis to examine in detail audience appropriations of Balabanov’s films, although they will be considered as a vital part of both the films’ ‘nationalist context’ and their ideological dimensions. Films can stir audience responses in ways unforeseen by the filmmaker. Moreover, a textual reading through the prism of popular, pre-established opinions about what ‘genre movies’ are, and common assumptions about a particular filmmaker’s personal ideological beliefs, risks an arbitrary focus on corroborative content and intent. Jenkins furnished another helpful insight in arguing that a ‘focus on content alone would ignore the fact that content has been worked upon, transformed or reshaped by formal practices and that form may set its own expectations about appropriate content… an understanding of form [is] essential to any consideration of content’. Genres are forms: purposefully created generic frameworks which are shared by cultural consensus, influenced by marketing strategies, mediated by critics and made visible through cinematic technology. Genre is cinema’s principal organiser. In order to arrive at satisfying historical explanations of Balabanov’s Zeitgeist films, one must start with the works themselves, since it is their palpable, generic forms which determine the films’ manner of representation.

In my thesis, I will use the prism of genre to conduct a close reading of five Balabanov films. This will automatically raise questions about intertextuality because a genre film exhibits features of certain film genres, which, in turn, define and are defined by a conventionally recognisable corpus of similar works. Iurii Tynianov observed in this connection that ‘[w]e cannot be certain of the structure of a work if it is studied in isolation’. No text can be studied out of context (historical and intertextual). But the text must be the starting point, and genre, which includes

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84 Ibid: 108.
the intertext of generically related works, is the main tool for accessing the historical, sociological and other meanings that Tynianov has in mind.

Genre and intertextuality will in the following sections be regarded as two contiguous, evolving and overlapping systems (gangster films, for example, establish a plausibly recognisable intertext and dominant generic framework for the film, *Brother*). First, I shall offer a more detailed justification of the use of film genre as the methodological basis for my investigation of self/other relations in Balabanov’s films. I proceed with a theoretical overview of the distinctions between ‘genre film’ and ‘film genre’. This will be followed by two main sections describing theoretical and historical approaches to film genre. The primary concern is to illuminate how questions of genre are linked with film representations and receptions. The section on historical genres will thus, crucially for the present purpose, outline (a) the concepts of genre evolution, variety and hybridity; and (b) the relationships between ‘genre movies’ and ‘art-house films’. I will next highlight the relationships between genre, expectation and verisimilitude. Finally, I will discuss the relationships between genre, ideology and representations, which will be divided into the subsections ‘genre, ideology, ritual and myth’ and ‘genre and representation’.

### 2.2 Why Genre?

Critics have tended to use genre labels not so much to analyse but rather to prescribe the meanings of Balabanov’s films. Unless one is willing to move beyond this approach, the films under investigation will remain imprisoned in the category of reactionary Russian ‘genre movies’ made to stir nationalist sentiments through xenophobic and stereotypical self/other representations. The central claim I make in my thesis is that, on the contrary, Balabanov uses genre in innovative, and often subversive, ways.

Jean-Loup Bourget observes of genre film that ‘whenever an art form is highly conventional, the opportunity for subtle irony or distantiation presents itself all the more readily... [a] director’s... point of view need not coincide with the hero’s.’[^87] The implication of this view is that it is the film-generic text that provides the basis for innovation and experimentation. It also highlights a general fallacy in

Balabanov film studies, whereby characters’ statements have been taken as ‘evidence’ of the director’s views and intentions. Bourget continues by suggesting that it is not surprising that large segments of an audience (notably including literary-minded critics) should decipher only one of these texts and therefore misread the sum total of the various texts. He points out that the ‘[i]ronical implications of a social breakdown can be embedded in the most highly conventional and least realistic films’. He also emphasises the allegorical potential of melodramatic genre films. For when long-established genres are applied to new socio-historical contexts they carry with them the memory of their prior concerns and instantiations. These, in turn, can be adapted and/or subverted.

The presumptuous, non-reflexive bandying around of Hollywood genre labels in Balabanov-film studies belong to an approach that, Andrew Tudor observes, ‘assumes, wrongly, the existence of [a] body of knowledge... by implicitly claiming to tap some archetypal characteristics of the genre’. Critics, to use Tudor’s words, ‘leap[t] in with genre immediately [and thus] put the cart before the horse’. The assumption has been that everyone knew what the genres deployed by Balabanov’s films signified and how they influenced those films’ representations. This explains why textual examinations of iconography and characterisation, plots and themes as well as other (meta-) cinematic presentations – all of which are mediated through genre – are rare in studies of Balabanov. Only after an analysis of a film’s iconographic features (which I shall discuss in more detail in due course) and the interplay of these semantic building blocks with its syntactic/structural plane, can that film’s dominant genre orientation and specific generic hybrid be established. And, as I shall shortly show, it is only by this route that the manner of its self/other representations can be properly understood.

In 1997 (the year of Brother’s release) most Russian audiences – critics included – did not generally share Balabanov’s level of knowledge of, and insight

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Tudor (Ibid: 10).
92 Rick Altman (2000), A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre, in Grant, ed., Film Genre Reader III: 26-49.
into, Hollywood film genres. Movie genre labels were applied with ‘common sense’ but without specialist knowledge. Until now, it has thus remained unclear whether these labels accurately described the films’ deployment of generic form, and, by extrapolation, the manner of their self/other representations. Balabanov’s film War has been widely treated as a ‘pure’ war film, with little regard for its complex use of documentary modes. Moreover, the two Brother films vividly demonstrate how the Russian boevik has been indiscriminately read as a Hollywood-type action genre. However, while, for example, the conventional melodramatic American action-hero saves the day, gets the girl and lives happily ever after, there is no telling if exactly the same applies to all of his Russian counterparts without conducting an in-depth analysis of a comparable Russian film corpus of boeviks. In a nutshell, Russian film genre studies lag behind their Western counterparts, particularly when it comes to so-called ‘genre movies’ and their manner of representation.

The primary focus of this thesis is self/other representations in Balabanov’s five Zeitgeist films. However, the need for an investigation through the prism of genre will, in addition, help establish a framework for Russian genre film studies. Genre film is art and needs to be taken seriously. Three pertinent questions of paramount significance to be asked of any narrative genre film are: what genres are deployed in the film?; how are these genres deployed?; and, why are they deployed in this particular manner? Only then can one interpret that film’s representational codes, cogently.

The answer to the first question will elicit the film’s dominant generic orientation, in particular its genre blend, and thus the manner by which a main genre is modified by one or more subordinate genres (modes or styles). Brother, for example, will be shown to be a gangster neo-noir film in which a ‘neo-noir’ element further defines, and enters into conflict with, the dominant gangster orientation. The fact that the film also pays deference to the psychological crime thriller and the tragedy is an early indication of the complexities of genre hybridism in Balabanov. Thus, we already begin to articulate an answer to the question of how these genres are deployed. Film noir and neo-noir, for example, are widely recognised as subversive genres or styles, and thus as markers of progressive filmmaking.93 By establishing a film’s generic allegiances, we can gain access to its manner of

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93 See David Desser (2003), Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism, in Grant, *Film Genre Reader III*: 516-536.
representation. In other words, after the ‘what’ (which genre/s?) and the ‘how’ (progressive or conventional?) have been dealt with, we can move onto questions about the ‘why’: why, for example, was the character of Danila presented as a psychotic gangster and neo-noir drifter in *Brother*, and, by contrast, as a satirically hybridised frontiersman/gangster in *Brother-2*? Why was the character of Ivan in *War* interviewed by an intradiegetic/fictional team of docudrama filmmakers? Answers to these ‘whys’ help us ascertain the effects of genre on a film’s self/other representations.

A functional analysis through the prism of genre, then, uncovers *how* a particular film deploys textual conventions. These are important not so much in order to fix genre categories but rather to elicit what audiences can plausibly expect to find in these films. Jonathan Culler calls this mental process the ‘operations of reading’ and argues that ‘the function of genre conventions is essentially to establish a contract between writer and reader so as to make certain relevant expectations operative and thus permit both compliance and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility’. 94 His view concurs with that of Roman Jacobson who argues that communication acts are intelligible only within the context of a *shared*, conventional, or codified framework of expression. 95 The filmic text itself and its non-/compliance with genre conventions provide strong evidence for the film’s dominant orientation and the manner of its self/other representations. The outcome of such an approach may, of course, differ substantially from recreational viewing by wider audiences and conventional genre criticism as practised by critics in the popular press.

Genre, as Tom Ryall points out, provides ‘[film’s] dominant level of comprehensibility’. 96 Thus, as Barry Grant observes, narrative genre films ‘are always about the time and place in which they are made’. 97 They refract the contemporary *Zeitgeist* and represent aspects of their historical environment. Both the American film noir and Soviet-Russian *chernukha*, for example, were artistic-

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97 Grant (2007: 1, 5 & 6).
generic reflections of contemporary periods and critical of the societies they represented. Post-Soviet Russian film genres, in general, and Balabanov’s genre films, in particular, must be understood partly in their interrelationship with an overarching global genre system dominated by mainstream Hollywood, but also as reflections of the specific contemporary socio-historical context to which they belong.

2.3 What is Film Genre?

Grant observes that ‘genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations.’ Genre films, regardless of specific fictional settings in space and time, reflect the ‘contemporary Zeitgeist’ together with its dominant self/other structures and their underlying ideological foundations.

Genre specialist Rick Altman traces awareness of the need to avoid a purely artistic approach to genre back to Aristotle. He acknowledges that ‘[o]f all the concepts fundamental to literary theory, none has a longer and more distinguished lineage than the question of literary types, or genres’ – but also emphasises that film genre cannot be reduced to internal textual characteristics. Film scholar Robert Stam disputes the existence of film genres per se and argues that they are merely invented by critics and the film industry. In his discussion of genre, David Bordwell invokes Boris Tomashevskii, who observed that

[n]o... logical classification of [film (FW)] genres is possible. Their demarcation is always historical... correct only for a specific moment of history; apart from this they are demarcated by many features at once, and the markers of one genre may be quite different in kind from the markers of another genre and logically they may not exclude one another.

Meanwhile, Steve Neale approaches genre not simply ‘as forms of textual

98 For example, Stanislav Govorukhin’s chernukha-documentary We Can’t Live Like This (Tak zhit’ nel’zìa, 1990).
99 Grant (2007: 1).
100 Ibid: 5-6.
102 Ibid.
codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject.\(^{105}\) Notwithstanding his note of caution, it is the filmic text, however, which remains the nexus of this relationship. Neale adds elsewhere that the ‘specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them... interact with the films themselves during the course of the viewing process’.\(^{106}\) Film genre, it appears, is constituted by conventions that are reflected in the filmic text and which are interrelated with intertextuality, systems of production, marketing, criticism, education and consumption. This raises questions about the genre knowledge and expectations of wider post-Soviet audiences and critics in the mid-1990s.

However, audience knowledge and ‘perception of the relations between a text and all the other texts that have preceded or followed it’,\(^{107}\) are only of secondary importance for my primarily textual analysis, despite belonging to the broad intertextual backdrop to the films I examine. Whilst acknowledging the broad/inclusive understanding of intertextuality, I tend to use the concept in a narrower, more exclusive manner. In its largest sense, the term refers to the polyphonic dialogue of a text with all other texts and textual systems that it rearticulates: most importantly those sharing its genres (i.e. the genre corpus/ora). I have not set out to identify all of the intertextual works cited in Balabanov’s films, for this is not a thesis driven by intertextuality theory. Of primary importance to me have been those instances of intertextuality or transtextuality\(^{108}\) serving as specific, targeted allusions by which a film self-consciously aligns itself with a particular generic field, that is ‘verbal or visual evocation[s] of [other] films [and works of literature (FW)]... as an expressive means of commenting on the fictional world of the alluding film’.\(^{109}\) Closely related to allusion is hypertextuality, which ‘refers to the relation between [a] hypertext [e.g. Brother] to an anterior text or hypotext [e.g. Crime and Punishment], which the former transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends’.\(^{110}\) The intertextual relations most important for this thesis are those where

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\(^{109}\) Ibid: 206.
\(^{110}\) Ibid: 209.
texts are ‘explicitly cited’\textsuperscript{111} or ‘silently [but recognisably (FW)] evoked’\textsuperscript{112}. Architextuality, moreover, ‘a text’s willingness, or reluctance, to characterize itself directly or indirectly in its title’\textsuperscript{113} indicates in the present case what Iurii Lotman calls ‘genre mistakes’, that is situations where critics are induced into misattributing a given generic status to a film, and thus confusing the film’s textual characteristics\textsuperscript{114}. Such genre mistakes, as I shall demonstrate, were common in studies of Balabanov’s genre films, which usually failed to recognise the importance of the films’ titles in their interpretations and genre assignments. Balabanov’s own paratext of film scenarios, yet another form of intertextuality, was of some help in achieving my goal\textsuperscript{115}.

Balabanov’s novel approach to genre film and its introduction into post-Soviet cinema supports the general view that the seemingly monolithic mainstream to which it belongs in fact consists of various different currents, includes its own subversions and evolves. Mainstream genre films account for the bulk of global cinema thanks to the deceptive ease with which they are reapplied, consumed and prescribed, but this does not alter the fact that the uniformity which appears to characterise them masks a complex plurality of sub-genres, pseudo-genres and anti-genres which shape and inform them. This is in keeping with Andrew Tudor’s remark that ‘genre terms seem best employed in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited’\textsuperscript{116}. The salience of such ‘groups of films’, moreover, reconfirms the importance for film genre of intertextuality. Robert Stam goes further, observing that ‘[i]n order even to discuss the relation of a work to its historical circumstances, we are obliged to situate the text within its intertext and then relate both text and intertext to the other “systems” and “series which form its context…”’\textsuperscript{117}. ‘Intertextuality’, Stam continues, ‘is a valuable theoretical concept in that it relates the singular text principally to other systems of representation’,\textsuperscript{118} like that of genre. The notion of intertextuality draws attention to the textual, narrative quality of genre films. Correspondingly, Neale emphasises that the pivotal point of the cinematic

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid: 208. \\
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{115} Balabanov (Ibid.). \\
\textsuperscript{116} Tudor (Ibid: 10). \\
\textsuperscript{117} Robert Stam et al (Ibid: 205). \\
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
institution, its ideological function and the discourses it disseminates, is narrative: ‘What mainstream cinema produces as its commodity is narrative cinema, cinema as narrative [and] the system of narration… serves as the very currency of cinema itself.’ Neale is aware, however, that this principle can be applied in equal measure to so-called ‘art-house films’.

Conventional genre classification assumes the existence of two separate systems: art-house films and genre movies. This convention is one of the main facilitators for the production, marketing, consumer knowledge, criticism and scholarly studies of narrative cinema, at whose centre the Hollywood system resides. So-called ‘national cinemas’ are often considered as the source of art-house films which are made as (national) answers to Hollywood’s dominance. But the multi-cinematic intercultural dialogue, which these national cinemas, directors and audiences engage in, renders notions such as reactionary ‘Hollywood genre movies’ versus progressive ‘European art-house film’ dubious. Grant has argued that ‘[under the impact of globalisation,] all genres, including art-house films, will inevitably interact more intensely across national boundaries’. That the latter has already been true for decades was evinced, for example, by Soviet Russia’s early and hugely successful adaptations of the Western genre (e.g. the Vasiliev brothers’ Chapaev, 1935 and Vladimir Motyl’s Eastern, White Sun of the Desert, Beloe Solntse Pustyni, 1970)).

Stephen Hutchings has noted the importance of linking the national, global, and intercultural in Russian cinema’s relationship with Hollywood, arguing that

[t]he ties between [Russian] cinema and assertions of national identity which challenge US dominance are not difficult to demonstrate… The role of cinema is paradigmatic not only in the sense that it constitutes one of the key cultural products of exchange in the process of intercultural dialogue known as globalisation, but in the adaptive mechanisms it employs as part of this process.

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National Russian cinema is influenced by, and reacts to, Hollywood cinema, adopting and adapting features of genre movies within changing post-Soviet cultural and historical paradigms.

2.4 Theoretical Genres

The genre system is much more than ‘just’ Hollywood cinema. Indeed, ‘Genre is what we collectively believe it to be’,\(^{123}\) Neale reminds us, quoting Andrew Tudor. Genre definitions are useful but not necessarily universally valid and the genre system is more amorphous than ‘genre imperialism’\(^{124}\) would like to admit. This is demonstrated by the intercultural influx of Hollywood genres into national cinemas and their art-house products. Conversely, the Hollywood system has increasingly imported national art-house features including experimental techniques by individual auteurs.

Categorisation of historically evolving systems is difficult and should only serve the purpose of comprehension, not of prescription. With these difficulties in mind, Ryall distinguishes three levels at which the film genre system can be understood:\(^{125}\) First, there is the generic system of individual genres – implicitly including art-house film – in relation to dominant Hollywood cinema; the second level consists of these individual genres with their defining aspects and common elements, including potentially ‘new’ styles and cycles established by individual artists (e.g. the fictionalised war documentary of Balabanov’s War) and at certain historical periods (e.g. the gangster as a representation of post-Soviet Russia’s sudden, violent turn to the ‘free market’); thirdly, there are individual films analysed within, and compared with, their generic contexts and overarching systems. Thus, Balabanov’s deployment of American genre conventions requires us first to position his genre films in relation to the heterogeneous Hollywood cinema. Secondly, we must acknowledge that they helped initiate a new cycle of national films established during a specific historical period. Thirdly, we must analyse these films within their own generic contexts and in relation to their particular intertexts.

Ryall’s systematic view, however, says little about the manner in which the


\(^{124}\) Tudor (Ibid: 3).

\(^{125}\) Ryall (Ibid: 327-37).
genre approach to cinema can be operationalised. In addressing this gap, Neale supports Alan Williams’s suggestion that cinema’s main Genres (with a capital ‘G’) can be classified as narrative, experimental/avant-garde, and documentary. Though this typology is, it fails to account for a distinct cartoon Genre. The narrative Genre is fictional, representational filmmaking of staged events and includes both ‘genre movies’ and ‘art-house films’. The experimental/avant-garde (abstract) Genre tends to be non-representation (lacking obviously staged narrative and characterisation). These two theoretical Genre labels must be understood as the two poles of a single continuum. The documentary Genre, meanwhile, represents actual rather than fictionalised staged events. However, since documentaries are also susceptible to partial fictionalisation, this boundary, too, is useful only for heuristic purposes and should not be accorded a positive ontological status. Williams is, in fact, clear about the fact that the three main Genres are ideal constructs, and that specific individual films can straddle several boundaries at once. Such hybridisations, it must be stressed, do not preclude the need to search for dominant generic orientations, and to trace their modifications by adjectival/qualifying sub-genres.

Such qualitative – sometimes called ‘adjectival’ – use of one genre to modify another, dominant genre (orientation), will in this thesis be considered a mode or style irrespective of whether it is primarily cinematic or literary. So, Brother’s dominant genre will be shown to be the gangster and subversively modified by the neo-noir style. Similarly, Brother-2’s satirical mode critically subverts the film’s dominant orientation of the Western, which, in turn and just to complicate matters, is blended with the embedded gangster plot of the main anti-heroes. Likewise, It Doesn’t Hurt will be shown to continue and complete Balabanov’s deployment of the gangster genre as one of its two – beside the Western – main generic orientations, this time, however, modified by melodrama, which therefore assumes the role of a mode.

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129 Neo-noir, following film noir, has long been argued to be a style applicable to a range of conventional genres rather than such a genre itself. See Desser (Ibid.).
Williams’s distinction necessarily focuses on specific generic functions rather than on inclusive accumulations of data and/or exclusive categorisations of generic canons. It is these functions that enable us to link films through textual analysis to ‘industrial and cultural usages’. An understanding of the manifestations of the text requires this level of theoretical abstraction in order that we might investigate cinematic forms in their full complexity, and to link text with context.

Neale further defends Williams’s taxonomy, claiming that ‘on this basis, particular genres can be characterized, not as the only genres in which given elements, devices and features occur, but as the ones in which they are dominant, in which they play an overall, organizing role.’ He complements Williams with his own threefold distinction, positing a genre classification by: (i) internal textual features (iconography, themes, and narration, which includes characterisation); (ii) the economic view of genre standardisation as a way of targeting specific audiences; (iii) the cultural consensus view that refers to spectators’ knowledge, expectations and the influence of aesthetic regimes. Neale’s conceptualisation of genre corroborates what we have argued so far. An analysis of Balabanov’s narrative Genre films must start with the filmic text and its internal features. Moreover, such an examination must also consider that, within a conventionally standardised genre system, Balabanov necessarily adapted identifiable aspects of these film genres to the Russian cultural and socio-historical context. Finally, the comparative genre knowledge and related expectations of wider post-Soviet Russian audiences and Russia’s traditionally pro-art-house critics cannot be taken as the primary basis for a genre analysis of films.

2.5 Historical Genres

2.5.1 Genre Evolution, Variety and Hybridism

Film audiences are recipients and thus ‘lag behind’ innovative auteurs in their knowledge of film genre. Film genres evolve under the impact of individual filmmakers and through their global/cultural adaptations. They are also influenced by processes like ‘deviation’, ‘deformation’ and ‘defamiliarisation’.

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131 Ibid: 63-64.
coined by the Russian formalists Iurii Tynianov and Roman Jacobson, possess genre-subversive implications and go hand in hand with those of genre blend, hybridism and cycle. Primary examples from recent Soviet/Russian cinema are its own, in-house variant on film noir known as chernukha, and the Russian gangster adaptation.

Through individual films such as Balabanov’s Brother and Pavel Lungin’s Taxi Blues (1990), individual genres, and with them, the entire generic system, are transformed. Roman Jacobson noted that ‘[t]his simultaneous presentation of tradition and breaking away from tradition form the essence of every new work of art’.

Thus, the first post-Soviet gangster film, Brother, deviates from, and deforms, its American forerunners under the influence of the auteur and his socio-historical environment. The Russian gangster’s first target city, for example, was Russia’s crime capital and window to the West, St. Petersburg, not the classic Chicago or the Little Italy of neo-noir fame.

Neale observes that genres ‘are processes of systematisation [that] function to provide, simultaneously, both regulation and variety’. This process of regulation and variety is based on similarities and differences in their visual, auditory, and narrative composition. Genre films are generic hybrids and Brother’s representational concerns, for example, saw the subverted neo-noir gangster as a plausible generic reflection of post-Soviet Russia’s violent transition to an American-style market-society. A new, post-Soviet Russian variety was added to, and reset, the cornerstones of a genre blend that had been created in Hollywood. In a distinction reminiscent of that between the Saussurean langue/language and parole/speech, the individual utterance of the film and its components stand against, and are judged by, a complex of norms.

A synchronic investigation of self/other representations in Balabanov’s narrative genre films makes sense only inasmuch as one recognises and addresses the genre system’s flexible, contiguous, evolving and intertextual nature. A synchronic approach to Balabanov’s films also necessitates consideration of its diachronic intercultural and intertextual influences. Historical/diachronic genres like the gangster and the Western evolve and impact upon subsequent audiences’ genre-

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133 Jacobson (1971: 82-87, 87).
knowledge. Because of the continuity that comes with standardisation and convention, certain fundamental generic features remain recognisable from today’s perspective, despite evolution and hybridisation. Balabanov’s gangster and Western hybrids, for example, remain regulated by the codes and conventions of Hollywood genres, even if they synthesise elements and structures of two or more genres in new combinations.

According to Rick Altman, genres consist of semantic and syntactic planes. Both need to be accounted for if one wishes to avoid the tendency to produce either extensive, all-inclusive lists based solely on semantic considerations, or limited, exclusive genre canons that use syntactic definitions. The semantic approach, if overemphasised, cedes ‘explanatory power’ because it focuses only on the presence of easily identifiable elements like, for example, props, standard situations, costumes and stock characters. Some of the semantic elements or iconography of a classic Western (ca. 1860-1890) are horses, six-shooters, and Indians. According to this approach, films containing these elements are Westerns and films without them are not. The syntactic interplay of these elements is largely disregarded, as are larger genre-typical themes and characterisation. The syntactic approach, by contrast, ‘emphasises not the vocabulary of [for example] the Western but the relationship linking lexical elements [surrendering] broad applicability in return for the ability to isolate a genre’s specific meaning-bearing structures’. Syntactic elements are the structures (plots and subplots) that hold the semantic components together. This approach generally establishes a critical canon, which includes a small number of ‘classics’ but may fail to account for the evolution of a genre, its subsequent cycles and innovative applications by outstanding visionary filmmakers. Neither the syntactic nor the semantic models are on their own able to account for the evolution of genres and the associations between iconography and genre which viewers might establish.

Combining Altman’s approach with David Bordwell’s conceptualisation of generic categories as ‘core/periphery schema, with more “central” members of the category creating a prototype effect’ allows film and genre analysts to be both

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137 Ibid: 183-84.
exclusive and inclusive, as required by the circumstances. It is thus possible to accept an arbitrarily exclusive-syntactic definition of the Western, which conventionally includes core Westerns such as *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), for the purpose of establishing an initial and culturally consensual historical paradigm. By the same token, *Brother-2*, which shares its ride-rescue-revenge structure with *The Searchers*, qualifies as a peripheral Western despite its apparent lack of the Western genre’s semantic building blocks. Instead of horses, for example, Danila rides a car on his way into Western territory and the girl to be rescued is held by the ‘Black’ instead of the ‘Red’ ethnic other. *Brother-2*, moreover, like other narrative Genre films, is generically polyphonic and speaks through the voices of the gangster and the Western, as well as within the cinematic modes of satire and melodrama.\(^{139}\)

In terms of its self/other representations, the film’s depictions of frontier conflicts acquire additional significance, if considered in the light of the Western genre and of American as well as Russian frontier myths.

In Altman’s words, it is important in film genre analysis to recognise ‘how meaning of one kind contributes to and eventually establishes meaning of another’.\(^{140}\) Or, citing Ryall, ‘[i]nstead of asking the question ‘To what genre does... [*Brother-2* (FW)] belong?’\(^{141}\) it is necessary to probe the consequences of positioning the film in relation to the various genres to which it has a family resemblance.

2.5.2 Genre Movie versus Art-House Film and Auteur

Hollywood’s ‘genre movies’ are usually regarded as popular mass entertainment and thus opposed to art-house, experimental and documentary cinema. ‘Genre films’, Thomas Sobchack notes, ‘are made in imitation not of life but of other films’.\(^{142}\) What he refers to are those myth-propagating formulas, which are conventionally offset against art-house films, which are generally (held to be) more progressive. He continues to explain that other ‘fiction films are not genre films precisely because they... go out of their way to be original, unique and novel’.\(^{143}\)

However, as we argued earlier, this dichotomy only represents ideal poles on a long spectrum. Martin

\(^{139}\) Satire and melodrama are considered cinematic modes because they modify through ‘militant irony’ and ‘emotional appeal’ the dominant genres of, also Balabanov’s, films. Northrop Frye wrote that ‘The chief distinction between *irony* and *satire* is that *satire* is militant *irony*’, which renders it a mode of expression rather than a genre. Northrop Frye (1957), *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: University Press: 223.

\(^{140}\) Altman (2000: 188).

\(^{141}\) Ryall (Ibid: 336).

\(^{142}\) Sobchack (Ibid: 105).

\(^{143}\) Ibid: 106.
Scorsese’s, Brian De Palma’s and Quentin Tarantino’s idiosyncratic styles of artistically inflected genre movies, which happen to supply frequent intertextual reference points for and genre influences on Balabanov, are testament to the many, less definitive, examples that lie in between these poles.

Despite countless instances of art/genre-film/movie hybridism, ‘genre movies’ are still regarded by many literary-minded critics as simplistically formulaic and generically homogeneous. Barry Grant, however, usefully points out that art cinema is, for its part, also ‘infused with elements of genre’. Art-house film, David Bordwell’s widely accepted argument goes, is a historical genre itself. Grant observes that ‘despite the most excessive claims of its adherents, auteurism in fact never entirely ignored the historical context in which directors worked’. To paraphrase Raymond Durgnat for the present context, Brother ‘isn’t important because it tells us anything about an individual called’ Balabanov. Balabanov ‘is important because’ Brother ‘reveals something about’ Russia, ‘and about us all’. An auteur generally functions to push and reset rather than either to conform to, or destroy, the boundaries set by the system. Great directors appropriate genres: good directors borrow formulae. Today’s art-house films can be as progressive or reactionary as their genre movie counterparts.

Both categories, for example, include movies about war: Sergei Bodrov Sr.’s art-house film, Prisoner of the Mountains, Ridley Scott’s Hollywood movie Black Hawk Down (2001), and Balabanov’s own War. It is impossible to tell from the reactions of critics and of wider audiences alone whether these films are oriented unequivocally either to progressive art-house or to reactionary genre positions supportive of the status quo. In all three examples, the concept of the auteur is embedded and recognisable in the text (a ‘Balabanov’, ‘Ridley Scott’, ‘Bodrov’ film). These ‘embeddings’ are not manifest and do not belong to any code but are rather the ‘organising principle’ of the ‘implied author’ behind the making of the

144 Grant (2007: 1).
films, which pertains to the variability which moderates the fixity of genres and their representational regimes.

The function of this personal style is to dominate generic elements and establish itself at the fore. Lawrence Alloway reminds us that ‘the personal contribution of many directors can only be seen fully after typical iconographical elements have been identified’. He thereby implicitly acknowledges the primary importance of internal imagery. Grant concurs with this view when he asserts that genre ‘provides a frame within which auteurs can animate conventions and iconography to their own purpose’. In fact, ‘auteur and genre are inextricable’.

Individual auteurs create disruptions within the genre system. New artistic impulses can become œuvres and create those genre variations by which the market-regulated processes of the cinematic institution is profitably managed. It is a common phenomenon that disruptions to the system are not taken to kindly by orthodox critics, whose received knowledge they threaten and who, accordingly, tend to view these films according to the conventional genre models they have learned to trust.

2.6 Reception, Expectation and Verisimilitude

Nonetheless, according to Reception Theory, meaning is not inherent in the text and is dependent precisely on the reactions of audiences of the sort that read Balabanov’s films in conventional generic mode with all of the ideological consequences that flow from this. In his examination of the nexus between ideology, genre and auteur, Robin Wood suggests that

[i]t is only through the medium of the individual that ideological tensions come into particular focus, hence become of aesthetic as well as sociological interest. It can perhaps be argued that works are of special interest when the defined particularities of an auteur interact with specific ideological tensions and when the film is fed from more than one generic source.

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151 Grant (2008: 5).
152 Grant (2007: 59).
153 Robin Wood (1986[2003]), Ideology, Genre, Auteur, in Grant, ed., Film Genre Reader III: 60-74, 64.
The phrase ‘the medium of the individual’ must be taken to refer not only to the auteur but also to audiences and individual critics. If filmmakers are the ‘organising principle’ in the creation, then audiences/critics present the ‘organising principle’ in the reception of genre films. Their responses help highlight their own ‘ideological tensions’ and are of interest for sociological studies. However, they cannot form the basis for initial studies of the filmic text itself.

An application of genre theory as methodology is justified in leaving aspects of the individual viewer’s own ‘ideological tensions’ behind, that is behind the prism of textual genre analysis. For what is said and written about a film after the viewing belongs to a different discourse, and requires an entirely different lexicon, from that which applies to the cinematic text itself. Responses are fuelled by audiences’/critics’ own backgrounds, ideological leanings/needs and tastes. ‘High culture’ art-house film critics criticised the use of movie genres in Brother, while so-called ‘mass audiences’ found them appealing, for similar reasons, but to different effects.154 Both audiences largely ignored the film’s genre blend, which included significant components of the art-house model. Film analysis that uses genre as an initial methodological framework rather than as an aesthetic doctrine can avoid the pitfalls of selective viewer receptions.

Film receptions are influenced by expectations and hypotheses regarding specific film genres and genre films made by certain directors. They are based on familiarity, or the absence thereof, with similar texts or media/marketing and other socio-cultural discourses. With genre films, notions of intelligibility, expectations, and hypothesis are not subject to values of truth or falsity but rather what is deemed probable and plausible: that which seems verisimilitudinous. Neale observes that ‘[t]he concept of verisimilitude is central to an understanding of genre, as is the question of the social and cultural functions that genres perform’.155 He continues to explain that verisimilitude is both culturally and generically dependent. Generic verisimilitude refers to the rules of genre, a knowledge of which is thought to be shared by the audiences, film-makers and critics, albeit to varying degrees. Cultural verisimilitude refers to what is deemed probable within a culture (e.g. Russian, American, etc.). There is a ‘balance’, Neale observes, that always exists ‘between

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154 See, for example, the popular website for Brother and Brother-2.
purely generic and broadly cultural regimes of verisimilitude”. They overlap, thanks to factors like genre hybridism, globalisation and the considerable mutual influence of genre cinema and cultural myths.

A relation is established between the filmmakers, the film and what audiences believe/accept to be true on the basis of their ‘real’ life experiences: the suspension of disbelief. This relation may be harmonious – filmmakers and audiences are ‘on the same page’ – or there may be discrepancies between that which is encoded in the text and that which is appropriated. Early 1990's post-Soviet verisimilitude (that of socio-economic upheaval and the rise of the gangster), for example, corresponded to aspects of American history as it was reflected by the classical Hollywood gangster and Western genres (i.e. the rise of the New Russians and the frontier struggles). Besides the gangster genre, war films and Westerns such as those discussed in the chapters to follow, likewise strongly appeal to the socio-historical/cultural verisimilitudes that viewers retain in their memory, alongside those of genre. This overlap of verisimilitudes resulted for Russian audiences in a high level of authenticity and strong identifications with the depicted characters and events. The attention of audiences was diverted from the films’ generic composition, from their innovative narrative potential, and from breaks and fissures in their cinematic presentations. In the case of the reception of Balabanov’s ‘art-house movies’, the genre movie displaced the art-house film almost entirely.

2.7 Genre, Ideology and Representation

2.7.1 Genre, Ideology, Ritual and Myth

Generic regimes of verisimilitude, Neale notes, ‘are almost as “public,” as widely known, as “public opinion” itself’. Public opinion and common sense, which it uses, are generally trained to see and state the obvious and formulaic: they are related to genre formulae. Stuart Hall observes that

common sense... – the residue of absolutely basic and commonly-agreed, consensual wisdom – helps us to classify out the world in simple but

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156 Neale (1990: 47).
meaningful terms. [It] does not require reasoning... [it] is spontaneously available, thoroughly recognisable, widely shared.\textsuperscript{158}

Thus, to play devil’s advocate, and overlooking its documentary features, Balabanov’s \textit{War} might seem obviously to belong to the war genre, in which a hero shoots members of his ethnic other to save the day/community. Such a habitual form of analysis remains passively subordinated to the influence of the dominant ideology and supports it through the discourse of an aesthetic regime that only appears to present itself as detached and objective. Public opinion thus negatively affects criticism, which by definition ought to engage in ‘being critical’.

Whatever its genre blend, a film’s aesthetic is intrinsically linked to ideology through the medium of the implied author and, by extension, of the implied viewer. I use the term ‘ideology’ here in the sense of the means by which dominant classes construct the limits of ‘primary lived reality’ for subaltern classes. Hall notes that

\begin{quote}
[t]his operates, not because the dominant classes can prescribe and proscribe, in detail, the mental content of the lives of subordinate classes (they too ‘live’ in their own ideologies), but because they strive and to a degree succeed in \textit{framing} all competing definitions \textit{within their range}, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

Reactionary mainstream movies/moviemakers which deploy genres in a formulaic manner for religiously optimistic representations are ideologically bound in just this sense.

The concept of ideology is linked to that of \textit{Zeitgeist}, or ‘spirit of the time’, and refers to the ideas and concepts prevalent in a cultural space during a certain period and expressed in contemporary cinema and in other cultural texts. Such ideas and concepts, in turn, form ideologies, become embedded in society’s myths,\textsuperscript{160} cultural tropes, representations and, in fact, in genre formulae and their themes. In their dominant forms they are propagated by the state and its organs as well as through the ritualistic common sense of public opinion. In their countercultural

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid: 333. Hall’s emphasis.
forms, they challenge dominant ideological, mythic, representational and film-
generic forms of expression.

This apparent generalisation is based on the view that myths and cultural
tropes share family resemblances with orthodox genre formulae and stereotypes as
as well as their manifestations in reactionary genre movies by providing naturalising
disambiguations of historical complexities. The question underlying my thesis’s
main objective is whether Balabanov’s genre movies rely on formulaic plots,
narratives and devices with an allegiance to nationalist-xenophobic ideology, thus
helping to re-create and disseminate reassuring mainstream myths or, whether they
challenge orthodox ‘genre rules’ in order to undermine such myths and their
ideological progenitors. It is plausible to suggest that the artistic deconstruction of
one type of formula, that of genre, entails the subversion of another, which is
represented through it, that of myth. And if a society’s myths are challenged, so, too,
is its ideology.

Barbara Klinger contends that research into genre has resulted ‘in the
development of a refined set of analytical procedures that designate and differentiate
the ideological contours of specific textual practices within this only apparently
monolithic mainstream [of genre cinema (FW)]’.\footnote{Barbara Klinger (1986[2003]), "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” Revisited: The Progressive Genre, in Grant, ed., Film Genre Reader III: 75-91, 75.} Klinger uses terms like
‘countercinema’ and ‘rebel’ texts to describe a category of films referred to as
‘progressive’ or ‘subversive’\footnote{Ibid.} that is ‘quite substantially inflected by questions of
auteur’.\footnote{Ibid: 76.} Accordingly, films are examined according to how they practice or
subvert predominant expressions of ideology. Thus, some prototypically reactionary
genre movies possess certain features such as a closed/reassuring order-chaos-order
structure and a propensity to stereotype that exemplify dominant representational
concerns and practices. Progressive filmmaking, by contrast, tends to be self-
reflexive and to deconstruct these standard formulaic-reactionary texts.

The standardised, ‘classic form’ of filmmaking, Klinger notes, ‘subscribes to
an ideology of representations – the achievement of the “impression of reality” – and
in so doing unproblematically broadcasts dominant cultural ideas’.\footnote{Ibid: 78-79.} This appeal to
audience expectations facilitates the sale of genre films. Hollywood’s classic form still exists today in formulaic genre movies. These continue to be made in Hollywood (e.g. the *Lethal Weapon* series (Richard Donner; 1987, 1989, 1992, 1998)). But they have also infiltrated Russia (e.g. Egor Konchalovskii’s and El’dar Salavatov’s *Antikiller* films (2002, 2003, 2009)). Such films present ritualised forms and serve mythical functions. They must be constructed from certain well-known plots – ‘plots usually dealing with melodramatic incidents in which obvious villains and heroes portray [a] basic conflict of good versus evil’, as Thomas Sobchack observes. Basic order-confirming ideological messages are, for example, the notions that ‘all’s well that ends well’, or that ‘every man forges his own destiny’. They are represented by the ‘reality effect’ of genre film – the impression of an ideal reality (cinematic realism) that is in fact a carefully staged cinematic illusion. This pseudo-realism depends on the repetition of reassuring melodramatic mythic forms. The pleasingly optimistic, cathartic text is both the commercial package and the vehicle for its simplistic, naturalising representations and falsely obvious messages to unsuspecting yet consenting spectators who ritualistically consent to suspend their disbelief and to being inscribed in the process of watching.

Formulaic-reactionary genre movies propagate myths of order that naturalise and reduce complex social conflicts to manageable, familiar-looking binary oppositions and stereotypes. They are perfectly at home with ‘us versus them’. Sobchak notes that in reactionary movies ‘the resolution of the tension between the two poles will always be in favour of the community’. Hence, Schatz provides the helpful insight that the ‘concept of genre as a filmic system must be characterized, like that of myth, by its function; its value is determined not according to what it is, but rather according to what it does’.

Myths, public opinion and genre movies fulfil the culturally indispensable function of expressing and codifying popular beliefs. They protect and implement a mainstream morality, connect the individual to an imagined community and promote

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165 Sobchack (Ibid: 104).
166 While the notion of the spectator as ‘passive dope’ has been rejected already in the 1970s by reception theory, cinema’s dream-like modus operandi indubitably breaks down psychological barriers as leading scholars of cinema have pointed out (e.g. Robert Stam, 1992[1993]).
168 Thomas Schatz (1986[2003]), The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study, in Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader III*: 92-102, 97. Myth, he observes, ‘is defined according to its function as a unique conceptual system that embodies elements specific to the culture which realizes it’. (Ibid: 96.)
a feeling of belonging and harmony. As such, reactionary genre movies are about conflicts within the community (between the individual and the group) or between the community and its external others. In their reactionary form, they smooth out fundamental cultural-ideological contradictions, ritualise collective ideals, conceal disturbing conflicts and propagate dominant mainstream myths. The imposition of ideals through the dominant ideology blends with active ritualistic popular participation in the creation of mainstream myths.

By contrast, progressive filmmaking is also often marked by its discourse within cinema – the metalingual function – that ‘refers to its own narrative procedures [and] in its self-referentiality... produc[es] a metalanguage.’ 169 While such metacinematic devises of defamiliarisation have by now become conventionalised, they must still be accorded special attention. Susan Hayward observes that ‘spectators are … intentionally distanced by these practices so they ‘can see what is really there’, and reflect upon it rather than be seduced into a false illusionism’. 170 Such practice may merely serve the harmless function of self-parody, as, for example, the shooting of a film-within-a-film in Donner’s otherwise status-quo-confirming Lethal Weapon 3. It may also be indicative of a symbolic countercultural narrative, as in Martin Scorsese’s Mean Streets (1973), which undermines order-confirming mythic representations.

The question of ideological orientation will clearly be a litmus test for Balabanov’s generic self/other representations. Do they, above all, adhere to what Robin Wood calls ‘American capitalist ideology – or, more specifically, the values and assumptions so insistently embodied in and reinforced by the classical Hollywood cinema’? 171 Wood names several components that one needs to look out for in this context: ‘the right of ownership’, ‘the moral excellence of work’, the myth of the family, progress and the city, the ‘Rosebud syndrome’ (viz. the poorer, the happier), ‘the happy ending’, [and] the incompatible pair of the ideal male and female (viz. the virile adventurer and the dependable wife and mother). 172 A related purity test to be applied to Balabanov’s films in order to gauge their ideological orientation and their self/other representation structures will be an examination of

171 Wood (Ibid: 61).
whether their characterisation strategies are geared towards the production of stereotypes, or the articulation of more open-ended, complex, socio-historical types.

2.7.2 Genre and Representation: Stereotypes versus Social Types

Grant observes that dominant (pseudo-)realistic movie genre narratives ‘convention[ally] feature standard ways of representing gender, class, race and ethnicity’. By contrast, anti-realist representations subvert such reactionary representations, deploying instead socio-historical types. The latter are described by Orrin E. Klapp as ‘representations of those who “belong” to society… whereas stereotypes are those who do not belong, who are outside of one’s society… [this distinction] is principally geographic’. Stereotypes are essentially defined, a-historical and thus of limited value. They ‘cannot possibly evolve from the “nature” of things’, as Roland Barthes notes. But they possess definite socio-historical functions and betray specific attitudes.

Richard Dyer develops the notion of stereotype further, and in a way that is of direct relevance to this thesis. He observes that ‘who does or does not belong to a given society as a whole is then a function of the relative power of groups in that society to define themselves as central and the rest as ‘other’, peripheral or outcast’. Stereotypes are outwardly oriented toward the world of others as they are posited from the position of the dominant and mainstream self. They tend to connote universality through the flat, unchanging, stable forms in which they are imprisoned. They share these traits with myths and with the overarching formulaic plot-structures of mainstream genres; they are closed and exclusive. They have only limited fictional function because they always carry with them a preordained, implicit narrative which must bend to the formula of the reactionary narrative genre movie just as the latter is in thrall to it in turn.

By contrast, anti-realist Genre films ambiguate fictional types. This results in complex, flexible, socio-historical types. They denaturalise myths and stereotypes and subvert mainstream self/other representations. By addressing the other’s complexities, they represent that other as equal to the self. Socio-historical types like

the developing character of Danila are able to adapt themselves to a wide range of roles in the fictional plot (the gangster neo-noir and the gangster/Western satire). They are epitomised in novelistic, round, developing characters which, as Dyer observes, are ‘defined by a multiplicity of traits that are only gradually revealed to us through the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on the growth or development of the character and is thus centred upon the latter in her or his unique individuality, rather than pointing outwards to a world’. Novelistic and other socio-historic types are often depicted in character-oriented (reflective) rather than plot-driven (action-based) modes, both of which can, of course, blend to varying degrees, as Balabanov’s films bear witness to. They emphasise historical contingencies, randomness and existential complexities.

Flat stereotypical types seem, of course, in control of their own fate. Together with the mainstream myths they embody, they bring pre-existing narratives as their cultural baggage. Like those Russian variations on the stereotypes related to the Caucasus and Ukraine, they uphold nationalist homeland ideologies and ‘unite the people against a common enemy’. The self that is articulated in cinema of this sort is generally presented in the form of a mythic success story. Such a self is implicitly subjugated to all-comprising norms, whose dominant mythic status must be naturalised. They thus appear as an attainable model of emulation for everybody apart from those designated as inconvertibly other.

2.8 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to introduce genre as my chosen method for examining self/other representations in Balabanov’s Zeitgeist films. I have shown that an analysis of the manner of these representations through the prism of genre offers the most plausible approach simply because the objects of my examination, at least on the surface, belong to the genre film category. Genre films, moreover, reflect the contemporary Zeitgeist of their historical context. Balabanov’s genre films, in particular, explicitly foreground issues of emergent post-Soviet Russian identity through the complex structures of self and other that they articulate.

Genre, it has been argued, is cinema’s prime mover. For that reason it is often taken for granted. Labels tend to be applied to films without prior genre

analysis and then the ‘real’ work of, for example, historical studies is conducted. These approaches neglect the fundamental influence of genre on historical representations. Different genres favour different characters, iconographies, themes, plots, etc. and these can be deployed in different ways for different target audiences. Thus, generally speaking, art-house films appeal more to the educated middle classes, while genre movies tend to be embraced by so-called mass audiences. This tendency deflects attention from the fact that both art-house films and genre movies belong to a single narrative Genre, and that one can find genre elements in art-house films and art-house elements in genre movies. They are each part of an overarching system dominated by Hollywood cinema and by capitalist ideology.

It is important to understand that the genre system can be divided into theoretical and historical genres. Theoretical distinctions like those separating narrative, experimental and documentary Genres from one another are important for an appreciation of the mode of representation favoured by genre films. Within this theoretical framework, historical genres, by contrast, are conventional narrative sub-genres, and these include the gangster movie, the Western and the art-house film. In this thesis, I will, nonetheless, abide by a convention and describe these sub-genres as genres with a smaller case ‘g’ (as opposed to the theoretical narrative Genre with capital ‘G’): thus I will, for example, speak of the gangster genre. These theoretical sub-genres, yet, conventionally speaking, genres, are particularly important for the semantic and syntactic analysis of genre blends.

All such historical genres are conventions that have developed over time through standardisation by the industry, appropriation by audiences, mediation by critics and re-applications by auteurs. These agents possess varying kinds and degrees of genre knowledge, which differently influences audience expectations of the genre film viewing experience. Labels applied by the industry and many critics are largely designed to sell either the film or a professional opinion to cinema-goers, not to conduct close textual readings in order to elicit culturo-historical meaning. The opinions formed by these kinds of discourse are therefore unreliable for a methodical investigation of genre and representation.

The chapters to follow will studiously avoid critical ‘leaping in with genre’. Interplays of iconography, cinematography, narrative, themes and characterisation will be analysed before arriving at conclusions about the films’ genre blends. The
vast majority of films combine at least two genres – or a genre modified by a style/mode – under the influence of the filmmaker-auteur who remains both within and outside the system in order to develop it. The relationship between filmmakers, films and what audiences believe/accept to be true and plausible (i.e. verisimilar) are not always balanced from a generic point of view: audiences, critics and innovative filmmakers are often not ‘on the same page’ with respect to generic verisimilitude. Therefore, I have argued, we must analyse the filmic text before drawing conclusions about audience appropriations. Above all, we must avoid permitting accepted notions of common sense and public opinion to dictate the direction of our analysis of self/other representations.

The manner of these self/other representations can, however, be elicited through an exploration of how genre conventions are used within the films. An analysis of a genre film’s iconography, themes, plots and characterisation is as important as the examination of how these semantic building blocks are combined syntactically. In this way, one can exploit the findings of genre studies pertaining to core corpora of prototypical filmic texts and their internal features, while acknowledging the evolution and mutation of genres into sometimes barely recognisable forms and blends. By answering the question of how genres are deployed through characterisation and the interplay of themes, plots, cinematography and sound, we can gain clear indications as to a film’s ideological leanings. We can gauge if the cinematic narrative is seamlessly realistic or metacinematically disrupted via defamiliarisation devices. We are able to measure ‘genre regulation’ against ‘auteuristic variety’, determining whether a film depicts stereotypes or socio-historical types and interpreting the consequences for Balabanov’s articulations of post-Soviet Russian identity, and for his self/other representations.
Chapter 3: *Brother (Brat, 1997)*

Gangster Neo-Noir Representations of Russia’s Self and Others

3.1 Introduction

The objective is to analyse the character of self/other representations in Aleksei Balabanov’s *Brother* through its use and subversion of generic convention. *Brother*’s combination of ‘low-brow’ genre devices with ‘high-brow’ art-film attributes, I shall argue, formed part of a self-conscious deconstruction of established cinematic hierarchies. Such an approach, the first and most successful of its kind in post-Soviet film, served the writer-director as a tool for equally subversive discussions of the post-Soviet Russian *Zeitgeist*, identity, and self/other relations.

*Brother* was shot during and after the first Chechen war in 1996 and released in 1997, when confusion and controversy about Russian identity still prevailed. The reverberations of Russia’s controversial market-oriented reforms were felt also by the post-Soviet film industry, which was in crisis.\(^{178}\) ‘The ‘land of plenty’ materialised largely for those few who were able to ride above the socio-political and economic chaos.

Against this background, *Brother* became a hit, especially with youth audiences.\(^{179}\) The Russian actor Sergei Bodrov Jr. became a star and his character, Danila, a national hero, particularly for younger generations searching for a reassuring national identity.\(^{180}\) Some liberal Russian critics criticised *Brother*, which appeared to present a killer as a positive hero, for being an ideologically dangerous populist ‘genre movie’.\(^{181}\) This view was generally accepted by Western scholars but also caused controversy.

Western critics generally accepted criticisms levelled at the film by Russian intellectuals, taking popular glorifications of *Brother*’s apparent messages as substantiation of the film’s xenophobic nationalism.\(^{182}\) The general consensus was

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\(^{178}\) See Beumers (1999[2006]: 2-4) and Lawton (Ibid: 1-6).

\(^{179}\) Lawton (Ibid: 128-30).

\(^{180}\) *Brother* was a hit with young audiences, who identified with their ‘positive unambiguous hero’: ‘before Danila Bagrov lies a bright path… Our hero – hero of our times – set off on the classical route from St. Petersburg to Moscow…’ (‘pered Daniloi Bagrovym – svetlyi put’… Nash’ geroi – geroi nashego vremeni – napravlyalsya po klassicheskomu marshrutu iz Peterburga v Moskvu’), http://brat2.film.ru/brat1.asp, (10/10/2010).

\(^{181}\) E.g. Dondurei (1998); Mantsov (1998); Margolit (1998).

\(^{182}\) See, for example, Gillespie (2003); Hashamova (Ibid.); Horton (2000); and Tippner (Ibid.).
that *Brother* was a commercial mainstream movie which, according to Beumers, rejected the defeatism of the *chernukha* model. Beumers also pointed to *Brother*’s new approach to post-Soviet Russian cinema and, like Brandon, highlighted its artistic merits. While it is true that Balabanov moved with *Brother* ‘toward the mass audience’, this chapter will demonstrate that Balabanov never abandoned art-house film.

Denise Youngblood observes that *Brother* is ‘entertainment, not art, but the kind of mass-market filmmaking that deserves serious attention’. Brandon agrees that it is deserving of scholarly attention yet disagrees that it is mere entertainment. Entertainment and art are not mutually exclusive, as I will demonstrate.

*Brother* depicts the Russian self through the prism of the gangster genre in its subversive neo-noir form. The strategic blending of the gangster film – itself a tragedy with psychoanalytical and socio-historical implications – and psychological neo-noir crime drama draws attention to a number of works belonging to the immediate cinematic intertext. The two main Western influences on *Brother*, I suggest, are Martin Scorsese’s gangster neo-noir *Mean Streets* and Dostoevskian neo-noir crime thriller *Taxi Driver* (1973 and 1976). Their countercultural perspective sympathetically, yet self-critically, represented the traditionally marginalised and stereotyped outlaw as both the implied author-director’s ethnic self (i.e. the Italian-American in-group) and its own internal criminal other. *Brother* shares with them the strategic use of similar cinematic and narrative devices as well as the subversive deployment of genre. The principal Russian cinematic influence, I hold, is Pavel Lungin’s allegorical *Luna-Park* (1992), whose themes, symbolic narrative and re/presentations are echoed by *Brother*.

A genre-based analysis will shed light on *Brother*’s representations of Russia’s key constitutive others: America, the Caucasus and the European West. By identifying the rules and conventions defining the American gangster genre and its

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184 Beumers (2007: xv)
185 Brandon (Ibid.).
186 Beumers (2005: 94).
188 Brandon (Ibid: 8).
neo-noir variant, I shall determine how Brother’s fictional types are produced and with what demonstrable consequences for the film’s self/other representations.

Brother’s status as a Russian variant of the gangster neo-noir genre and that of its protagonist as an anti-heroic oedipal gangster and neo-noir drifter is, I contend, closely connected with the film’s perspective on Russia’s self and others. Because of its depictions of the Manichean struggle between good versus evil, the classical gangster genre lends itself well to figurative interpretations (i.e. double readings), which, I suggest, support a symbolic reading of Brother’s re/presentations.

This way of ‘speaking otherwise’ can be expressed in the form of a symbolic narrative: fable, parable or allegory. John Cuddon observes that allegory invites us to attribute to characters, places and events ‘double meanings’ that ‘have an arbitrary existence.’ An allegorical reading is invited by Brother’s film language, metacinematic framing and its self-conscious use of psychoanalytical concepts. These features accord characters, places and events intensional associations with important socio-historical referents and developments that are significant for Brother’s self/other representations.

To facilitate the analysis of these representations, I will first provide a synopsis of the film, followed by an overview of the gangster genre and neo-noir style/mode. Next, Brother’s adaptation of the gangster genre’s structural dimensions and neo-noir features will be examined. There will follow a close examination of the film’s two beginnings, the opening credits with the establishing shot and the portrait episodes in St. Petersburg. A thorough analysis of these two introductions – to the film and to the St. Petersburg action – will be important for an informed reading of Brother’s self/other representations and those of Brother-2 in the next chapter.

3.2 Synopsis

A demobilising war veteran, Danila Bagrov, bumbles onto a stage, as if hypnotised by a song, ‘Wings’ (Krilia). A music video is in the making. Nautilus Pompilius’s

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191 Intensions are connotative uses of words, phrases or other symbol to indicate something else. Ferdinand De Saussure (1967[1986]), Course in General Linguistics, transl. Roy Harris, La Salle, IL: Open Court Classics.
album, ‘Wings’ (1995), is being finalised. Assaulted by the film director’s strong-arms and arrested by the police, the wronged tough guy rejects the latter’s offer of employment. Instead, he goes to search for ‘his’ ‘W/wings’ and, egged on by his mother, joins his elder brother and apparently successful businessman, Viktor, in St. Petersburg.

Viktor, however, is an assassin working for the Russian gangster boss, Kruglyi (‘Roundhead’). He is being commissioned to carry out a hit on the latter’s Chechen counterpart, who has just broken free and retaken control of a local trading area, the Haymarket (Sennaia ploschad’), which is used by both Russians and Chechens as a farmers’ and black market. Viktor exploits Danila’s fraternal loyalty, persuading his unquestioning penniless brother to take the contract. Allegedly, his own life is threatened by the Chechen gangsters and the deed would help Russian business. In fact, the move is designed to get the Chechens' turf back under the Russian gangsters’ control.

Danila successfully assassinates the Chechen gangster kingpin. His preparations were perfect but things still go awry when two of Kruglyi’s hoodlums, who were meant to kill Viktor, try to take out Danila instead. Shot and injured, he flees on an empty yellow streetcar, killing one of them. The tram driver, with whom he soon starts an affair, is the older Sveta, the cheating wife of an abusive husband.

The double-murder on the Haymarket is the beginning of Danila’s clash with the local crime world. The blood money affords him access to mainstream society’s goods. Carrying on the single-minded search for his ‘W/wings,’ Danila turns into a fan of Nautilus Pompilius, at whose concert, a young prostitute, Kэт/Cat, asks if Sveta is Danila’s mother. Later Kэт/Cat meets Danila – after making sure he is moneyed – and repays him with sex for a night out. His only real friend, yet unavailing good influence, is the russified German and conscientious objector to the lures of the city, Goffman.

In self-defence, and for his own moral reasons, Danila kills several of Kruglyi’s gangsters. Kruglyi’s minions rape Sveta to punish her for helping Danila. Driven to the edge, Danila wrathfully retaliates. He executes Kruglyi and the rapists but spares Viktor’s life. He sends him to their mother’s provincial home. Now at the

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192 Nautilus Pompilius’ album was released late summer 1995. [http://nautilus.ru/history/his9x26.htm](http://nautilus.ru/history/his9x26.htm), (04/09/2010)
top of St. Petersburg’s rampant underworld, Danila receives his final setback, when the horrified Sveta rejects him in favour of her abusive drunkard-husband.

Danila’s money may have been able to buy him the CD, ‘Wings,’ but not his freedom. The remorseless soldier-turned-gangster sets off to Moscow after a cursory hand-washing in the dirty waters of the river Neva. In his pockets he carries the cash he does not value and under his coat his new ‘bride’, a sawn-off shotgun.

3.3 Gangster Genre and Neo-Noir Style: An Overview

‘Gangster films,’ McArthur observes, ‘carry intrinsic charges of meaning independent of the qualities particular directors bring to them.’

They inform audience expectations and hypotheses regardless of historicity or individual films.

Gangster movies depict an ‘other’ who stems from the fringes of mainstream society. The classical gangster movie is marked by a striking iconography and by unhealthy oedipal developments. Set in the city it takes Protestant America’s mainstream viewpoint and gives expression to mainstream society’s binary black-and-white ideology. Made for entertainment, it was also a politico-cultural tool with which to marginalise and dominate particular others of the ‘good law-abiding’ American self. The gangster is a myth based on real criminals, places and events that strongly figured in the contemporary public imagination. Its iconography, approach to verisimilitude and other structural dimensions, were informed by the American contexts of Prohibition and the Great Depression.

Global/neon noir films revisit the theme of the gangster critically, depicting common, drifting and disturbed criminals, rather than larger-than-life anti-heroes. Marked by its depressive mood and idiosyncratic cinematography rather than by a strict iconography, neon noir possesses parallels to the defeatism of the Soviet-Russian chernukha model. This is reflected not only in their names (noir/chernukha) but also in their mutual emphasis on ‘the darkest, bleakest aspects of human life.’

Undercutting mainstream myths, neo-noir aims to depict the ‘reality’ and all-pervasiveness of crime, corruption and ambiguous, ‘unhealthy’ relationships. It gives realistic/naturalistic representations of sex and violence mixed with a good measure of nihilism. With its blunt and brutal representations, crude moral tone and anti-

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193 McArthur (Ibid: 1).
194 See, for example, Little Cesar (1931), Scarface (1932) and The Public Enemy (1931).
195 Graham (Ibid: 9).
establishment viewpoint, neo-noir demythologises the myth of the driven, glamorous tragic gangster. Self-critically heterogeneous representations attempt to trace the roots of, rather than whitewash, the national (e.g. Italian-American/Russian) self.

Desser observes that ‘we [can] account for... “neo-noir”... in terms of contemporary issues in global culture and society...’. Desser (Ibid: 516). Hong Kong neo-noir, for example, he continues, reflected ‘the overall anxiety provoked in Hong Kong by the 1984 Joint Sino-British Declaration’.197 He concludes that ‘local concerns... [and] increased fears of rising crime have just as much salience for the genre as the impact of the film language and techniques of gangster movie mavens [like] Martin Scorsese’.198 These observations indicate historical parallels with Russian contextual ‘realities’. In Brother, Balabanov combines countercultural Scorseseian neo-noir techniques with the gangster genre’s iconography the subversive commentary on the contemporary Russian Zeitgeist and self/other representations, which Lungin began in 1990 (Taxi Blues) and 1992 (Luna-Park).

3.4 Gangster Neo-Noir: Iconography, Characterisation and Themes

An iconographic description can give a convenient starting point to the analysis of a genre film, providing a formal basis for the discussion of developing themes and self/other representations.

McArthur identifies three categories of iconography; the physical presence, attributes and dress of the characters; qualities and themes emanating from the milieus within which the characters operate; and those connected with the technology at the characters’ disposal. Iconography therefore goes well beyond the visual aspects of a film that the term’s etymology might suggest. The gangster’s easily identifiable tragic character development is subversively modified by neo-noir themes and visual traits. An examination of their combined presence will establish that Brother can be characterised as a gangster neo-noir film.

Brother’s key fictional types revolve around a capable war veteran-turned-gangster: Danila. There are gangster minions who fall by the wayside as did many of their ‘real-life’ counterparts, appearing either as the classical pair or with their boss

196 Desser (Ibid: 516).
198 Ibid.
199 McArthur (Ibid: 3).
in the form of a triad. Night club owners and their sadistic strongmen, who reflect the violence of the era, are enacted by the New Russian film director, his bodyguards and other racketeers. The few ‘cops’ are as marginalised as the powerless figure of the tram conductor, indicating the film’s critical position towards the Russian state in the 1990s. Small-time street vendors are represented by Goffman, a young Chechen food vendor, and assistants in two music shops. Danila’s treacherous brother is Kruglyi’s ambitious dogsbody. Viktor gives Danila blood-money to dress himself adequately and to assassinate Kruglyi’s rival Chechen gangster boss. Genre-typically, Danila buys new clothes, other goods and rents a flat. Viktor turns into a stool pigeon.

The image of the gangster’s mother as the embodiment of family virtues is undermined by Danila’s mother’s rejection of her youngest son. Furthermore, and explicitly indicating the Oedipus theme already witnessed in Luna-Park’s characters of Andrei and Aliona, Kst/Cat calls the older Sveta Danila’s ‘mother’ (‘Mama tvoia?’) at the Pompilius concert. Brandon observes that ‘Sveta is our stand-in for mother Russia’, 200 which supports my view of the allegorical potential of the story. Sveta, moreover, possesses a dog calendar of 1997 and a lapdog which indicate another literary intertext, Anton Chekhov’s Lady with a Dog (1899) with its accompanying morality. There is the banal, amoral crudity of Sveta’s promiscuous lifestyle (poshlost’), with which she balances her dreary monotonous work, life and lack of prospects (byt). 201 The latter is indicated by her blinkered view out of the empty yellow streetcar’s window onto the never changing railway. Brandon also notes Sveta’s promiscuous lifestyle, describing her as a ‘sometime-prostitute.’ He continues that ‘Sveta is unable to leave her primary path’ like ‘the Tram-tracks upon which she drives on a daily basis’. 202

With respect to milieus and technology, turf wars are an important theme of the gangster genre and central to Brother through the Haymarket assassination. Of importance are the city’s façade, run-down mean streets and claustrophobic back courtyards, dingy rooming houses (kommunalkas) and pool rooms. The tailor shops

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200 Brandon (Ibid: 24).
associated with classical gangster movies are replaced by clothes shops and a hairdresser’s. Danila’s new dark square ‘gangster’ coat marks his rising status. He uses archetypical, gangster-like weapons: a revolver, a Colt, and a sawn-off shotgun. Cars serve as status symbols and paramilitary machinery; Kruglyi’s jeep strikes a parallel with Viktor’s Volga, which also serves as a reconnaissance vehicle. Telephones are used for threatening, grass-up and ‘contract/order’ calls.

The gangster rises to the top, displaces the gangster boss, only to fall precipitously and either die a tragic death or be reformed. With his stand-in for Viktor, Danila starts a bloody turf war for the Russian gangster boss. As a consequence, he kills his own associates and fails in his pursuit of happiness. Danila is represented as an anti-heroic gangster-killer to whose views the film refuses to accord unquestioning authority. According to the ethically more authoritative voice of Goffman, Danila falls from grace (‘Vot i ty propal’) and thus dies a spiritual death.203 The gangster’s attraction to mainstream society is reflected in his ‘taking’ of one of its women; Sveta. Danila’s relationship with the prostitute, Kэt/Cat, is marked by the similarities in their social status (gangster/prostitute). In sum, Brother enacts the gangster genre’s iconography in every aspect, yet with significant deviations.

Danila is easily manipulated by his female other, Kэt/Cat, and elder brother, Viktor. The negative influences of these character-doubles (materialism, escapism and gangsterism) combine in a morbid, counterproductive fashion with Danila’s desire to free himself from his past and present circumstances, symbolised by ‘Wings’. They (mis)direct him and contribute to his downfall. Danila does not replace the gangster boss after killing him. He develops a superiority complex (‘But they’re all weak here’ – A zdes’ slabye vse), is neither killed (punishment) nor reformed (integration). Danila leaves St. Petersburg, ‘Russia’s “Crime Capital,”’204 and goes to Moscow to seek bigger challenges. Brother’s incomplete gangster trajectory implies that the bigger and more glamorous Moscow represents Russia’s gangster metropolis. The move mirrors Danila’s/Russia’s withdrawal into him-/itself. By the end of the film the anti-hero has turned into a Russian gangster

203 Already Larsen (Ibid: 505) calls Goffman the film’s ethical voice.
204 Jennifer Ryan Tishler (2003), Menty and the Petersburg Myth, Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 10 (2): 127. Tishler notes that ‘Petersburg has always demonstrated both Russia’s ideals and its disappointments when those ideals are not realized’ (Ibid. 128).
assuming his brother’s role and, paradoxically, turning his back on the ideal, yet non-viable, models that both mythic America and Russia present.

Danila neither assumes the wealth, power and status of the local gangster boss nor does he accept Goffman’s path of hesychast enlightenment.205 Potential father-figures and ‘resolutions’ to the modern Russian dilemma – the ‘good’ pacifist Goffman, the ‘evil’ gangster boss Kruglyi and the abusive drunkard Pasha – are rejected. The ending remains open, pointing to the ongoing nature of post-Soviet Russian developments. Hap- and wingless Danila’s dilemma is unresolved. Soviet Russia is not dead and the new post-Soviet Russia is still in the process of defining itself.

*Brother*’s protagonist is, as Warshow observed already about his classical forerunners, a ‘gangster [and his implied author’s] “no” to that great American “yes” which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives’.206 If even the classical gangster implicitly undermined ‘that happier American culture’207 and the mainstream viewpoint reflected in the movies in which he featured, subsequent neo-noir variants posed a more explicit challenge to that viewpoint. It is these later films which most influenced how *Brother* used the gangster genre for its self/other representations.

Like all neo-noir films *Brother* features plot elements linking it to ‘heists-gone-bad, male camaraderie, trust and betrayal, criminal couples on the run, extreme moments of violence, dark humour, and the importance of coincidence’.208 Neo-noir’s important element of coincidence is revealed in the uncertain present and future of the protagonist as well as his random behaviour. All of them are moulded by this inevitable, oedipal, trajectory.209 Drifting strangers (Danila) are ‘immediately and fatally attracted’ to a *femme fatale* (*Kэt/ Cat & Sveta*), wandering into situations beyond their control (the Haymarket murders). Moments of violence and bloodshed are frequent and explicit. The ‘heist-gone-bad’ theme presents a variation of Raskolnikov’s double-murder of the old pawn-broker and her sister, who happens

208 Desser (Ibid: 519-20).
209 Also Beumers (1999[2006]: 83) notes that Danila, the ‘makes no choices, but lives on the spur of the moment’.
onto the scene. Danila does not notice the trap on the Haymarket set for his brother. He kills the Chechen and a Russian gangster and takes a bullet for Viktor. The importance of male camaraderie can thus be seen in the brotherhood theme and overlaps with that of ‘trust and betrayal’. It is evident in Danila’s relationship with Viktor and his killing of two ‘brothers-in-arms’ in the flat beneath the ‘bohemian party’. Influenced by a superiority complex and a split personality, the second double-murder (of the other two members of his gang) is enacted by the deteriorating protagonist, who, in order to remain true to his promise to Stepan, Ironically, commits fratricide by killing two ‘bandits’.210 Neo-noir’s ‘dark moments of humour’211 are, for example, evident in Brother’s adaptation of Macbeth’s porter scene, when Danila arrives at his second address and ‘military base’ for the Haymarket murder (‘Act 2, Scene XIV’, 25:10), and Danila’s botched ‘linguistic exchange’ with the Frenchman at the techno party.

Russia’s lack of knowledge of its various Western others and its inability to communicate with them is portrayed in a tragi-comic fashion. Danila’s uninformed, thoughtless statement ‘Your America is going to hell soon’ (Skoro vsei vashei Amerike ke rdyk), is uttered only after Danila has invited the Frenchman to share a joint of marijuana. It forms part of an exchange of banter, is outdated at a time of Russian infatuation with America, and thus twice subverted: once by dint of Danila’s ironised uneducated backwardness, which provides a further indication of Luna-Park’s influence, and once by the fact that Danila re/presents a voice with weakened authority. Sharing a spliff with the Westerner belongs to Brother’s food-sharing motif and rejects xenophobic readings. Danila’s assumption that the Frenchman is American reflects Russia’s contemporary infatuation with everything American. Danila’s remark betrays his extremist mindset and his superiority complex. The obvious hyperbole in his belief that he is better than others further undermines his position and that of the Russian self that he represents. The Frenchman’s inability to speak Russian is overshadowed by Danila’s to relate to his social environment. In a complex layering of conflicting meanings, the comical edge of the conversation is in turn challenged by the tragic note struck by the protagonist’s psychological problems.

210 The killing shows Danila’s self-hatred, which is similar to that of Luna-Park’s Andrei. Stepan, a film director, is, like Balabanov, a representative of Russia’s threatened national cinema. He is terrified by Danila’s split personality which displays a cold murderous streak blended with genuine friendliness and helpfulness towards a man whom the superman later nonetheless contemptuously calls a ‘weakling’ (dokh’ak).

211 Desser (Ibid: 520).
and latent baby-faced aggression, both of which he shares with Andrei from Luna-Park and Travis Bickle from Taxi Driver.

The oscillation of Danila’s status between professional soldier and criminal killer is, like that of Travis, tragic. They were both sent as soldiers to kill in wars of aggression (Chechnia and Vietnam). They are both, like Andrei, driven by an inner necessity and display character flaws that are not of their own conscious making. They are tragic and ‘in Meredith’s fine phrase ‘betrayed by what is false within’’.

Each lives by his own moral code – one which does not always coincides with the institution of the law. Danila, Andrei and Travis are the alienated ‘losers’ of mainstream America (1970s) and Russia (1990s) respectively.

Danila’s inability to look after his money sensibly is, like that of Johnny Boy (Mean Streets), foolish and betrays a character flaw which cannot be presented euphemistically as a form of spiritual contempt for material possessions. It rather mirrors the degree to which incompetence is endemic in the Russian economy. The gangster genre lends itself to such figurative readings directed towards exposing the ambivalence of a modern, urban world. The irrational violent nature of the romanticised gangster (mainstream society’s inferior other) makes him squander his wealth in an irresponsible manner.

The gangster genre’s potential for ‘double readings’ is significantly increased through meta-cinematic devices, which demonstrate the director’s (self-)conscious approach to the genre. In order to appreciate this allegorical potential, it is necessary to examine Brother’s fundamentally important two beginnings. The meta-cinematic devices contained in the opening credits signal the general importance of the film’s connotative dimension. The St. Petersburg portrait episodes invoke specific images of contemporary Russia. A close reading of these scenes helps to demonstrate Brother’s invitation to be read allegorically.

3.5   The Film’s Two Beginnings

3.5.1   Establishing Shot and Opening Credits

The establishing shot of a genre film possesses an importance similar to the first line of a poem. This narrative convention is, Suzanne Speidel observes, ‘a shot at the

start of a film or scene [often a crane shot] which establishes spatial relationships within the mise-en-scène and locates the story within the diegesis. The opening sequence is particularly important in establishing the mood of the film.

_Brother’s_ establishing shot is a crane shot tracking from a murky, swampland scene to a medieval castle. It is accompanied by the sound of violins, which, together with the camera’s sepia filter and low-key/expressionist lighting, set the neo-noir mood for the film. The song, ‘Wings’ is a waltz written in a minor tonality. ‘Wings’ helps create a depressing atmosphere of dizzy disorientation. The unhealthy yellow-brownish murky shade of the sepia tone indicates an unwholesome atmosphere and foreshadows Dostoevskian madness. The dominant colours – as in _Mean Streets_ and _Taxi Driver_ – are red, yellow and a sepia hue.

The shot is abruptly cut after depicting a barred window and the back of a half-naked actress/model with her gown down to her waist. Just before the jarring jump-cut, the song’s narrative voice is synchronised with the actress’ image, thus addressing her (‘You’re taking off…’). Upon continuation (‘... your evening dress’), the next, and now extradiegetic/non-fictional, crane shot clarifies that the first shot had been that of the making of a fictional video. Such jarring jump-cuts foreground cinematic technique and can serve as blatantly self-referential and/or meta-narrative devices. They draw viewers’ attention to the story’s concern with filmmaking and establish two narrative levels. Moreover, the protagonist’s entry coincides with the song’s narrative voice; it is synchronised with his image and thus addresses him this time (‘I want to cry with pain or forget myself…’). Such audio-visual synchronisation constitutes a meta-narrative/cinematic device and a vital carrier of information.

The synchronisation device also reinforces the effect of the jump-cuts and the self-referential function of the second extradiegetic camera. The visual perspective changes after the entry of the actress and Danila into the intradiegetic shooting of the video clip; viewers are presented with three different parties: the film crew

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214 It is a popular belief in Russia (reflected in _Crime and Punishment_) that yellow is connected to madness.
215 For more detail see Speidel (Ibid: 67).
(fictional), the trespasser, Danila (fictional), and the actress (doubly fictional as part of both the intradiegetic video clip and the film). Both of these features (the audio-visual synchronisation; the meta-cinematic use of intra- and extradiegetic cameras), along with the stage-setting and its expressionist low-key lighting, articulate the film’s two narrative planes. The low-key lighting creates the chiaroscuro effect which supports the visual neo-noir atmosphere.

Like Mean Streets, Brother uses a meta-cinematic device to communicate the self-referential mode in which it invites its meanings to be read. It draws attention to the dramatic-theatrical quality of the upcoming story and counters the interpellation of viewers into the fictional world by distancing them from it; its self-referential beginning undermines primary and secondary audience identifications with the eye of the camera and the characters, respectively. As such it assists the viewers’ conscious engagement with the story, directing their attention towards connotative readings above and beyond the surface narrative. Brother’s action begins on a stage together with the appropriate ‘theatrical’/expressionist lighting (Mean Streets concludes in the same manner). The film’s characters on stage take on a second, dramatic role. The meta-cinematic mode of filmmaking creates the ambiguity integral to all self-focused messages.

Moreover, since the video clip for ‘Wings’ is only in the making, viewers (were supposed to) ‘understand’ that the narrative time is 1995. Here, it is useful to describe how Brother indicates the symbolic character of its narrative through the story’s time line. The fictional time of the symbolic narrative is clear thanks to Danila’s visits to the music shops in St. Petersburg and his provincial hometown. He fails to acquire the CD ‘Wings’ (made in 1995) at home because it had not been released yet. Before committing the murder on Haymarket, Danila is told by the shop assistant that ‘Wings’, released in January 1996, sold out quickly. The Haymarket murder of the Chechen gangster boss invites symbolic readings of the assassination of Dzhokhar Dudayev, president of Ichkeria/Chechnia, on April 21, 1996 by Russian guided missiles. After the fictional representations of the assassination, Danila acquires Nautilus’ latest album ‘Yablokitai’ (1997).

Returning to Brother’s opening, we might observe that the narrative voice in the song, ‘Wings’, to cite Robert Stam, ‘does not “see” the events of the fictional

217 For a concise treatment of these concepts see Stam et al (Ibid: 151-54).
world, but recounts them; he... does not observe from a post within the fictional world, but recalls events from a position outside the fictional universe.’ Contextual reality intrudes upon the fictional world, which increases the sense of cultural verisimilitude, cinematic realism and the presence of the contemporary Zeitgeist. Viacheslav Butusov’s intrusive voice and lyrics, used by both the film’s implied author and the fictional director simultaneously, are directed at the protagonist. In lamenting the loss of Danila’s wings, it metaphorises his deplorable ‘fallen’ condition and loss of freedom.

When the camera focuses on Danila for the second time, the song’s narrative voice addresses him again with ‘Where are your wings that I liked so much?’ (gde tvoi krylia, kotorye nravilis’ mne?) On the recurrence of this chorus, the camera switches and shoots Danila walking past the actress. The lyrics are now simultaneously directed at both the young Russian man and the woman, addressing them as a whole made up of two parts. Significantly, in its connection with the castle’s barred windows, this shot represents the protagonist and his female counterpart behind bars, literally; that is, the focus of the camera is obstructed by the image of prison bars. This device is unusual for filmmaking and thus carries metaphorical loading.

Although the viewer sees the two protagonists only once through the director’s ‘barred’ viewfinder, the same viewfinder presents the perspective from which the music video ‘Wings’ is shot. Both characters – the Russian woman and man – converge as a single entity addressed by ‘the song’s lyrics and portrayed as if living behind bars. The opening figures, props and meta-cinematic devices are thus designed to foreshadow the film’s themes (the search for freedom, violence and family relationships) and its modes of reading (neo-noir and allegory).

Brother’s opening sequence introduces a stage together with two ‘actors’. This literal stage foreshadows St. Petersburg’s ‘theatrical’ function as the stage for Brother’s gangster tragedy. The roles of the two characters become twofold; as characters in the film (the surface structure) and on stage within the film (pointing at the allegorical deep structure). St. Petersburg’s function as the main ‘stage’ for Brother’s gangster tragedy also confirms its link to the ‘barred window’ trope: the city is widely known to represent Russia’s window to the West. All the windows in

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the opening scene and the highly unusual view through the camera are barred. Despite its St Petersburg setting, the main story will not depict characters that freely travel to the West, as did Iurri Mamin’s *Window to Paris* (*Okno v Parizh*, 1994). In *Brother*, the window to the West is barred and the neo-noir gangster still caught in confusion in his ghetto. Proper emancipated transit and exchange between Russia and the West remain obstructed.

The colours of the captions in the following six fade-to-blacks change from yellow to blood-red, invoking the overall impression of Dostoevskian madness (yellow), bloody violence and death (red). Besides introducing Danila as a Raskolnikov figure, the all-pervasive use of the colour of red links *Brother* to *Macbeth*’s corresponding thematic blood-imagery. Beumers identified Danila as ‘a modern Raskolnikov’. Meanwhile, Danila’s very surname, Bagrov, indicates one aspect of the colour red’s symbolism: its association with bloody violence, an association immediately foregrounded by the consequences of the violent physical altercations in Scene Two. Danila’s loss of wings not only connote the loss of freedom but also presents him as a fallen angel.

*Brother*’s dramatic quality is further underlined by the first six ‘provincial scenes’ which fulfil the function of an exposition and point to a six-part narrative arc. The fade-to-blacks correspond to the theatrical curtain falling (a further motivation for the stage motif). There are 25 fade-to-blacks in the whole film, concluding 25 scenes, which numerically corresponds to the number of scenes in *Macbeth*. Moreover, like *Macbeth*, *Brother* is divided into five distinguishable acts which conform to the classical story arc as presented within the ‘Freytag pyramid’.

Because of his act of trespass in the *initial situation*, Danila is attacked by two strong-men, foreshadowing more violence to come. Roughened up and bloodied, he is interrogated by the police, to whom he reveals laconically that he is ‘Danila Sergeevich Bagrov, born 1975, not demobilised yet’ (*dembel’ ne otgulial*

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220 Larsen’s observations (Ibid: 505) that the ‘film’s opening scene invites the viewer to see the film as an elegy for a world populated by wingless would-be angels, fallen... from history’ implies the narrative’s potential for metaphorical double-reading.
221 See Cuddon (Ibid: 335): exposition (i.e. the six episodes/scenes of the opening sequence); rising action (i.e. starts with the conflict/problem in ‘Scene VII’ and finishes with Danila accepting the job of assassinating the Chechen in ‘Scene XIII’); climax (i.e. starts with Danila reconnoitering the market and finishes with the wounded youngster talking to Goffman ‘Scenes XIV and XV’); falling action (i.e. starts with Krugly threatening Sveta and finishes with the noir episode/‘Scene XXIII’ on the cemetery); dénouement/resolution/catastrophe (i.e. starts with Sveta’s rape in ‘Scene XXIV’).
Danila will use exactly the same words in the film’s final scene after leaving the stage of St. Petersburg, indicating Russia’s perennial state of militarization. Only on the St. Petersburg stage will he claim that he served in the safety of an office. This also indicates the two different narrative levels of the frame (exposition and ending) and the St. Petersburg action. His refusal as an unemployed war veteran to work for the state organs reflects the problem that Danila has with authority. The police tell him to find a job within seven days or face probation. This presents Danila’s conflict/problem. Red stars on the walls of the police station show that times have barely changed in Russia. The colour scarlet also alludes to the lingering influence of the Soviet mentality.

Scene Three, the complication or rising action, shows that finding a copy of ‘Wings’ has become Danila’s desire and provides a further motivation for him to find work. In this material world, without money he will not be able to acquire ‘W/wings’. Ironically – since the song’s lyrics state that money is unimportant – without rediscovering his ‘W/wings’ Danila will not be able to save himself and the possessor of the song’s narrative voice, whose extra-textual position coincides with that of the Russian viewers, many of whom would be well acquainted with the lyrics.

In the fourth scene, the climax, we learn through the police officer’s off-screen narration that the protagonist’s father was a recidivist burglar killed in a prison camp, when Danila was seven years old. Syntactically, the words vor-retsidivist are synchronised with an image of a well-tended Lenin statue shot through a window. Since one sees nothing but the statue of Lenin, it represents the referent of the signifier (vor-retsidivist) and ‘Lenin’ the signified. The phrase, in fact, has two overlapping signifieds: one verbal (Danila’s father), and one visual (the statue of – and standing for – Lenin). The word-image synchronisation develops critical remarks made about Lenin by Luna-Park. It connotes the rejection of Khrushchevian revisionism, pinpointing as the original culprit and robber of national Russian values not Stalin – as did Pavel Chuchrai’s otherwise excellent film The Thief (Vor, 1997) – but the Father of the Nation, Lenin.

The synchronisation device confirms the film’s invitation to be read allegorically. The young war veteran is not merely a fatherless half-orphan, but, figuratively, has a filial relationship to Lenin. Problematic father-son relationships are a fundamental gangster theme, contributing to the gangster’s problematic
The origins of Russia’s current problems lie in its past, at the beginning of the Soviet era and the birth of its dysfunctional ‘great family.’ Russia’s state-socialist past did not end in 1991 and continues to affect the country adversely. The theme of the father figure recurs in Brother’s explicit treatment of the gangster’s oedipal developments which, in turn, have clear ramifications for the film’s self/other representations. Mirrored in Danila’s search for, and rejection of, a paternal model, post-Soviet Russia seeks, and fails to find, self-identification via a series of paternal others of its own.

The fifth (falling action) scene shows Danila driven by an inner necessity. He makes the pitiful attempt to buy the CD, ‘Wings’, the video clip of which is only just in the making. A further intensional association between Danila and post-Soviet Russia is implied in the CD’s making in 1995, for the nation itself is only three and a half years old. This age approximately signifies the beginning of the oedipal phase at the end of which the boy – now aged five – will either identify with his father or murder him and take his place, figuratively speaking. In 1997, Danila will kill Kruglyi, dismiss Viktor, defeat Pasha and abandon Goffman.

The Oedipus theme is consolidated through Brother’s intimate links with Sergei Bodrov, Sr.’s film, Prisoner of the Mountains (Kavkazskii Plennik, 1996) and Pavel Lungin’s Luna-Park. Quite apart from the presence of the actor Sergei Bodrov Jr. Prisoner and Brother as well as his resemblance to the character of Andrei, Prisoner also represents Russia’s conflict with the Caucasus and one of its strongest and most memorable images is that of the shackled feet of the young, fatherless soldier-captive, Vania. Some of Luna-Park’s main themes that Brother shares are post-Soviet Russia’s oedipal search for identity, anti-Semitism, abuse through the state and escape into violence as a means of problem solving.

In Scene Six, the dénouement, the camera again depicts Danila through a window, this time from the outside. He is sitting at his mother’s table, eating alone. One can see his image in a mirror. The mirror construction, which will recur repeatedly, points once more to a meta-narrative, doubling effect. The viewer finds himself as if situated inside the diegesis next to the characters and included within the story. Danila’s mother scolds and harasses him, while praising Viktor. When she

222 The mythical Oedipus received his name, ‘swollen footed/feet,’ because the child’s shackled feet had swollen up after abandonment.
tells Danila – unsuccessfully – to look at his brother’s photos, another story-line is initiated. Her words, ‘He was a father for you’ (*on za mesto ottsa tebe byl*), sound odd when contrasted with Danila’s indifference. He takes no interest in his elder brother, who by extension represents a link to Danila’s Soviet past. The theme of brotherly relationships evokes the larger theme of kinship between the remnant of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia (Viktor and Danila). It is used subversively by the elder brother through his abuse and betrayal of his younger sibling, who eventually displaces his emasculated alter ego. *Brother* rejects the model of Soviet-Russian brotherhood and also a return to a powerful father-figure. It thus counters post-Soviet Russian restoration nostalgia and related myths about the ‘good old Soviet days’.

While their mother is telling Danila to join his brother, we see on screen a diachronic sequence of Viktor’s photos; ordinary faces of a boy growing into a man. The photos evidently make a nostalgic impression on Danila’s mother but lack information and create uncertainty about Viktor, who seems to belong to the past. The automatic impression of the individual photos is synchronised with Danila’s mother’s voiceover creating a mini-narrative. Importantly, one photo of a uniformed Viktor provides the unchanging background for the sequence of images, leaving the impression of a man connected inextricably to the Red Army and the Soviet era.

This reflective approach deviates from the norm associated with genre cinema where the viewer tends to remain uninterruptedly and emotionally absorbed in the ‘here and now’. In *Brother* the viewer’s experience is constantly disrupted. On this occasion, the disruption involves a technique different from, but parallel to, the jump-cuts and sound-visual synchronisations in Scenes One and Four. *Brother*’s repeated use of displacement – here the delegation of the narrative voiceover to a character and the chronological sequencing of photos – creates embedded narratives. These embeddings, together with the symbolic concepts of ‘wings,’ blood/red’ and ‘paternal model’ possess significant intensions. Their repetition generates a whole second level of signification. Their individual intensions conspire together to invite a sustained allegorical reading.

In sum, on the film’s two narrative levels, both Danila and post-Soviet Russia have problematic family relations. The myth of the patrilineal ‘great family’ is subverted via Danila’s Oedipus complex, which also affects his fraternal relations
with his elder brother and father figure. *Brother* begins in 1995 when post-collapse Russia was around three years old and finishes early 1997, when Danila leaves the stage of St. Petersburg. Post-Soviet Russia has turned five, which in psychoanalytical terms concludes the Oedipus phase. Accordingly, it is the friendly Russian truck driver (a representative of Russia’s grass roots), who gives Danila a lift to Moscow, who emerges as a viable father-figure for the erring young criminal. In line with the open ending, however, this remains only a suggestion for the future, or even an opportunity already rendered unavailable by the inexorable trajectory of the gangster’s path to tragedy.

### 3.5.2 The Portrait Episodes: Introducing Russia and Raskolnikov

The opening credits – together with the film’s title – introduced a number of fundamental structural and thematic dimensions. The first St. Petersburg ‘act’, and the drama’s ‘rising action,’ re-emphasises the theatricality of the story. It introduces more characters and cues to motivate Danila’s future behaviour. The sequential organisation of these Gogolian ‘portrait chapters’ is important for the film’s self/other representations. The opening scene of the St. Petersburg action situates the film within the orbit of the gangster genre. It shows a conversation between the hitman Viktor, or Tatarin, and his boss Kruglyi. Kruglyi informs Tatarin that ‘the Chechen has broken free’ (*osvobodilsia*) and taken control of the market. After the invitation to allegorical viewing/reading signalled by the exposition, the Chechen’s liberation and the recapturing of his market indicates another intensional use of a character, place and event: the Chechen (declaration of) independence in late 1993. The conventional gangster solution in such a turf war is to kill the competitor.

Although he declares that ‘our people do not want a war’ (*nashi voiny ne khottat*), in planning an assassination, Kruglyi in fact separates himself from ordinary Russians. This rejection of popular Russian sentiment against the first Chechen war shows that the gangster elite’s interests do not coincide with those of the common people. *Brother* establishes its counterpolitical positions against the first Chechen War and the Russian leadership, which, fully aware of popular antipathy to the idea, waged war like one group of gangsters against another.223 Kruglyi’s red

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223 In 1996, General Aleksandr Lebed’ famously claimed the ‘[Chechnia] war… was started by the Moscow gangsters to punish the Chechen gangsters for taking more than their fair share of the corruption pie…’; in Peter J.S. Duncan (2005), ‘Contemporary Russian Identity between East and West’, *The Historical Journal*, 48 (1): 277-294, 288.
jacket points both to the symbolism of death, and to the impersonation of the Soviet state’s evil, gangster-like past.

Kruglyi continuously quotes proverbs. These are fixed linguistic expressions representing uncritically received knowledge and thus categorical thinking similar to stereotyping. The impression is that of a ‘vulgar’ character, as Luna-Park’s Naoum Kheifitz remarks. This element of satire foreshadows Brother-2’s use of caricature for its own satiric representations. It is, furthermore, a pointer to Kruglyi’s function as representative of the criminal pinnacle of Russia’s contemporary elites, who since Soviet times traditionally hailed from provincial backgrounds. Here Brother introduces a crucial aspect of Balabanov’s approach to self/other representation. The ethnic and national self and others as well as their relationships are depicted in complex ambiguous and even-handed manner. Russia’s criminal elites that dominated Russia in the 1990s are unambiguously ‘othered’ as vulgar evil gangsters.

After Danila’s arrival in Scene Two, the film emphasises its theatricality by showing the protagonist ‘guiding’ the viewers along famous monuments of St. Petersburg’s façade. In typical noir fashion ‘compositional tension is preferred to physical action [with] the scene [moving] cinematographically around the actor’. When Danila arrives at Viktor’s flat on the Moika Embankment, his brother is not at home. Danila again attempts to buy the CD, ‘Wings’, which he cannot afford, and which has ‘sold out quickly’ anyway. It is now 1996. Later, Danila spends the night in an attic, where the insomniac is seen lying with open eyes and a shadow swinging across his face like a hypnotising pendulum, which indicates the dreamlike quality of the upcoming action on the St. Petersburg stage. There is no fade-to-black between this and the following episode which takes place the next day and introduces Goffman, a russified German who is also portrayed as a model Russian and as the ethical voice of the film.

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226 Petersburg has long been conventionally depicted as an unreal fantastic place where anything is possible (e.g A.S. Pushkin’s *Queen of Spades*, 1834). Day, (2005): 617, notes Brother’s dreamlike quality and how the film doubles in on itself. She calls Danila ‘another Petersburg dreamer [whose] lonely strolls are doubled by the recurring figure of a hollowed-out tramcar.’
Birgit Beumers observes that the film’s fragmented narrative almost allows its episodes to be rearranged ‘in any order’. But Danila’s first meeting with Goffman includes a trigger device which would render such rearrangements problematic. Danila overhears a Russian racketeer call the street-vendor, Goffman, a ‘nit/parasite’ (*gnīda*), when the latter is unable to pay his protection money. These words will influence the protagonist’s subsequent actions and must therefore be timed to occur at that point. Trigger conversations of this sort are gleaned from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. They show the viewer how Danila’s actions and choices were influenced and/or his hand forced. Like Raskolnikov, the anti-hero is vulnerable to external forces, and to his own obsessions. His unworldly, provincial backwardness, lack of experience of the modern material world, and problematic psychological state, make it difficult for him to comprehend post-Soviet reality. His guilt is moderated and rendered ambiguous through reference to these factors and the carefully constructed narrative within which they are articulated.

During a literary trigger conversation, Danila’s intertextual antecedent, Raskolnikov, overheard a student making the utilitarian proposal that it would be useful to kill a useless pawnbroker and use her money to help others. Worthless people are ‘insects/worms’; the use of lethal force is therefore permissible if targeted towards the greater good. Danila, in turn, learns from his first encounter with Goffman and a racketeer that the laws of Russia’s streets are dog-eat-dog and might-makes-right (the survival of the fittest). Anyone who does not pay is a parasite. (Danila will use the same derogatory expression in reference to an Armenian fare-dodger.) Danila beats the Russian racketeer unconscious and takes his revolver. The episode suggests an intrinsic sense of justice on Danila’s part combined with law of the streets/jungle; Russian turns against Russian.

Accompanying Goffman to the Lutheran Cemetery, Danila hears about the dark side of the modern city: ‘The city is a terrible force. The bigger the city, the stronger it is. It sucks you in. Only the strong have the power to resist.’ (*Gorod strashnaia sila. Chem bol’she gorod, tem on sil’nee. On zasasyvaet. Tol’ko sil’ny mozhet ustoiat’*). While the motif of strength is thus verbalised, Goffman in fact refers to the moral strength necessary to withstand the lure of success in the modern material world. The apostolic hermit-figure criticizes the corrupting force of the

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227 Beumers (1999[2006]: 84).
modern city/world, which is reflected in the traditions of both the gangster genre and St. Petersburg. Danila, however, misunderstands Goffman, whose words are antithetical to Viktor’s expressed view (‘All power is in Moscow’ - *V Moskve vsia sila*), which induces the gangster to go to Moscow.

Here *Brother* introduces Dostoevsky’s view of St. Petersburg, the city which became a symbol of modern disorder in a changing Russia. St. Petersburg – post-Soviet Russia’s ‘Crime Capital’ – can be thematically linked to the gangster’s city, which is ambiguous in its glamour, its promise of success, yet its ‘final meaning [of] anonymity and death’.²²⁸ Both gangster cities, Russian and American, provide the menacing and inhuman background for displaced and alienated anti-heroes.

Still on their way, Danila asks Goffman his name and reacts with surprise at the answer: ‘What, you are a Jew?’ (*Evrei, chto li?*). When Goffman corrects him, saying, ‘I’m German’ (*nemets*), Danila responds, ‘Oh, I’m not wild about Jews.’ (*A to ia evreev kak-to ne ochen*).²²⁹ The theme is also at the centre of Lungin’s *Luna-Park*, where the oedipal protagonist turns from an anti-Semitic hooligan into a protector of (what may be) his Russo-Jewish father. It was, furthermore, noted that anti-Semitic and racist remarks are common for neo-noir characters. Motivated by neo-noir’s blend of naturalist realism and misanthropic nihilism, the purpose is to rattle complacent politically correct mainstream viewers and subvert mainstream society’s myths. While Danila, like the anti-heroes of *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, expresses a negative opinion, he is not explicitly discriminatory and his remark does not constitute fully fledged anti-Semitism. Danila is presented as an uninformed Russian bigot. His apparent anti-Semitism fades after Goffman challenges him to explain what the difference is (*A v chem raznitsa?* (between Germans and Jews; FW)) – a challenge which a truly racist anti-Semite would have leapt to meet.

The selection of a German, of all nationalities, to provide the film’s ethical voice, and moreover someone who repudiates the existence of a distinction between Jews and Germans, confirms the importance in *Brother* of a positive, enlightened

²²⁸ Warshow (Ibid: 102)
²²⁹ Vera Tolz observes that Germans were perceived as ‘model’ Russian citizens in the 19th century. Baltic Germans, for example, were widely perceived as the most patriotic Russian citizens in the 19th century. Vera Tolz (2008), ‘European, National, and (Anti-) Imperial: The Formation of Academic Oriental Studies in late Tsarist and Early Soviet Russia,’ *Kritika*, 9 (1), 53-82. This tradition is also reflected in cultural representations such as that of Andrey Stoltz, the main positive character and half-German in the Russian writer I. Goncharov’s 1859 novel *Oblomov*, which was also adapted to film by Nikita Mikhalkov in 1980.
West European other. Nonetheless, as Susan Larsen observes, Goffman’s ethical voice is undermined ‘by the fact that he lives in St. Petersburg’s Lutheran cemetery, which he calls “motherland’” (in Russian Matushka zemlia, Matushka Rus’ or rodina-mat’). Apart from the morbid impression created by his living space, the force of Goffman’s voice is weakened by his decision to answer Danila’s questions with a proverb (‘what’s good for Russians, is death for Germans: shto russkomu khorosho, eto nemtsu smert’). For in so doing, he links himself to his vulgar counterpart, Kruglyi.

The episode finishes with Danila symbolically sharing his food with this father-figure and other homeless people in their skit-like abode at the cemetery. Goffman stands against both the establishment (religioius and political) and the blatant materialism of Russia’s 1990s.

As if in contrast to the cemetery scene, on the following day (Scene Three), Danila takes a tram, where he contemptuously ‘deals with’ two Armenian fare-dodgers ridiculing the powerless Russian conductor. The rolling tram can be interpreted as the metaphorical Russian ‘ship of state’ on which everyone has to pay their fares (i.e. their taxes or energy charges). In this episode Danila breaks the law to uphold order and justice. Anthony Olcott ‘recognises as the fundamental tension… “that between zakon, or ‘law’ and spravedlivost, [or] ‘justice’”’. Danila’s racist slur demonstrates the ambivalence of his character and subverts an essentially well-intended action even more than the drawn revolver. Together they indicate Russia’s attitude towards their – not entirely innocent – ‘brethren’ in the Caucasus region. Misconstruing Goffman’s words about strength, Danila demonstrates that he remembers the racketeer’s word ‘parasite’ (gnida); as ‘top dog’ he feels justified in invoking the right of the mighty. His criminal father and dysfunctional family have conditioned his perception and attitude. He steps in with his revolver and infamous words: ‘You’re not my brother, black-arsed parasite’ (’Ne brat ty mne, gnida chernozhopaia’). The conductor, who represents the authorities, becomes complicit in Danila’s aggressive intervention by letting him proceed.

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230 Larsen (Ibid: 505).
231 The ‘skit [is] a small cell... existing under conditions of deprivation... the hermit movement associated with Hesychasm... provided an alternative to institutional faith.’ Condee, (1999[2006]: 28).
232 These two characters were identified as Armenians by a Russian-Armenian native speaker in Stephen Hutching’s seminar in 2007-08.
233 Anthony Olcott in Tishler (2003: 139)
Danila develops from an unemployed, lonely drifter into an awe-inspiring yet ambiguous vigilante figure. He distinguishes between those trying to cope, only to be robbed by racketeers, and those who rob the state by not paying their dues. Guilt lies on both sides but, here, there is no disguising Danila’s racist tendencies. Nonetheless, despite being painfully aware of his own poverty Danila does not stoop to take the Armenian’s bulging wallet, highlighting his disregard for money. The committing of a crime for material gain will, as we shall see, require a further trigger conversation with Kət/Cat and a meeting with Viktor.

Later in the film, Danila’s next encounter with a representative from the Caucasus further ambiguates his racist attitude. Before the Haymarket assassination, Danila has a friendly conversation with a fruit vendor from the Caucasus. Unlike the fare-dodgers, this young man is as an utterly likeable, honest worker. Before selling Danila a watermelon he offers the protagonist a piece for free. Danila emphasises his own ambivalence towards his ethnic other by accepting the free gift of food. Unlike its predecessor, this episode defies conventional views of the film’s xenophobic ‘othering’. Furthermore, there is a world of difference between a hero’s actions and statements and the stance adopted by the film as a whole, especially when that hero is in fact a deeply compromised anti-hero and the film’s ethical voice belongs to another main character. The moral hierarchy represented in Brother rejects criminality and endorses civic duty. The symbolic narrative, moreover, leaves no doubt that the end does not justify the means. Within the St. Petersburg narrative, the gangster is punished.

In the next episode (Scene Four), Danila bumps into an American couple; a European-American boy and his Asian-American girlfriend. Danila understands nothing when they ask him for directions. At this point, his female Russian counterpart, Kət/Cat, makes her entry. While Danila stands there like a lummox, she gives directions in English. The Asian-American girl then takes her boyfriend by the arm and walks off with him. Viewers are here confronted with a successful interracial relationship; a European-American boy goes out with an Asian-American girl and accepts her leading role. Similarly, the urban Russian girl from St. Petersburg is more willing and able to communicate with her American other than the provincial Russian lout.
Kэт/Cat provides Danila with the next trigger. First she makes remarks about the poor quality of both his clothes and music. The newcomer in the gangster film is typically under-dressed at the beginning of his criminal career. Motivated by his sluggish, uncomprehending appearance and lack of contextual awareness, she pointedly asks Danila if he is in possession of the hallucinogenic LSD. Then the drug-taking, yet observant, techno-girl makes the sign of evil in front of Danila’s face: ‘And dough. Got any dough?’ (‘A bashli. Bashli est’?). She completes the trigger device: ‘When you have money, come here and we’ll get stoned’ (‘Budut den’gi, prikhodi. Ottopyrimia.’) Danila is now fully prepared to meet his brother. As a result of his precarious economic situation and lack of understanding, Danila is open to Kэт/Cat’s suggestion that money will solve his problems. Viktor will set him on his way to kill a ‘black-skinned parasite’ and thus generate the money he now believes is necessary to obtain his ‘Wings.’ The material object of the CD is merely a token and substitute for the metaphorical symbol of freedom.

The film’s portrait episodes finish by demonstrating the nature of the brotherly relationship between Danila and Viktor. In scene Five, Viktor points a gun at Danila’s head and, on recognising him, greets him with a hostile welcome: ‘Well, hello… brother.’ (Nu zdravstvui... brat). The hesitation before uttering the word ‘brother’ indicates Viktor’s distrust of, and distance from, his sibling. After all, Danila has come as an uninvited guest to Tatarin and ‘an uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar’ (Neproshennyi gost’ khuzhe tatarina).234

Here Brother further subverts ‘the metaphor of the “great family” united by shared moral certainties, cultural values, and unconditional loyalties to a state that no longer exists’.235 The negative representation of the gangster brothers’ uneasy relationship contradicts the nostalgic Mikhalkovian reassertion of both the patrilineal ‘great family,’236 and the ideal fraternalistic community.

Viktor/Tatarin represents an older, weakened (late Soviet) Russian self. His

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234 I must thank Rachel Platonov for bringing this proverb to my attention. Russian history was from its beginning intimately connected with that of its nomadic steppe neighbours. Muscovy’s southern frontier saw an encounter between sedentary Russian peasants and nomadic herders and raiders. Possessing different conceptions of territorial borders and ownership, Tatars kept their less warlike neighbours in fear of sudden attacks. Today’s Republic of Tatarstan is a constituent republic of the Russian Federation.

235 Larsen (Ibid: 511).

time as a hit-man is over and he exploits Danila’s loyalty for personal benefit, leading him astray. Eventually he betrays him. Unlike the vigorous Danila, Viktor has no female acquaintance. Nor is he up to the task of assassinating the Chechen. Viktor’s nickname, Tatarin, like his surname, Bagrov, can be understood by reference to the reproduction of Viktor Vasnetsov’s *The Legendary Heroes* which hangs in Sveta’s room. The battles of Russian heroes against the Tatars are depicted in Russian medieval tales (*byliny*). Larsen has observed that the painting serves as an indicator for ‘[t]he literal and symbolic impotence of the national and cultural values’. The heroes of the *byliny* can only observe Sveta’s promiscuous lifestyle and rape by Kruglyi’s minions. Their post-Soviet avatar, Danila, is unable to protect his mother-figure and fails to recognise and deal with one of his main adversaries, Tatarin. Instead he succumbs to Tatarin’s and the city’s influence and becomes worse even than the latter; i.e. *khuzhe Tatarina*. Viktor’s and Danila’s relationship exposes the fallacy of the Soviet trope of the family.

The sequenced entry into the action of Danila’s character-double, Goffman, and his female counterpart, Ket/Cat, dramatise two fundamental traits of a mythologised Russian self. In the protagonist one can find essential goodness and passive acceptance, suffering and endurance. These combine with his alter ego’s materialism, careless self-destruction and aimless wandering to constitute the conflicted essence of the fabled ‘Russian national character’. Russia’s dominant others have been introduced; America, the Caucasus and the nation’s unequivocally alien criminal leaders. Two conversations have triggered involuntary and fateful responses in Danila, pre-empting his final ‘fall from grace’.

The Russian racketeer’s words prepared him ideologically for his confrontation with the Armenians, whose particular ethnicity or nationality makes no difference to Danila. They are two non-Russian fare-dodgers not paying their fee, while at the same time ridiculing the Russian conductor. Balabanov may well be tapping here into popular resentment towards those former republics in the Caucasus which, following their independence after 1991, continued to reap economic benefits from Russia. But by choosing to represent the ‘non-Russian’ targets of Russian xenophobic hostility via characters of Christian Armenian ethnicity/nationality, Balabanov also engages in a subtle criticism of Russian stereotyping, normally.

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directed against the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus: Russia’s ‘blacks’ (chernye). Ket/Cat, in turn, ‘instructs’ Danila about modern post-Soviet life’s material necessities and possibilities (drugs). Viktor provides Danila with the catalyst for what he now believes is the ‘solution to his problem’. He bestows on him the role of hit-man and persuade him to go to Russia’s biggest city and gangster metropolis, Moscow.

_Brother_, in fact, undermines both sides of the Slavophile-Westerniser dichotomy. For St. Petersburg, on the one hand, does not present a real opportunity for interactions with the Americanised West. Its mythological window is barred, which indicates the obstruction of a real exchange and dialogue with America in the 1990s. Moscow, on the other hand, has by 1997 become the centre of commercialism, gangsterism and thus a ‘window of opportunity’, Western-style. Neither artificial, ‘Western’ St. Petersburg nor organic, ‘Russian’ Moscow presents an answer to the age-old Russian debate. Danila’s (Russia’s) problems predate American post-collapse influences. Beunmers notes that Danila ‘combines within himself the contradictions at the heart of the “Russian Idea”: self-assertion and self-effacement, the right to judge and the compassion to redeem, West and East’.

Danila, however, neither acts on his own terms (he is conditioned and ‘triggered’ into action, accepting Viktor’s lead without fail) nor is he timid (he simply gate-crashes Nautilus Pompilius’ gathering). He does not make rational, balanced distinctions. But nor does he exhibit deep sympathy/sorrow (his fury after Sveta’s rape is arguably caused by his own helplessness).

Danila neither endorses the Slavophile vision of a Russia that can redeem the West from its iniquities, nor does he adopt the American way. Moreover, the ethical voice of the ‘ideal Russian’, Goffman, has been undermined, along with the remaining West European potential it holds. This is abundantly apparent from the botched exchange with the Frenchman.

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238 These Russian thinkers presented an ideological-cultural two-way dialogue about Russia’s nature and future. The Westernizers regard(ed) Russia as backward and felt the need to modernise the country. They somewhat idolise/d and mythologize/d the West and strove to adapt Western European ways. The Slavophiles idolise/d and mythologize/d Russianness through Russia’s native tradition and what they regarded as a national culture, believing in the country’s destiny of greatness. Both currents, still discernible in contemporary Russian politics and thought, were concerned with Russia’s need to change in order to realise its potential; the Westernizers wanted to assimilate into Western Europe and the Slavophiles hoped for Russia to impart its greatness to the rest of the world.
The critical self/other representations at the centre of Brother will be further developed in Balabanov’s four other ‘pop-genre Zeitgeist films’. The story so far presents the post-Soviet Russian self as an evolving gangster-protagonist. The Russian gangster’s story has not finished yet and will be continued in Brother-2.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter’s primary objective was to scrutinise representations of the post-Soviet Russian self and its others in Balabanov’s Brother through the prism of genre. In focusing on the question of genre, I have argued that the film’s status as a gangster neo-noir is in part attributable to its self-conscious and explicit deployment of relevant outstanding works of the literary and cinematic intertexts. This, in turn, is connected with its ‘knowing’ deployment of meta-cinematic/narrative techniques and its emphasis on the two narrative beginnings which forced a separation of the provincial frame from St. Petersburg.

Balabanov’s first ‘pop-genre Zeitgeist film’, I have further suggested, blurs and deconstructs the boundaries between genre and art-house films. Its purposes in doing so are both to reach a wider audience, and to expose that audience to challenging, counter-cultural perspectives on post-Soviet articulations of Russian national selfhood. Through its explicit adoption of the neo-noir gangster film, Brother enables Russia to express itself in the voice of its dominant other, America. This self-conscious deployment of genre facilitates, in turn, the placing of ironic, cinematic quotation marks around stereotypical western representations of Russia as a second world breeding ground for gangsters, institutes a complex dialogue with the American other. The counter-cultural neo-noir idiom in which this effect is achieved finds its parallel in Russian chernukha, aspects of which Brother also invokes via its depressive mood and focus on destructive family relations. Finally, I have shown, the meta-narrative devices embraced by Balabanov’s version of neo-noir invite audiences to perform an allegorical critique of key developments in post-Soviet Russian society.

Within the broader, allegorical framework, Russia is depicted as a hybrid of oedipal gangster, psychotic Raskolnikov-figure and drug-taking, materialistic prostitute (Кэт/Cat), ‘rescuing’ Brother from capitulation to its xenophobic-populist

239 Beumers (1999[2006], 83).
reading. Nationalist appropriations of the film refused to acknowledge Danila’s role as a product of Russia’s ‘dark side’. Admiration for his pluck and the tendency to heroicise him no doubt reflected a growing disillusionment with the Russian elite for its failure to deliver on their promises of the early 1990s. But xenophobic statements made in the film are those of its highly compromised and ambiguous protagonist and ought not to be attributed to Balabanov or accorded privileged status. One must never uncritically equate a character’s words and actions with its creator’s intentions.

Like Mean Streets and Taxi Driver, Brother counters mainstream cinema’s tendency to disambiguate historical complexities and naturalise dominant myths. Like Luna-Park, it self-critically exposes the ills of post-Soviet Russian society and deconstructs the mythological figure of the Russian ‘hero’ and son of the fatherland (otechestvo). My analysis has exposed as misperceptions previous views of him as an unambiguously racist and xenophobic action-hero, and as the privileged voice of the film. Through Brother, Balabanov entered into a dialogue with the dominant American other, using that other’s voice to undermine established views of Russian self-identity. His response to Luna-Park was returned by Lungin’s gangster film Tycoon (2002).

The subversion accomplished by the film, I have indicated, takes place along ‘vertical’ (intra-cultural) as well as ‘horizontal’ (cross-cultural) lines. Its targets are at once global and national: corrupt institutions and criminal leaders, mindless materialism and junk-food, modern Techno and drug culture, the cold ideology of ‘the survival of the fittest’ and the ideological eye-wash behind the claim ‘you can get it, if you really want,’ (the American dream). These are contradicted by the film’s ethical voice, that of the model-Russian Goffman, who, however, also fails to develop fully into a repository for ‘true virtue’.

Brother implicitly sides with the common people, regardless of nationality. It opposes war, bloodshed, xenophobia, criminal business and those real-life ‘gangsters’ whose interests the latter serve. It also deconstructs the Slavophile/Westerner dichotomy, and criticises banality and bad taste (poshlost’) as effects of the daily grind in Russia (byt). Moreover, it rejects Khrushchevian revisionism by branding the father-of-the-nation, Lenin, as a criminal who negatively influenced the two eras represented by Viktor and Danila.
St. Petersburg’s window to the West remains barred. There is neither real exchange nor transit between Russia and America as Danila’s geographical trajectory and failed mission indicate (he travels Eastwards, not Westwards; the viewer never finds out what CD he leaves on Sveta’s table in the end). Danila’s move to Moscow – the real gangster metropolis and the new, unconventional locus for evil in Russia – seems to place him on a moral down slope.

Through the mechanisms of intercultural dialogue that it employs (including, crucially, that of genre), Brother acknowledges the American other’s cultural potential, simultaneously criticising contemporary Russia’s failed/-ing adaptation of the American ideal. Such criticism does, however, not extend to the people of America and the European West themselves. Like the Chechen food vendor on the Haymarket, they are represented in a positive and respectful manner. The botched conversation between Danila and the young French visitor offers a critical commentary both on the general inability of people to communicate across cultures and specifically on Danila’s Cold War-influenced, Soviet education, from which he derived his binary conception of the relationship between Russia and America (good/progress vs. bad/decline).

In Brother, the Russian gangster is de glamourised. Despite his ‘fall from grace’ he is denied the right to a genuinely ‘tragic’ fate, and to enter the gallery of legendary Russian heroes. The assassin’s guerrilla tactics and inability to protect Sveta undercut familiar heroic mythologisations of the ‘glorious’ past of the Russian army. Likewise, nearly all of Balabanov’s representations of the mythic Russian family are negative apart from Danila’s forgiveness of his elder brother (an act which reveals his human side).

For its conclusive cinematic depiction of post-Soviet Russia’s contorted efforts to forge a new identity for itself via its shifting relationships with its multiple others, Balabanov’s oeuvre will require four more genre Zeitgeist film chapters. These form part of a single meta-narrative developing similar and connected themes. The meta-narrative will unfold during the course of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.
Chapter 4: *Brother-2 (Brat-2, 2000)*

Western/gangster Carnival (‘‘Good Bye America’, Farewell Ukraine’)

4.1 Introduction

My examination of *Brother-2 (Brat-2, 2000)* will maintain the focus on self/other representations viewed through the prism of genre. Balabanov’s sequel to *Brother* continued to return Russian movies to their wider audiences. It also developed *Brother*’s little recognised, self-conscious approach to the critical representation of post-Soviet Russia’s historical context. Similar to its forerunner, *Brother-2*’s popularity overshadowed its subversive, self-critical discussion of post-Soviet identity and self/other relations.

Previously, Balabanov followed *Brother*’s initial deconstruction of the conventional art-house film–genre movie dichotomy with the film *Of Freaks and Men (Pro urodov i liudei)*. The shift towards the art-end of the film genre spectrum it accomplished did not save it from criticism for its pornographic subject matter, but it did ensure a warmer welcome by the aesthetic elite. *Brother-2*, then, resumed, and further complicated, *Brother*’s orientation towards genre film, while continuing Balabanov’s general concern with reflecting post-Soviet Russia’s recent history, contemporary *Zeitgeist* and self/other relations. Despite being a sequel, this Russian blockbuster exhibits an idiosyncratic blend of genres, transgeneric modes and literary and cinematic intertexts that make the manner of its reflections and representations crucially different from that of *Brother*. The latter’s historical context comprised early post-Soviet Russia’s disorientation, economic chaos, inability to shake off its state-socialist past, widespread Americanism and war of aggression against Chechnia. It did not, however, touch upon the issue of Russia’s separation from Ukraine, which is the central theme of *Brother-2*.

The changing relationships between Russia and Ukraine signified a crucial shift in Russia’s receding western frontier. Despite Ukraine’s triadic relationships with Russia, the USA and NATO, the country was seen by many Russians as part of an East Slavic Union until the late 1990s. Kiev’s push for Westernisation was increasingly accepted in Russia from spring 1997. By the time of its ratification of the 1997 Inter-State Treaty with Ukraine in 1999, the Russian government formally
acknowledged the former as an independent nation against strong popular opposition. This meant that Russia’s ‘new economic path’ included no more ‘free lunches’ for Ukraine. Vladimir Putin continued to use liberal economic advisors despite the controversial consequences of Yeltsin’s market-oriented changes, the resulting economic depression and Russia’s financial crisis of 1998. Moreover, Putin assumed a tough stance towards the second Chechnia crisis after Chechnia-based militants had launched an invasion of Dagestan in August 1999. These developments, together with his law-and-order image and support for the newly established Unity party (Edinstvo), raised, despite the opposition against the treaty with Ukraine, both Putin’s popularity and the public’s hopes for a better future.

Reflecting these topical issues, Brother-2 emulated and surpassed the reputation that Brother had secured. It built on and parodied its forerunner’s controversial success, thus involuntarily generating the same misplaced audience identifications and even more scathing criticism, which both resulted in the (in)famous Danila myth. For Larsen, however, Brother-2 merely showed a ‘fiercely anti-American plot’. German remarked on its ‘absolutely racist statements’ and Lipovetsky and Leiderman criticised its ‘clearly fascist attitudes’. Hashamova saw in it the expression of an immature, irrationally aggressive Russian Zeitgeist. In generic terms, Brother-2 was by Tippner regarded as an action sequel defined by seriality rather than difference or, by Lawton, as a poor, action-lacking copy of Hollywood adventure films. It has also been called by Anemone the second part of Balabanov’s ‘Vigilante trilogy’, with War forming the trilogy’s conclusion. Disputing the general consensus of Balabanov’s commercially oriented populist-jingoist cinema, however, Beumers observes that ‘while Balabanov undisputedly promotes a Russian way of life, Americans and Russians are not schematised’. Sulkin goes even further in identifying Brother-2 as a ‘vicious satire’ and “double-

242 Larsen (Ibid: 511).
244 Lipovetsky and Leiderman (Ibid: 292).
246 Tippner (Ibid: 329).
barrelled” parody”. The reasons for these contradictions in critical assessments can be better understood through an analysis of Brother-2’s generic attributes, self/other representations and clearly signalled intertexts.

I proceed by analysing how the film’s fictional types are produced. Identifying the Russian protagonist, Danila, as a variant of the anti-heroic frontiersman-gangster-hybrid, for whom killing seems a necessity, and Dasha as the crack-smoking descendent of the Western genre’s kindly whore with a golden heart, I will illuminate developments in Balabanov’s post-Brother perspective on contemporary Russian identity. The Western genre, it will be shown, also overlaps with another of the film’s adapted genres, that of Socialist Realism (SR). Re/presenting a Russian anti-hero through a Western-SR blend was possible through Brother-2’s parodic mode, which blends with that of satire. Simply speaking, both modes depict society’s ills through caricature, irony and other distancing devices. Brother-2’s Menippean satire deploys as one of its tools the main protagonist, who despite or because of his vicious satirical attacks lacks self-awareness and becomes an object of his own satirical gaze. At the end, he joins the crowd, turns into what he critically beheld and thus the old order reestablishes itself.

These developments, which are atypical of conventional sequels, reflect the influence of key intertexts, including Brian de Palma’s Western-gangster allegory The Untouchables (1987), Lev Kuleshov’s satirical adventure film, The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Lands of the Bolsheviks (Neobychainye prikliucheniiia mistera Vesta v strane bolshevikov, 1924), and the Vasiliev brothers’ well-known Socialist Realist classic Chapaev (1934). The main literary impulse stems from Fiodor Gladkov’s paradigmatic Socialist Realist novel Cement (Tsement, 1925). Brother-2, moreover, parodies its forerunner, Brother, as its opening scene indicates.


252 For a succinct overview of Cement, see Katerina Clark (Ibid: 69-82). She names Cement ‘an allegory’ (ibid. 76), which further links the novel with Brother-2 in narrative terms.

Being a combination of sequel and parody, *Brother-2* inevitably shares structural similarities with *Brother*. These includes some of the latter’s gangster elements, a framing story, its narrative surface and deep structure. *Brother-2* thus invites viewers to attribute to characters, places and events *intensional* (i.e. intentional plus connotative) ‘double meanings’ that ‘have an arbitrary existence.’ Kitses has in this context noted the Western’s potential for double representations (symbolic narratives), \(^{254}\) which it shares with the gangster genre.

A close reading and analysis of such structures, generic influences and associated self/other representations will commence with a brief synopsis. This will be followed by an examination of the film’s beginning and end, as these provide indications about its genre, relatedly, the open/closed character of its structure and the final, defining moment of the anti-hero’s development. Then a theoretical overview of *Brother-2*’s dominant cinematic genres and transgeneric modes/styles will follow together with an examination of the film’s use of caricature. Next, I will explore the influence of the Western genre and the Socialist Realist canon on the narrative line in *Brother-2*.\(^ {255}\) After or together with establishing its genre blend, *Brother-2*’s re/presentations will thus be examined according to the rules of three different genres that act in concert.

4.2 Synopsis

Moscow, 1999. Danila walks past the shooting of a commercial directed by Balabanov and continues on to a TV show, where he meets his comrades from the Chechen war, the Russian Ilia and the Ukrainian Kostia. The host calls Danila’s wish to become a medic ‘symbolic’.

Danila’s spiteful brother, the policeman, drunkard and thug Viktor, goes to Moscow to share in Danila’s apparent success. Danila has begun an affair with the pop star Irina Saltykova, whose bodyguard is the Afghanistan veteran Boris. Kostia works for the banker Belkin and gets killed by his thugs because of a misunderstanding involving Kostia’s twin brother Mitia, a professional ice-hockey player, who is being cheated out of his wages by the new American ‘Al Capone’.


\(^{255}\) In her seminal work, Katerina Clark (Ibid: 256-60) presents the ‘general scheme for the plot stages of a typical [Socialist Realist] production novel’. This overview is invaluable for a generic-structural analysis of *Brother-2* as its main structural points match those of the film convincingly well.
Menis ("The Menace"). Mitia needs to be informed of Kostia’s death and supported against the machinations of the American businessman/criminal.

Danila believes Belkin’s lie that Menis had Kostia killed. He lets Belkin live, as the latter has a son. Belkin sends his henchmen after Danila and Viktor to protect his business interests. The two brothers dispatch the other gangsters summarily. They go to America; Danila to help Mitia. The delighted unsuspecting Viktor serves as a decoy. Viktor has no wish to return to Russia. Danila tells Irina that he is travelling somewhere near Tula but flies to New York.

After a few hilarious encounters with Americans and Ukrainians at Chicago airport, Viktor assaults a Polish police officer in/near Chicago’s Ukrainian community. He has a ball with Russian émigré-prostitutes, masquerades as a rich American in Western/business man attire and kills a New Ukrainian gangster in a shoot out. Danila arrives in New York’s Russian speaking (Russian-Jewish) community in Brighton Beach, is cheated by a sleazy Russian-Jewish used-car dealer overcharging him for a dysfunctional American car and travels towards Chicago.

On his way to the West, his car breaks down in Pennsylvania but when Irina calls him on his mobile, he tells her again that he is near Tula (‘I’m stuck somewhere near Tula - Pod Tuloi zastrial). A friendly American truck driver, Ben, gives Danila a lift and introduces him to the American way of life. In Chicago, he offers Danila to pay for a prostitute. Refusing her services, Danila finds out that she is Russian and called Dasha. Ben restrains him when he wants to help her against her black pimp, who slaps and robs her.

After leaving Ben, Danila stages a car accident. Nervous about injuring the white man, the black news reader, Lisa Jeffrey, feels compelled to drive him home; especially since Danila assures her that he is a doctor. They sleep together. Later Danila finds Dasha, saves her from prostitution and drags her into his violent affairs. She helps him acquire guns and he protects her, when her armed black captors break into Dasha’s flat to assault her.

After a killing-spree in Menis’ night-club, where he had hoped to find the gangster boss, Danila climbs up to Menis’s office on top of a sky scraper. Danila kills two more men and humiliates Menis at chess, vodka drinking and philosophising. He lectures Menis on the values of money and truth/righteousness.
Menis is, like Belkin, reduced to fearful, emasculated helplessness. Danila returns to Mitia the money that was stolen from him. Danila realises the extent of Mitia’s Americanisation and thus bids him farewell. He also leaves behind Viktor, who is apprehended by the police.

Danila and Dasha escape with Ben’s help to the airport. Danila is clad like a rich American. He receives another phone call from Irina, whom he asks to reserve a table for four in a restaurant, apparently forgetting about Belkin’s killers. During the take off, Danila listens to the song ‘Goodbye America!... Where I have never been...’ (‘...gde ne byl nikogda...’).

4.3 Brother-2’s Beginning and Ending

Underpinning all of Brother 2’s genre borrowings is its status as a frame narrative with two levels: a framing narrative and an embedded narrative. The framing is established at the film’s initial Moscow ‘chapter’ and via the ending on the Russian plane leaving the Midwest. The embedded story which unfolds in America is also an adaptation of Brother’s technique of ‘staging’ the film’s main part in another location for the purpose of allegorical presentations.

Brother-2’s establishing shot parodies that of Brother, rendering its forerunner’s cinematographic technique a subversive constituent part of itself and distancing itself from Brother’s failure to articulate its metacinematic mode of representation. Through its parody Brother-2 also satirises Brother’s audiences and their mis/appropriations of the film.

Like that of its predecessor, Brother 2’s initial camera-shot moves in a tracking-shot from right to left, depicting a film crew and, foregrounded against a greenery and pond, red and yellow props. The main differences are the absence of neo-noir features, Danila’s circumnavigation of the film set and Balabanov’s self-parodic presence, which confers a clear meta-cinematic status on the establishing shot and displaces the writer-director from the position of an all-knowing narrator. The inherent dissonance of these representations must be understood as the film’s parodic answer to previous criticism of Brother, as well as a pointer towards the film’s incipient transgeneric modes. This is supported by the sound/image synchronisations.
The musical background of Chaikovskii’s ‘Swan Lake’-derived theme of eternal love refers to the Hummer jeep and, metonymically, to the USA. In this way, the film establishes the car as one of the film’s central motifs. The image and musical background are synchronised with a New Russian bumpkin badly, and completely inappropriately, reciting Lermontov’s ambiguously patriotic poem ‘No, I am not Byron’.

References to Byron and Lermontov – two poets with politically oppositional reputations – make reference to Russia’s oriental territories/frontiers and support the opening sequence’s mode of representation. Both poets participated in wars with ethnic others (Turks and Chechens) and died far away from home. Byron, with whom Lermontov (and Balabanov) compares himself in his poem, was a well-known satirist and critic of the English government.

A satirical treatment of the Chechen war is further suggested when somewhat later a TV host asks ‘if the Chechens have arrived or not!’ (‘… chechentsy prishli ili net!’). He refers to three Chechen war veterans of the Russian army. In the Russia of 1999/2000, this request assumes a double-voiced, ironic character because of Dagestan’s invasion by Chechnia-based Islamic militants. It also helps introduce the film’s deployment of metonymy and irony, as the label ‘Chechens’ for Russian soldiers causes ambiguity. Within three and a half minutes, Brother-2 has revealed its ambivalent and self-/critically satirical position with respect to the media’s attitudes towards Russian selfhood.

The following ‘Moscow Chapter’ offers a further example of the film’s mirroring technique. It is edited in a fashion similar to Brother’s exposition, presenting a classical story-arc and using strategically placed fade-to-blacks in a meaning-creating pattern. Brother-2’s establishing shot is not included in this longish ‘exposition’. It serves largely as a set-up for the film’s dominant self/other representation of Russia and America as well as its satiric-parodic mode.

The Moscow Chapter, like Brother’s provincial episodes, precedes the protagonist’s journey to another place. Again, there is an ‘initial situation’ and an introduction to the main characters in the TV studio, followed by the ‘conflict/problem’ in the form of the twin Ukrainians’ story and Kostia’s death. There is the ‘rising action’, which includes Danila’s and Ilia’s acquisition of
weapons as well as Viktor’s arrival. The climax presents Danila’s interrogation of Belkin, who deceitfully blames Menis for Kostia’s death. This presents Brother-2’s main theme: that of the loss of Ukraine. Moreover, the hunters become the hunted, as the anti-heroes are pursued by their own Russian leadership. The ‘falling action’ shows ‘civil war’ on Moscow’s ‘mean streets’ and the Bagrov brothers travelling to the West. Finally, there is the ‘dénouement’ and a further prompt for a connotative-symbolic reading of the narrative; upon being asked by Irina, Danila denies that he is leaving for America and explains that he is going to somewhere near Tula.

Danila already kicked Kostia in the television studio on the latter’s mentioning of the name of Tula. There was no motivation whatsoever for this disruption but to draw viewers’ attention to the town’s name. At the end of the exposition sequence, the journey of ‘Mr. East’ and his sidekick to the land of the capitalists begins, with the take-off of both planes filmed from Russian soil, which thus remains the main reference point for the upcoming staged action.

Of similar importance is the film’s ending. It involves a reprise of the car motif, which is prevalent throughout the film from its beginning; after having used two taxis driven by grumpy Russians, it is finally America’s (Ben’s) turn to chauffeur the New Russian anti-hero. Instead of being paid, however, the good proletarian-turned-chaffeur, Ben, happily accepts one of Danila’s music tapes. In this almost cruel satirical twist, the helpful American is ‘outwitted’ by the New Russian frontiersman. Danila appears to have learned the lessons taught to him by his other American mentor, Menis.

Moments later, Danila – sitting on the plane – tells Irina by phone to book a table for four and that he is bringing her bodyguard Boris, who is the film’s only thoroughly positive and reliable character, a present. Here, the film plunges into open-ended ambivalence. What present will Boris receive? A tape like Ben, money for his services as a bodyguard or a surprise in form of Dasha, who is the female representative of his, Boris’, generation? Whom is Danila going to meet in the restaurant? Belkin’s henchmen had tapped Irina’s phone and will certainly be there. Will Danila choose the pop star Irina or the ex-prostitute Dasha, his Sonia? What has happened to Ilia? These questions are left unanswered and despite their momentary triumph, the couple face an uncertain future.
When Danila finishes the call and puts on his headphones, Nautilus Pompilius’s song ‘Good bye America! Oh… Where I have never been! (… gde ne byl nikogda!) plays. It concludes the film and is synchronised with a camera shot out of the plane’s window, creating a parallel to the use of Lermontov’s poem and Swan Lake’s theme of eternal love in the establishing shot. With its suggestive lyrics and accompanying visual references, the song, moreover, reconfirms the allegorical nature of Danila’s Swiftean journey to the land of the Midwest.

The final shot from the plane during take-off both contrasts and converges with that of the camera filming Danila’s and Viktor’s planes from the ground as they take off from Moscow for the USA. Both cameras shoot from Russian ‘territory’ – Russian soil and plane – and together they reinforce the significance of the film’s frame narrative. The song, moreover, is extra-diegetic and is heard only when Danila turns on his disc player. Audible ‘from within his head’, its words are synchronised with the actions of the camera. The lyrics present Danila’s thoughts and the camera becomes his – and the audience’s – eyes. The narrative voice, as noted before, ‘does not observe from a post within the fictional world, but recalls events from a position outside the fictional universe’. 

Pars pro toto, the Russian anti-hero thus takes leave from a place where he has never actually been. He travels to the Midwest somewhere ‘near Tula’, that is to Ukraine, to fulfil his mission. In so doing he is side-tracked into saving his countrywoman from their ethnic other. At the vanishing point of the film’s allegorical plane, the ever-present figure of the Caucasus appears once again.

4.4 Western/gangster Satire or Parody?: Genre Overview and Intertextuality

Danila returns from his westward journey to the gangster metropolis, Chicago, just as Elliot Ness had done before him in The Untouchables. Like the latter film, Brother-2 deploys the most significant of American genre formats. The Western and the gangster genre are linked to specific American periods and myths, which Brother-2 effectively transposes to the Russian historical context. Both genres possess the potential to acquire parabolic overtones and allegorical significations.

Like its predecessor, Brother-2 uses the voice of its dominant other to express similarities between Russia and the USA: here the shared experience of
struggles at the frontier. Unlike Brother’s representation of the post-Soviet Russian self as a lonely gangster-neo-noir drifter, Brother-2’s Western formula presents a purposeful, individualistic, Wild Western anti-hero with associates. Together, they bend and break the law: Danila to help his friends and establish his order, Viktor to become American, Dasha to return home. These anti-heroes expose through violence and ridicule the vulnerability of the criminal tycoons, Menis and Belkin, as well as criminal members of marginalised groups (Ukrainian and black American). In Brother-2, black Americans connote Russia’s own ‘blacks/chernye’ from the regions of the Caucasus and the Caspian sea, portrayed earlier as Russia’s ‘natives’ in the Soviet Union’s own Eastern, White Sun of the Desert. In Brother-2, Balabanov uses a variation on the Western formula so as to accommodate an ironic, allegorical depiction of Russia’s struggles at its receding (rather than expanding) frontiers. Because of its contemporary setting, the film largely discards the genre’s iconography and takes the form of a Russian boevik.

In the methodology chapter (Section 2.5.1), it was observed that genres possess semantic and the syntactic planes.256 Both need to be considered if one wishes to avoid the pitfalls of conventional approaches to film genre and genre films. Meaning of one kind contributes to and eventually establishes meaning of another.

Part of the vocabulary of primary elements is a genre’s iconography, which presents a convenient starting point for genre analysis. Thus, several of Brother-2’s semantic elements – like, for example, Viktor’s Stetson and gunslinger’s coat, which he wears in Chicago – help draw attention to the film’s status as a pseudo-Western. Genre-typically, their black colour signifies Viktor’s villainous character. The business suit, which Viktor wears underneath, marks him also as a gangster. Moreover, at the end of Brother-2, Danila is dressed like an American tycoon, indicating profound changes in a developing character. Earlier Soviet films, Emma Widdis argues, often used the dresses and mannerisms of negative characters to draw audiences’ attention to their otherness.257 Brother-2 thus signals the negativity of Viktor’s character and Danila’s shifting identity through their respective outfits.

Brother-2’s dominant Western formula presents Danila as a Russian anti-

hero on a mission, after the successful completion of which he returns to the East together with the golden-hearted whore he has rescued, and with his pockets full of money. *Brother-2*’s Danila, the purposeful, self-assured Russian ‘frontiersman’, initially endeavours to protect his community and comrades, using whatever means necessary, but ends up enriching himself. The transposition of the Western format into the 1990s has the logical effect of submerging its syntactic formula in the semantic elements of the modern age.

As Hollywood’s most enduring genre, the Western is, as Kitses observes, ‘many forms [with] recurring elements... the [anti]hero, the antagonist, the community [taking on] an ever-present cluster of possible significances’. 258 *Brother-2* exploits the Western genre’s semantic potential and extracts new significance from it by applying it to the cultural Russian context, thereby also widening the scope of its generic verisimilitude. John Cawelti, moreover, identifies the Western syntactically and thematically as ‘always set on... a frontier, where man encounters his uncivilised double. The Western thus takes place on the border between two lands, two eras, and with a hero who remains divided between two value systems’. 259 Russia’s frontiers, the uncivilised American double, the discrete temporalities of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, an anti-hero divided between Slavophilia and Westernisation, and his wish to do right by all means: these can all be accommodated within the Western’s structure and themes.

*The Untouchables* – clearly referenced in *Brother-2* via a Chicago tourist bus emblazoned with the label ‘The Untouchable Tours’ – provided an earlier model of a morally ambivalent frontiersman-protagonist journeying to a gangster metropolis (Chicago) to defeat a demonic foe (Al Capone). *Brother-2* avoids according his own gangster-tycoons, Belkin and Menis, the honour of such an illustrious profile. Rather, he dethrones them through ridicule at the hands of its tool of satire, Danila. Like *The Untouchables*, *Brother-2* submerges the Western structure within urban gangland settings. While De Palma’s allegory depicts the violent frontier dividing American society, *Brother-2* ‘goes global’. Both films use Chicago as their stage, with *Brother-2* extending its own to Brighton Beach. *Brother-2* portrays genre-defining, violent encounters at Russia’s frontiers, pitching the forces of post-Soviet Russian burgeoning ‘civilisation’ against those of the ‘wilderness’ of American

258 Kitses (Ibid: 17 & 21).
capitalism and the Caucasus. These frontiers exist also within Russian society and its mirrored others, the Wild Western anti-hero and his kindly whore. Corresponding to the hero’s struggle with the Western genre’s opposition pitting savage wilderness against civilised community, Elliot Ness and Danila break the law in order to establish their order. Ness utters the words which mark him as an ambiguous Wild Westerner and satirist and which can also be applied to Danila: ‘I have become what I beheld, and I am content that I have done right’. Crucially, however, Danila lacks his antecedent’s self-awareness. At the end of both films neither of the protagonists is any better than the enemies they defeated. Despite imposing their form of ‘order’, they have become the objects of their own satirical gaze, having turned into the very phenomenon they had set out to confront. Brother-2’s satire thus overlaps with its carnivalesque parody, as the old order has been re-established.

Brother-2’s satire is Menippean. It lacks a first person narrator. Its parody is carnivalesque. It presents a popular criticism but at the end of the story, the old order is reestablished, with the ambiguous Danila turning into a New Russian. Satire and parody, like Brother’s neo-noir tragedy, serve to undermine and mock conventional genres, their familiar binary representations and, contextually, the social-political ills they refer to. Menippea shares its iconography with Bakhtinian carnivalesque parody.

Satire and parody are also distinguishable. The main difference, Margaret Rose observes, ‘is parody’s use of the preformed material of its “target” as a constituent part of its own structure. Satire, on the other hand, need not be restricted to imitation, distortion, or quotation of other… texts… and when it does deal with such preformed [artistic] material, need not make itself as dependent upon it for its own character as does the parody, but may simply make fun of it as a target external to itself’. Putting it in simplistic binary terms, Brother-2 satirises representatives of contemporary Russia’s self and others, deploying parody for its distancing from various forms and instances of discourse, which can be described by genre and intertextuality.

Stam, however, observes the similarities between carnivalesque parody and

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Menippean satire, stating that ‘[p]arody of the kind theorized by Bakhtin… favors decidedly negative, even grotesque images to convey a deep critique of societal structures. Satirical or parodic films may… challeng[e] the stereotypical expectations an audience may bring them… it all depends on the modalities and the objects of the… parody’.  

Due to the potential polyphony of texts/films, however, Menippea/parody can be interspersed with 1st person satiric viewer-directed addresses by characters, who then represent the satirist’s voice.

The satirist sees himself as the paladin-protector of an unequivocal moral good and launches violent attacks against unambiguously vicious evil, using ridicule, caricature, irony, parody and related devices for his criticism. S/he is an artistic device – the implied author’s voice – that represents society in terms of purposefully hyperbolized, slanted, grotesque stock characters; that is caricatured portrayals of human vices. The satirical anti-hero, however, ironically fails to perceive the self-defeating futility of his constant and increasingly extreme attacks. This makes him a caricature too and subverts his voice. This continuous struggle with vice and use of exaggeration without achieving real change makes the satirist ‘become what he beheld’ and forms the basis of satire’s tragic mode. For, given the hero’s capitulation to his own satirical sword, he cannot escape his fate, nor provide any resolution to the evils against which he has struggled.

Such caricatures together with ‘abundant food, extravagant costumes… masquerades, pranks, and dances form’, Stam observes, ‘both Menippea’s and Bakhtinian parody’s iconography presenting ‘a people’s view of history as seen “from below”’. Such popular re/presentations from below are re/presentation from the viewpoint of the self, which always include the ‘suggestion of some kind of humane ideal’. However, since carnival is ultimately a means of revitalising and reinforcing current power relations order is always restored at the end of it, and the deposed king recrowned. In satirical terms, the original, ugly condition targeted for ridicule is merely intensified, with the anti-hero now assimilated to that very

265 Kernan (Ibid: 11).
condition and indistinguishable from the object he had set out to critique. At the end of Menippean/Bakhtinian parody, the ‘scum’ still exists and, consequently, these two related literary genres or cinematic modes run the risk of lacking plot dynamism, which can be borrowed from other genres and intertextual sources.

4.5 **Brother-2’s satiric and allegorical self/other re/presentation**

Unsurprisingly, in *Brother 2*’s Menippean/Bakhtinian environment, the characters and groups pertaining to Russia’s self and others are all flawed. Even the reliable steadfast Boris and helpful Ben may be seen as subverted by their unreciprocated faithfulness to Saltykova and ridicule through Danila, respectively. They thus all contribute to the film’s pessimistic overtone. All male characters, apart from Ben and Boris, belong to some sort of criminal gang (*bratva/Brat-2*). Here, as Beumers observes, *Brother-2* presents audiences with a parody of ‘the [Soviet] concept of a ‘brotherhood of people’ [and mockery of real ‘brotherhood’]’.

One of Russia’s female representatives, the crack-smoking ‘émigré-prostitute’, Dasha, develops in a direct line from *Brother*’s materialistic, drug-abusing prostitute *Kэт/Cat*, via the sadomasochistic, porn-loving and Western-oriented Liza (*Of Freaks and Men*). Dasha, like *Kэт/Cat* and Lisa, represents both the early post-Soviet Russia and those of the country’s younger women pining for a life in the West. One of the first images of Dasha depicts her being slapped by her black pimp. The film’s main, female, Russian character is held captive by her black, ethnic other. The captivity motif presents a novel adaptation of the theme of ‘the prisoner of the mountains’ and forms part of *Brother-2*’s intertextual symbolism.

Later, by a camp fire, Dasha, Viktor and Danila are again assaulted by ‘blacks’ after a cultural misunderstanding. It concerns the widely misconstrued argument that Danila is a racist, since he calls a black, homeless man a ‘nigger’. In fact, however, he uses the outdated anthropological term ‘negr’, which the character, whom he addresses, understandably mishears as ‘nigger’. However, the word is nothing but the Russian equivalent of the pre-1960s, then neutral English/American

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267 There are two more moments of violence connected with Dasha’s captivity and prostitution. First, Danila spontaneously attacks the black pimps/captors on their own territory. Secondly, the pimps’/captors’ attack Dasha in her flat. I see these incidents as symbolic representations of the first Chechen war, which was started by Russia/Danila and the beginning of the second Chechen war, when a motley crew of insurgent bands attacked Russia from the Causasus and were repelled. I further believe that the first incident is a parodic revisitation of *Brother*’s Haymarket murder.
word ‘negro’. Amusingly for the observant viewer, Danila explains that ‘negr’ is the term which he was taught at school (i.e. during the 1980s) to use for ‘black’ African people. His words demonstrate his politico-cultural unawareness and provoke an aggressive reaction from the ‘black’ American character. Dasha’s similarly infamous reply is made under the influence of crack. Likewise confusing the terms ‘negro’ and ‘nigger’, she explains that blacks are better referred to as ‘Afro-Americans’. She then further undermines her own, already misguided, ‘political correctness’ by invoking in racist fashion the elemental, bestial strength of the blacks and the fears such strength produces among white Americans. By giving Danila and Dasha blunt and truthfully satiric voices, while simultaneously ridiculing their naiveté and drug-induced platitudes, Brother-2 critically questions attitudes towards race and ethnicity among young, post-Soviet Russia(ns).

Dasha’s younger Russian counterpart, Irina Saltykova, is also caricatured. She is enamoured with her own pop-image, watching and listening to herself on her music videos before and after work, where she produces the very same songs and clips. Compared to the music of rock bands, which Danila listens to (DDT, Nautilus and Kino), Irina’s songs are flashes in the pan. They, and she, embody the materialistic limbo of the carnival of modern western pop culture adopted by Russia in the 1990s. Sociologically speaking, Dasha and Irina critically represent two generations and two aspects of post-Soviet Russian young women. Connotatively, they point to post-Soviet Russian schizophrenia: the older, Americanising version with its ruptured American dream; the younger version, with its own pop culture and indifference to things American.

While also depicted as a single, emancipated woman and representative of the media, Saltykova’s black American counterpart, Liza Jeffrey, fears witnesses to, and the legal consequences of, her car ‘accident’. The ‘accident’, which was staged by Danila, and Lisa’s reaction to it, satirise American attitudes to justice. Despite Danila’s obvious guilt – he dashes out onto the street and jumps into the car – Liza anxiously tries to avoid the attention of witnesses and quickly drives the white youngster away. Through his refusal to visit the hospital and insistence on the fact that he is a doctor, she finds herself compelled to take him home. Liza’s actions mirror those of Sveta in Brother, although the parody may be lost on western viewers. They both give the bleeding Danila a lift and, attracted to the ‘helpless’, yet insolent stranger, sleep with him. In Brother, however, Danila was wounded by
gangsters with American attributes that also indicated their western orientation. His counterpart in *Brother-2* injures himself by jumping in front of the American vehicle so as to ensure the driver’s help. *Brother-2*’s ironic jibe at both America’s legal system and its problems with racism is thus counterbalanced by a self-critical connotative-allegorical interpretation of the ‘accident’ which can now be read in terms of how Soviet Russia needed help on its journey westwards, and how it ‘prostrated itself’ before the American ‘car’, claiming that its economic plight – Danila’s injury – had been caused by western capitalism.

The ‘winners’ in Soviet Russia’s ‘accident’ are thus the caricatured fat, simple and violent Ukrainian gangsters, who live in the Midwest at Russia’s intra-American frontier. They do business with whoever pays, Russia included. When Viktor addresses one of them as countryman (*zemliak*), he is rebuffed (‘Russians aren’t my countrymen’). Viktor counters by asking whether he – the Ukrainian – is a Banderoverts (i.e. a West-Ukrainian nationalist with links to German Fascism). Later, he kills the gangster, telling him that Ukrainians will still have to answer for ‘taking’ Sevastopol, one of the most famous Russian naval citadels, which was transferred to Ukrainian jurisdiction with the 1997 Inter-State Treaty. On the allegorical level, the killing of the Ukrainian mobster in the Midwest can be viewed in parallel with the murder of the Ukrainian Kostia in Moscow. Both are killed by Russian gangsters – Belkin’s assassin and Viktor – on two different levels: the framing narrative and the embedded story within it. Viktor represents those irredentist Russian voices that did not accept the loss of Sevastopol, and tend to regard it as only temporarily separated from the homeland. His grotesque portrayal discourages us from identifying his voice with that of the film’s implied author. He and, by implication, those audiences who sympathise with his views, are among the butts of *Brother-2*’s satiric ridicule. The Ukrainian gangster-caricatures are, moreover, counterbalanced by the similarly ugly and stupid Russian minions of Belkin.

Another of the film’s satiric parallels and caricatures are the two disgruntled Russian cab drivers, who provide a stark contrast with their helpful American counterpart, Ben, at the end of the film. One is a loud-mouthed lout, unhappy with post-Soviet life in Moscow. His Russian-Jewish counterpart lives in Brighton Beach, which represents Russia on the film’s allegorical American ‘stage’. This carbon copy of the Moscow taxi driver is cynical about ‘The American Dream’ and has not found
happiness in the Big Apple. The film painstakingly draws attention to its mirroring technique when Danila asks ironically: ‘Do you have a brother in Moscow?’ (‘A u
vas brat v Moskve est’?). While they make valid points, the two misanthropic discontents would, it seems, moan wherever they lived. Caricatures of those former
Russian intellectuals who frequently took up taxi driving, they complain incessantly, without trying (or being able) to effect a change because, paradoxically, their situation makes them feel superior to their contemporaries.

There is another parallel between the two stories. The apathetic and emaciated Russian arms dealer, ‘Fascist’, finds his counterpart in the sleazy, Russo-
Jewish used car dealer. The carnivalesque figure of the Russian arms dealer wears a Nazi uniform and indiscriminately sells both Soviet and German WWII booty, which he apathetically calls ‘echoes of the war’ (ekho voiny). His nickname ‘Fascist’ is deeply ironic because he is a truthful chap who helps Danila and Ilia. ‘In Russia [however] the term “fascist”[is] a synonym for “enemy”’ as Nina Tumarkin observes.268 His counterpart indulges in false pretences through his proletarian clothes and sells Danila an overpriced American car with the ironic words: ‘Young man! We Russians don’t cheat one another!’ (Molodoi chelovek! My russkie ne obmanyvaem drug druga!). By ironic contrast, the ‘Fascist’ does not deceive Danila (‘The Fascist didn’t lie.’ – Ne obmanul fashist).

Nina Tumarkin notes the death of Russia’s war myth, which was ‘’already
[in the early-mid 1990s (FW)]... completely destroyed’’.269 Tumarkin continues, ‘Moscow’s Jews or liberal democrats... could become 1993’s incarnation of Nazi invaders [and] a portion of society had lost the innate capacity to distinguish friend from foe’.270 Brother-2 does not equate Russian Jews with German Fascists. Both Russian parodies, that of a German Fascist and that of a Russo-Jewish merchant, belong to and show aspects the Russian people, who, according to the film, have done them some kind of harm. The representations are simultaneously literal and metaphorical. The one supplies Russians with weapons to fight other Russians. The other sells them an American vehicle. At the same time, the Russian anti-heroes are gangsters and killers. Brother-2 is critical of what it regards as Russian-Jewish

269 Ibid: 221. Tumarkin also recounts how Russian entrepreneurs hoped to use the memory of World War II ‘as a marketable consumer product’ (Ibid: 226).
270 Ibid: 222-23.
involvement in Russia’s ‘acquisition’ of American capitalism. It is similarly critical of right-wing nationalists that further what the film regards the infighting and thus self-destruction of Russia. A critical treatment of the Russo-Jewish and right-wing nationalist themes began with *Brother* and, before that, *Luna-Park*. The Russo-Jewish theme will be taken up again by *War* and *Zhmurki*. *Brother-2* acknowledges, like *Luna-Park*, that Russian Jews are as integral to the new Russian self as the political nationalist right wing. One lives in Moscow and the other one in Brighton Beach, which symbolically represents Russia on the film’s deep structure. Danila, as the representative of a prototypical self, resorts to robbery and character-defining dress codes at the end of the film.

Another of Russia’s others depicted in the film is an officious and hypocritical Polish policeman, who by his profession is represented as America’s (civil) servant patrolling the (European) Midwest. After a hilarious case of aggressive miscommunication, he is knocked down by his thuggish Russian counterpart, the policeman Viktor (*Yeah. I’m a copper myself. – Da ladno. Ya sam militsioner*). The ridiculing of America’s Polish ‘lackey’, however, is counterbalanced by that of his Russian counterparts in Moscow, who in contrast to his dutiful attitude, laze around near their police station. Moreover, instead of trying to find Kostia’s murderers, they help Belkin’s henchmen chase Danila.

Another policeman, the drunken thug Viktor, fittingly uses a ‘Chapaevskii’ Maxim machine gun to shoot other Russian gangsters in the ‘civil war’ that rages on Moscow’s ‘mean streets’. The shot adapted from *Brother-2’s* socialist realist forerunner, *Chapaev*, shows Viktor firing his gun from the back of a Volvo – *Brother-2’s* gangster-version of the ‘tachanka’ – rather than from a barn. Already Anemone observes the Volvo’s transformation ‘into... a horse-driven cart that carried a Maxim gun’.

The ‘Maxim gun’, Anemone continues, ‘is an obvious reference... to perhaps the most popular Soviet movie of all time, the 1934 *Chapaev*.’ Viktor’s character parodies the socialist realist hero and satirises his admirers by turning him into a psychopathic gangster-policeman. The parody is reinforced by Viktor’s similarities with another violent character of early Soviet cinema: Mr. West’s sidekick, the cowboy/frontiersman, Jeddy.

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272 Ibid: 139.
Lev Kuleshov’s satirical adventure film, Mr. West, is explicitly cited via Danila’s stolen car in Moscow. This car has the conspicuously changed licence plate, “Ia 999” (‘I am 999”), which is the same as that of Mr. West’s car. Nancy Yanoshak has identified Mr. West as a mimesis or mimicry of Hollywood movie making and a ‘satire of American stereotypes of Russia’.273 Brother-2’s satire, by contrast, is largely directed against Russian stereotypes although it presents a parody of the Western genre, too. Another memorable Soviet film, which was influenced by the Western genre, is thus turned inside out as the post-Soviet Mr. East (Danila) is sent, together with his mad, wild ‘frontiersman’, the Chapaevian Viktor, to the American Midwest.

The New Russian gangster-entrepreneur’s Chicago adventures are portrayed as a form of carnivalesque debauchery and violence which undermines Brother’s tragic, gangster-film narrative arc. Viktor, the degenerate representative of the last Soviet generation, enters the city, acquires a gun and money through violence, kills and robs another – Ukrainian – gangster and lives it up carousing with Russian émigré-prostitutes. Unflatteringly exposing American business ethics, he masquerades in a black Stetson as a frontiersman-gangster-businessman hybrid and finally suffers the gangster’s fall from grace. In the end Viktor is shown throwing empty vodka bottles out of a window as if they were Molotov cocktails. He gives himself up to the local police in another of Brother-2’s subversions of the ‘Russian spirit’, shouting: ‘Russians never give up!... I give up! I give up! I’m going to live here!’ – ‘Russkie ne sdaiutsia!... Ia sdaius’! Ia sdaius’! Ia budu zdes’ zhit’. For Americanising Russians of his type, it seems, life in Russia is impossible. Ironically, Viktor gets what he wants and deserves. Like Liza in Freaks, he stays behind in the West, incarcerated.

The Ukrainian, Mitia, likewise remains in the West. His move and the murder of his twin brother, Kostia, are the reasons why the frontiersman and vigilante, Danila, travels to the Midwest. (Danila’s violent encounters, however, start with his black ethnic others.) At the beginning of Brother-2, Kostia is introduced to the narrative by his nickname: ‘Bol’shoi’ (‘Big Man’), which represents a national metonymy. Such stereotypically ‘Ukrainian features’ are emphasised by the photograph shown to the TV host at the beginning. Kostia eats, while Danila makes

the ‘rabbit-sign’ above his head, drawing symbolic attention to the former’s slow-wittedness, fear and Mitia’s cowardly readiness to ‘leg it’. Kostia’s size and physical strength together with his hearty appetite are attributes which are commonly offset against those of weaker, non-muscular intellectuals (here, the brainy Ilia). Brother-2, moreover, strives hard to make audiences aware of its deployment of metonymy for referencing and metaphor for understanding. The TV host asks Ilia whom he means by ‘Big Guy’ (bol’shoi), although Ilia had quite evidently talked about Kostia in this context. The otherwise superfluous question thus serves no other purpose than to alert the audience to the metonymic significance of figures of speech throughout the remainder of the film.

Kostia and Mitia are played by one actor, Aleksandr Diachenko. This emphasises their closeness. Consistent with the film’s double-coding, the Ukrainian twin brothers represent the country’s two ethnic Russian and Ukrainian majorities and are portrayed as equally naïve. In the ‘Ukrainian plot’, moreover, Kostia was helped by Belkin, who was friends with his father. Here, Brother-2 dissociates itself from that brand of conservative Russian nationalism which claims family relations between Russians and Ukrainians.

Mitia chose life in the West as a professional ice-hockey player, initially relying on the help of his own Ukrainian gangster-elite. Then he foolishly sought support from the American gangster, Menis, signing a contract which he did not understand. Here Brother-2’s deep structure depicts America’s exploitation of Ukrainian naïveté. Through his contractual obligations, the Ukrainian becomes little more than dependent of the American. Kostia’s naïve turn for help to Belkin annoys the New Russian. His dumb Head of Security liberally misinterprets this act (‘… you didn’t want to see him again’ – … videt’ ego bol’she ne khotite). Hence, Kostia was killed, and by symbolic extension, the 1997 Inter-State-Treaty signed, because of incompetence and miscommunication among the Russian elite. The treaty’s ratification in 1999 is represented by Danila’s final farewell to Mitia. After the farewell, Mitia is emancipated but also left to his own devices in his further dealings with his American boss.

The ruthless, greedy American gangster enriches himself through criminal activities such as extortion, snuff-porn, drugs, money laundering and the exploitation of labour forces. Menis forms a criminal ‘brotherhood’ (bratva) with Belkin. There
is, however, no love lost between the two, as Belkin’s satirical attitude toward Menis suggests. Belkin’s domestic animal is a turtle/tortoise – i.e. a cold-blooded reptile – with the uncomplimentary name ‘Menis’ (*domashnee zhivotnoe*: *cherepakha* ‘Menis’). The Russian banker’s relationship with the American businessman is based solely on profit making. The most prominent images of the American ‘Menace’ and Belkin are those of an American vodka-spilling, whining villain faced with the reality of his own mortality and a Russian crook wetting himself in the face of death. In both cases, through its narrative outcomes, *Brother-2* presents the viewers with the implied author’s knowing acknowledgement of his inability to effect real change. Belkin survives, as, apparently, does Menis.

Danila’s satiric function is most evident in his final speech on the power of money and truth/righteousness, which is undercut by the satirist’s own violent behaviour and self-enrichment. After killing approximately a dozen gangsters, Danila heads off for his showdown with his last opponent, ‘The Menace’. *Brother-2*’s parody of first-person shooter games involves a metacinematic approach deploying secondary cinematic identification. It posits the viewer in the role of the shooter parodying those anti-American Russian audiences infatuated with FPS games. Via Menis’s defeat in the vodka-drinking and chess competitions, Balabanov pours scorn on both Russian and Western stereotypes of the Russian self. As Westerner-frontiersman, Danila wins in a ridiculous fashion, taking as his spoils a pile of dollars. What he, as satirist, loses, is part of his idealised Russian self. He contradicts his own principle (truth/righteousness over money), kills scores of people, steals money and finishes the story clad as an American tycoon. The ironic incongruity between Danila’s philosophical words and his violent actions, his lack of self-awareness and his embodiment of quintessential Russianness via his role as Wild Western anti-hero, presents a paradox. It is resolved only when we acknowledge *Brother-2*’s self-conscious deployment of parodic satire and its two main intertextual-generic influences: the Western film genre and the aesthetics of Socialist Realism.

### 4.6 *Brother-2*: A Western/Gangster Story

There are two more possibilities of how to read *Brother-2* and both stem from the film’s deployment and blend of genres. In other words, *Brother-2*’s genre hybridity allows and asks for ‘different’ readings that complement and overlap with one
another. In order to gauge the importance of these intertextual-generic influences, let us first retell the *Brother 2* narrative as if the Western semantics were implemented. Three veterans return to their community from a ‘civil’ war ‘of secession’ between the North (Russia) and the South (Chechnia). Things have gone awry in their absence. The place has been taken over by shady businessmen-tycoons of the modern age, who employ gangs to enforce their interests. Initially, the returning war heroes intend to give up the way of the gun for a peaceful life, which they are, according to the Western’s generic verisimilitude, inevitably denied.

One of the three comrades is murdered when he demands justice for his twin brother, an adventurer to the promised land of the West who allows himself be cheated out of his money by a local property/land speculator. All traces lead the remaining two veterans to the criminal businessman, who, having bought all the local politicians, makes his money in the Midwest. The adventurer-hero receives additional help from his brother, an unscrupulous lawman, who fancies a trip to the western frontier, which he regards as a kind of El Dorado.

The stoic protagonist has struck up a relationship with a civilised woman from the East.\footnote{274 This ‘develops the classic configuration of the anarchic world of Male Savagery pitted against the civilized world of Woman and Home’. Thomas Schatz (1981), *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, New York: McGraw-Hill: 51.} She is, because of her socio-cultural background, unable to understand his moral code. Instilled with a sense of mission, the hero goes after the tycoon to help his dead comrade’s brother and to exercise his version of justice.

On his journey to the American Midwest, the greenhorn is ripped off by one of his own people who overcharges him for an unfit car (semantically the modern equivalent for a horse). After the breakdown he manages to hitch a lift with a truck driver (equivalent to the waggoner) and becomes buddies with him. They travel across the vast expanse of American land. The guide makes him aware of local customs.

On his arrival in the Midwest, the protagonist finds a white woman in enslavement to her cultural other. Intruding into their territory, the anti-hero spontaneously attacks the woman’s captors. A genre-typical fight ensues. The battered anti-hero is picked up by a local lawman, who is both white like the perpetrator but also a representative of his American law and thus partial other,
culturally speaking. Danila is released by the white, racist lawman (the semantic equivalent to the Indian-hating sheriff). The protagonist obtains weapons with the help of a prostitute, who understands and accepts his moral code. Later, the anti-heroic couple are attacked in her abode by the woman’s former captors. They are summarily dispatched by the gunman defending the ex-prostitute’s home and their very lives.

In a parallel (gangster) sub-plot, the gunman’s brother – also a thuggish lawman – does not dream of helping the frontiersman. He is attracted to the life in the west and its opportunities. While the frontiersman uses violence only when forced to establish what is right,275 his criminal gangster-brother relishes his violent outbursts as much as his spells of debauchery. He beats up and robs a local lawman, shoots a mobster and parties with prostitutes. His lawman status not only renders him beyond reproach but increases his guilt. Dressed up like a local tycoon and gunslinger, he is apprehended by the local constabulary after his short spell of success.

To strengthen our reading of Brother-2 in Western mode, we might note that the prostitute had previously been attracted to the lure of the west. She married a frontiersman to escape the boring east but failed to adapt to the new life outside her community. After her divorce, the woman was left stranded and to her own devices. She resorted to drug abuse and financed her life by prostitution, which in generic terms is ideally represented by the hard-drinking whore of the classical Western. Her lowly position has not corrupted her golden heart and she helps the frontiersman fulfil his nigh-on unfulfillable task. The frontiersman-killer and the prostitute put all wrongs to right. The frontiersman goes on a killing spree, annihilating all criminals and confronting the criminal tycoon. He gives a final speech demonstrating his superiority and beats the tycoon in a duel. While returning most of the stolen money to his dead comrade’s brother, the frontiersman, “[r]ecogniz[ing] the inevitability of social progress”276 keeps plenty of it for himself. He bids his farewell to the adventurer, who stays in the west and, now also dressed like a tycoon, asks his local buddy once more for help to see him off to the ‘station’ (airport).

275 This presents ‘the Western’s essential theme that “a man’s gotta do what he’s gotta do”’ (Schatz, Ibid: 63).
276 Ibid.
The protagonist thus asserts his eastern identity but only after having developed the traits of the frontier-killer. Being the latter’s vengeful yet (self-?) righteous version, he exhibits the traits necessary to deal with the wilderness and his others. He acknowledges and acts upon ‘the pressures of obligation’,277 which make him become a frontiersman by necessity. This distinguishes him from Viktor, the gangster/lawman, who ‘desperately wants to “get ahead”’278 and live in ‘El Dorado’. Although Brother-2’s Danila is a ruthless killer of outlaws, he is not an assassin like his gangster-like alter ego in Brother. The ‘peculiarity of the gangster is his unceasing, nervous activity’,279 as Danila’s feverish, yet brainless search for ‘Wings’, and for a sense of direction, demonstrated in Brother. Danila, the frontiersman, by contrast, is a man on a mission yet also ‘a figure of repose [and] par excellence a man of leisure’,280 as his linear trajectory and the good times he spends with Russian and American friends show.

Having been turned into a Russian version of the iconic (anti-)hero of American genre cinema, Brother-2’s Danila both provokes and responds to American criticism. For, while Brother’s ‘gangster [was] the “no” to that great American “yes”’,281 Brother-2’s frontiersman is its affirmation, even if an ambivalent and ironic one. Together with Viktor’s and Danila’s changing dress code, Brother-2’s adaptation of the Western reflects contemporary Russia’s acceptance of some of America’s primary values as embodied in its archetypal cinematic form.

4.7 Chapaev and Cement: Brother-2, a Parody of Socialist Realism?

Brother-2’s deployment of the Western genre is nothing new in Soviet-Russian cinema. The early Soviet adventure satire, Mr. West, the classic Socialist Realist film, Chapaev, and the Eastern, White Sun of the Desert, all adopted features of this genre. But Balabanov’s film resembles Chapaev in more than just its shared associations with the Western. Like its distant ancestor, it also reflects the influence of Socialist Realism, and on a number of levels.

Brother-2’s links with Socialist Realism are also reflected in the manner in which it invokes Gladkov’s famous production novel, Cement (Tsement, 1925). To

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277 Warshow (Ibid: 114)
279 Ibid: 106.
280 Ibid: 107-08
281 Ibid: 106.
begin with, *Brother-2*’s anti-heroine, Dasha, has the same name as the heroine of the paradigmatic Socialist Realist production novel. The film, moreover, shares its main structural points with *Cement*, which are laid out in detail by Clark. Clark observes of Gladkov’s work that it, ‘[exemplifies] in many ways... most comprehensively... the prototypical Soviet novel’. Together with the equally seminal *Chapaev*, Gladkov’s novel thus provides the ideal target for a satirical critique of the Socialist Realist aesthetic. In order to appreciate the subversive affinities that link Balabanov’s film with that aesthetic, let us recast its narrative one further time, viewing it this time through the Socialist Realist lens.

Leading a trinity which also includes Ilia and Kostia, Danila returns home after demobilisation. He soon realises that all is not good in his microcosmos. The economy is in a bad state and in the hands of people who are not committed to its reconstruction beyond their own materialistic self-interest. Bourgeois values are rampant. The heroic trinity devises a way of righting wrongs. Thinking ‘along somewhat the same lines as the state’, which generally expects of its subjects to somewhat unilaterally abide by the rules that it imposes on them, the distinguished veteran and law-abiding citizen Kostia asks the local bureaucrat and economic leader Belkin for help. He thus plays by the rules as is expected of him and weakens his position, as the rules are made to support the system of which the New Russian Belkin, the representative of the paternalist state’s head, is a more important ‘member’ than the Ukrainian. Belkin is a corrupt man who uses the ‘new economic path’ to his own advantage. The Russian state cannot protect Kostia from himself and its bureaucracy. The Ukrainian comes between the wheel of ‘bigger issues’ and is killed as a result of a misunderstanding by an over-enthusiastic head of security and bureaucrat.

Kostia’s brothers-in-arms thereupon mobilise ‘the people’ (presented as an informant selling FSB data, a forger of passports and an illegal arms dealer), who help them set things right. The work on the project begins but is hampered by a series of obstacles (‘prosaic’: a car breakdown, and ’dramatic’: fighting with enemies). The protagonist has a problem with his love life (Saltykova or Dasha?)

282 Clark (Ibid: 256-60).
283 Ibid: 69.
284 Ibid: 257.
285 Ibid: 258.
and with controlling his emotions (a spontaneous fist fight). Eventually, however, he comes to consciousness (even if ironically, in his idiosyncratic adoption of the American way) under the influence of the mentor/father figures Ben and Menis. Danila makes a journey to deal with the problems he has, according to his heroic role, taken upon himself to resolve but his task seems unfulfillable. Despite everything, he prevails and the task is completed. There is a speech (V chem sila?) ‘marking the completion of the task’, ‘or in some tangible form the theme of regeneration’ (the poem ‘ya uznal, chto u menia est’ ogromnaia semia’). A funeral is held for the tragic victim (figuratively, the farewell to Ukraine). There is a celebration (with vodka on the plane) to mark the completion. The love plot seems to have been resolved with a minor reshuffling of the personae. However, the Socialist Realist narrative model is undercut through an open ending, as the criminals of Moscow lay in wait for the unsuspecting Danila and Dasha.

For older Russians, Dasha represents a highly recognisable parodic quotation, since a character with this name features also in Cement. Brother-2’s Socialist Realist plot structure is, to be sure, unaccompanied by the semantics of the Soviet period. But the unmistakable associations linked to the name, and to the plot in which its bearer is involved, furnish the tools of a trenchant assault on the restoration nostalgia and the glorification of Socialist Realist myths to which older generations in Russia are prone. The prostitute, Dasha, and the iconic Maxim-gun, are deployed in ways that pour scorn on their Socialist Realist antecedents. Thus, Dasha ‘degenerates’ from a hardworking Soviet ‘new woman’, who generously loved Red Army soldiers, into a post-Soviet ‘new woman’, who is a crack-smoking prostitute. The Maxim gun used by Chapaev to fight the White Army is used to kill the henchmen of the post-Soviet New Russian bourgeoisie. Moreover, Anemone observes that the ‘Russian crime boss Belkin [is filmed] in Lenin’s office at Gorki’.

Putting the New Russian banker into the office of the man who was already denounced as a criminal by Brother further emphasises the allegorical overtones of the film and its link with Cement through Lenin’s ‘New Economic Policy’, aspects of which the novel describes.

Dasha’s name and character are both parodic and satirical because they copy in exaggerated form the original’s promiscuous sexual activities and continue

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286 Ibid: 259.
Balabanov’s subversion of the Mother Russia motif and the Socialist Realist trope of the ‘great family’. The lonely Dasha of 2000 ‘sleeps around’ like her forerunner, while her partner is ‘defending the cause’. Post-Soviet Dasha belongs to Viktor’s generation and is represented as a victim who is, however, responsible for her own downfall. This makes her development resemble that of the gangster in *Brother*.

Dasha’s husband in *Cement*, Gleb, was the ‘new man of action [and] likened to... the mythical knight of the Russian oral epic or byлина, the *bogatyर*”. Gleb’s heroic image is severely undercut by Danila’s anti-heroic identity as a killer. The mock-image of the *bogatyर* is continued and developed in *Brother-2* through Danila’s status as an anti-heroic frontiersman, unable to prevent his comrade’s death. Significantly, Clark herself links the Socialist Realist *bogatyर* to the (anti-)hero of the Western film: ‘they are all “struggle,” “vigilance,” heroic achievement, and another cluster of qualities rather like the “true grit” of the American frontier’. Despite his toughness, the frontiersman, and particularly the distorted version of post-classical cycles, is a killer, an outsider, an anti-hero, and an ambiguous other to ‘civilised’ society. His days are numbered and Danila must make room for the next generation as embodied in Fedia Belkin, just as Viktor ceded place to him in *Brother*.

As already indicated, Soviet-Russia’s seminal ‘Western’, *Chapaev*, presents yet another motivation for *Brother-2*’s adoption of the Western genre. Here it is the myth of the protagonist rather than the structure of the work that is parodied. There is, however, also the reverse parallel development of the characters, Chapaev and Viktor, to take into account. The cinematic Chapaev’s development began as a killer in Russia’s Wild West, whereupon he fled eastward and – as a largely re-educated communist – was killed by the bourgeois White Army. Viktor kills first in the East, flees westward and is apprehended in ridiculous manner after adopting a vaguely bourgeois ideology at the end of film (‘All power in the world is in America!... in money’ ‘*V Amerike vsia sila mira!*... *v dengakh*’).

### 4.8 Conclusion

As is the case for *Brother, Brother-2*’s key mainstream generic influence provides, together with its transgeneric style, the dominant orientation of the film. *Brother-2*

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288 Clark (Ibid: 73).
mirrors and parodies the methods of *Brother* and *The Untouchables* by conflating the structure of the Western, the content of a late 1990s *boevik*-adventure movie and aspects of the gangster film. *Brother-2*’s generic structure and themes (those of the Western) are thus submerged in the semantics of the modern, post-Soviet Russian age. The conventional art-house film/genre movie dichotomy is subverted through a Kuleshovian avant-garde performance that rejects ‘Russian psychological drama’ in favour of ‘American... thrillers’. 290

Such a move does not, however, diminish the film’s depth and significance. As with *Brother*, audiences are faced with a frame-narrative that invites complex allegorical readings. The result is a further ‘art-house Zeitgeist movie’ that self-consciously explores Russian identity and self/other relations. The identity of the unconventional sequel’s protagonist is transformed from *Brother*’s drifting neo-noir gangster into that of a purposeful Wild Westerner on a mission at Russia’s, ironically receding, frontiers. Balabanov’s self-parodic mode is signalled in the establishing shot with its visual focus on Russian commercials of American cars a leitmotif for the film.

*Brother-2*’s story is told with help of a Kuleshovian journey to the land of the capitalists. Like Ness of *The Untouchables*, Danila travels to America’s Midwestern gangster-metropolis, Chicago, to right wrong. Like Ness he deals with and ‘defeats’ society’s others. During the struggle he deploys means – increasingly vicious attacks - that together with the influence of his dominant other change him into somebody similar to the latter. He becomes what he beheld, is thus himself defeated and the circle closes.

Through its satirical take on the Western, *Brother-2* tells the story of post-Soviet Russia’s loss of Ukraine (‘separation/relocation and figurative death’) and the economic traumas Russia endured in the 1990s. It also depicts Mother Russia’s captivity by, and servitude to, her ethnic other, along with her socio-economic downslide. All of these traumas are represented as self-inflicted. Finally, the film closes the chapter on Russia’s pursual of the American dream with the words ‘Good bye, America!’.

289 Ibid.
The satirical representation of contemporary Russia, with its cultural kowtowing to the West, is marked by caricature and absurd, provocative situations, episodes, statements and character constellations. These problematise the status and self-identity of all the characters (with the arguable exceptions of Boris and Ben), explode the Danila myth and undercut popular Russian nationalist sentiments. For in this film Balabanov criticises both the glorifications and the vilifications of the USA prevalent in Russian popular culture. It posits the true ‘others’ of any society as being the leaders of its criminal fraternity. Above all else it assails lives committed solely to material gain and the consequences of such lives: betrayal and indiscriminate violence.

The satirical assault is not restricted to purely contemporary issues. The film also creates a parodic distance from the classics of Socialist Realism (Cement and Chapaev), their heroes and the entire Socialist Realist canon. It thereby casts a large shadow over the whole of the Soviet past and over those of its contemporary recipients who still indulge in post-Soviet ‘restoration nostalgia’. Brother-2 ‘others’ the Soviet past and its contemporary admirers. Its intensification of its predecessor’s tragic pessimism concludes when Danila follows in his pathetic brother’s footsteps and dons the attire of a rich American businessman. Brother-2 is everything but a simplistic nationalist blockbuster. Through its subtle manipulation of the Western format it depicts Russia’s identity, historical context and self/other relations in a decidedly ambivalent manner, simultaneously entertaining and alienating the mainstream viewer, thwarting his tendency to disambiguate historical complexity and naturalise dominant myths. In effect, it pulls the rug from beneath everything it presents.
Chapter 5: War (Voina, 2002)
An Eastern-Docudrama Critique of Mainstream Media Representations

5.1 Introduction

In 2002, Aleksei Balabanov directed his third Zeitgeist movie, War, using the actor Sergei Bodrov Jr. for the third time, this time in the role of the mythical Russian prisoner of the Caucasus. War developed Brother’s and Brother-2’s method of blending genres and deconstructing genre hierarchies for increasingly controversial representations of Russia’s self and others.

Brother and Brother-2 both included representations of the Chechnia conflicts in their allegorical-connotative deep structure. War, by contrast, is entirely dedicated to the second Chechen war, complicating the theme of the prisoner of the Caucasus Mountains by allotting the role of the prisoner jointly to a Russian and a British man as well as a British woman.

The film’s seemingly crude, box-office format, harsh mode of representation and controversial subject matter made it even more unpopular with liberal critics than Brother and Brother-2. However, the initial impression that the film was kowtowing to the popular market belies its subtle blend of genres, metacinematic technique and narrative complexity. As I shall endeavour to show, these features combine to offer a trenchant critique of the Russian media’s mainstream representations of the Chechen conflict.

War’s release in 2002, coincided with the 2nd Chechen war. Vladimir Putin had been propelled into the presidency after the 1999 bombings of apartment blocks in Moscow and other Russian cities, for which Chechen terrorists were blamed. Putin’s tough, authoritarian stance was greeted with popular support. But he was soon accused by liberals in the arts, media and politics of reinstituting Soviet-style censorship to manipulate the population. His government had begun earlier to assert more control over the press, taking over the private television channels NTV and TV6 and thus increasing its political influence. Coverage of state corruption, social ills and the brutality of the Chechen war were suppressed.291 Social cohesion among

the approving and increasingly apathetic Russian population improved and anti-Chechen sentiments spread. Putin and his government were able to portray the war as a struggle against international terrorism. Russia appeared to co-operate with, and move towards the West, with which Russia now shared a common foe. The West, nonetheless, criticised Putin’s government for its state-centred, authoritarian nationalism, which, however, enabled Putin’s government to appropriate the banner of Russian patriotism from, and undermine popular support for, the communists.

Reflecting this historical context, War appeared to many to exceed even Brother-2’s jingoism and xenophobia. Gillespie found it to be ‘as racist a film as [Alexander Nevzorov’s] Purgatory [Chistilishche, 1998]’. For Hashamova it presents a ‘true’ Russian point of view [full of (FW)] nationalistic fervour’ and ‘aims to destroy Chechen cultural and ethnic marks’. Lipovetsky labelled it a prototypical work of commercialised post-Socialist Realism identified by its totalitarian discourse and ‘straightforward plot’. By contrast, Hope, in a position close to mine, saw in it a scathing answer to Sergei Bodrov Sr.’s overly humanistic film The Prisoner of the Mountains (Kavkazkii Plennik, 1996) as well as a deconstruction of the myths of a ‘much-vaulted Russia’ and a ‘free and authentic Caucasus’. Despite seeing it as ‘extremely violent [and] ugly’, Youngblood also distanced herself from the highly critical canon, noting that War was ‘complex... intentionally ironic [, without] heroes [and critical] of the post-Soviet Russian state.’ For Anemone, War constitutes the concluding part of Balabanov’s ‘Vigilante trilogy’. This view, apart from the genre assignment, coincides with the one presented here. For, while War is not Brother-3, it presents the third part of Balabanov’s critical engagement with representations of the Chechen conflicts.

Considering such wideranging opinions, we might, as in the previous chapters, be able to ascertain the nature and development of its self/other representations through a close analysis of the film, its genres, its intertextual impulses, its narrative structures and the construction of its fictional characters and types. I will thus pay particular attention to the influence on War of the Western

294 Ibid: 308.
296 Hope (Ibid: 69).
genre, and of its peculiar brand of anti-hero. Unlike *Brother-2*, which reflects the Western in its classic, mature variant, *War* deploys the prototypical, historically inspired format of Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. I identify a still more prominent literary influence dealing with frontier conflicts in Lev Tolstoy’s *Khadzhi Murat*. This narrative’s blend of fiction with history (*istoriia*) overlaps not only with that of *Mohicans*, but was also deployed cinematically in *War* through its documentary modes. The documentary aspect of the film was also to some extent ‘based on the true story’ of a British couple’s adventures during the recent Russian-Chechen conflicts. In fact, the UK’s Channel 5 docudrama series, ‘Kidnapped Abroad’, treated the same ‘true story’ in an edition entitled ‘Nightmare in Chechnya’ (2008). Through such an analysis of genre and intertextuality I will ascertain the character of *War*’s self/other representations.

As previously, a brief synopsis will help lay the foundation for a close analysis of the film’s self/other representations. There will then be an examination of *War*’s deployment of the documentary genre and its impact on character presentations as well as self/other representations. This section will also provide a close reading of the beginning of the film because it introduces its documentary genre in various modes. It will next present an overview of the documentary genre, its role in the film and its relevance to the fact that the film draws on the true story of events involving a British couple. The final subpart of this section will offer an analysis of all of the film’s documentary modes, and of their impact on the film’s double-coding as well as on the narrator and his credibility, maintaining a constant focus on *War*’s self/other representations. I will then examine *Khadzhi Murat*’s influence on the film’s hybrid status, involving, as it does, both history (docu) and story (drama). Here, a short section on the intertextual importance of *The Last of the Mohicans* will be included. Finally, I will turn to the film’s ending, pointing to its implications for the different strands of my analysis.

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299 Susan Layton (1994), *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Layton observes that *istoriia* means ‘both “history” and “story.”’ She continues, ‘this nuance in the Russian leaves doubt about whether the narrative is largely a literary fabrication (“just” a story) or rather the recounting of the actual past. Offered as two things at once, *Hadji Murat* has a typically Tolstoyan double-coded character’ (Ibid: 266-67).

5.2 Synopsis

A newsreel depicts different groups of Chechens in the streets of Grozny. Visual images are accompanied by a Muslim war song (*nasheed*). The scene changes to an interview with the prisoner and ex-soldier, Ivan, who talks about events in Chechnia in late summer 2001. Film and video reconstructions help present Ivan’s flashbacks. He recalls the beheading of two Russian soldiers, and meeting the English actors John and Margaret. Ivan’s army service had finished before the start of the story, while he was in captivity. The opening credits finish with the film’s title.

The viewers are told that Aslan Gugaev, himself a former prisoner of Russia’s labour camps and now Russia’s implacable enemy, lectures Ivan on the nature of the Russian-Chechen war by using a sheep-shepherd metaphor. Aslan is shown amicably sharing a spliff with his captive. The warlord is unreligious and does not participate in the evening prayer of his Muslim soldiers. But he also uses Sharia law to justify the cutting off of the Russo-Jewish Semion’s finger.

The prisoners are transferred like sheep to another camp, where they meet another prisoner, Capt. Medvedev. John, an English actor and captive, keeps bleating about his human rights. Ivan is impressed by Capt. Medvedev’s calm purposeful strength. The narrator recalls that Margaret fell for Medvedev straight away. Aslan releases the eager John to obtain a £2,000,000 ransom for Margaret. He also frees his ‘servant’ Ivan, without payment.

Ivan goes to St. Petersburg to tell Medvedev’s family about their son, husband and father. John gets no help from the British government or from NATO. Only Channel Five offers its ‘assistance’ in the form of £200,000. In return, John has to film his upcoming adventures in Chechnia. He sells all his property to obtain part of the ransom. When he goes to Moscow, the Russian government proves as unhelpful as the British officials. The only person to ‘help’ is a corrupt government official selling John the contact details of an ex-KGB major in Vladikavkaz.

Meanwhile, Ivan has returned home to the Siberian town of Tobolsk and is becoming alienated from his family, friends and society. John offers the penniless and demoralised veteran up to £35,000 for helping him confront Aslan. Reluctantly,

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*The name Medvedev means ‘bear’, which is the national personification for Russia and comparable to the British lion.*
Ivan accepts. In a flash forward to the present, he explains to the interviewers that he sympathised with the British, and also wanted to free Capt. Medvedev.

John continues to shoot videos, making commentaries despite his evident lack of cultural competence. In Vladikavkaz, he believes every local to be Chechen. Thanks to Ivan they escape the trap set for them by the ex-KGB major. Ivan ‘buys’ their transfer into Chechnia from a Russian contractor. Once arrived, the two intruders lay an ambush to obtain a vehicle. During the second attempt – they spare a bus with women and children in it – three Chechen paramilitaries are killed in a shoot-out.

The violent nature of their undertaking begins to dawn on John and he blames Ivan. Rejecting the accusations, Ivan tells John to take responsibility and accept reality, if he wants to succeed. They capture the Chechen shepherd, Ruslan, whom Ivan forces to help find Aslan’s camp. Ruslan agrees only after Ivan claims to work for NATO, which would be prepared to kill the Chechen’s family. John continues to show his lack of cultural competence, accusing Ivan of vengefully and pointlessly torturing Ruslan. But Ivan knows Chechen culture and merely ensures Ruslan’s cooperation. While John shoots videos, Ivan and Ruslan talk about Moscow and Ruslan’s aspirations to make his son a politician. They clearly have at least as much in common as Ivan and John. Thanks to Ruslan, they reach Aslan’s camp.

Ruslan, still afraid for his family, tells Ivan that Aslan will not keep his oath before Allah. He also tells Ivan about centuries-old Chechen blood feuds between their clans. He accepts a gun and promises support. John continues to film but has also toughened up and is ready to fight. They attack, killing several Chechens and freeing the two prisoners, Capt. Medvedev and the actress Margaret. John murders Aslan, believing that he raped his fiancée. Without their protective shield, Aslan, the motley crew has to fight its way out of the mountains. They take refuge in a stone tower, where they are cornered defending themselves against Aslan’s band of soldiers. Two Russian gunships rescue them thanks to Capt. Medvedev’s personal army connections. After their rescue, John swaggers around the Russian camp, telling war stories, completely insensitive to his fiancée’s suffering. He pays Ivan only after being reminded. Ivan in turn volunteers to give Ruslan £2,000 for his services, which that one accepts as a matter of course.
From the final voice-over, it emerges that, while the civilian Ivan was imprisoned for breaking the law and killing Chechens, John returned home to become rich and famous from selling the adventures of his rescue action to the media. Ruslan has moved to Moscow, where his son studies at the university. The final image of the Chechen, Ruslan, sitting together with the Russian, Ivan, on a stone is accompanied by a melancholy Russian song, Viacheslav Butusov’s *My Star (Moia Zvezda)*.

5.3 Docudrama and Documentary Modes: Metacinematic Complications of War’s Surface Narrative

5.3.1 The Docu-Mode of Representation: War’s Opening Sequences

While in the final shot, a Russian and Chechen sit side by side, *War’s* first visual impressions are of Chechens only. The images are synchronised with a Chechen song sung in Russian: a cultural hybrid.

The apparently incongruent synchronisation of image and sound in the first sequence is striking. The muted establishing shot of Muslims in a mosque is accompanied by the Russian language song. But the singer’s – and the film’s – first words ‘Oh Allah!’ (‘О Аллах!’) indicate a non-Russian theme. More silent documentary reel shows various individual and groups of paramilitary Chechens listening to speakers, checking cars, hiding their faces from the camera or posing for it with their weapons. The scenes of voiceless religious, propagandist and military activities inform the viewer about life in Grozny some time in 1996.

These scenes stand in stark contrast to Bodrov’s *Prisoner of the Mountains* which is, from the outset, a committedly Russian film focusing on Russian soldiers. *War*, by contrast, begins by focusing on Chechens to the sound of the in/famous religious war song (*nasheed*), *Ierusalim*, by Timur Mutsuraev, a Chechen resistance fighter and professed Islamist. In the space of a few minutes *War’s* main themes, motifs and cinematic technique are established: war in Chechnia, the lack of a Chechen voice in the Russian media, the capacities of the documentary genre and Russian-Chechen hybridity.

*Ierusalim* blends Russian with Chechen/Muslim culture. Its Russian lyrics address Allah; the theme is holy war, the fight against evil and the retaking of
Jerusalem. However, it clearly laments the onset of darkness and yet another war. Chechens are seen moving their muted lips. The visual impressions are augmented by their strange silence. Particularly striking is a military man’s repeated shout ‘Allahu Akbar’ (‘God is [the] greatest!’). The mainstream media have vilified these words as belonging to terrorists about to launch a bloody attack. But this conceals the fact that the same words are used by the vast majority of Muslims in peaceful prayer. The man’s kind face could be that of a European. The documentary reel is still suffused with the beautiful Chechen tune and its Russian lyrics. Jerusalem never mentions the Chechen conflict, thus avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. The ‘Russian/Chechen’ nasheed foreshadows through its own hybrid nature one of the main themes of War: the tragically intertwined fate of two different peoples.

By confronting audiences with voiceless Chechens and the desolate urban setting of Grozny in 1996, War, like Nevzorov’s Purgatory, opposes Prisoner’s reanimation of romantic idealisations of the Caucasus. Images of the mountainous ‘freedom fortress’ of Pushkin’s and Bodrov’s idealised fantasias are contradicted by scenes of patrolled streets in ruins and by the symbolism of a damaged, yet still semi-functional bridge. Images of praying Chechen Muslims and paramilitary urbanites replace Prisoner’s delusional depictions of ‘noble savages’ leading a pastoral life. In stark contrast to Prisoner’s widely criticised refusal to locate its action in Chechnia, War’s opening scene clearly pinpoints its location. It immediately problematizes Russian-Chechen relations and, implicitly, their representation by idealist romantics such as Bodrov. It also contradicts Aleksandr Rogozhkin’s Checkpoint’s (1997) suggestions of an incomprehensible, irreconcilable cultural difference between Russians and Chechens. Grozny, historically and demographically an overwhelmingly Russian city, seems full of Chechens that move to the sound of a Russian-Chechen song. Such representations of hybridity will be repeated throughout a film in which crass depictions of brutality are foregrounded to jar with the magnificent background of the Caucasus. War turns a beautiful dream into a living nightmare.

The voice of the Chechen other is still more emphasised by a big sign reading ‘Get out of Chechnia, Russian Fascists!’ (Von iz Chechni, russkie fashisty). Another

302 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HMOLt15151 (06/12/09). This in/famous nasheed became an anthem for Chechen fighters during the 1999-2000 Battle of Grozny and is well-known also in Russia.
visual image is shown in close up - a magazine caption reading, ‘Soldier of Fortune, soldat udachi, no. 12/95.’ Interestingly, the magazine is held by a Chechen yet the film’s main mercenary character is the Russian, Ivan. The importance of the profit motive in the Russian-Chechen war is thus underlined.

The next two sequences of the opening credits continue in documentary style but change to docudrama. During his interview in prison, Ivan addresses his fictional interviewer and tells him about his imprisonment in summer 2001. The next shot is a flashback. Some of Ivan’s memories are recorded by a Chechen video camera, including the beheading of two Russian soldiers (possibly a reference to Nevzorov’s Purgatory). One had killed Aslan Gugaev’s brother and was tracked down in a Russian town at the cost of $30,000. The other was a contractor, who had left his post to obtain vodka. The beheading takes place in the centre of the mise-en-scène against the background of a stony barren mountain slope and a watch tower.

There are no representations of the romantic myth of magnificent mountain scenery that could embellish the two killings as righteous revenge or contemptuous punishment. The stony watch tower indicates the age-old military prowess and impregnability of the North Caucasus. The stony vegetationless landscape is baking in the summer heat and presents an uninviting metaphor for the barreness of Russia’s relationship with the Chechen other.

From the three opening sequences, the viewer can expect an independent docudrama-contribution to the Chechen war theme and, pars pro toto, to the wider war on the Muslim world, as signalled by British/NATO involvement in the plot. The theme of the prisoner of the Caucasus has already been introduced and undercut by Ivan’s imprisonment in Russia. Chechens, in particular, and Muslims, in general, have been given a voice and eyes by the film, which thus confronts mainstream media practices head on. The film has established its status as that of an uncompromisingly gritty blend of ‘history and fiction’ which is the docudrama.

5.3.2 Documentary, Docudrama and ‘Nightmare in Chechnya’

War is a fictional film narrated in documentary mode. It combines mainstream and documentary genres, fiction and history, for double-coded re/presentation, continuing the complex hybridity characterising earlier films in Balabanov’s oeuvre. Documentary presents a genre whose objective is to instruct or inform. It is generally regarded as different from fictional entertainment film. It nonetheless presents a
‘creative treatment of actuality’ and shares with fictional genres the authorial voice, narrative structuring and the fact that it reflects the contemporary Zeitgeist. There is a necessary, albeit paradoxical, distinction between narrative ‘purely’ as a means of structuring, on the one hand, and fictionality as an indicator of truth claims, on the other hand. While, as John Izod and Richard Kilborn insist, ‘every documentary is bound to present evidence or information about the socio-historical world’, the popular docudrama in particular has blurred the distinctions with fictional film. It uses actors for the dramatic re-enactment of events for which there is no camera access, and the authorial voiceovers to be found in fictional films (e.g. Checkpoint). Such strategies amplify the genre’s commercial appeal and dramatic aspect, and thereby its authenticity (after all, the narrator ‘was there’ and experienced it!). Often unawares, spectators buy into the fictional aspect as truthful, not realising that documentary’s measure of ‘objective truth value’ and degree of historicity have drastically declined. Docudrama’s enhanced fictional aspects make it unsound with respect to documentary’s ‘truth claims’ and unreliable in ideological terms. The genre is easily deployed as a quasi-educational propagandistic tool. For this reason, it can also be turned against itself, as War demonstrates.

Six years before the Channel 5 docudrama ‘Nightmare in Chechnya’ and three years after the release of ‘real-life’ hostages, John and Camilla, War picks up their abduction and rescue story. ‘Nightmare in Chechnya’ was a gripping adventure tale that circulated across the world in 1997-98. It depicted the abduction and abuse of a humanitarian and naïve English couple by war-damaged, and thus deranged, Chechens. After experiencing torture and rape, they were released. The docudrama re-enacted the events, as they had not been filmed. The English couple provided the frame-narrative. Actors played their roles. The result was very watchable for wide mainstream audiences who enjoyed the thrilling abduction story about the ordeals of an innocent English couple. At the same time it appeared to be authentic, and provided information about the horrors in Chechnia. Its happy ending displayed ‘understanding’ and ‘forgiveness’ towards the war-damaged Chechen other, without, however, avoiding binary representations.

War also depicts reconstructed events ‘based on a true story’, for whose presentation it deploys various documentary modes and levels of presentation. It,

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303 John Grierson’s defining phrase of the documentary quoted by Izod and Kilborn (Ibid: 427).
too, uses the technique of interviewing the main (Russian) character in front of a camera and shows video footage to represent the narrator’s ‘memories’ in flashbacks. Dramatic re-enactment is similarly blended with ‘real’ documentary footage of the localities. In fact, War deploys all six available documentary modes.\(^{305}\)

### 5.3.3 Documentary Modes and Metacinematic Double-Coding: Who is Ivan?

The *expository* mode uses ‘explicitly rhetorical techniques in order to make points about aspects of actuality’.\(^{306}\) Izod and Kilborn observe that ‘narration of this type became known as the ““voice-of-God” mode’,\(^{307}\) despite its ‘I’ narration (FW). War uses an apparent eyewitness voiceover to relay what Izod and Kilborn call a ‘relatively straightforward “show and tell” structure to guide the viewer through the material’.\(^{308}\) While the apparently authoritative eye-witness, Ivan, appears to inform his audiences, the voiceover is limited in order to augment visual impressions and thus narrative cinema’s illusion of reality, of ‘showing rather than telling’.

Most of the action takes place (as if) in *observational* mode, which is an apparently ‘neutral’ fly-on-the-wall docu-technique. It is introduced during the news-reel sequence of the opening credits in order to increase the impression of cultural verisimilitude and historicity. It resembles the narrative technique of a third person omniscient narrator and makes strong truth-claims about the world, be it fictional or socio-historical. This style of narration suggests factual reporting about empirically observable historical events, an impression that is apparently reinforced – but in fact compromised – by the *expository*, eye-witness account.

The *poetic* mode is repeatedly used to portray the scenery of the Caucasian mountains, evoking ‘a mood rather than stating or asserting things directly’.\(^{309}\) It contradicts romantic myths of the innocent Caucasian wilderness through the foregrounded commitment of atrocities. The conventionally romantic melodramatic picture of the ‘Russian’ Caucasus appears life-threateningly real in War. The impressive images of the Caucasus form the background for foregrounded human actions, atrocities and sufferings. Russian soldiers are beheaded in the heat of the

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\(^{307}\) Izod and Kilborn (Ibid: 429).

\(^{308}\) Ibid.

glowing sun rather than taken prisoners ‘for no other reasons’ than revenge and contempt. Such actions, together with the background of a lifeless barren, stony flank of a hill, deprive the noble savagery of the mythical Caucasus of its allegorical, romantic gloss. At a later point in the film, the image of another, stunningly beautiful, scene clashes with the scene of human brutality in the foreground. The screaming Margaret is stripped and hung like an animal by a rope around her neck into an ice-cold mountain stream. The filming of dumping of corpses of ambushed male and female Chechen fighters into a ravine further explodes the Lermontovian ideal of the heroic masculine death in open battle.310

John’s participatory film making and comments provide metacinematic and narrative embeddings, while ‘proving’ his active involvement. He ‘does not remain aloof from the subject matter, but actively engages with it – by openly participating or interacting with the people and institutions on show’.311 John earns his money and appears rather like a tourist. His is the third use of handheld cameras in the film (it follows that of the Chechens and that of the journalists as they film John’s arrival in London). These different reels were inaccessible to the main narrator and character Ivan, as he states at the end of the film. Yet they are supposed to present his memories through flashbacks. Doubt is thus cast on the film’s ‘truth value’, on the authenticity of the ‘memories’ it presents, and on the narrator’s credibility. The mainstream media’s reliance on the documentary form as a means of claiming to represent the objective truth about the war in Chechnia is seriously jeopardised. In this way War complicates its audiences’ primary identification with the eye of the camera and disrupts their comfortable entry into the dreamlike, cinematic state of mind.

There are, however, two more documentary modes, which underline War’s deviation from standard cinematic and narrative re/presentation. These act in unison with War’s use of fade-to-blacks (introduced in Brother and redeployed in Brother-2). Together, they disrupt the emotional absorption of the film’s audiences, their ill-advised, blind faith in the illusions of reality promulgated by the media.

Then there is War’s use of the interactive or performative mode which, as, Stella Bruzzi has notes, ‘accords documentaries authenticating meaning through its focus on the interaction between performance and reality’. But in War, such interaction undercuts the documentary ideal, throwing the film’s credibility into doubt by augmenting the sense of artifice and structure superimposed from ‘outside’ (the intradiegetic, i.e. fictional, filmmakers). Izod and Kilborn observe in this context that ‘in general, ‘this [mode] will occur via an on-camera interview’. Indeed, War’s ‘on-camera’ interview is, as already observed, conducted by unseen fictional docu-filmmakers who fabricate the whole docudrama under the fictional roof of the genre film. Izod and Kilborn continue that this mode normally ‘suits that current of television discourse that claims to get the truth from the horse’s mouth’. War, by contrast, uses the interactive/performative mode to pull the rug out from under its own docudramatic re/presentations and media representations.

While the character of Ivan seems truthfully to be answering a journalist’s questions, the viewer is left with an ostensible choice regarding his narration. Either the main action of the film belongs to Ivan’s memories, that is they are his flashbacks. Or we witness a case of dramatic re-enactment in which actors impersonate those historical personalities whom the character of Ivan appears to remember and authoritatively tells us about. The multi-levelled narrative structure of War means that several things may be true at once. This, of course, raises the question of whether Ivan is really a ‘historical’ figure, an actor explicitly performing the life of that figure, or a completely fictional persona.

For if the screen presentations were a ‘historical’ Ivan’s memories, how could he remember those actions taking place in England and Moscow during his absence? After all, according to his own admission, Ivan has never seen John’s documentary. John’s film and all the ‘documentary’ material taken by the various hand held cameras – John’s, the Chechens’ and English as well as Russian journalists’ – were inaccessible to the imprisoned Ivan. These apparent ‘memories’ must have been ‘reconstructed’ by the intradiegetic filmmakers, who interview somebody for their authoritative frame-narrative. This ‘somebody’ may just as well be another actor enacting the life of the historical (or, indeed, the fictional) Ivan.

313 Izod and Kilborn (Ibid: 430).
War’s audience is thus now made aware of a further documentary mode centring on the use of metacinematic devices to induce a sense of *reflexivity* (these devices are also, as we have seen, a feature of fictional films like *Brother* and *Brother-2*). Ward explains that such techniques ‘encourage the viewer to question the very idea of “documentary” as a category or mode’. He continues, ‘this questioning can also lead to a critique of larger categories such as cinematic realism’. Izod and Kilborn elaborate, observing that:

The reflexive mode is found where the manner in which the historical world is represented itself becomes the topic of cinematic representation. It makes not only the film’s subjects, but also its own formal qualities, the object of questioning and doubt... The political dimension of the reflexive project lies partly in the way such films imply that people’s memory, perception, and interpretation of events are distorted by stereotypes (largely screen-based) that circulate in our culture. More emphatically, the deconstructive methods these films deploy undermine realism, which term,... is usually taken by documentarists to refer to an unproblematic access to the world through traditional mimetic representation.

Reinforced by its own use of fade-to-blacks, War’s further development of Brother’s and Brother-2’s counter-cultural, meta-cinematic, alignment asks us to question its own ‘unproblematic [realistic] access to the world’. It critically approaches media representations as a whole, and points towards an alternative, symbolic level of narrative.

To recapitulate, War’s meta-cinematic prompts, designed to raise the viewers’ awareness, start with the opening credits’ documentary style. Shortly afterwards, they serve to reinforce the fictional status of the camera that films the character of Ivan during the interviewing process. Next we should recall the embedded episodes shot with hand-held cameras. Ivan simply could not have witnessed several of these events (England and Moscow) and he admits so himself.

The character of Ivan as imprisoned narrator, moreover, is present from the beginning of the re-enacted action. The role is performed by the same actor who

314 Ibid.
316 Ibid.
317 Izod and Kilborn (Ibid: 430).
plays Ivan the prisoner on the reel of the portable Chechen camera at the beginning. The tape of these shots, however, has remained in John’s possession in England. This suggests that War’s docudrama-filmmakers had to use characters dramatically to re-enact these episodes, shot with handheld cameras. Since the same ‘Ivan’, who appears on the Chechen video camera’s footage, now sits in front of the intradiegetic camera, the complete documentary story of the fictional film War is ‘reconstructed and re-enacted.’ The person (the actor, Aleksei Chadov) sitting before the interviewing journalist in prison is thus performing a role on two levels: that of Ivan, and that of the actor impersonating Ivan.

Under the fictional roof of the genre film, War, intradiegetic yet off-screen docu-filmmakers have recreated the whole abduction story, the episodes of the prison interviews included. War therefore possesses the following narrative levels: (i) Balabanov’s fictional film, War; (ii) the prison interviews constructed by the fictional docudrama-filmmakers and providing the narrative frame for the docudrama; (iii) the events, which ‘Ivan’ seems to remember but which are historically inspired re-enactments (of the ‘real’ historical events, on which the film is loosely based) by the filmmakers staging the interview together; (iv) the embedded footage made by video and other hand held cameras, all of which are part of the dramatic re-enactments and reconstructions.

The ‘Russian answer’ to John’s restructured memories of his film, My Life in Russia, evidently had to do without its ‘real-life’ protagonist. Unless one chooses to take the intradiegetic docudrama as complete fiction, the ‘original’ Ivan’s absence renders the ending of the film ironic, along with one of Ivan’s final statements: ‘I don’t think they’ll put me away’.

For Ivan was put away and rendered ‘unavailable’, either because the authorities did not give the journalists access to their prisoner, or because he was like the character, Rat (krysa), in Blokpost, handed over to the Chechens and killed. Ivan, by contrast to Rat, acted as a civilian throughout the film and had broken Russian and international law by becoming a mercenary for the English vigilante, John.

5.4 The War Genre
A mercenary is very different from a vigilante. The first sells his/her services in armed conflicts for personal gain. The other metes out extra-legal punishment. In
War, Ivan accompanies John as a mercenary. His motivations are pay, pity and his wish to save the older veteran Capt. Medvedev. By calling Brother, Brother-2 and War the ‘Vigilante Trilogy’, Anemone draws attention to merely one, gradually diminishing, aspect of the leading characters in these three films. While they all appear to try to right some wrong, Ivan in particular does not set out at all to punish anybody. Almost up to the end he believes that he will be able to strike a deal with Aslan and consents to attack only on Ruslan’s ‘advice’. Death casualties are ‘mere’ collateral damage (Aslan is murdered by John). But all three Russian anti-heroes – the gangster, the Wild Westerner, and the (ex-)soldier – are paid (or pay themselves) handsomely for their services.

Just as Brother-2 shared the gangster genre with Brother, so War shares elements of the Western format with Brother-2. Continuing the overt hybridizing techniques characteristic of Balabanov’s oeuvre, War foregrounds the influence of the Western primarily on its syntactic plane. Like Brother-2, the film’s semantic and syntactic planes largely belong to different genre categories. Semantically, War is a species of war film, even if lacking anything in the way of mass, armed combat. Syntactically, as observed by Youngblood (2006) and Lavrentiev (2002), it adapts the structure of a Western. The generic hybridity is underscored through the intertextual links with the Eastern White Sun of the Desert, and Cooper’s classic novel, Last of the Mohicans.

All three narratives – War, White Sun and Mohicans – revolve around para- or ex-military ‘heroes’, who participate in wars between colonial powers and involve bands of natives, or between a colonial power and non-compliant members of its ethnic other. They are all abduction-and-rescue stories (though the model is turned on its head by White Sun). War’s Ivan and White Sun’s Sukhov are returning war veterans with their women waiting at home. Mohican’s Anglicised Uncas – the last of the Mohicans – loses his beloved one to her native captors. His co-hero, Hawkeye, is a hunter, who has gone half-native and occasionally works as a scout for the British and, in Mohican’s, for a whimsical British man going after the native kidnappers of one of his countrywomen. All three heroes have to protect and/or rescue female captives. All three stories feature internally divided ethnic others. All are in their own manner about colonial wars and consequently represent a variant of

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colonial discourse. War and Mohicans are historically inspired narratives pivoting around the Russian-Chechen and British-French wars, in general, as well as the hostage-taking of the British couple and the siege of Fort Henry, in particular. All three stories blend the Western and war genres.

The Wild Westerner is, as we saw earlier, a paradigmatic anti-hero living at the frontier. The captivity theme, whether involving representatives of the self (often a woman) by the native other or representatives of the criminal other (bandits) by the sheriff – is prevalent in the genre. Hawkeye – a forerunner of the Wild Westerner – no longer fully belongs to his home civilisation but has also not gone completely native. Like the many of the anti-heroes of the later Western genre, he moves to and fro between ‘wilderness’ and ‘civilisation’ as necessity dictates. Alienated from, and marginalised by, his community, he is a hybrid and a drifter with his own practical ethical views, which usually include a feeling of superiority not only over the natives but also many of his own ‘civilised’ people. Neither a good nor a bad figure, he acts upon necessity. After all, his community’s laws do not hold in the wilderness and are only beginning to encroach upon the frontier. He does not, and cannot, question the fighting, while it continues. The Wild Westerner of the film often represents a war veteran, serves as a military man at the frontier or, like Cooper’s Hawkeye and Uncas, as a scout for the (British) army. If he allies himself with natives, then it is conventionally on a master-servant basis. This anti-heroic figure seemingly fulfils his society’s romantic myth of frontierrnanship. He thus represents both society’s alienation from itself and its fantasies about a romanticised and/or vilified native other that still inhabits the garden Eden.

The classical war hero, by contrast, embodies the glorious deeds of a particular nation and its son’s love for the homeland, which he protects. He defends the homeland and defeats its oppressors, or dies in his heroic fight against the threat to his family. Youngblood (2007) notes that in the Soviet period the war genre was used to create and sustain images of the enemy as the barbarians beyond the gates. The Soviet leadership, Youngblood observes, was probably more concerned with depictions of the barbaric enemy (imagined or real, external or internal) than any other country, with the possible exception of the USA. Usually, the construction of the hostile others – the Whites, the Germans and the Chechens, for example – are predictable. But Youngblood observes that there have always been films with
ambiguous heroes, too.\textsuperscript{319} Such films reflect the complex nature of both self and others as well as that of war. They must not therefore be aligned with the classical war film’s stereotypical and archetypal self/other representations.

Ostensibly a war film, \textit{War} adopts several features of the Western. For a mercenary scout, killer and societal outsider cannot be a glorified military hero, especially if he no longer belongs to the army. During the second sequence of the opening credits, Ivan informs audiences that, when he met John in summer 2001, he had been a Chechen captive for 2 months. Later, during his first encounter with Capt. Medvedev, he tells the latter that he had only two weeks left of his military service at the time he was imprisoned. Ivan is throughout the film no conventional soldier but rather a Cooperian scout/mercenary for the British. This fundamentally changes \textit{Brother-2}’s position and representations of the second Chechen war as started by the invasion of Russia through war-bands from the Caucasus region.

And if the war hero’s conventional image is discarded, so are his views and representations of the other. Ivan’s anti-heroic reappraisal of the character of the second Chechen war posits this war, at least, as of implicitly colonial character. Rather than depicting a conventional war about ‘us’ against the barbaric enemy at the gates, \textit{War}’s historically inspired abduction and rescue story at Russia’s frontier belongs only to the fringes of the war genre.

In fact, hardly any of the action involves conventional troops on battle fields. Even the liberators’ flight down-river and retreat into a tower is a far cry from the heroics of tank and infantry brigades depicted in more conventional war films. Rather, Ivan brings his hunting rifle on his adventure trip to the frontier and strikes up a master-servant relationship with one of the natives, Ruslan. His goal is not to defeat and kill his enemies but rather to strike a deal with them and free the two – Russian and British – prisoners of the mountains. Despite their differences, there is mutual respect and shared cultural knowledge between Ivan and Aslan, which is also typical of the Western. Aslan merely wanted to acquire his ransom to aid his fight against the Russian aggressors but, after himself becoming a prisoner of the mountains, he is murdered by John.

\textsuperscript{319} For example, Dmitrii Meshkiev’s \textit{Our Own} (\textit{Svoi}, 2004). See Morris and Torlone (2008: ix-xv).
While the Western’s precise semantics are largely submerged beneath War’s contemporary setting and subject matter, the genre’s thematic and structural impact is considerable. Unlike in the classic war film, none of the main heroes is unequivocally good or bad. There are no clear ‘us versus them’ representations. The natives on Russia’s frontiers are no more or less barbarous than the Russians or British. Ivan and John are deserted and alienated by their nations: neither the Russian, nor the British government, nor NATO free their ‘sons’ from captivity. It makes no sense economically. So, both come to Chechnia as illegal border violators and aggressors, crossing the Wild Western frontier and entering the wilderness in order to rescue two captives from the natives. Aslan does what he knows best and fights against his Russian oppressors, while being separated from, and even in a blood feud with, other Chechen clans. All characters take turns at being savages and captives. The theme of the captive in the wilderness of the ethic other, also prevalent among Westerns, made it easy to blend the Hollywood genre with one of Russia’s key myths: that of ‘the ‘prisoner of the mountains’.

5.5  *Istoriia* and Historically Inspired Narrative: Genre and Intertextuality

Balabanov’s adaptation of the Russian colonial myth of the Caucasus is a response to the perpetuation of this myth by the mainstream media. The myth typically revolves around noble and/or demonized savages, captives and corpses in the military conflict between the colonisers and the colonised. Russian military men are – *pars pro toto* for the Russian nation – depicted as alienated and victimised by both the imperial state and the anti-imperialist resistance. Through their own captivity, they metaphorically represent Russia as a prisoner of the Caucasus Mountains. These often fatherless figures are typically abandoned by the state (and ‘fatherland’). Their suffering mothers represent in similarly figurative fashion Mother Russia.

The most notable Russian intertext in War is Lev Tolstoi’s *Khadzhi Murat*. Like *War*, it is a historically inspired story about Russian imperial endeavours in the Caucasus and resulting Chechen-Russian conflicts. The adaptation of Tolstoi’s work follows similar deployments of Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment* and Gladkov’s *Cement in Brother* and *Brother-2*, respectively. Like its forerunners, *War* reflects

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320 For a detailed discussion of the myth and its use by modern media coverage of the Chechen conflict, see Ram (Ibid.).
321 For such metaphorical treatment, see also *The Prisoner of the Mountains*, Alexander Sokurov’s *Alexandra* (*Aleksandra*, 2007) and Andrei Konchalovskii’s *House of Fools* (*Dom Durakov*, 2003).
more than one intertextual impulse, synthesising generic and narrative aspects of both *Murat* and *Mohicans* into an ‘Eastern’ for the purposes of exploring radically unconventional self/other representations. After portraying post-Soviet Russia as a confused, Raskolnikov-like, neo-noir gangster in *Brother* and a grittily purposeful, Socialist Realist Wild Westerner in *Brother-2*, the trilogy finishes with *War*’s Tolstoian-Cooperian alienated scout-mercenary.

*Khadjzi Murat* is written as an *istoriia* which combines a historical account with story telling. The dual purpose is to entertain readers and to challenge the imperial state by criticizing the Russian militaries’ (mis)conduct towards their Chechen others. In today’s terms it could be said to belong to the fringes of the literary war genre. *War* attains *Murat*’s *istoriia*-mode by combining conventional genres (the war film; the Western) and docudrama. The result is a hybrid that invites multiple readings: a deeply symbolic narrative based on real-life events and characters. Through its double-articulations (fact versus fiction; conventional versus documentary genre; surface versus symbolic narrative), *War* acquires a Tolstoian, double-coded voice which attempts ‘to force the Russian readership [/audiences (FW)] into a new relation to the tribes’. By reflecting the character of *Murat* in that of the very ambiguous Ruslan, the Russian Ivan’s role acquires further critical dimensions in *War*’s assault on the post-Soviet media.

Layton observes that in *‘Hadji Murat... writers are dehumanizers and liars prone to a kind of falsification notably manifested in historiography’*. One particular detail shared by both *War* and *Murat* is the death and disappearance of the soldiers Ivan and Avdeev. In *Murat* it ‘is distorted in an army communiqué illustrative of the falsification of history’. *War* falsifies Ivan’s account with help of the intradiegetically deployed docudrama. As a result, both characters’ final fates remain unclear. The conduct of the army and the state bureaucracy is thus implicitly criticised through the form in which it is presented. The readers/audiences, are invited to express puzzlement and outrage about the treatment of the sons of their fatherland.

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322 Layton (Ibid.).
324 Ibid: 274.
Furthermore, like the character of Murat, who, Layton observes, ‘proves unable to make his voice penetrate the tsarist power structure’, John fails to get through to the British, NATO and Russian leaders. These timewasting bureaucrats politely yet cynically deceive him, never intending to help. As a result, John arrives late at Aslan’s military base, by when Aslan was no longer bound by his word. Hence, Margaret was probably raped. Ivan is deprived of his voice by the Russian state in what Youngblood describes as ‘a scathing indictment of post-Soviet Russian society’. The ex-soldier who served and ‘defended’ his country in the Caucasus is an English-speaking IT and weapons expert. But he is unable to find either work in Russia or support from the authorities. The Russian soldier receives a voice only later, when the docudrama that is War provides a Russian version of the Russo-British colonial mission.

The mission and the ordeals it involved had already been documented, commented upon and released by John as a docudrama in Britain, including criticism of Ivan’s violent behaviour. War develops the theme but indulges neither in embellishments nor in government cover-ups, nor, for that matter, in business-motivated fear-mongering, as probably did John’s book and film My Life in Russia. In so doing War’s intradiegetic docudramamakers acquire ambivalence. On one hand, their recorded reenactments have presumably been deemed ideologically safe by the government. On the other hand, these reenactments present overt falsifications that challenge their own documentary status. Audiences must decide whether War is a dehumanising, nationalist-xenophobic account of the sort criticised in Murat, or whether, like Murat, it redeployes an anti-imperialist istoriia as a means of responding both to John’s profitable self-aggrandizements, and to Russian state brutality in Chechnia.

Thus, War might be said to possess some of the attributes of post-colonial discourse. It refuses to present the Chechen other as a homogenous whole. Nor does it portray individual Chechen characters as flat stereotypes. These characters representing Russia’s other atypically take up considerable screentime, are ambiguous in their statements and behaviour and they develop during the course of the narrative. They present complex socio-historical types rather than flat stereotypes. The classic post-colonial subject seeks a hybrid identity in response to

prior representations of him/her as a ‘pure’ homogenous. *War* embraces hybridity and ambiguity on every level. Through the Russian film *War*, the post-colonial subject possesses a voice in the dominant discourse and acts. For it is the Chechen, Ruslan, who convinces Ivan to attack Aslan’s sleeping camp. It is also Ruslan’s witness account that provides the final stumbling block for Ivan. Moreover, in Aslan’s lecture to Ivan about the character of the Russian-Chechen war and its participant fighters, Balabanov, as John Hope observes, ‘strips his Chechens of any trace of romantic appeal [and] gives us a provocative look at [Aslan’s] views’. The other’s voice is thus accorded a heterogeneity, power and a complexity split across the non-religious separatist-freedom fighter Aslan who observes local customs more than Sharia law, and the Muslim, yet Moscow-oriented, shepherd Ruslan.

In *War*, new-found post-colonial identities (e.g. Ruslan’s son studying in Moscow), similarly to self-representations of the imperialist masters, are heterogeneous, unstable, impure and constantly struggling with themselves in a continual and mutual displacement of features, roles and sub-identities. The ambiguous characters of Ruslan and Aslan represent opposing yet overlapping aspects of Chechnia’s heterogeneous culture, challenging those media stereotypes of a homogenous Muslim enemy which have aligned Russia with its former Cold War adversaries.

Despite his loud claims to be a Muslim believer, Aslan does not pray. His oath to Ivan made before Allah and Ruslan amounts to little. John, moreover, has already broken his agreement with the warlord by his late arrival and thus endangered Margaret’s health and safety. Ruslan in turn does not like war but incites Ivan to attack. He wishes for his son to study politics in Moscow. Despite, or rather because of, being treated like a slave by Ivan, Ruslan supports him. He has no qualms about killing other Chechens and gleefully swears at his enemy and captive, Aslan, before the latter is murdered by John. After being turned into a prisoner of the Caucasus and then a corpse, the dead Aslan even loses an ear to Ruslan. Ruslan takes this trophy as Cooper’s Indians and colonial masters took scalps. There are savages, captives and corpses on all sides.

Aslan is represented as John’s and Ruslan’s rather than Ivan’s adversary. *War* is this grizzled, small-time Chechen chieftain’s livelihood. But, as the film explicitly

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328 Hope (Ibid: 67).
acknowledges, he represents only a small faction of Chechens. He has little resemblance to the historical freedom fighter, enjoying the benefits of being a Russian citizen, of Russian state benefits, and of property and businesses in some of Russia’s most important cities. The sheep-shepherd metaphor, which he uses in his lecture to Ivan, indicates a thinking mind and his comment about innocent Russian boys being led to their slaughter is hardly that of a brutal fanatic. Nor is he a religious fundamentalist, as Hope noted. Despite Aslan’s purported religious motivation (‘I’ll purge [my land] of unbelieving dogs!’), a lingering shot shows him watch his Muslim soldiers’ evening prayer through the window from within his house. Significantly, while his praying soldiers face the centre of the Muslim world, Aslan, during a speech resounding with claims for his true Islamic believes, sits with his back to Mekka, with Ivan facing him. Aslan is also unexpectedly generous. He releases Ivan for free, however, warning him: ‘Don’t come back again! I won’t let you go a second time.’ (‘Bol’she ne prikhodi! Vtoroi raz ne otpushchu.’). Within the context of Russia’s two Chechen wars, this statement assumes symbolic character.

Ruslan equally defies the stereotype of the savage, war-mongering barbarian. He is proud to be a peaceful shepherd and full of contempt for war: ‘Not all Chechens can tend a flock, but anybody can fire a gun.’ (‘Ne vsiaki chechen umeet baranov pasti, no vsiaki umeet streliat’.’). But to complicate matters, he then cuts off the dead Aslan’s ear. To further muddy the waters, the shepherd Ruslan accepts payment from Ivan and backstabs him afterwards in court, while Aslan, however cruel, is – in non-religious matters – a man of his word. Some might think that this, along with Ruslan’s aspirations for his son to enter politics, and Ruslan’s hate-inspired words denouncing Aslan as a liar, confirm Ruslan’s ‘treacherous’ Chechen character. And this view has a point, as Ivan decides to attack Aslan’s camp only after being urged on by Ruslan’s fearful diatribe, in which he predicts Aslan’s deadly treachery. Yet the film also makes clear that it was circumstances which forced an unwilling Ruslan into participation in the Chechen-Russian conflict, and in appearing proudly with his son, the future politician, in Moscow at the end of the film, he merely fulfils, Murat’s, ‘dreams of self-aggrandizement through political power’. Balabanov’s ‘others’ inconveniently refuse to conform to recognisable ethno-cultural templates.
All of War’s main characters offer support for Homi Bhabha's observation that modern identities exist in more than one form and are defined by hybridity. The self resides in several places not just an inside opposed by its outside, is ambivalent and can be symbolised by the Roman god Janus. Thus, Ivan has gone half-native, is both accepted as an abrek-like mountain warrior by Aslan and marginalized by his own state and people. He initially survives through his knowledge of Chechen culture but eventually lets himself down by trusting a Chechen ‘real-politician’ and a British businessman. Ivan speaks English, understands Chechen culture, ridicules his Siberian friends’ interest in Moscow politics and fumbles over his motivations as to why he volunteered to go back into Chechnia. Ruslan and Aslan are bilingual and betray indecisiveness in their decision making. Aslan admits to being unable to explain why he let Ivan go after his first engagement in Chechnia. Ruslan is Ivan’s captive but also his own Chechen compatriot’s mortal enemy. After causing the attack on other Russian citizens (the Chechens in Aslan's camp), this Chechen ironically fulfils his Russian civic duty and turns on Ivan in the Russian court, which in turn condemns Ivan for killing Chechens. Why the court has not also convicted Ruslan remains unexplained. John follows a similarly contradictory trajectory from sophisticated western urbanite via a useless, whining dud into a driven negotiator, border violator, murderer and commercially successful ‘expert’ on ‘life in Russia’. The two losers are the military men Ivan and Aslan. The two winners are the actor and filmmaker John, who turns his adventures and Margaret’s ordeals into profit, and the shrewd Ruslan, whose grass-roots manipulations of Ivan and, presumably, the Russian court ensure that his son can become a politician. War critically deconstructs the four arms of the modern state: the army, the media, big business and politics.

One of Ivan’s redeeming features is his antagonism to needless conflict. Thus, he attempts to impress upon John that one needs to think before starting a war: ‘No think at war, John! Think before war!’ But his subsequent actions (and words) are not at one with his convictions. For, in his confusion, he admits that working for John was a mistake and the fate he suffers confirm this. Despite his admiration for Capt. Medvedev, he (and his country) might have been better off without starting

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their ‘second Chechen war’ to free the ‘prisoners of the mountains’. For without their intervention, Capt. Medvedev (‘the Russian Bear’) would have died in the mountains and with him, perhaps, the deadly romantic myth at the root of the very attitudes leading to Russo-Chechen conflict.

5.6 The Ending

The film appears to end on a moderately happy note. John and Margaret return to England, with John ‘raking it in’ and Margaret having experienced ‘true love’. Ruslan lives contentedly in Moscow, where his son is studying politics. Even Ivan at least receives public exposure and – who knows? – may eventually be released, if he is still alive and not an enacted figure.

But appearances are deceiving. Like its two forerunners, War closes nothing but its frame narrative. On a high plateau in front of the Caucasus Mountains, which are lit by the sinking sun, Ivan sits down next to Ruslan, accompanied by the sound of Butusov’s famous song, My Star (Moia Zvezda). In reference to Bodrov’s Prisoner’s ending, two grounded, motionless gunships pose behind them. Synchronised with the melancholic Moia Zvezda, Ivan gives Ruslan $2000 for his services and remarks ironically: ‘Your bonus from NATO. For your part in the fight against international terrorism’ (‘Premiia tvoia ot NATO. Za bor’bu tvoiu protiv mezdunarodnogo terrorizma.’). Ruslan still accepts the involvement of the NATO as a fact. Then Ivan’s final voice-over commences and the ‘happy ending’ unravels still further, taking a meta-textual turn.

While the camera shows the border-violator and murderer, John, bragging about his deeds in front of Russian soldiers, the narrator’s voice informs us that the Englishman became famous for his film and book My Life in Russia. Having previously announced in London to his friends, ‘… it ain’t ENGLAND there, mate! It’s RUSSIA!’ John, was, even after his experiences, still unwilling to distinguish the two cultures. For the West, Chechnia seems unequivocally to belong to Russia according to War’s docu-representation. (This is reminiscent of Balabanov’s satirical take on homogenising Western attitudes to Russia in Brother-2, when in answer to Lisa’s question ‘Are you gangsters?’, Dasha replies ‘No we are Russians’).

Next, referring to footage of the killing of ‘the old man and his kid at Aslan’s base’ and the paramilitaries in the Jeep, the narrator asks himself ‘When did he [John
(FW)] film all that?’ (‘Kogda on uspel sniat?’). For these episodes were not shown by ‘John’s’ video footage and thus must have been re-enacted by the docudrama. John had been unable to make a complete film of his adventures in ‘Russia’ and must have re-created them, as did later the Russian docu-drama filmmakers. The question presents a meta-narrative technique signalling the entire docudrama’s unreliable double-coding and mode of representation.

Capt. Medvedev is now free and thanks to Ivan’s (John’s/the West’s) blood money his back, which was nearly broken in the Caucasus, has been healed. He is the only person supporting Ivan while he is on remand. According to the docudrama, Ivan is not yet conclusively imprisoned and, in his guise as narrator, does not believe that this will happen: ‘I don’t think they’ll put me away, but who the fuck knows?’ (‘Dumaiu, ne posadiat, khotia khren tol’ko znaet?’). But because of the film’s double-coding and narrative ambiguities, it is unclear whether the narrator is, in fact, Ivan or somebody enacting him.

The narrator, (called) Ivan, finishes with a mockery of Ruslan’s interest in Moscow and Putin’s legal reforms, which seem unimportant to him but are headlines in the Russian news. He claims never to have seen John’s film. A slow fade-to-black stops for a brief moment to impress the still sunlit images of the darkening and then black outlines of Ivan, Ruslan and the two grounded Russian gunships. Butusov’s sad lyrics resonate as the Russian answer to Mutsuraev’s purposeful nasheed at the beginning of the film and together they frame this complex story of intermingled Chechen-Russian self- and otherhood. The ending, however, remains open. There is no explicit knowledge of Ivan’s own fate, other than the fact of Balabanov’s (fictional) film. Russian military forces remain in the Caucasus.

5.7 Conclusion

The objective was to scrutinise representations of the post-Soviet Russian self and its others in Balabanov’s War by focusing on the film’s deployment of genre. I have argued that both the film’s use of docudrama and its blend of the war and Western genres (Eastern) are attributable to its self-conscious deployment of literary and wider media intertextuality. The ‘knowing’ deployment of meta-cinematic/narrative documentary techniques is designed to distance the viewer from the seemingly authoritative voice of the narrator. The Wild Western anti-hero struggles with the
national war hero. *War* thus represents a second sequel to *Brother*, characterised by similar hybridity, whilst also further developing Balabanov’s deployment of conventional genres for his self-conscious self/other representations.

Balabanov’s third ‘Zeitgeist movie’, I have suggested, blurs and deconstructs the boundaries between fictional genre and historical documentary films. Its purpose in doing so was to continue reaching a wider audience and to expose them to self-consciously controversial counter-cultural representations. These, I have argued, challenged post-Soviet and other national mainstream media articulations of Russian national selfhood during the crisis of the second Chechen war. This includes the issue of Russian-Western alignment in a war against the Muslim world, which the mainstream media conveniently label a ‘war against terror’.

*War*’s Eastern-version of the Western both expressed itself through the voice of its dominant other, America, and simultaneously excised that other, particularly on the level of characterisation. As we already saw with *Brother-2*, America ceased to be Russia’s dominant other at around the turn of the last century. Definitions of the Russian self were now constructed with reference to the West European other. Nonetheless, the film’s references to the globally ubiquitous NATO, confirm that there still exists, albeit in diminished, compromised form, a pan-Western other dominated by America.

To achieve its aim, *War* uses a number of double-articulations which align it in part with those of Tolstoy’s *Khazhi Murat*’s. This code of representation is generically related to the docudrama in that it tells a historically inspired fictional tale. Such double-coding was found on four levels; the generic level (‘factual’ documentary versus ‘fictional’ film); the superordinate fictional level of the conventional genre (the war and the Western combined as ‘Eastern’); the intertextual influences of *Murat* and *Mohicans* (both informing the conventional genres and the colonial theme); and the story’s surface and symbolic narrative levels.

Within the broader, allegorical framework, the mythological Russian war hero – traceable to the *bogatyr* figure of the *bylina* already invoked (and undermined) in *Brother* and *Brother-2* – is depicted as a hybrid of the mercenary, the vigilante, and the scout, in the service of the West. Both the Russian and Chechen war anti-heroes are denied glorious Romantic deaths. Ivan uses the same guerrilla tactics as his forerunner, Danila, and is similarly unable to protect a woman,
Margaret, from abuse. The bound and defenceless Aslan is murdered by John and has his ear cut off by Ruslan. Familiar heroic mythologisations of the ‘glorious’ past of the Russian army and Romanticisations of the abrek are undercut. Likewise, nearly all representations of the mythic Russian family are negative: girlfriends do not get married; parents get divorced; mothers, wives and daughters live alone in constant fear for their male loved-one’s lives.

My argument clearly challenges War’s overwhelmingly xenophobic-populist readings. Nationalist appropriations of the film fail to acknowledge tensions and contradictions in the role and status of Ivan, both as character, and as the docudrama’s narrator. Admiration for Ivan’s rescue of the injured Capt. Medvedev is overshadowed by the fact that this action is an ambiguous and controversial representation of the Russian state’s perpetuation of the Chechen conflict or, better, its representations in Russia’s mainstream media. Depictions of Ivan as an alienated, marginalised and imprisoned character, who ridicules Putin and his yea-sayers among the population, no doubt reflect a critical disillusionment with the Putin government and with mainstream media representations of an ill-defined war. Xenophobic statements are attributed to all the main characters, regardless of their ethnicity. They must, however, be seen within the context of the film’s double-voiced mode of representation and, as I argued in previous chapters, cannot be accorded privileged status.

Like Murat and Mohicans, War engages with colonial discourse. War’s anti-colonial voice differs from that of Murat in its critical commentary on all war participants, rather than merely on Russian anti-Chechen brutality. It differs from Mohicans by critically questioning binary colonial representations. Neither the Chechens nor the British characters are subjected to stereotyping and all the main characters are prisoners and savages at some point. Aslan and possibly Ivan turn into corpses. Both Ruslan’s and John’s characters develop alongside Ivan’s. The Chechens are like the British and the Russians represented as a heterogeneous group. Unlike Checkpoint, War does not represent an incomprehensible Chechen ‘nature’ pertaining to a homogenous ethnic identity. It rather shows Russian and Chechen fates as ambiguously intertwined yet (finally) bound for separation, as reflected in the rationale for the separation of Ivan’s parents: ‘Remember son: ‘If you fall out of love, walk away’ (‘Zapomni syn: ‘Razliubil – ukhodi’). The Chechen war is a civil, and thus senseless, war, since, for Balabanov (though clearly not for Russia), both
parts should have the option of separation, as in a civil marriage. This is, nonetheless not the end of the relationship, as Ruslan’s move to Moscow indicates. Despite the film’s implicit criticism of Ruslan’s leaning towards politics and backstabbing of Ivan, there also seems to be some hope expressed in his son’s future profession of a politician.

Contrary to Bodrov’s *Prisoner*, but like Konchalovskii’s *Fools*, *War* counters mainstream cinema’s tendency to disambiguate historical complexities and naturalise dominant myths. It self-critically exposes the corruptive character of the Chechen conflict on post-Soviet Russian society and deconstructs the Romantic myth of the Caucasus. The Russian-Chechen and Russian/Western-Muslim conflict is not represented as a conventional war. This war is not defined by ‘glorious deeds’ on open battlefields but rather by ambushes, brutality and the money motive. *War’s* counter-political criticism and existential voice resembles *Murat’s* rather than that of other literary influences, which more often than not romanticise the Caucasus and Russian-Chechen conflicts. *War’s* evident polemic with *Prisoner* and *Checkpoint* challenges their slip into colonial idealisations and articulations of unbridgeable cultural divides, respectively.

*War’s* subversions take place along ‘vertical’ (intra-cultural) as well as ‘horizontal’ (cross-cultural) axes. Like its forerunners, *Brother* and *Brother-2*, *War* aims at targets which are both global and national: corrupt institutions, criminal leaders, dissembling mainstream media outlets, governments and other elites, drug dealers, and the waging of war for the profit motive. It develops a clear line of cinematic and narrative argumentation from its two forerunners. It sides with the common people, regardless of ethnicity and nationality. It opposes war, bloodshed, xenophobia, and careless government officials.

In *War*, Russia cooperates with the West, without being conjoined to it. Despite sharing a common Muslim foe, the two temporary allies maintain a cool distance. Exchange and transit are still rather one-sided, with the urbanite John moving freely to and fro, and the provincial Ivan enjoying little access to the West. While *War* criticises John’s materialism, it also underlines his development into a tough, gritty frontiersman anti-hero. His materialism, moreover, is balanced by Ivan’s/Russia’s willingness to sell himself/itself as a mercenary against ‘their’ Muslim other. At various points the film even casts doubt on the whole notion of the
Muslim as Russia’s other, deploying the Russia-oriented Ruslan to provide a Eurasian bridge between East and West. This ideological-geopolitical identity is reflected on the film’s generic plane through its transformation from Western into ‘Eastern’.

As Anemone (2008) argues, War presents the third part of Balabanov’s trilogy, although the motif of the vigilante that unites the three films can only begin to describe the specificities of their respective anti-heroes and self/other representations. To complete its rendition of Russia’s strenuous efforts to forge a new identity for itself via its shifting relationships with its multiple others, however, the meta-narrative that is Balabanov’s oeuvre will require two further Zeitgeist films. These form the subjects of my final two chapters.
Chapter 6: *Dead Man’s Bluff* (Zhmurki, 2005)

Neo-Noir Gangland Comic Strip Subversions of ‘The Gangster as Tragic Hero’

6.1 Introduction

With *Dead Man’s Bluff* Aleksei Balabanov released a film that continued to refract the approach of his ‘mercenary/vigilante trilogy’ to post-Soviet Russia’s historical context through the prism of genre. It deploys a blend of popular and classic genres not only for the purpose of entertainment, but also in order to challenge conventional self/other representations. To achieve the latter goal, *Dead Man’s Bluff* parodies *Brother* and *Brother-2*, also introducing new ideas. These result from *Dead Man’s Bluff’s* deepening of the intra- and intercultural dialogues, which Balabanov’s earlier films had initiated with their Russian and Western others. To intensify its dialogue with Egor Konchalovskii’s populist gangster-boevik *Antikiller* (2002) and Pavel Lungin’s ‘historical’ gangster film *Tycoon* (*Oligarkh*, 2002), *Dead Man’s Bluff* adapts the comic-book mode of presentation, which the American director Quentin Tarantino had deployed in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1 & 2* (2003 & 2004).

*Dead Man’s Bluff* responds to Konchalovskii’s pro-government, nationalist depictions of a ‘wannabe’-pacifist, yet heroic, He-man figure, with its ultra-violent, comic-book super-antiheroes. The film also complements *Tycoon* by excluding the rise of the Russian tycoons from its representations.

While *Antikiller*’s title focuses, in a somewhat populist way, on the invincible Russian hero, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s sarcastic and ambiguous title includes both gangster and civilian death casualties (*zhmurok* – coll. for *pokoinik/deceased/corpse*) and the survivors of the chaotic gangland war shenanigans of *Dead Man’s Bluff* (*igrat’ v zhmurki*). The game, and thus metaphorically Russia’s gang wars, are defined by randomness and blind luck. ‘The blind’, Vadim Rudnev observes, ‘is looking for [and trying to become (FW)] the sighted, the dead is looking for the living [trying to ‘become alive’ (FW)]’.333 *Dead Man’s Bluff*, however, makes it clear that the lucky survivors of the game of death do not attain another, higher state of existence. In contrast to the step-by-step development and final victory of *Antikiller*’s heroes, which are typical of the genre,

Dead Man’s Bluff’s ‘blind’ and ‘dead’ Russian souls remain ‘blind’ and ‘dead’, even if they wear business suits in 2005.

With Dead Man’s Bluff, Balabanov intervened in a post-Soviet Russian cinematic debate that deployed the gangster genre to represent Russia’s ruthless transition to a market society in the 1990s. It presents an example of Balabanov’s dialogue with his own work, audiences and emulators, and it deploys parody for its genre defining attempt to distance itself from Brother, Brother-2, and other, earlier post-Soviet gangster movies. It assails the xenophobic and racist attitudes of those films’ anti-heroes. More importantly, it targets their audiences’ uncritical endorsement of such attitudes. Brother’s Danila and the gangster-heroes of Antikiller are turned into tragicomic fools and ‘dead souls’, following the grotesque model of Brother-2’s Viktor, and Tycoon’s main character, Platon, at the peak of his criminal trajectory. The manifestation of racism, sexism and blood-spilling, which belong to, and are permitted by, socio-critical genres such as neo-noir and satire, are accorded deliberately absurd proportions in Dead Man’s Bluff.

The tragicomedy, which results from Dead Man’s Bluff’s blend of the tragic gangster genre with black comedy, offers no positive characters in its representations of Russia’s internal others. The criminals – whether a policeman, a lawyer, a doctor, an ex-schoolmaster or an ex-Komsomol member – are depicted as the only actors in a post-Soviet Russia still influenced by the living ghosts of the Soviet past. Dead Man’s Bluff, like Antikiller, shifts its narrative focus entirely to Russia’s internal others and largely refrains from explicit dealings with external others in its choice of characters.

Yet Balabanov’s dialogue with the Western other was continued by proxy on the levels of genre, intertextuality and mise-en-scène, as well as via his depictions of broader Russian attitudes to the West. Dead Man’s Bluff developed Balabanov’s intercultural dialogue with its American other by deploying the comic-book filmmaking techniques of Quentin Tarantino. This, in turn, fed back into Balabanov’s intracultural dialogue with what could ideologically be regarded as the film’s cinematic self (Tycoon) and other (Antikiller).
Dead Man’s Bluff is, nonetheless, a commercial (kassovyi) ‘genre film’ aimed at a broad audience. The general consensus among most Russian critics was that Dead Man’s Bluff was Balabanov’s weakest genre film to date. It was accused of more or less failing to be funny, not least because of its ‘crude plot’ and unpleasant, primitive excesses. Zara Abdulaeva finds the film’s ending superfluous. Stanislav Zel’venskii describes Dead Man’s Bluff as ‘cynical retro trash’. Marina Drozdova, rather dubiously, gives the film its due by defining the main characters as ‘tragic figures’. Others, however, clearly recognised the film to be a black comedy. Viktor Toporov perceives the figure of the provincial gangster boss as a Zombie-Vampire blend. Armen Medvedev regards the film as “a parody of a whole period of our [Russian (FW)] cinema’. But, as one would expect of film reviews, none of these more nuanced readings was based on an analytical approach with a clearly delineated methodology. Meanwhile, academic film specialists in the West, whilst acknowledging its comic intentions, largely bypassed Balabanov’s film because of its commercialism. Thus, Seckler’s Kinokultura review is in tune with the more critical opinions of her Russian colleagues, as she criticises the film for its poor execution of the comedy genre, as well as for its commercialism, racism, nationalism and sexism. Condee’s contribution is limited to two observations about Dead Man’s Bluff being an outlet for ‘Balabanov’s nationalism’ and its characters’ racist slurs ‘a deliciously egregious violation of Hollywood norms’. Whilst following the general consensus, Hashamova acknowledges that Dead Man’s Bluff ‘exposes the stupidity and cruelty of the criminal world’. She omits, however, to include the film in her examination of Russian cinematic imaginings of the West.

Brandon provides a useful point of departure for this chapter by linking the “’history” film’ Dead Man’s Bluff with Gilles Lipovetsky’s theory of

340 Ibid.
342 Condee (2009: 233). Here Condee equates character statements with the filmmakers views.
343 Ibid.
hypermodernity, which describes ‘a time [after post-modernity] where the primary
concepts of modernity are taken to their extreme conclusions.’
Brandon observes that the ‘conditions Lipovetsky described were already manifested in... “Brother”’. He continues to note that *Dead Man’s Bluff* is the film most similar to *Brother* in its artistic depictions of hypermodern times. The latter term, according to him, ‘precisely [defines] the conditions in Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union’. Indeed, in a metacinematic, neo-noir cutback to the autumn of 1995, *Dead Man’s Bluff* inflects its nihilistic, hypermodern presentations with laughter directed at Russia’s fledgling gangster culture of the 1990s, when new, influential socio-economic roles, political positions and wealth were up for grabs by the socially mobile.

Deploying a genre hybrid of ‘neo-noir/black gangster comedy’ and comic representations à la Tarantino, *Dead Man’s Bluff* plots the ludicrous rise of some of Russia’s surviving gangsters to the top of Moscow’s political elites. By omitting the normally obligatory fall of the gangsters, *Dead Man’s Bluff*, like *Tycoon*, ‘violates’, the rules of the genre in order to achieve its ‘laugher with a lash’. The film’s parodic farce is an example of Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter ‘from below’ and thus represents popular criticism of the state’s high and mighty in 2005. But herein also lies *Dead Man's Bluff’s* pessimism, as the old order is restored at the end of the carnival, and the deposed ‘king’ is recrowned.

*Dead Man’s Bluff* differs crucially from its forerunners in that it does not reflect any new advancement in post-Soviet Russian society, but rather depicts the return of the old order in a new guise. The film’s cutback to the past implies restoration and thus the onset of contemporary Russian stagnation. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s flashback to the 1990s puts a corrective period in front of *Brother*’s openly ambiguous ending and thus includes in its ‘reply’ also *Brother-2*, the satiric ending of which presented the final success of the New Russian gangster/frontiersman, Danila. The final full stop in Balabanov’s exploration of post-Soviet Russian selfhood will come only with his next film, *It Doesn’t Hurt*. Before the appearance

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345 Brandon (Ibid: 16-17).
348 Taken from the title of Andrew Horton’s, ed. (1993), *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
of that melodrama, *Dead Man’s Bluff* gives viewers a chance to laugh heartily, and possibly derisively, not least about themselves.

As in the previous chapters, an initial synopsis of the film will facilitate an understanding of the subsequent discussion. It will be followed by an outline of the workings and implications of *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s genre hybridity. Next, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s intertextual relationship to the gangster-*boevik*, *Antikiller*, and Sergei Soloviev’s satirical late-Soviet gangster punk film, *Assa* (1987), will be examined with particular attention to their opposing and overlapping self/other representations. This will be followed by a close analysis of the way in which the film’s opening sequence signals *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s genre, theme and mode of representation. I conclude by showing how *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s characters function as neo-noir, comic superantiheroes.

### 6.2 Synopsis

A university lecture in 2005 has as its topic how Russian criminals of the mid-1990s acquired their start-up capital to join Russia’s political elites. The action cuts back to the mid-1990s, where, in a morgue full of bodies, a pathologist, ‘Topsman/Executioner’ (*palach*), is torturing a gagged(!) victim to ‘make him speak’. They are both shot by a corrupt policeman, Stepan (Viktor Sukhorukov).

In their provincial Russian town, the cruel gangster kingpin and former communist schoolmaster, Sergei Mikhailovich (Nikita Mikhalkov), employs a bunch of equally sadistic ex-Komsomol349 idiots. His two enforcers are the tough, dim-witted Simon/Semion (Dmitri Diuzhev), and Mikhailovich’s chicken-hearted namesake, Sergei (Aleksei Panin). Simon has a penchant for everything western. Sergei ‘jr.’ is ostensibly a practising Russian Orthodox believer, who crosses himself in front of every Orthodox Church that appears in the film. Mikhailovich’s bodyguard is a mentally challenged member of the OMON.350 He adores his son and treats his wife like a servant.

Sergei and Simon cross the brutal landscape of the provincial Russian town, zipping from one location to another in their black BMW. First they kill an obstinate

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349 The Communist Union of Youth, usually known as Komsomol, a syllabic abbreviation from the Russian Kommunisticheskii Soiuz Molodiozhi.
350 OMON is the acronym for *Otriad Militii Osobogo Naznachenia* (a special police force unit), a (Soviet) Russian special militia force controlled by the Ministry for Internal Affairs.
criminal, nicknamed ‘The Doctor’ (Aleksei Serebriakov). He refines drugs and does not want to pay protection money. Mikhailovich’s trigger-happy minions, however, were not supposed to kill the very sheep their master wanted to fleece.

Mikhailovich threatens to whip his ‘schoolboys’ (shkol’niki), as he calls them. But Simon tells him that he still wants to kill his own father because he was himself whipped as a boy and the old gangster desists. Simon and Sergei relax in a billiard bar, where they are served by Katia, whom Simon fancies and calls Кэт/Cat. Mikhailovich orders them to buy a case of heroin from a Jewish lawyer.

The drug deal is botched. The pair have been set up by Stepan, who learned of the deal after killing ‘The Executioner’. Stepan wants to obtain the money and employs for the ambush a triad of immature dimwits: Koron, ‘The Crowned’ (Sergei Makovetskii), Baklazhan, ‘The Aubergine’, also known as the ‘Ethiopian’ (Grigorii Siiatvinda351), and Bala, ‘The Windbag’ (Anatolii Zhuravlev352). They bungle the operation and retrieve the suitcase with heroin instead of the one with the money. The heist has gone bad for both gangs.

Mikhailovich warns Simon and Sergei that continued failure could cost them their lives. He sends them after Stepan, whom he suspects. The policeman has also employed Mozg, ‘The Brain’ (Garik Sukachev), and his gang to get rid of the three dimwits and save their commission. Charged with recovering the stash of heroin, Simon and Sergei delightedly torture and eventually execute Stepan, after retrieving the heroin. They capture Koron & Co. and kill ‘the Brain’ and his minions. Gleefully, they spare neither bullets nor lives to achieve their goal and turn the turf war into an ultra-violent massacre with collateral ‘civilian’ damage.

Sergei ‘defeats’ Koron and Bala in a game of Russian roulette. But he is shot in the stomach by Baklazhan, who is then killed by Simon. Surrounded by corpses, Sergei survives painful surgery at the hands of a young cocaine-sniffing punk. He decides not to return the heroin to Mikhailovich but rather use it to buy himself a place among Moscow’s political elites. The idea came from Kaban, ‘The Boar’ (Iurii Stepanov), a former provincial gangster colleague, who has become a big shot in Moscow’s bureaucracy.

351 He is a Russian film and theatre actor, whose father is from Zambia.
352 He already played the part of a gangster in Brother.
The action returns to Moscow in 2005. It shows the two gangsters in their office with a view of the Kremlin and St. Basil’s Cathedral. They have bought their way into Moscow’s political elites with the suitcase full of heroin. Sergei has become a corrupt member of the Duma (the Russian parliament) and reneged on his promise to build a new church. Simon still hates blacks, is bored, plays with knives and misses the old action-packed days. Kat/Cat continues to serve them. Mikhailovich and his son work as their receptionist and secretary.

6.3 Neo-Noir/Black Gangster Comedy and Comic Strip

While Dead Man’s Bluff’s screen-narrative punishes most evil-doers, the ironic happy/tragic ending rewards those who came out on top of the gory turf war of the 1990s. Only the sociopathic Simon ‘suffers’ boredom, yearning for the old days of action. The gangster demonstrates that he has not changed, despite his lofty position and his suit (a mark of his successful membership of modern society). A blend of carnivalesque ‘laughter from below’ and the black ‘lash’ of neo-noir comedy arouses mocking and, among some audiences, even cynical, laughter.

Dead Man’s Bluff depicts the rise of the gangster in Russia. Iconographically, the film deploys the black BMW as the new Russian version of the archetypal gangster car, and a symbol of the gangster’s rise in the modern city. The representation of provincial criminals reflects the gangster genre’s focus on the lure of the city. Following the classical gangster’s trajectory they ‘work’ their way up to, and within, the city. Moscow promises power and glamour. The classical gangster’s criminal dominance of the city, however, extends in its Russian adaptation to the whole country. Moscow is not just a crime capital like Chicago but it is also the hub of Russia: Moscow’s elites are also Russia’s. Rather than contriving to overtake and eliminate their boss and former schoolmaster, the two gangsters chance upon an opportunity and take him along in the end. Deglamourising their ‘profession’, they turn into fully-fledged gangsters only once they are well established in the city. This is shown iconographically by their suits, and thematically through the displacement of their boss. Other conventional iconographic details are included: there are

handguns, a stash of cash, heroin (as the modern substitute for moonshine), the settings of a bar and billiard room with a blond waitress, dirty mean streets and the oedipal killing of a policeman. The significance of clothes is underlined. Bosses wear red jackets (Mikhailovich, Kaban and Koron). Lieutenants wear a red collar (Sergei). Proper gangsters wear suits.

Significantly, the film cuts out the standard gangsters’ ‘tragic fall’ and thus crucially deviates from the genre through its embrace of a brand of farcical, neo-noir crime comedy already apparent in nascent form in Brother. The film’s blend of neo-noir mode and black comedy further develop Brother’s chernukha style (all genres/modes share the attribute ‘black’). The provincial gangster boss’s wife and the waitress Kэt/Cat, for example, are reduced to being mere backdrops in a male-dominated society, serving in the homes, bars and offices of their criminal masters. The oedipal Simon suffers from a serious father-son complex because of the child abuse the psychotic killer had suffered and returns the favour against other male characters with a farcical vengeance. Neo-noir invocations of a depressive mood and focus on destructive family relations are foregrounded via their clash with the farcical depictions. Neo-noir’s depictions of drifting and disturbed criminals and societal corruption are matched by the genre’s depressive mood, idiosyncratic cinematography and salient themes. Neo-noir undercuts the image of the larger-than-life anti-heroic gangster. It lacks a strict iconography and genre-typical plot. Psychopathic neo-noir criminals do not, like classical gangsters, sprout from vilified marginal groups. They are not outsiders but rather a natural part of ‘society proper’. The tongue-in-cheek neo-noir style nonetheless does not shy away from depicting the ‘reality’ and all-pervasiveness of crime, as well as the corrupted and disturbed minds of criminals. Among the deconstructed and degrified mythical figures featured in neo-noir are usually the driven, glamorous gangster, the hard-working successful businessman, the honest and helpful state bureaucrat, the incorruptible hardboiled detective, and other socially mobile representatives of successful mainstream society. Neo-noir’s naturalistic representations of sex and shocking violence, gory details and heaps of corpses are conventionally blended with an unhealthy dose of racism, sexism and nihilism. Neo-noir represents uncertainty. The apparently ‘unrelated nature of... multiple characters’ goes together with neo-

354 Seckler (2005) notes that ‘the iconic raspberry-colored sports coat [was] a hallmark of New Russian wealth in the mid-1990s’.
355 Desser (Ibid: 531).
noir’s ‘skewed chronologies [and] multiple storylines’. Its deconstruction of the romantic figure of the classical gangster, and of his glamour and judgement also destroys one of society’s main myths. Existential, self-critical re/presentations trace the roots of, and hold a mirror to the face of, rather than whitewash, the national self.

*Dead Man’s Bluff* combines neo-noir’s ‘blackness’ with comical depictions of the rise of a tragic gangster. It is tragic because of its depictions of the frequently violent developments that Russian society underwent during the 1990s only to end up being ruled – ironically – by the lucky, yet undeserving, survivors of murderous turf wars. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s black comedy is funny only if we accept that comedy is simply tragedy happening to somebody else. By turning the gangster genre on its head, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s story of the 1990s makes Russian audiences the butt of its humour. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s black tragicomedy, whose characters regularly make mistakes, is linked to satire through its farcical mode. Horton observes that there are many films ‘that would not be judged “satires” *per se* [although they are] permeated with satiric irony’. The circle of classical genres closes as tragedy, via its connections with satire, mutates first into black comedy and then into farce (the very antithesis of tragedy).

Farce narrative, when tinged with the light touch of satire, depends on skilfully exploited situations rather than on the development of characters. It is thus well suited to the similarly situation-based narratives characteristic of neo-noir. Despite changes in time, locations and positions, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s characters do not develop. In carnivalesque manner, Moscow’s gangsters remain provincial criminals, even if they are now clad in expensive suits. The old order has been re-established through the ex-Komsomol criminal’s rise to the top. Whether one regards the ending as a sarcastic depiction of the Russian self or not, it does have tragic implications for the country and people. The resulting genre conflict between neo-noir gangster comedy and comic-cartoon caricature inflects the film’s depiction of unpunished and rewarded violence with a sense of satirical laughter. *Dead Man’s Bluff*, however, is neither a first-person nor a classical Menippean satire. In *Brother-2*, Danila serves as an intratextual satirist and as the paladin-protector of an/his ‘unquestionable’ moral good. He launches increasingly violent attacks against unambiguously vicious evil, even if he eventually ‘becomes what he beheld’. There

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is no such actively satirical force within *Dead Man’s Bluff*, which carries out its satirical mission entirely ‘from without’.

*Dead Man’s Bluff* provides an example of Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter ‘from below’, receiving its satirical energy from popular criticism of contemporary Russian political elites. Laughter, however, is often only a momentary expression of power stemming from the release of tension born out of fear. In his Bakhtinian approach to satire, Horton observes that ‘carnivalesque satire and laughter is a popular, folk laughter of the people, by the people, for the people, and is, in the spirit of carnival, a sanctioned, liberating attack on all authority’.\(^{358}\) Laughter is thus a momentarily liberating tool of empowerment and ‘a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically’.\(^{359}\) Such laughter is facilitated by the caricatured, and politically satirised, representation of *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s comic characters.

It is widely recognised that comic strips typically tell action-adventure stories that hold a distorted mirror to society for the purpose of political and social commentary. All of *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s main characters are farcical caricatures and engage in situational (their actions) and verbal (their speech) comedy, which becomes openly satirical, i.e. socially critical, at the very end of the film. While it is evidently not an animation, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s use of ex-Komsomol, boy-scout-like caricatures serves just this critical purpose in its farcical representation of the infancy of the Russia’s elites. They are unconditionally subservient to the ex-Soviet bureaucrat and schoolmaster who controls them, but they are also invincible super-antiheroes.

### 6.4 Intracultural Dialogue with Antikiller, Brother, Assa and Tycoon

*Dead Man’s Bluff*’s parodic depictions of its criminal antiheroes enables the film to establish a critical distance from *Antikiller*’s eye-of-the-law, Korenev aka (The) Fox. *Antikiller* presented a straightforward, patriotic reply to *Brother*’s complex self/other representations. In *Antikiller*, a trilogy launched in 2002, only the first part

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\(^{358}\) Ibid.

is of interest for *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s intra-cultural dialogue, as only this first instalment deploys the gangster genre.\(^{360}\)

Furthermore, *Antikiller* used narrative elements from at least one work of the Soviet cinematic intertext. Prokhorov observes that ‘as in Stanislav Govorukhin’s cult mini-series *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (1979)... the Moscow police in *Antikiller* are unable to cope with criminals until the appearance of the protagonist with his own new code of honour.’\(^{361}\) Here, *Antikiller*’s ideological difference from post-Soviet Russia’s first countercultural gangster adaptation, *Brother*, becomes apparent. *Antikiller* tried to ensure that audiences could recognise its specific take on the gangster genre in the film’s distinct representations of Russia’s gangland culture of the 1990s. To this end, the film redeployed *Brother*’s method of revealing its borrowings from Hollywood gangster films (Francis F. Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972) and Robert Rodriguez’s *Desperado* (1995)).

*Antikiller* committed the same ‘sin’ of which *Brother* had been mistakenly accused by some and for which it had been hailed by others. It used Western genre and intertextual influences to present a pro-establishment, restoration-nostalgic voice supportive of the contemporary Russian regime and Putin’s law-and-order image.\(^{362}\) It introduced the symbolic figure of an ex-KGB major with the metaphorical name Korenev (*koren’* meaning ‘root’). The initially reluctant but typical boevik-hero cannot but succeed in his self-sacrificial and successful fight against both the commercially driven, in-fighting Russian mafia and drug-taking, sociopathic Russian youths.

*Antikiller*’s main villain is a Russian crime lord with the symbolic name ‘Shaman’, who is killed by one of his soldiers, Metis (i.e. a crossbreed). The film ends with law and order reinstated on Russian turf, but Korenev’s/Fox’s life still depends on the new local gangster boss, ‘Cross’ (*Krest*), who is portrayed as a principled and tough Russian father-figure. Both, Korenev and Krest are obviously made of the same Russian ‘wood’, one representing the life-giving connection with the motherland and the other, the cross the nation has to bear. *Antikiller* thus

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\(^{361}\) Ibid.

followed Brother (cf. the symbolic names of Bagrov and Tatarin), placing Russia’s well-being and hopes in the hands of a Russian national hero and the paternal figure of a gangster-godfather.

In contrast to Antikiller’s pro-establishment voice yearning for a strong leader, Dead Man’s Bluff deploys unflattering depictions of crime, corruption, the rise and the criminal character of some of Russia’s elites. Rather than following Antikiller’s search for answers in the Soviet past, Dead Man’s Bluff includes this past within its object of ridicule. Its politico-social criticism is articulated through exaggerated ‘naturalistic’ presentations of brutal violence committed by morbid characters. Dead Man’s Bluff’s ‘heroes’, as opposed to the heroic ‘antikiller’ Korenev, enjoy torturing and killing. Their provincial godfather Mikhailovich, not too bright himself, ends up as a receptionist in the office of his ex-Komsomol charges. Despite its strong Russian idiom, this ‘neo-noir/black gangster comedy’ is reminiscent of Quentin Tarantino’s self-conscious antics and hyper-stylized, nihilistic presentations of violence. The revenge film, Kill Bill: Vol. 1, and the gleeful, blood-spattering nihilism of Reservoir Dogs, in particular, spring to mind.

Despite some glitches, Dead Man’s Bluff’s antiheroes are in fact as invincible as Kill Bill: Vol. 1’s character, ‘The Bride’ (Uma Thurman), and Antikiller’s ex-KGB hero, ‘The Fox’. They mount a strong critique of the melodramatic Russian self-glorification apparent in the kitsch-boevik, Antikiller, and its endearingly reluctant, wannabe-left-alone pacifist hero, the Fox. Dead Man’s Bluff’s Simon is enthralled by his chance to torture the corrupt policeman and murderer Stepan. Stepan presents for him a father figure. Cinematically, he represents the corrupt paternalistic state. By contrast, Antikiller’s Korenev killed the sociopathic ape (also played by Viktor Sukhorukov) only after his brave and dependable OMON side-kick, Litvinov, started torturing the latter for committing rape and murder. Dead Man’s Bluff’s representative of OMON is simply an foolish servant. Antikiller’s humanist saviour of Russia and its national populist message thus stand in stark contrast to Dead Man’s Bluff’s anti-heroic gangsters and the film’s political challenge to the present regime.

Sergei and Simon happen to get the better of their colleagues-adversaries, happily killing whoever steps in their way. Korenev, by contrast, saves the day,
using force only reluctantly against Russia’s internal enemies. On the surface, both stories are equally simple and reflect a semi-closed order-chaos-order structure. Antikiller’s closed story finishes with a cliffhanger (i.e. an ending that allows for a sequel). Dead Man’s Bluff’s ‘tragi-happy ending’ remains open, as the film’s frame is not closed. It never returns to the university lecture but leaves the film’s audience in the place of the students instead. Dead Man’s Bluff’s fast paced, tightly knit narrative seems a parodic, almost schoolmasterly, answer to Antikiller’s unfocused, disjointed ramblings. Balabanov’s newly adopted comic mode both blends with the neo-noir crime thriller and undercuts the gangster genre.

Dead Man’s Bluff can also be seen as a response to Konchalovskii’s own inadvertently comic strip-like representation of a reluctant nationalist ex-KGB-major-turned-He-man. Like Antikiller, Balabanov’s film focuses on post-Soviet Russia’s tumultuous 1990s, and offers new understandings of Russia’s self and internal others within that context. In Dead Man’s Bluff’s representations, Russia’s main internal others have been influenced by the still living ghosts of the past. For example, Mikhailovich has an image of Stalin’s head tattooed on the left side of his chest. Precisely the same tattoo, which has a clear symbolic significance, is worn on the same spot of his chest by the criminal character, Tolian (Vladimir Mashkov), in one of the most acclaimed post-Soviet films, Pavel Chukhrai’s The Thief (Vor, 1997). The anti-establishment, anti-nostalgic implications of this intertextual link with another cinematic symbolic narrative underline Dead Man’s Bluff’s ideological leanings. It stands in clear opposition to Antikiller, which searched for Russia’s national security and leadership in a strong ex-KGB ‘superman’ returning from the Soviet past.

By shifting its narrative focus entirely to Russia’s internal others, Dead Man’s Bluff, like Antikiller, refrains to a large extent from explicit dealings with external others. However, through the mise-en-scène and also through depictions of Russian attitudes for and against the West – the Slavophile Sergei and the Westernizing Simon (Semion) – Balabanov’s dialogue with the Western other continues implicitly. Through its representation of internal others, Dead Man’s Bluff ridicules Antikiller’s depictions of the successful battle of Russia’s tough law-and-order He-man against the evil machinations of various gangsters. Antikiller’s romantic-apologetic endorsement of the need for an honourable Soviet-Russian godfather, without whom Russia’s strong leader and peacemaker could not have
prevailed, is questioned implicitly by Dead Man’s Bluff which portrays that need as mere nationalist myth-making.

Dead Man’s Bluff shares with Antikiller not only the gangster genre, but also its intended audiences. Both action thrillers and gangster neo-noirs target young people who identify more easily than older generations with representations of fast-paced violent action, and who have arguably been less influenced by the old Soviet aesthetic regime, which favoured art-house films over genre movies. Dead Man’s Bluff’s comically eager antiheroes climb to the top for personal gain and are the target of ridicule. The populist Antikiller’s tired, reluctant superhero wants a quiet life after saving the day and arouses melodramatic sympathy, perhaps even pity. Both films’ main themes are the gangland struggles for economic wealth and political power in Russia of the 1990s. Such depictions of action and violence usually incorporate a strong emphasis on male camaraderie and in-group jokes. Open physical and verbal aggression against the shared other are typically the order of the day.

In its dialogue with Antikiller and the audience it shares with that film, Dead Man’s Bluff adjusts the trajectory of the provincial Russian gangster marked out in Brother. Danila went first to St. Petersburg, historically, Russia’s window to the West, but today also its ‘crime capital’, and only turned to Moscow at the end of the film in a movement also accomplished by Tycoon’s gangster-oligarch, Platon. Dead Man’s Bluff sends Sergei and Simon straight to Russia’s true capital, Moscow, thus rejecting the possibility that Russia ever had a real chance of opening itself up to the West. Brother’s Viktor is thus proven right when he said in Brother-2: ‘All power is in Moscow!’ (V Moskve vsia sila). Tycoon’s expression ‘Vsia vlast’ v Moskve’, which means the same, is used twice in Lungin’s film and might well be borrowed from Brother. Tycoon’s episode depicting the ambush of a former Soviet colonel in Moscow’s back alleys, in turn, was taken from Brother-2, where Danila and Viktor dispatch their enemies with the help of a Maxim gun. By cutting out St. Petersburg, Dead Man’s Bluff changes Brother’s representations of Russia’s journey first Westwards (to St. Petersburg) and then inwards (to Moscow). The Russian gangsters’ journey, Dead Man’s Bluff implies, was always and inevitably directed towards the century-old hub of Russia. The country’s Westernizing aspect is nothing but an (Simon’s) infatuation in the service of the more dominant (Sergei’s) Slavophilic leadership.
Dead Man’s Bluff features many of the classic attributes of neo-noir: ‘heists-gone-bad, male camaraderie, trust and betrayal... extreme moments of violence, dark humour, and the importance of coincidence’.\textsuperscript{363} It shares these with Brother with its comparatively understated, but bleak reflections of ‘contemporary issues... culture and society... local concerns... [and] increased fears of rising crime’.\textsuperscript{364} In 2005, by when Brother’s fears have become a reality, Dead Man’s Bluff exaggerates and ridicules the former’s representations in a light-heartedly mocking, but biting, self-parody. It turns them into sarcastic representations of a black comedy that depicts the grotesque and absurd story of the New Russian gangster’s rise and ultimate success. The implications of Dead Man’s Bluff’s ending are, in a typical noir fashion, grim.

Similarly to Brother’s plot-driven narrative, which revealed the importance of coincidence in neo-noir, Dead Man’s Bluff’s preconceived story line provides the narrative’s main thrust. Dead Man’s Bluff’s gangsters are largely deprived of a dynamic linear plot, and for the most part lack the ambitions of their American individualist counterparts. The protagonists’ uncertain and often random behaviour is influenced by a trajectory that does, however, have oedipal traits. The criminals start off as lowly enforcers. Only their most significant ‘arbitrary encounter’\textsuperscript{365} with their former gangster-colleague Kaban gives Sergei information that turns into an idea towards the end of the film. ‘The Boar’ has already started to climb the social ladder and peacefully dabbles in international businesses from Russia’s seats of power in Moscow. Through him, the provincial Sergei becomes aware of how Russia’s centripetal power structures work and, when the opportunity arises, he takes it. The gangster genre typically resolves its narrative tensions through death or rehabilitation. To be sure, drifters wander at their peril – in Dead Man’s Bluff they are mostly sent – into situations of violence and bloodshed beyond their control and the heist keeps going bad for most participants because of unlucky coincidences. Without the film’s cutforward or ‘return’ to 2005, the neo-noir gangsters’ future would, at best, have been unpredictable. The ending, however, is crucial and demonstrates how Dead Man’s Bluff in fact flouts the gangster genre’s normative plot resolution.

\textsuperscript{363} Desser (Ibid: 519-20).
\textsuperscript{364} Ibid: 516 & 526.
\textsuperscript{365} Ibid: 528.
For in *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s happy ending, Sergei’s and Simon’s reintegration into society - their ‘rehabilitation’ – takes place under the aegis of carnival. According to the film’s representation techniques, the old order has been restored by 2005, at the end of the post-Soviet carnival. Far from being killed or rehabilitated, the deposed ‘king’ is recrowned, as in *Antikiller*. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s light satirical touch turns into bitter sarcasm. Russia’s ‘developments’, it indicates, did not bring any real change to the country’s power structures. While *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s end is similar to *Antikiller*’s, its mode is nevertheless different to the latter’s melodramatic-heroic representations.

*Dead Man’s Bluff*’s objects of ridicule are further indicated in its final song, which supports the film’s reading as a satire. Zhanna Aguzarova’s song, *Wonderland* (*Chudesnaia Strana*), which was also used in Soloviev’s *Assa* (1987), renders *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s ending ironic: ‘You will understand me. You will never find a better country.’ (*Menia ty poimesh’. Luchshe strany ne naidesh.*). For these words follow depictions of endless violence, brutality and blood galore, which result in the very perpetrators becoming members of Russia’s elites in Moscow. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s criminals come from the Russian heartland, the regenerative powers of which are hereby challenged. Their violent, ludicrous ascent is dominated by coincidence, facilitated by corruption and marked by troves of corpses. *Wonderland* further underscores the difference between *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s message and that of *Antikiller*. Its sardonic tone contrasts sharply with the modern, stylish Cuban hip-hop salsa song, *Represent* (*Cuba*), which in *Antikiller* reflects the hero’s yearning for Cuba, as the only country where state-socialism still exists.

*Wonderland* serves to highlight additional intertextual ties between *Dead Man’s Bluff* and *Assa*. One of *Assa*’s main characters is a young man called Bananan, played by the rock musician and actor, Sergei ‘Africa’ Bugaev. Both *Assa*’s Bananan and *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s Baklazhan die. Baklazhan, moreover, shares his ethnic heritage with *Assa*’s Afro-Russian character, ‘Negro Vitia’ (‘negr Vitia’, played by Dmitrii Shumilov). *Assa* depicted a murderous affair between an illegal business entrepreneur (*tsekhovik*) and Soviet-style gangster, Krymov, and his nurse, Alika. The film was critical of Soviet Russian criminal and pop culture, as it

366 Horton notes *Assa*’s satirical character (Ibid. 8).
depicted murder and illegal business activities. *Dead Man’s Bluff* takes part of its thematic and generic lead from the earlier film.

While *Assa* is referenced at the end of the film, *Dead Man’s Bluff* shares with *Tycoon* the use of flashbacks to tell a frame narrative. Lungin’s arthouse-influenced detective/gangster noir film hybrid, which likewise includes carnivalesque elements, begins, like *Dead Man’s Bluff*, in the present – the day of Platon’s death – and then cuts back to the mid-1980s. *Tycoon* depicts the intellectual beginnings of one of Russia’s oligarchs, and includes a university lecture on economics. *Dead Man’s Bluff* also begins with a university lecture on economics before cutting back to 1995. *Dead Man’s Bluff* distances itself from *Tycoon* through its parody of the gangster genre. Moreover, the main part of the film largely excludes Russia’s tycoons. The only notable exception is that of the Russian-Jewish lawyer, who conducts drug business with Mikhailovich. He shares with Platon the status of learned intellectual, criminal businessman, survivor, and ethnic Jew (Platon was presented as half-Jewish). However, despite its critical undertones with regard to Russia’s oligarchs, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s representations mostly focus on those who are already depicted in *Tycoon* as Russia’s vilest top criminals, Moscow’s politicians. They, the paternal leaders of the state, even try to rob the robbers, who are depicted by *Tycoon* in a somewhat sympathetic manner. And when the freedom-loving ‘un-Russian’ buccaneer resists, he signs his death warrant.

All in all, *Dead Man’s Bluff* adopts an ambiguous and complementary stance towards *Tycoon*. Balabanov’s film includes a parody of Lungin’s but, despite this distancing, which was unavoidable because of *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s parody of the gangster, it shares *Tycoon*’s modes of presentation and polemises with its ‘othering’ strategies in the same way that it does with those of *Antikiller*. The main anti-heroes in both films survive. *Tycoon*’s Russia-loving buccaneer returns to a Moscow which *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s dumb oppressors help control.

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367 The general consensus is that Platon Makovskii was modelled on real life tycoon Boris Berezovskii. See Peter Pozefsky (ibid. 303)

368 Koretskii, *Tycoon*’s chief villain, is Platon’s powerful contact in the Kremlin. When he wants to extort more money from Platon for his services and the oligarkh refuses, Koretskii calls him a half-breed (*polukrovka*) and they become mortal enemies.
6.5 The Beginning and Ending: Theme and Mode of Representation

Dead Man’s Bluff’s neo-noir farce ends with darkly pessimistic intimations. The drug deal ‘goes bad’ for most active participants, who turn into zhmurki (corpses). The gangsters have taken Moscow and, with it, Russia. Yet Dead Man’s Bluff’s ending remains open, as the film’s metacinematic frame does not close. It does not return to the university lecture shown at the film’s beginning, thereby putting its audiences in the students’ place, even if the cut-forward to Moscow in 2005 coincides with the lecture on the temporal plane. Cinematically speaking, the action remains on the plane of the embedded narrative. As a consequence, Dead Man’s Bluff’s audiences find themselves in the seats of the students. The ‘lecture’ that is the film itself has been directed at them.

The university lecture (on ‘Russia’s Politics and Economic & Social History’) serves to introduce Dead Man’s Bluff’s theme, genres, and transgeneric modes, and thereby gives the key to its self/other representations. Here Dead Man’s Bluff follows Brother, Brother-2 and War in the significance of its metacinematic opening credits. The students are shown a film about how Russian criminals of the mid-1990s acquired their start-up capital to merge with Russia’s authorities in Moscow. The narrative-cinematic embedding cuts back in time. The theme and focus of the lecture reflect the othering of certain male representatives of the Russian self.

Within the opening sequence, the action swings back in time to a morgue in the mid-1990s, as the caption indicates. The lengthy establishing shot is a stationary medium-long shot that lingers in a coolly detached manner on two men: an armed sadistic pathologist, ‘The Executioner’, is setting out to ‘work’ on a gagged victim with syringe and saw. The choice of camera shot distances the viewer and underlines the irony of the action, which otherwise would merely be horrific. The colour of the reel has changed to a sepia-hue, a technique already deployed by Brother. It is one of the hallmarks of neo-noir. The morgue’s setting, its background filled with corpses and the foregrounded characters of ‘The Executioner’ and his gagged, yet fearlessly communicating, victim, further emphasise the upcoming story’s neo-noir form and farcical tone.

Dead Man’s Bluff’s black humour seems to clash with the depressive pessimism of neo-noir but it also meshes with it. For the ironic distancing of this
genre blend allows the film to indulge in pessimism, but refrain from spelling out its implications for contemporary reality. Thus, the pathologist talks to his gagged victim in an exceedingly polite and even friendly manner that stands in stark contrast to his sinister intentions and blood curdling actions. The fearless gagged victim engages with his would-be torturer in a conversation, replying with sounds. The ‘Executioner’ prepares to use his tools on the victim, while telling the gagged (!) man: ‘So, if you do not want to talk, you don’t have to. It’s your business. We are in a free country now.’ (Tak shto, esli ne khochesh’ govorit’, ne nado. Eto tvoe delo. U nas teper’ strana svobodnaia.) The irony is unmistakable: nothing seems to have changed in Russia but the substitution of nominal freedom for the laws of the gangland. The ‘Executioner’ continues to tell his victim that he would let him die quickly, if he just talked. Yet, he does not remove the gag but rather continues to tell him how much he likes slicing up corpses. He adds that it is a happy day for him since it is his daughter’s first day at school. The time of the year is the same as when Brother’s action started. The establishing shot ends when three masked men storm into the morgue.

The would-be-executioner recognises in one of them the corrupt policeman, Stepan, by his voice and tells him so, thus making his own death certain: ‘I know you’ (ia tebia znaiu). This idiotically suicidal observation is understood by the viewer as such in terms of both cultural and generic verisimilitudes. Witnesses, especially of police corruption, after all, have to die. The ironic mismatch between the coolly and rationally detached pathologist and his suicidal statement cannot be missed by viewers. It reemphasises his morbid character, the comical incongruity of the screen action and thus the farcical quality of the story. Nothing is as it should be and the horror of the depicted actions is made palatable through black comedy.

Only Stepan survives the shooting that follows, during which he also kills – with a shot to the shoulder! – one of his own accomplices and potential witnesses. Another link, now with Brother-2 and Antikiller, is established, when Stepan takes off his balaclava. The corrupt policeman is played by Viktor Sukhorukov. After the actor’s critical portrayal of the Russian police in Brother-2, the viewer can expect further developments in Balabanov’s criticism of Russia’s state organs. In Dead Man’s Bluff, as in Brother-2, Sukhorukov’s role as a corrupt policeman and a representative of the paternalistic state is rolled together with a blend of three characters of traditional national Russian colouring: the (un)holy fool (iurodivyi), the
merry drunkard and the thug. Sukhorukov also portrayed Antikiller’s maniacal rapist and drug-gobbling killer Ambal (Ape) and thus continues in characteristic mode.

*Dead Man’s Bluff* sticks closely to Balabanov’s idiosyncratic elaboration of one of the conventions of classical genre films; it promises to give information about the upcoming story’s diegesis and theme in its establishing shot. Following the pattern established in *Brother, Brother-2* and *War*, *Dead Man’s Bluff* draws the audience into the film during the opening credits. It painstakingly attempts to give the viewers information about the film’s genre and mode of representation that will facilitate their understanding of the film’s generic form and thematic concerns.

### 6.6 A Neo-Noir Comic: Ex-Komsomol Criminals turn into Gangster Politicians

The opening credits conclude with the corrupt killer-policeman, Stepan, sitting in the morgue in front of scores of corpses: old and new. A symbolic interpretation of the setting, similar to that of the mental asylum in *House of Fools*, offers itself. In the latter, the mental patients represented a cross-section of post-Soviet Russian people, with the Chechen war as a backdrop. *Dead Man’s Bluff’s* background is the bloody 1990s. The violent action which is foregrounded is co-defined by lunacy. Heedless of the corpses, Stepan reads a slip of paper that contains some information meant for the local gangster kingpin, Mikhailovich. In a parody of Antikiller’s opening, the title of the film, *Dead Man’s Bluff*, appears on the screen. Following the sound of a gunshot, the title’s red colour slowly trickles down the screen like fresh blood in a manner reminiscent of both horror films and comics, a comic horror story, as it were.

The establishing shot in the following scene depicts a football pitch with players on it. The next shot shows three men smoking and watching the football players, in a position similar to Antikiller’s Koronev, who watched American football players. These three are the criminal infantile dimwits (*otmorozki*, as they refer to themselves during the first dialogue) Koron, Bala and Baklazhan/Efiop sitting in that order from left to right. Koron sits on the left, like a leader of a group of Komsomol members (*otriad*). This structure undercuts the traditional gangster constellation, where the boss appears in the centre flanked by two of his strongmen. It indicates the militarization of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, where groups of

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369 Also Antikiller’s psycho-killer Ambal & Co. are referred to as *otmorozki* by other gangsters.
Young Lenin Pioneers (children) and teenagers (Komsomol) were already lining up in formation. Another indicator of the immaturity of early post-Soviet Russia’s criminals is that Bala does not inhale the smoke of his cigarette but only puffs away like a schoolboy. This impression is strengthened particularly by Bala’s adolescent emotional instability, by his ungainly adolescent body language, and by all three characters’ unsophisticated, blunt statements, continuous bickering and untiring use of crudely idiotic racist jokes about Baklazhan. They are shot from a low angle looking up, reflecting a carnivalesque perspective ‘from below’ onto the stage.

Baklazhan’s African roots (the Russian actor’s father was Zambian) and his mates’ incessantly racist jokes create a critical distance from what the film represents as the ambiguous nature of Russian ethno-chauvinist intolerance. Its inherent irony is directed at Russia’s national infatuation with a person whom the national cultural canon of the country’s aesthetic regime describes as the country’s ‘greatest’ poet: Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. Baklazhan is continually ridiculed as an Ethiopian (Efiop) and a cannibal. They call him Liudoed (cannibal), which may be a pun at one stage removed on Pushkin’s Ethiopian great-grandfather’s name, Gannibal. Notwithstanding his protests (he has never even been to Ethiopia), he is denied his Russian national identity by his own friends.

Bala, in turn, is seriously ‘hurt’ by Koron’s haranguing of him for messing up a previous ‘job’. He had endangered his ‘colleagues’ by starting to shoot left, right and centre in his excitement at wielding a gun. Bala does not even know what ‘perspective’ (perspektiva) means; he has the educational level of an adolescent. Despite the actors’ mature age, the overall picture is that of emotionally unstable, criminally inclined, racist adolescents. Their readiness to make racist jokes in public, particularly with the purpose of attacking one of their peers, is typical of people of a young age. Their immaturity is particularly typical of those youths who struggle with combining their soaring testosterone levels with society’s ethical constraints. In addition, their liberal take on the newly found freedom of speech throws a critical light on their previous Soviet education, which ostensibly preached the equality of all nations, but, in fact, reserved ‘more equality’ for the Soviet-Russian elder brother.

These three caricatured criminals, their mannerisms and statements are depicted in a condescendingly humorous mode. Their caricatures are portraits that exaggerate and distort what Dead Man’s Bluff represents farcically as the essence of
Russia’s aspiring criminal class in the mid-1990s. The easily identifiable, oversimplified caricature of the criminals and mocking condescension towards the Zeitgeist of early post-Soviet Russia focuses on their Komsomol-like immaturity, their stupidity, their racism, their disregard for other people’s lives and their self-destructive bickering. Russia’s elites in 2005 are shown in their infancy/youth. On the comic level, the three dim-witted specimens are the archetypal enemies of Mikhailovich’s ex-Komsomol pupils (‘shkol’niki’), Sergei and Simon/Semion. Inevitably, they will fall by the wayside at the hands of their antiheroic opponents.

Sergei and Simon are the two provincial gangsters who will come out on top of Russian society after walking over corpses. They are as invincible as Antikiller’s Korenev and Tarantino’s comic-avenger ‘The Bride’. They ‘zip’ like real comic heroes from one explosive episode to another, in the emblematic black BMW we associate with New Russian gangsters. Unlike their superhero-forerunner, Korenev, and his gangster opposition, Dead Man’s Bluff’s characters are infantilised. Like Bill’s ‘Deadly Viper Assassination Squad’, they are complete slaves to their boss, until a dramatic change occurs (the ‘Bride’s’ pregnancy and ‘The Boy Scouts’’ case of heroin). They are unbeatable thanks to incredible luck, to their ‘wonder weapons’ and to their willingness to use them in their fight against an array of archetypal enemies. Their comical representations (almost?) endear them to the viewer on an artistic level. But they would be grotesquely horrific to encounter in reality.

Sergei and Simon are initially shown to be as incompetent as their master and the three dimwits. However, Simon’s unhesitant use of his cartoonish ‘wonder weapons’, carefully hidden handguns that pop into his hands as if from nowhere, see them through. Simon’s idiocy is particularly underlined. While brainy Sergei, after a night of boozing, drinks clean water from an old manual water pump to quench his thirst, brawny Simon ‘values his health’. After stating ‘My health is dear to me’ (Mne zdorovie moie dorogo), he pays, after making the pun, to drink incredibly dirty water from a vending machine. The criticism of Russia’s adoption of Western commercialism, which seems to turn anything into profit, even if at the cost of quality, is evident, without needing to be spelled out.

In contrast to Sergei, Simon also prefers McDonald's hamburgers to Russian pies (pirogi). Both crooks make a case for their preferred food: pirog or hamburger, clean water from a pump or dirty water from a machine. These binary oppositions in
culinary preferences, Sergei’s professed Orthodoxy and Simon’s love for Western rock music and comic-cartoons, appear to reference the Westerner-Slavophile dichotomy among the Russian elites. While Simon does not desist from his infatuation with everything English/American – reflecting Kill Bill’s influence, he reads American comics – it is, however, Slavophilic Sergei, who clearly dominates the pair. The film’s critical stance towards both ideologies is expressed through the idiotic immorality of the characters.

The two boy scouts’ first job takes them to ‘The Doctor’. They are filmed outside the chemist’s house with a high-angle shot that makes them appear like boys on an errand. This impression is emphasised by another, this time extremely long, shot showing their tiny figures on the stairs outside the house. They are waiting for their call to be answered. During their subsequent clash with the sinister Doctor, Simon kills the latter’s bodyguards. Called Volshebniki (the Wizards), these are two podgy, grumpy looking ‘boys’ who move and hold their guns in the most dilettante manner imaginable. They are no match for the sharp-shooting Simon and his advanced technology. After the killing, situational comedy is blended with verbal irony, when Simon observes in all seriousness that ‘they are really no wizards’ (oni, pravda, ne volshebniki).

In the course of the subsequently unfolding events, Sergei and Simon are shown to be the quickest learners of the game of death and the opportunistic acquisition of ‘capital’. After all, they are somewhat lucky survivors of the lethal tussle who manage to make it to the city. Sergei carries his leather file (papka), which contains a metal plate meant to protect the coward, but which also symbolically foreshadows his future function in Moscow as a parliamentary deputy. Simon is his gun-wielding, simpleminded sidekick. He readily gives in to his father-son complex, which he ‘inherited’ from Danila and the gangster genre. Torturing and killing whomever Sergei permits or orders him to lay his hands and tools on (knife, axe, gun and lit cigars), is a joy for Simon. His abuse and murder of Stepan, who as a policeman represents the paternal state, affords him particular satisfaction. In Dead Man’s Bluff’s nod towards alleged racism in both Brother films, Sergei almost manages to top Koron’s and Bala’s racist jokes about Baklazhan’s semi-African roots.
The racist remarks and attacks that are directed at Baklazhan by virtually every Russian character develop the conventions of neo-noir, which strives to depict society’s ills in the bleakest colours, to a grotesque level. The absurdity stems from the illogical nature of these remarks and their hyperbolic frequency. According to Bala, Baklazhan cannot be Russian because he smokes two packs of cigarettes a day. Simon, in turn, upon meeting Baklazhan says ‘Ah, the Ethiopian’. Upon Baklazhan’s reply ‘I’m Russian’ (ia russkii), Simon wordlessly knocks him out cold without a word. When Sergei asks Simon why Baklazhan is not waking up, Simon laconically replies ‘Negro’ (negr). Upon Sergei’s expressed worries about an international conflict, Simon reassures him, explaining ‘He said he’s Russian.’ With a connoisseur’s look on his face, Sergei replies with conviction: ‘He lied!’ (On navrall!). The ‘black comedy’ – in both of its senses – takes place on the verbal and situational levels. The jokes are genuinely funny for those recognising the satire and its criticism of the characters and what they represent: post-Soviet Russia’s criminal mafia and certain aspects of that society’s Zeitgeist. The xenophobic tendencies among elements in Russian society are represented by blunt and brutal techniques, a crude moral tone and an anti-establishment viewpoint. The neo-noir mode conspires with farce and satire to depict the ‘reality’ and all-pervasiveness of crime and corruption, and the unhealthy state of individual minds and society as a whole.

Sergei even comments, although benevolently, on Simon’s maniacal sadism. Simon’s infatuation with the West earns him Sergei’s ironic remark ‘As if somebody needed you there!’ (Nuzhen ty tam komu!), begging the question ‘who needs him here?’ The racist assassin and Ivanushka-durachok (Simon), and the more philosophically-inclined, Raskolnikov-type, figure (Sergei), together ridicule two aspects of their forerunner, Danila Bogrov. Even though the representative of Russian Slavophilia and nationalism is the dominant character of the pair, he nevertheless depends on the Westernizing gunslinger.

During the film, Sergei crosses himself repeatedly and bows in front of Orthodox churches, several of which are shown through a clever positioning of the camera. He presents himself, ironically like the Afro-Russian Baklazhan, as a true Orthodox believer, but in a manner which undermines his professed belief. The ex-Komsomol gangster seems to have donned his peaceful Christian doctrine like a new cloak. It is incongruous with his criminal profession and subverted cinematographically. Sergei thus crosses himself in Baklazhan’s flat in front of a
foregrounded window through which he sees an Orthodox church. The window frame, however, has the form of an inverted cross, which in its popular meaning is often associated with the rejection of, and opposition to, the church and is used as a sign of the devil. Sergei’s devotion to the Church is thus pushed into the background (literally and figuratively) in this episode by the fact that his prayer is addressed to a symbol of evil.

Sergei and Simon are not merely lampoons of Russia’s fledgling elites. They are archetypical, yet ridiculed, antiheroes, who confront and defeat their equally ridiculous, but rogish archenemies. Their ‘advanced equipment’, i.e. Sergei’s protective file with the metal plate and Simon’s pop-out guns, moreover, give them an edge in a comic strip but would be rather useless in reality. Dead Man’s Bluff’s iconography blends that of the gangster genre with that of a comic strip, which serves the purpose of its farcical representations.

The code Sergei and Simon live by is ‘kill or be killed’: their purpose in life is to make a living through criminal activities. When the opportunity arises, they go to Moscow and, in gangster terms, ‘take’ the city. Similarly to typical superheroes, however, they initially risk their lives for a ‘higher purpose’, which, at the beginning of the film, is nothing but being led by their paternal schoolmaster/gangster figure, Mikhailovich, without expecting much reward in return. After all, the former state bureaucrat represents their substitute father, whom they look up to and who provides them with a ‘killing’. Because of their own personal morality, which stems – like Danila Bogrov’s – from an unresolved father-son complex and abusive childhood in the USSR, they seem hardly aware of the actual immorality of torturing and killing. Their unresolved psychological problems and emotional immaturity provide the motivation for their actions. Mikhailovich gives them direction and thus a feeling of security; individual thinking is discouraged by him and their complex-related immorality flourishes in morbid, yet comical, acts of cruel violence.

When they cheat Mikhailovich at the end of the story, they do not simply overtake and kill him like ‘real gangsters’, but rather take him along to Moscow as their receptionist. After all, they learned their trade from him, an old communist with ‘CCCP’ tattooed across his whole chest. The representation of the contemporary

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370 Such inverted crosses are worn especially by Heavy Metal fans and punks on chains, and they go together with the devil sign made with either hand (resembling a goat’s head or ‘devil’s horns’).

371 Cyrillic letters for SSSR (Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskih Respublik), in English USSR.
Russian elites as gangsters is complicated by the fact that they keep their former communist boss in pay. In the classical gangster genre, the anti-hero gets rid of his father figure. Russian gangsters are, according to *Dead Man’s Bluff*, part of a larger family that reaches back to Soviet times. Dutifully, they retain their paternal mentors who helped them on their way.

### 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter’s main goal was to examine representations of the post-Soviet Russian self and its others in Balabanov’s *Dead Man’s Bluff* by focusing on its deployment of genre/s and its intertextuality. I have argued that *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s blend of neo-noir/black gangster comedy is in part attributable to its self-conscious deployment of relevant well-known works of post-Soviet and Soviet cinema. These included Konchalovskii’s highly popular gangster-`boevik` *Antikiller*, Lungin’s *Tycoon* and Soloviev’s ‘gangster’-`satire` *Assa* and Balabanov’s own *Brother* films. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s deliberate deployment of meta-cinematic, narrative techniques and its emphasis on two narrative beginnings, which continue and develop *Brother*’s approach, forced a separation of the opening frame scene from the depiction of past events in Russia’s provinces that it introduces.

Balabanov’s fourth *Zeitgeist* movie, I have further suggested, continues to reach wider audiences for the combined purposes of entertaining them and and exposing them to challenging, counter-intuitive perspectives on Russian national selfhood. By its deployment of the gangster genre, *Dead Man’s Bluff* continues both Russia’s intercultural dialogue with one of its dominant others, America, and its intracultural polemic with Konchalovskii’s pro-establishment gangster-`boevik` *Antikiller*, with which it shares largely the same audiences. *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s critical representations polemicise with *Antikiller*’s glorified depiction of a heroic ex-KGB major’s successful battle with Russia’s gangland. The film differs crucially from Konchalovskii’s gangster-`boevik` in that it focuses on the lucky rise, supported by a Soviet-Russian godfather, of some random New Russian gangster criminals rather than on a Putinesque He-man’s victorious fight against them. Metaphorically speaking, all of *Dead Man's Bluff*’s gangsters, whether they die or survive, belong to Russia’s dead souls.
By placing most of the action in the provinces, *Dead Man’s Bluff* complicates *Brother’s* representations and undercuts the figure of the New Russian gangster even further than its forerunner. It challenges the myth of the regenerative powers of the Russian provincial heartland. If there was any glamour left in *Brother’s* representations, as some audiences would have it, it was completely destroyed by *Dead Man’s Bluff’s* deglamorising depictions of Russian criminals’ stupidity and propensity for senseless violence. *Dead Man’s Bluff’s* parody of *Brother*, I showed, involves the striking of a certain distance from Balabanov’s (and post-Soviet Russia’s) first gangster film and its anti-hero’s xenophobic remarks. *Dead Man’s Bluff’s* comic, neo-noir presentations of racism, sexism and blood-spilling, which resembled those of Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and *Reservoir Dogs*, took on truly grotesque forms in their parodic mockery of Danila Bagrov. *Dead Man’s Bluff* divested the Russian gangsters completely of their glamour by exposing them as psychopathic provincial murderers of near-infantile dependence on their paternal boss. They slavishly followed orders until by lucky chance they were given the opportunity to buy themselves places among Moscow’s political elites. They did not, however, undergo any character development which is typical of the genre.

The film’s blend of neo-noir idiom and black comedic effect further develop the Russian chernukha style deployed earlier in *Brother*. The neo-noir invocation of a depressive mood and focus on destructive family relations are foregrounded via their clash with the farcical depictions by which they are accompanied. The wife of the provincial gangster boss Sergei was like the waitress *Kat/Cat* presented as mere backdrops to a male-dominated violent society, serving in the homes and offices of their masters. The oedipal Semion suffers from a serious father-son complex because of the child abuse the psychotic killer had suffered. In *Dead Man’s Bluff*, the destructive family relations are made explicit, while the depressive mood occurs at the level of the implied author, who conveys it through the sardonic bitterness of his attitude to his characters and their actions. Finally, I have suggested that the meta-narrative device employed at the beginning introduced an incomplete narrative frame which invites viewers to see themselves as the audience of a lecture on key developments in post-Soviet Russian society in the mid-1990s.

The challenge to received cinematic (and cultural) wisdom accomplished by *Dead Man’s Bluff*, I have indicated, takes place mainly along ‘vertical’ (intracultural) lines. Its targets are predominantly national: provincial criminals who grew
out of former Komsomol members and who were initially led by former Soviet state bureaucrats later to become self-standing gangsters. Their Slavophilic (Sergei’s) mask was contrasted with their underlying Western (Simon’s) orientation. Challenges were also mounted on the ‘horizontal’ (cross-cultural) level, with junk-food, mindless technological advance for the profit motive and drug business counterbalanced by Russian materialism and criminality. Ironically, the American dream, the film seems to imply, came true for those Russians who joined the ruling elites.

*Dead Man’s Bluff* implicitly sides with the common people, who are killed on-screen and implicitly referred to in the film’s open ending. Through its narrative focus on Russia’s internal other the film presents a simple yet paradigmatic case of Balabanov’s much discussed ‘othering’. It typically takes place on the vertical-social rather than the horizontal-ethnic plane. Via its subject matter, its theme, its polemic with *Antikiller* and of its dialogue with *Assa*, *Dead Man’s Bluff* rejects nostalgic views of the late Soviet Union. The difference, moreover, between mid-1990s’ Russian criminals and crooked cops is shown to be reducible to the presence of a mere badge.

Following *Brother*, *Dead Man’s Bluff* also rejects the notion that there has ever been a possibility to open Russia up to the West. St. Petersburg, Russia’s ‘window to the West’, is not even mentioned and Russian criminals are forever shown to be heading for Moscow. While Danila faced a barred window and then went embarked on a slippery slope towards Moscow – the real gangster metropolis and a new locus of evil in Russia – there was only one goal for Sergei (once his nose was rubbed in it). While Danila was not deprived of the possibility of redemption, *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s lucky anti-heroes show that this was an illusion. Through the mechanisms of intercultural dialogue, *Dead Man’s Bluff* continues to acknowledge the American other’s cultural potential. It demonstrates how a small but ruthless element in contemporary Russian society has successfully adapted the American ideal. Of course, the film ironically concurs, not everyone can make it to the top and many have had to pay dearly for the survival of the luckiest and most ruthless.

To complete his cinematic depiction of post-Soviet Russia’s contorted efforts to forge a new identity for itself via its shifting relationships with its multiple others, Balabanov will require one further *Zeitgeist* film. *It Doesn’t Hurt* forms the final part
of a single meta-narrative developing similar and connected themes. The New Russian gangster will disappear and make place for both his younger version and a doctor. Mother Russia, whose subsidiary role as a ‘servant’ girl in *Dead Man’s Bluff* already speaks of marginalisation and exploitation, will be represented as terminally ill and close to death.
Chapter 7: *It Doesn’t Hurt* (*Mne ne bol’no, 2006*)

The Melodramatic End of The Post-Soviet Gangster and his Mistress

7.1 Introduction

With *It Doesn’t Hurt* Balabanov deployed the gangster genre for the last time. Following the neo-noir comedy of *Dead Man’s Buff*, which depicted the gangsters’ rise and return to power, Balabanov’s 2006 gangster film blended the genre with melodrama and traced the failure and demise of the aged sentimental gangster. *It Doesn’t Hurt* thus concluded Balabanov’s attachment to the gangster film as a generic means of representing the internal aspects of post-Soviet Russia’s violent transition to a market society. Balabanov’s final statement followed the now familiar strategy of blending genres and modes, along with intertextual forerunners, for the dual purpose of entertainment and critical self/other representations.

*It Doesn’t Hurt* continues the dialogue with *Brother* and with other post-Soviet Russian gangster films. It traces the fall from grace of the old gangster as well as the rise and mutation of his successor. It blends tragedy with some widely observed melodramatic elements. It is with the help of melodrama that Balabanov further modifies the gangster genre and its role in representing post-Soviet Russia and its others. The gangster genre is thus the dominant generic orientation in a decade-long dialogue. The melodramatic dimension to *It Doesn’t Hurt* possesses a significance similar to that of neo-noir in *Brother*, of satire in *Brother-2* and of black comedy in *Dead Man’s Bluff*. The result is a gangster melodrama or a melodramatic gangster film, which is also neither one nor the other. Both formats, moreover, contribute to the film’s links with the literary and cinematic intertext. *It Doesn’t Hurt*’s main intertextual influences are Erich Maria Remarque’s drama *Three Comrades* (*Drei Kameraden*, 1936) and Alexander Dumas Jr.’s *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848) and its own direct forerunner, *Brother.*

*It Doesn’t Hurt* completed a post-Soviet Russian cinematic debate, which had also seen other directors follow Balabanov’s lead and exploit the gangster genre for their representations of Russia’s ruthless transition to a market society (notably

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372 Special thanks to Seth Graham for pointing out to me my omission of mentioning the influential 1970s Soviet melodrama, which, however, would not have changed my analysis of *It Doesn’t Hurt*. A film that immediately springs to mind is Vladimir Menshov’s *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, 1980).
Antikiller and Tycoon). Like these, Balabanov deployed the gangster genre as a tool of sociological/historical representation. It also developed his symbolic method by depicting the Russian state and fatherland as a violent male gangster figure and the country, home- and motherland, as an abused, self-abusive, materialistic, masochistic and, finally, dying woman.

Melodrama’s function in using sentimentality to reflect and criticise bourgeois society’s values made it suitable for Balabanov’s final, wistful representation of the post-Soviet Russian self. After passing through its earlier neo-noir and satirical gangster phases, it had, by the time of It Doesn’t Hurt, significantly changed under the influence of the Western other’s market society. The film completed Balabanov’s gangster cycle by depicting the failure and fall of its two male anti-heroes – the older Sergei and his successor, Misha – against the backdrop of an infamous New Russian bourgeois demimonde that had established itself during the tumultuous 1990s.

During the 1990s, economic resources, political identities and social positions had been up for grabs for the socially mobile, lucky winners of Russia’s cut-throat economy. Now these fully integrated gangsters and other social chameleons had mellowed and were both eagerly imbibing late-post-Soviet Russia’s bourgeois value system and unable to preserve the motherland in its old form. Centrifugal Western developments (symbolised by St. Petersburg in Brother & It Doesn’t Hurt) began to dominate centripetal, Slavophile orientations (represented by Moscow in Brother-2 and Dead Man’s Bluff). The return of the cinematic meta-narrative to St. Petersburg represented a final transformation in the post-Soviet Russian self whose initial neo-noir gangster orientation was now superceded by the melodramatic excess of Mother Russia’s inevitable demise and the young gangster-successor’s agonised torment.

By contrast with the gangster genre, melodrama does not represent a unique Hollywood genre, but is rather a transgeneric mode of expression capable of infiltrating many different generic forms. Its origins may, according to James L. Smith, be traced back at least to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s Pygmalion (1762). Melodrama gained momentum in response to a particular socio-historical environment and its ideological imperatives over two hundred years ago. It was

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373 Smith (1973: 1).
espoused by the burgeoning French bourgeoisie as a means of representing the good bourgeois self vis-à-vis the abusive, aristocratic other. Quickly spreading across the literary and revolutionary world under the influence of French culture and social upheaval, melodramatic depictions can also be found, for example, in Fedor Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment*. With time, melodrama was transposed onto other socio-historical strata, depicting class oppositions such as, for example, *Remarque*’s respectable blue-collar entrepreneur-mechanics in their battle against the wealthy bourgeois upper-class. The melodramatic mode was a mainstay also on Soviet reel from its beginnings. Blending it into familiar and popular genres is an established convention of Hollywood and global cinema.

For its manipulation of the emotional pleasures of its audiences melodrama affects a tragic touch and presents clear-cut endings. The tragic touch, however, is commonplace (hence the everyday, denigratory term ‘melodramatic’) rather than classic. Binary depictions of conflicts between suffering heroes/heroines and external adversaries form an integral part of its system of representation. The melodramatic character is not internally divided like his tragic counterpart, who is ‘betrayed by what is false within’. The tragic character need not be villainous, while the melodramatic one simply *is*, unless, of course, s/he is good. Melodrama is thus conventionally used for moralistic, sentimental and fatalistic representations of everyday events and trivia, giving stock depictions of individuals stuck in banal situations with which audiences can easily identify.

It has already been noted that *It Doesn’t Hurt* is a melodrama influenced by at least one literary classic. Dmitrii Savel’ev called the film a ‘fully fledged’ melodrama with the structure of a classical melodramatic ‘triangle including a young man..., a mature woman, and her protector-businessman’. Sulkin agrees that the film ‘uses the structure of the melodramatic love triangle... But,’ he adds, the ‘obvious ideological charge in *It Doesn’t Hurt* disfigures the melodrama... shifting

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375 Savel’ev (Ibid.).
into the direction of quasi-patriotism and shattering the structure of the genre.” Condee holds that the city ‘recedes to [a] mere backdrop in [Balabanov’s not altogether successful]... modern rendition of Dumas fils’s 1848 novel, La Dame aux camélias’. Tat’iana Moskvina likewise perceives an adaptation of The Lady of the Camellias in what she considers a ‘light, clever, sad film’. She observes that the film’s title indicates its main theme of ‘proud and fearful concealment of pain’ but joins the consensus that the melodrama suffers from ‘serious inadequacies’. Klimova sees in Balabanov’s ‘new masterpiece’ a ‘story of a relationship with a terminally ill person’ and a ‘representation of the consequences of the market economy’. She draws attention to the potential symbolic value of the mise-en-scène, props and soundtracks, as well as to the absence of conventional melodramatic villains and heroes. Also Trofimenkov observes that a melodramatic surface reading of It Doesn’t Hurt’s structural dimensions and moral does not suffice, explaining that Balabanov’s ‘play with genre... is extremely serious’. He describes Balabanov as ‘an archaeologist of Russia’s most recent history’ and argues that the most important thing is ‘not the melodramatic form [but] rather the lively reality in which this form is immersed’.

Taking Trofimenkov’s and Klimova’s arguments as its starting point, this chapter will demonstrate that it is precisely the blend of two melodramatic modes with the gangster genre that helped Balabanov bring his allegorical meta-narrative of post-Soviet Russia’s alienation from its previous self to an end. I will further suggest that the primary intertextual influence on Balabanov’s approach in It Doesn’t Hurt was Remarque’s Three Comrades, with Dumas’s Lady of the Camellias running a close second.

In order to facilitate the subsequent analysis and familiarise readers with the story, a synopsis of It Doesn’t Hurt will be provided first. Next, a theoretical overview of the film’s genres will be given as the lead in to a discussion of the film’s title and opening scenes. Here, the significance of melodrama’s significance, will be established. I will then examine the film’s deployment of the melos for its symbolic

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376 Sulkin (2007).
378 Moskvina (Ibid.).
379 Ibid.
380 Klimova (Ibid.).
381 Trofimenkov (2007).
382 Ibid.
representations and for the way in which it is grafted on to the gangster format. In particular, I will demonstrate how the simultaneous deployments of the traditional melodramatic love triangle and the family drama are blended with the oedipal gangster story to form a hybrid gangster melodrama with allegorical overlay. This will furnish me with a lens through which to scrutinise the film’s self/other representations and their implications for Balabanov’s depiction of a post-gangster, post-post-Soviet Russia. I will conclude by placing these implications in the context of the crucial intertextual influence of Remarque’s *Three Comrades* and Dumas’ *The Lady of the Camellias*.

### 7.2 Synopsis

The romantic designer Misha (and first-person narrator; Aleksandr Iatsenko), the materialistic, linguistically challenged architect Alia (Inga Oboldina-Strelkova) and the dependable ex-paratrooper Oleg (Dmitrii Diuzhev), meet at a client’s flat in the centre of St. Petersburg. They want to start an interior design business. The three comrades are young, full of life and broke. Alia is dominated by her two male partners in the gang of phoney semi-professionals.

Their first ‘customer’ is Natella Antonovna, short Tata (Renata Litvinova), an eccentric, charming but nervous young woman, who lives in a large inner-city flat. She accepts the blaggers as professionals but is in her turn unable to pay them. The flat is not hers and Tata seems to have invited the youngsters in order to meet new people. She expresses her interest in Misha and seduces, in fact blackmails, him as part of the business deal, telling him ‘But an advance needs to be earned first’ (*Avans eshche nuzhno zasluzhit*). The reluctant youngster accepts to ensure his first commission. Later, a troubled Misha is seen sitting in the three comrades’ flat, receiving a score of bookings for his ‘service’. He sold himself under pressure but also fell in love and begins dating Tata.

The three comrades semi-squat in and, in return, do up, another large but run down flat. There the masculinised Alia and Oleg discuss interior design. An effeminate Misha does the housework. Alia continuously gorges herself with food. Oleg and Misha prefer booze. Tata introduces Misha to St. Petersburg’s New Russian *beau- and demimonde*, where everyone seems to know and like her.
Tata also appears to be the mistress (*soderzhanka*) of a rich and much older New Russian, Sergei. He keeps her in his large apartment. While Tata likes Misha, her situation allows only for occasional clandestine meetings. She is distressed because of the oppressive love of her paternal captor, who has installed a surveillance camera and sends his strongmen to take care of Misha, when he finds out about their relationship. Misha escapes relatively unscathed thanks to Tata’s intervention. She placates his jealousy, explaining that Sergei does not sleep with her.

It turns out that Tata is slowly dying of leukaemia. In fact, Sergei originally found her in a sickroom, from where he took her to his flat to care for her. Regardless, Tata leaves the emotional Sergei after finding out about his covert surveillance of her. At this point, the distressed old gangster, whose oppressive help was in vain and no longer desired, disappears unceremoniously.

He is replaced by another father-figure, the doctor (Sergei Makovetskii), who, like everybody else, loves Tata. They have known one another for ‘a thousand years’ (tysiach’u let) as Tata says. She sees him for the eighth time to receive help. The distressed doctor welcomes her back into his care. Meanwhile, Vasia the builder has joined the three comrades, while Alia has begun to dissociate herself from them. With their increased income, her materialistic streak has worsened and she refuses to put money in a common pot. She claims independence.

The friends go to celebrate the day of the paratroopers. They finish up in a café, where Tata used to work. It is now run by two Central Asian women, who are insulted by a policeman. Tata asks him to apologise and, upon his refusal, empties a plate with plov – a Central Asian dish – over his uniform. Oleg saves her. On his special day, the paratrooper has nothing to fear from the state organs. Back at their flat, the friends find Alia, who did not join them, together with a nondescript Western European man, who does not speak Russian.

The following morning, Tata disappears without explanation. Alia announces that she will leave together with her foreign partner to work in Europe. The friends decide, under Vasia’s influence, to buy a piece of Russian land somewhere in the countryside. They even get Alia to agree. The three lads happen to take on work in the doctor’s flat, where they learn that he is taking care of Tata but that she is going to die soon. Misha is devastated. The whole group meet together with the doctor in
the country for a final gathering. After the barbecue, which ends in a sentimental
booze-up, Tata tells Misha that hers was love at first sight. She bravely tells him that
she feels no pain. He admits his suffering.

Misha’s first-person voiceover starts again, telling the audiences that Tata
died after two months. Alia has left for Europe. Misha and Oleg have not been able
to manage without ‘their’ women. Oleg has returned to the army. Misha, with the
last statement of the film, sadly says ‘well, and I... just live (am just alive)’ (a ia...
vot zhivu).

7.3 Gangster, Melodrama and Symbolic Narrative

In a now familiar jibe, certain critics, when discussing It Doesn’t Hurt, attacked
Balabanov for using a popular genre to ‘lure people into movie theatres’, 383 and for
pacifying viewers with a melodramatic end. However, the film’s open ambiguous
ending is atypical of mainstream melodrama: it lacks ‘an overwhelmingly
[pleasurable] monopathic catharsis... of triumph or defeat’. 384 Its self-conscious
deployment of the melodrama’s figurative potential renders It Doesn’t Hurt more
complex than a mere ‘tragedy for simple souls’. 385

Melodrama lends itself well to symbolic discussions of socio-historical issues
and self/other representations, as Jesús Martín-Barbero explains in his overview of
the dramatic structure and symbolic functions of melodrama. 386 Melodrama’s highly
emotional themes conventionally depend on clichéd and polarised characterisations
(stock characters like ‘the traitor’, ‘the victim’, ‘the champion’ and ‘the fool’). 387
These characters, Hayward observes, ‘adopt primary psychic roles’ 388 that receive
increased significance through their interactive constellations, actions, gestures and
the social implications of all these factors. In order to emphasise its dramatic
structure and to increase its emotional appeal, film melodrama also makes genre-
defining use of soundtrack as musical background (the melos). Specific camera
angles and other cinematographic devices support the thematic structure and increase
the film’s three-dimensionality. The emotional impact is enhanced by close-ups,

384 Smith (Ibid: 10-11).
385 Trofimenkov (Ibid.).
386 Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993), Communication, Culture and Hegemony, trans. Elizabeth Fox and
388 Hayward (Ibid: 238).
The features of melodrama combine to form part of an excessive Manichaean narrative. ‘In melodrama we win or lose; in tragedy we lose in the winning... or win in the losing’, Smith observes. He continues that ‘melodrama is the dramatic form which expresses the reality of the human condition as we all experience it most of the time’. Whether in triumph, defeat or protest, conventional melodrama’s ‘polarization’, according to Martín-Barbero, ‘tends to split reality into Manichaean divisions’, which under ‘the willing complicity of the public’ permits ‘the relation of experience with archetypes’ and, ‘according to some analysts, ideological blackmail’. The provision of pleasurable monopathy serves the cathartic relief of the ‘melodramatic audiences’, who are stimulated to suffer alongside their melodramatic heroes and who can feel as whole and undivided as them.

Melodrama is widely known for its ‘focus on the victim’. The Manichaean good/evil dichotomy – originally the innocent bourgeois girl and the villainous exploitative aristocrat – makes melodrama a suitable ‘form of dramatizing... social conflicts’, stereotyping and xenophobic self/other representations. Grigori Aleksandrov’s melodramatic musical, Circus (Tsirk, 1936), attests to this in Soviet cinema. The genre’s use of ‘décor and mise-en-scène as stand-ins for meaning’ typically supports such black and white representations and conspires with hyperbolic gestures and scenes to metaphorical effect. Peter Brooks observes that ‘things [and] gestures... become vehicles of metaphors whose tenor suggests another kind of reality [and] refer[s] to a parabolic story.’ He continues: ‘[melodramatic]

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389 Smith (1973: 10).
390 Ibid: 11.
391 Martín-Barbero (Ibid: 116).
394 Martín-Barbero (Ibid: 116).
396 Hayward (Ibid: 240).
social signification is only the merest starting point for an immense construction of connotation’.400

Blended with the – sometimes only implied – family drama of the oedipal gangster genre, the melodrama’s surface details can indicate a structured net of secondary symbolic meanings that transcend merely sporadic connotations. Such symbolic narratives receive their social signification with the help of the subjective, cultural and emotional coloration of objects, gestures, and characters. The melodramatic victim is highly suited to representing the (female, national, ethnic) self and the (male, foreign, terrorist, ruling) other-as-victimiser. Thanks to the melodrama of everyday life and its ideological association with common sense, uncritical viewers equate the representations of mainstream melodrama (as of other ‘reactionary’ genres and modes) with their own daily experiences.

Peter Bagrov observes that ‘Stanislavskii called attention to melodrama’s verisimilitude as one of its greatest strengths: “In watching a melodrama, the viewer considers that everything that takes place in the play took place in life.”’ 401 What he is pointing to is the close relationship between cultural verisimilitude and generic. Both verisimilitudes, however, are informed by the same dominant bourgeois ideology, which results in the genre’s pseudo-realistic402 verisimilitude of Manichaean representations. Unsurprisingly, Stanislavskii indicates melodrama’s defining preoccupation with contemporary issues.

Stereotypical black and white re/presentations are a hallmark not only of the moralistic melodramatic mode, but also of modern Western and Russian societies and their manner of ‘othering’. Melodrama reflects and reinforces our melodramatic mainstream society's imagination, myths, values and life. Thus, melodrama only appears to be verisimilar and realistic. ‘What seems particularly important in the enterprise of the social melodramatists’, Brooks writes, ‘[like, for example] Dostoevsky… – is their dual engagement with the representation of man’s social existence… and with the moral drama implicated by and in his existence’.403 The playwright and actor William Gillette observes that realism should be interpreted not

400 Ibid: 10.
402 Martín-Barbero (1993: 113).
403 Brooks (Ibid: 22).
as ‘actualism’, but as ‘artistic representations of reality’, with melodrama providing the strong emotional impact which places realism on a par with its antithesis – romanticism. In its artistic representations, however, melodramatic characters are as undivided as melodramatic mainstream audiences would like (them) to be. ‘Melodramatic man [is and wants to be] essentially ‘whole’’, according to Robert B. Heilman. Melodrama, like the melodramatic narrative of our ‘reality’, is thus co-defined by what Smith refers to as an ‘undivided... total dependence upon external adversaries’ and resulting Manichaean stereotyping (‘us versus them’).

He continues that ‘we see most of the serious conflicts and crises of our everyday lives in melodramatic, rather than tragic terms’. The undivided heroic self struggles with homogenised, villainous others in “reality” as it does inside film. Through melodrama, contemporary life resembles film and film becomes life, as it were, because melodramatic narratives reflect our contemporary society, just as the classical Western mirrored the Western frontier (myths).

Melodrama thus corresponds to what Stuart Hall refers to as a regime of representation. The melodramatic regime of representation with its stereotyping, its techniques of marginalisation, its crushing defeats and its euphoric triumphs, permits contemporary wo/man to escape the multifaceted complexity of reality by entering ‘wholeheartedly into a struggle against manifest injustice [and, by] attacking villains... become heroes’. The melodramatic mode [is marked by] high emotionalism and stark ethical conflict that is neither comic nor tragic in persons, structure, intent, effect. The ‘people’ are the witnesses, actors, audiences, narrators, authors etc. of the melodrama of pseudorealism in and outside cinemas. Melodrama’s excessive ‘polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world... Their conflict suggests the need... to purge the social order’.

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406 Smith (Ibid: 7-8).
409 Smith (Ibid: 10).
410 Ibid: 12.
1990s Russia, however, was represented through the cinematic prism of the gangster genre, as *Brother, Brother-2*, their emulators and *Dead Man’s Bluff* indicate.

*It Doesn’t Hurt*’s ‘gangster movie’ status is established through the depictions of the New Russian, Sergei, and his two thugs, Sergei’s ‘capture’ of an ordinary woman, his failure and fall from grace, and the oedipal trajectory of his successor, Misha. This blend of traditional melodrama with the gangster tragedy is what makes ‘Balabanov’s play with genre extremely serious’.412 The oedipal gangster narrative dovetails well with family melodrama. For ‘[i]n melodrama’, as Martín-Barbero observes, ‘human existence becomes centred on the unravelling of secret familial relationships... the basis for [its] plot’.413 It is in the blend of the gangster tragedy and the family melodrama, both of which address generation issues, where much of *It Doesn’t Hurt*’s symbolic value and socio-historical signification lies. Through it, and via the depiction of incestuous love between a mother figure and her son, as well as the latter’s destructive relationship with his father figure, the pop-genre cycle’s deployment of the trope of the family acrtes new layers of meaning and attains unprecedented levels of ambiguity. The dominance of melodrama in *It Doesn’t Hurt* is the defining feature of this final instance of Balabanov’s attachment to the gangster genre. It is indicated in the film’s title, and in the opening scenes.

7.4 Repression, Doors and Redecoration

The film’s first shot zooms in onto a newspaper full of professional advertisements. The most eye-catching, predominant adverts read ‘doors’ (*dveri*). In the context of Balabanov’s emphatic deployment of opening sequences to foreshadow themes, the concept of ‘door’ assumes significance, particularly given the St Petersburg setting, before alighting on a second advert, reading ‘design, repair’ and indicating a further thematic trope. Doors share a semantic field with windows. Both present structural elements in buildings but possess different functions. While windows are there to look out of (and peep into) - the symbolic role of St. Petersburg, Russia’s Western capital - doors are walkthroughs and provide genuine connections. Even if at this point this symbolism may not be entirely clear with respect to the upcoming story’s

412 Trofimenko (2007).
413 Martín-Barbero (Ibid: 118-19).
socio-historical concerns, further generic and narrative developments will support the central function of the building metaphor.

After Misha’s voiceover has introduced the three comrades and their joint venture, Misha, Oleg and Alia enter the building. Misha has just called Alia stupid (dura). Both men walk ahead of the woman. A swinging door bangs into Alia’s face. Oleg, who should have held the door open for Alia, casually apologises for his negligence. Alia responds with the words ‘It’s nothing. It doesn’t hurt at all’ (‘Da nichego! Ne bol’no sovsem). She is obviously hurt but does not want his sympathy. She grits her teeth. This conventional type of white lie is not unexpected and is often used to avoid unwanted sympathy. The pain is repressed in solitude. Appearances are made in the hope of saving face and retaining self-respect. Not accepting it for ‘true’ violates social etiquette and the hurt person is left alone. This is a case of a melodramatic depiction of pain caused by an external agency. The same statement – ‘it doesn’t hurt’ – will be repeated by different characters and becomes a leitmotif for the film. Alia’s statement finishes the opening sequence and underlines the film’s title: Mne Ne Bol’no appears on screen against the background of a swinging door. The melodrama is underway.

*It Doesn’t Hurt* possesses three main themes, all of which are related to melodrama’s basic inability to ‘figure the birth of a new society – the role of comedy – but only the old society reformed’.414 There is firstly the personal restraint and non-communication of emotions, which together indicate melodramatic irony (everyone can see that it hurts, after all!) and create pathos. (This is connected with the ironic incongruity of painful reality and affected appearances in the screen presentation, which results in a show of silent, ‘dignified’ suffering. It also links with the privileging of the spectator’s superior awareness vis-à-vis the characters’ repression of intense feelings. The pathos, in turn, is used to explore the psychological repression.415 It can increase the viewer’s awareness of the melodramatic irony or blind them in their ‘suffering together with’ the character.) The second theme is that of open doors. It refers to Russia’s – painful – opening up to the West/ern way and includes the notion of transition from one state to another: Brother’s barred window/Petersburg mutates into a door. The third theme is that of redecoration,

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which transfers the basic inability of melodrama to create something new – ‘the birth of a new society’ – onto the planes of narrative and mise-en-scène. It Doesn’t Hurt will tell a story about the redecoration of the inner-city apartments of Russia’s wealthy New Russian demimonde and thus in melodramatic terms ‘the reformation of the old society’ but not the creation of a new one. Such a creation would, according to the building metaphor, have required the construction of new houses.

The three themes are presented metaphorically through the film’s title, its mise-en-scène, and its characters’ expressions and gestures. This strategy is inherent to melodrama. Brooks observes that the goal of ‘the narrator [is] to make [melodrama] give up to consciousness its full potential as “parable”’. A parable is a symbolic narrative and closely related to allegory. This figurative reading of the film is strengthened by its family resemblance to Balabanov’s previous four pop-genre films. It is further emphasised by the film’s soundtrack, which evokes the oedipal gangster genre and supports the presupposition of a symbolic subtext.

7.5 The Melos: ‘Pozovi Menia Nebo’ and ‘Mammy Blue’

One openly melodramatic aspect of the film is its two main musical themes, ‘Mammy Blue’ (sung by Alesia Adol’fova Man’kovskaia) and ‘Call me Heavens’ (‘Pozovi menia nebo’ by Vadim Samoilov). It is well known that cinematic soundtracks ‘comment on’ and underscore screen action. They help give the audience a third dimension to its viewing experience. Melodramas (or ‘weepies’), in particular, use soundtracks to amplify their emotional impact. When songs are used, their lyrics are intended to support the story’s or episode’s themes. They can also comment directly on the narrative and assume the role of presenting a character’s thoughts.

‘Pozovi menia nebo’ is one of the two songs that accompanies and provides a regular commentary on the comrades’ adventures. Oleg even assumes the voice of the singer, and thus of the external narrator, when he performs the song, which was written specially for the film by the rock musician and poet, Vadim Samoilov, of the band, Agata Kristi. There is a close overlap between the themes and mood of the song with those of the film. ‘Pozovi menia nebo’ also presents the film’s final statement following upon, and underlining, the last, sad words of Misha, the internal.

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416 See Brooks (Ibid: 9-11); Hayward (Ibid: 242); and Elsaesser (Ibid: 376 & 385).
narrator. 'Pozovi menia nebo' is – like *Mammy Blue* – written in a melancholy-inducing minor tonality.

While crossing from past to new times, it is so easy to make mistakes./ While crossing from past to new times – difficult questions arise./ Answers are difficult to find. I drifted carelessly./ I was looking for you, where are you? My life was without comfort.

I tore down life’s walls, destroying all hope./ I rinsed the golden garments with blood./ Lonely and blind, I died without my beloved woman./ It seemed, that the Heavens have forgotten me.

Chorus: Call me, Heaven, surprise me with the truth./ Of course, I am not the first, who tried to fly and fell./ As if on purpose, you play with me/ because you remember everything, because you know everything.

The song’s lyrics are deceptively religious. They continue a theme introduced by the ethical Christian voice of Goffman in *Brother*, It was continued by one of *Dead Man’s Bluff’s* killers, Sergei jr., who continuously bows at the sight of Russian Orthodox churches. But, as in the previous films, the song departs from its conventional religious associations through its mythological references to Ikarus and to a playful deity. The Christian God does not play and Russian Orthodoxy’s mainstream nationalist inclinations is attacked indirectly through the song’s defiance of audience expectations. The lyrics give the audiences further clues about some of the film’s themes.

The songs speaks of transition, life, pain and death. The words tell us that to err is only human, especially during periods of change. It also refers to careless drifting, the avoidance of giving answers and the difficulty in making decisions, to oedipal loneliness and to blindness, to endless quests and self-destruction, to the shedding of blood and the rejection of god/s. These were, of course, the themes of *Brother*. The chorus becomes even more specific in its reintroduction of *Brother’s* tragic Ikarus motif. His bold flight separated him from his father, incurred divine punishment and resulted in his tragic fall. It invokes the film’s gangster associations and, arguably, within its dense network of conspiring connotations, the demise of male dominance. The song, as already indicated, finishes on a note of playfully divine punishment for mistakes of the past, thus emphasising the theme of classical tragedy.418

417 Brooks (Ibid: 1).
418 Greek gods are known for their laughter and other human attributes, whereas the Christian god is too removed from humanity to be described like a playful child.
The film’s tragic motifs are highlighted in its other, perhaps even sadder, musical theme. ‘Mammy Blue’ provides through its first person narration yet another angle on the characters and their significance. Misha’s and Sergei’s love for Tata are marked as oedipal by the song’s audio-visual, meta-narrative synchronisation with particular events involving these three characters. On several occasions, the song lends its voice to Misha – and once to Sergei – when addressing Tata. In doing so it underscores the film’s gangster pedigree through the theme of filial love.

‘I may be your forgotten son/ who wandered off at twenty one/
   it’s sad to find myself at home/ and you, you not around./
If I could only hold your hand/ and say I'm sorry yes I am/
   I'm sure you really understand/ oh Ma/ where are you now.

The lyrics confirm Tata’s and Misha’s roles as those of mother and son. The symbolism does not require actual age differences. When Tata, the mistress, leaves Sergei for her next suitor, Mammy Blue identifies their relationship, too, as oedipal. For in the context of the “Russian gangster genre”, the New Russian, Sergei, is an oedipal figure, regardless of his age. In the parallel oedipal context of the family melodrama, moreover, Misha is Sergei’s filial successor.

Misha is, like Robert from Three Comrades, the first person narrator of the story. His ‘I’ narration coincides with that of Mammy Blue in which Misha seemingly addresses his mother figure, Tata. Their relationship becomes tragically incestuous on the story’s symbolic plane. Whenever Tata and Misha meet privately to talk and to express their feelings by word and gesture, Mammy Blue’s voice is synchronised with the screen action. It lends the younger Misha its words and expresses his thoughts just as as Good-bye America! articulated the words and thoughts of Danila at the end of Brother-2. The addressee is always Tata, whom the song/Misha addresses as ‘Oh Mammy, Mammy Blue...’.

Mammy Blue is an international song that has been sung for decades by various artists in East and West. It increases the film’s cultural verisimilitude: ‘In watching a melodrama, the viewer considers that everything that takes place in the play took place in life’.419 Although they were both created in France, neither Mammy Blue nor melodrama can simply and unambiguously be regarded as

419 Bagrov (2007).
culturally representative of the West. While *Mammy Blue* was initially written by the French composer, Hubert Giraud, it has transcended many borders, those of the Soviet Union included. Moreover, the rendition used in *It Doesn’t Hurt* is sung by Alesia Adol’fovnna Man’kovskaia, who was born in Minsk and worked in Moscow at the time of the film’s shooting. The deployment of *Mammy Blue* contributes to and underlines the film’s theme of open doors in a global world. Its minor tonality and lyrics are perfectly suited to melodrama. The theme, however, supports the gangster’s oedipal relationship and thus indicates here a convergence with tragedy.

Savel’ev observed that the “‘chemistry of emotions” between the young lovers [in *It Doesn’t Hurt*] is rarely felt’.\(^{420}\) This is atypical of ‘pure’ melodrama. Typically, the audiences of melodrama – albeit privileged and “knowing” of the act – are induced to sympathise and identify with the characters. *It Doesn’t Hurt*, however, distances the ‘melodramatic audiences’. It denies them cathartic relief with its genre-untypical lack of close ups, lingering shots of nature (which typically help reflect characters’ states of mind) and loving or hysterical actions appropriate for the melodramatic portrayal of two young lovers. Ol’ga Klimova, for example, noted that the film used medium shots instead of close ups and ‘lacks any lovemaking and kissing scenes’.\(^{421}\) The lack of these fundamentally melodramatic details – cinematographic, mise-en-scène and blocking\(^{422}\) – rendered *It Doesn’t Hurt*’s approach to genre “impure” and hostile to the predominantly melodramatic discourse of modern bourgeois society.

### 7.6 Traditional Love Triangle + Oedipal Family Drama = Symbolic Gangster Melodrama

Traditional melodrama depicts a triad of ‘he’, ‘she’ and the ‘villain’, who, in this case, is an ageing New Russian gangster. He keeps ‘her’, Tata, in a non-physical relationship, which turns oppressive, when she meets ‘him’, Misha, who becomes the old gangster’s successor. Sergei probably meant well when he took Tata from her sickroom but he has failed in his endeavours to keep her and disappears. His unceremonious disappearance presents a symbolic death. His successor’s good fortune is also short lived. He, too, loses Tata, the mistress. She dies and he remains

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\(^{420}\) Savel’ev (Ibid.)

\(^{421}\) Klimova (Ibid.).

\(^{422}\) Blocking refers to the positioning and movement, that is the actions of actors/characters on the stage/screen. It forms part of the mise-en-scène.
devastated and alone. The gangster tragedy lurks underneath one melodramatic mode (the traditional love triangle) and overlaps with another (the modified oedipal family drama).

Sergei’s (guilt-driven?) belief that his money could save Tata presents together with her ‘liberation from him’ his divided tragic nature and ultimate failure. His path of development presents the fall of the gangster (also, significantly, Sergei), whose rise to power was depicted in *Dead Man’s Bluff*. He is another descendent of Lenin, who was in *Brother* presented as Danila’s symbolic father and the criminal of the Russian nation. Misha, the blagger, is the last, and in his submissive, effeminate role a much diminished Russian ‘gangster’ figure. Misha’s and Sergei’s similarity is emphasised by the fact that Misha wears the same underpants as Sergei, something which he ironically comments on: ‘By the way, it ripped me up to see that our tastes regarding the colour of underpants is exactly the same.’ (‘*Kstati, mne ochen’ polztilo to, chto moi i vashi vkusy v vybere tsveta nizhnego bel’ia polnost’iu sovpadaeat’*).

Sergei’s verbal reply, ‘Rascal’ (‘*naglets’*), underlines their difference in maturity. Like Danila and Pasha, these two tragic figures also meet at the entrance to the abode of the older man and his partner’s. While Danila beats up Pasha, Misha – who is only a shadow of a gangster – resorts to clandestine meetings. He is more of a post-New Russian blagger than a ruthless psychotic gangster. Misha does not use violence against his own people like his forerunners, Danila and the Sergeis. The Russian gangster has, together with the capitalist market economy, been incorporated into mainstream society. But his endeavours and business-success are as incapable of saving Tata as Sergei’s wealth and power. Both gangsters suffer the genre-conventional fall and – symbolic – death.

Misha’s drive to make it in the city by presenting himself as an interior designer brings him in touch with Sergei, with some of the latter’s values and with ‘their mistress’. In typical gangster fashion, the young upstart’s appearance and intervention precipitates the old gangster’s fall. Misha’s love is tragic not because Tata dies but because it points up the split nature of their personalities and relationship. Tata becomes his mistress, too, and cheats on Sergei before she leaves the latter. But ‘what goes around comes around’ and Misha suffers the consequences of his actions. The natural ease with which Tata deceives Sergei makes her a suitable successor of Balabanov’s other feisty female characters. Misha initially sleeps with Tata, who blackmails him, in order to secure his commission. His mind is troubled
about the commercially beneficial effects of his prostitution, which reveals his divided personality. Soon he falls in love with Tata but their acquaintance tears apart the three comrades and leads to Misha’s precipitous fall. Misha returns like Danila to an older woman, who uses him sexually. Both films depict mature, penniless women who are unhappy in their old relationships and take lovers. Tata’s monotonous life is comparable to Sveta’s daily grind in Brother. Both also leave their younger lovers.

Misha’s accidental encounter with a dark-haired prostitute on Nevskii Prospect also evokes Brother, for it parallels that between Danila and Cat/Kэт. The working girl is, like her predecessor in Brother, clad in black leather and has dark curly hair. Misha, like Danila, distractedly bumps into the charming young woman. She replies to Misha’s apology with the words ‘No problem. It doesn’t hurt at all’ (Da mne ne bol’no sovsem). After a brief, friendly and almost flirty chat, the young woman follows the departing Misha with her eyes and sighs deeply. She is evidently attracted. This episode appears to be a narrative ‘patch’ that is unrelated to the overall fabric of the film. Its comparative length would be unmotivated, if it were not for the purpose of linking Balabanov’s last gangster film with his first.

Brother’s oedipal gangster, fell (‘propal’) but did not die, just as the traumatic changes endured by post-Soviet Russia were ongoing rather than complete. At the beginning of the 1990s the young gangster had just commenced on his path. Ten years later, he has grown old and he disappears two thirds of the way through It Doesn’t Hurt. Appropriately, two thirds of screen time correspond closely to the first decade of post-Soviet history. The end of the 1990s also saw the end of the criminal anarchy that defined the rise of the New Russian gangsters (depicted by Dead Man’s Bluff), who were the latest failure in the succession of unsuccessful masculine ‘patrons’ of what in It Doesn’t Hurt is represented as the ‘thousand year old’ motherland. Sergei shares his first name with that of Dead Man’s Bluff’s Soviet-to-post-Soviet gangster boss (also played by Mikhalkov) and the latter’s minion and successor, Sergei ‘Jr.’ (Aleksei Panin). Moreover, the actress, Renata Litvinova, also played the part of the waitress, Kэт/Cat, in Dead Man’s Bluff and was a namesake of one of Brother’s promiscuous, self-abusive anti-heroines. Kэт/Cat was taken by, or followed, the gangsters to Moscow to serve them. Litvinova’s and Mikhalkov’s twin roles as serving girl and kept woman, on the one hand, and an old Soviet and New Russian gangster, on the other hand, point to the two films’ shared concerns. Dead Man’s Bluff depicted the carnivalesque farce that was the rise of the
gangster. *It Doesn’t Hurt* portrays his melodramatic failure and fall. Notwithstanding these films’ generic hybridity, the gangster genre provides the basic plot and dominant orientation in both films. The dominant modes of representation are black, violent comedy (up) and banal melodrama (down). In a manner of speaking, with their shared gangster genre and carnivalesque elements, *Dead Man’s Bluff* and *It Doesn’t Hurt* form a diptych. Particularly important here is the absurd party involving St. Petersburg’s *demimonde*, to which Tata brings Misha in order to show him off, be fawned upon, and stuff her plastic bag with bottles of alcohol, whole chickens, cheese and salad under the understanding eyes of the successful New Russians. The episode is as grotesque as it is descriptive of the new Russian high society, whose members pose like returned aristocrats but are devoid of any taste: costumes expose naked behinds, excessive amounts of food, a tasteless blend of opera, bodybuilders, fireworks, balloons and Can-Can. The New Russians who became ‘self-made men’ in *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s carnivalesque parody can now enjoy the fruits of their endeavours in the 1990s and transform Russia’s old nobility into grotesque, pantomime characters. Alia’s gluttony also belongs to this parodic category. It symbolises her greed, materialism and hunger for a better life. One cannot help feeling sympathetic for her when she gorges herself on Tata’s spoils taken from the New Russian carnival, since she has probably never been treated to such delicacies.

Tata is Alia’s forerunner in her role as Mother Russia. She indicates her age twice, giving two very different numbers. On the one hand, she tells Misha that she is 27 and one year older than him. This sick woman was born in the very same year, 1979, when Soviet Russia invaded Afghanistan and began an occupation that drained the USSR’s economic and spiritual resources (see *Cargo 200*). But she also tells the doctor: ‘I have known you for a thousand years [my emphasis (FW)]. I have been here seven times under your considerate, tactful guidance (*ia zhe znaïu vas tysiaç’u let. Ia sem’ raz zdes’ lezhala pod vashim chutkim rukovodstvom.*).’ On the symbolic level, Tata represents the thousand year-old motherland which has already been ill and under the doctor’s care seven times. The last time, it was the old Sergei who took her from a sickroom, which, to pursue the construction metaphor, could be said to represent the Soviet Union.

Tata is both the last and, like all her predecessors, the quintessence of the traditional Russian motherland. On the one hand, all of her forerunners merge into
the single figure of the thousand year-old, dying Mother Russia. On the other hand, the sick *femme fatale* continues the sequence of provocative representations of Mother Russia that started with the aristocratic prostitute Anna from *Happy Days*. After Anna’s unenlightened, exploited and self-abusive successors, who all played their female parts in Balabanov’s challenge to the trope of the family, Tata recognises the nature of her illness and reports it to the nameless doctor.

The doctor replaces Sergei as a father figure. Young Misha is simply too inexperienced for such a task. Tata, moreover, like Sveta, does not place too much faith in her male partners. Like Sveta she uses but does not confide in the young man, who gives her what his older counterpart cannot give, i.e. romance, adventure and sex. She spends only one night in his run down flat, which by comparison to her prolonged stay in Sergei’s posh apartment presents a marginalisation of the place and its occupant in terms of screen time. Her return to the doctor is in vain. He can only fulfil the function of a nurse to ease Tata’s suffering for an eighth time.

In *It Doesn’t Hurt*, the mother figure finally dies. The care given to her in the last (‘post-2000’) third of the story cannot prevent her death. Gangster tragedies that undermine mainstream melodramatic representations of the mother as the benign fertile locus of the family – for example, Raoul Walsh’s *White Heat* (1949) – require the tragic couple’s fall in oedipal manner. Mother Russia’s death is tragic only if one considers that her life was spent as a gangster mistress (e.g. Sveta, Dasha, and the two *Kats/Cats*). Her leukaemia, which appears to be a melodramatic ‘external adversary’, acquires the importance of ‘divine’ punishment for her life as a cheating mistress of criminal figures. For the tragic reading it is important that she finds out about her terminal disease only after she seduces Misha and cheats on Sergei.

### 7.7 Self/Other Representations of the New Russia

Like Tata, Alia does not stay with her male counterpart, Misha. She chooses an individualistic path and follows a Western European abroad. The new Russian female is an ambiguous figure. Initially, she retains the masculine appearance of a Soviet woman. Alia is, however, also an architect with aspirations: a fitting metaphor for a modern Russia that wants to rebuild itself. She is, for most parts of the film, clumsy and poorly dressed, eats like a pig, and is continuously made fun of by her male friends. Alia is a far cry from the eccentric, yet charming, self-
humiliating, yet wilful, Tata, who is full of zest and life despite her pending doom. Tata’s monotonous existence - that of a deceitful mistress - could not be more different from Alia’s successful endeavour to earn her own living from architecture.

The satirical depictions of Alia may provoke laughter, but they are also cringe-worthy. Either way the effect is to distance the viewer from the character, revealing Balabanov’s ambiguous attitude towards the new Russia and its ‘new women’. Alia is a capable architect. Her move to the West is motivated by the lack of appropriate tasks in St. Petersburg and, symbolically, Russia. She is surrounded by Russian men but does nothing to appeal to them. Her female features are suppressed by her masculine way of dressing, hair cut and eating manners. Her proletarian appearance, like that of Svetla, makes her the successor to the working-class Soviet woman. She is merely a masculinised component of a collective governed by males. When, however, she meets a Westerner, she begins to develop an individual taste in clothes and pay more attention to her appearance. The foreigner represents something worth changing for. Nonetheless, it is Misha and Oleg who help her find more appropriate clothes.

Doing up flats for rich New Russians is not enough for Tata’s materialistic, Western-oriented successor. The healthy bourgeois glutton enters into a non-physical partnership with a man who can give her a new life but probably no children. When Oleg enquires about the character of Alia’s relationship with the Westerner, ‘And what about sex?’, she answers, ‘What about it?’ (‘A seks?’ – ‘Che seks?’). By following her ‘partner’ to Finland to take on projects as an architect, Alia shows herself to be more emancipated than Tata. The country of her destination, moreover, somewhat alleviates the shock of her departure. It is not as far removed as America - Russia’s western other in the two Brother films.

When, with the help of her male friends, Alia changes into an emancipated female individualist, the myth of the Soviet working collective represented by the three comrades is shattered. Her positive development, however, goes hand in hand with her - and Tata’s - crucial role in the destruction of the ‘brotherhood’. Without her and Tata, the new and the old heart of the national family, the remaining friends are scattered to the four winds. Critical ambiguity, however, is not only directed at women. At root, the melodramatic gangster, Misha is also an individualist incapable of sustaining cooperative activities and relationships.
The trajectory of Alia’s development from a munching scarecrow in combat trousers to an attractively clad woman runs counter to Tata’s. Tata began as a stylish representative of St. Petersburg’s (Russia’s) beaumonde (and possibly unrespectable bird in the gilden cage of the criminal demimonde). At the end of the film, however, it is she who ‘wears cargo pants and a black turtleneck sweater and looks like a ghost with a short haircut, pale face, and dark circles under her eyes’.²²³ Alia will never possess the class and allure of the carousing, Russian femme fatale of the past. But she will not be a cynical kept woman either. At the moment it is impossible for her to follow her aspirations at home together with Misha. Alia’s proletarian outfit and her inability to express herself linguistically spoke of the repression of her desires and ambitions. Tata defies the submissive role of the working woman still further but her final, robust proletarian appearance fails to conceal her illness and disappears with her.

The new Russia is unfavourably represented. Her financial contribution to Vasia’s mission to buy a patch in the Russian provinces renders her still more ambiguous. Although she prefers to work in the Near-West rather than at home, where, to be fair, there are no real projects for the architect yet, she is also committed to, and remains connected with, the Russian heartland. The idea of buying the land, however, came from the group’s newest member and Alia’s successor, the builder, Vasia.

Vasia is Alia’s opposite and counterpart. He joins the group when Alia is beginning to emancipate herself. His building profession provides the solid foundation for Alia’s architectural designs. Through his profession, ‘post-post-Soviet’ Russia is represented as needful of a solid foundation rather than fancy projects. This part of the ‘construction’ theme, like that of the ‘new Russian woman’, can be viewed as sociological and metonymic, and/or as figurative and metaphoric. Vasia, moreover, represents Russia’s inward Slavophilic orientation. By initiating the land purchase, he ensures that the members of the scattering group remain connected with each other and the homeland. His character thus also provides a counterweight to the negative representation of Slavophilia in Dead Man’s Bluff’s Sergei, whose Westernizing antithesis, Simon/Semion, shares his centrifugal orientation with Alia. Vasia is, in turn, also a successor of Brother-2’s ever-reliable

²²³ Klimova (Ibid.).
and sturdy bodyguard, Boris. He is the only unambiguously good, solid representation of all that is fair about Russia. He is a dependable builder and farmer who loves the Russian countryside. His undivided self is typical of melodrama and thus indicates the film’s melodramatic triumph in the face of Misha’s tragic defeat.

By returning the group of friends to Russia’s regenerative heart- and motherland, the film embraces continuation and development to balance its depictions of illness, death, departure and rupture. The old ‘family collective’ has disappeared at the end of a sequence of tragic relationships between the promiscuous courtesan of the motherland and her criminal male partners who represent the state and the fatherland. The motherland’s hypermodern version, Alia, may return one day, when she hears of Tata’s death, to take her place.

Besides these renderings of the darker sides of Russia’s self and its domestic others, It Doesn’t Hurt’s also comments retrospectively on Brother’s self/other representations. Tata’s interaction with representatives of Russia’s Central Asian others parallels that of Danila. It Doesn’t Hurt’s Eastern other comes in the form of two Central Asian women running a small restaurant. They mirror both the helpful young Caucasian man selling watermelons on the Haymarket and Danila’s hostile encounter with two Armenians on a tram. Danila’s racist comment (‘you black-arsed scum’) is in part cancelled out by his otherwise friendly relations with ordinary people, Russian or otherwise. It Doesn’t Hurt’s synthesises the tram and Haymarket episodes, further challenging audience misreadings of the former. The film depicts amicable relations between the motherland and the female representatives of her ethnic other. That part of the paternal male state represented by one of the policemen, however, is shown to be as hostile and aggressive towards his ethnic other as Danila was towards the two Armenians. Danila’s melodramatic successor, however, the melodramatic gangster Misha, relies on his friend and ex-paratrooper to resolve the situation in peaceful manner. Misha, as opposed to Danila, possesses neither the ability nor willingness to use violence. Besides the protector, Oleg, and the abuser, the policeman, Misha represents in this episode a third facet of the paternal state – the petty bourgeois businessman.

Tata, moreover, shares the same social class as the two Central Asian women. This becomes clear when one of the policemen says to her ‘But I recognise
you. You used to work here, didn’t you? (A ia tebia uznal. Ty zhe zdes’ rabotala.). Tata’s image as a kept woman at the fringes of the New Russian *demimonde* are thus modified through the revelation of her previous working-class background. Tata orders four portions of plov, which she and three of her friends will eat in the small restaurant, displaying their confidence in the women by buying and consuming it on their territory. Ethnic otherness thus escapes marginalisation in *It Doesn’t Hurt*, relativising post-Soviet Russian stereotyping which generally exploits Chechen men – not Central Asian women – as a synecdoche for all of Russia’s ‘blacks’ (*chernye*). Moreover, despite Tata’s crucial role in the destruction of the male-dominated collective, one of Mother Russia’s redeeming feature is that of mutual acceptance and non-violent coexistence with her Central Asian others. The fact that her successor Alia does not appear in this episode underscores new Russia’s western orientation.

The episode deepens Balabanov’s critical attitude to the state police, which he sees as unrelated to the conventional armed forces. For the army is made up of the country’s abused sons (Danila, Ivan and even Oleg). They represent an entity quite different from the state police, ridiculed earlier in *Brother* (Viktor) and *Dead Man’s Bluff* (Sergei). The fact that the scene takes place on the day of the paratrooper (2 August) motivates the film’s low-key screen action and adds to its socio-cultural verisimilitude, as does the subtle detail according to which the policemen know they must show the white feather to an ex-paratrooper (Oleg) on a day when St. Petersburg ‘belongs’ to him and his military comrades for 24 hours. In *It Doesn’t Hurt*, male characters also contribute to the suppression of violence in a sentimental gesture which confirms the film’s melodramatic inclinations. Oleg’s excessively romantic streak (re)connects him with his loyalty to his military past. He thinks seriously about returning to the army to punish and kill a former comrade for accidentally causing another friend’s death. But in typical melodramatic style, he needs alcohol to give expression to these repressed feelings (melodrama is no stranger to repression, as many have observed) and there is no telling, if he would actually go that far.

The theme of a previous war which continues to exert a negative influence over a society in transition also links *It Doesn’t Hurt* with one of its primary literary influences, the German melodrama, *Three Comrades*. In both works, post-war societies and their conflicts are depicted together with the rise of an opportunist
bourgeois society and potentially dangerous right-wing currents. Both works depict the death of an old era through the death of their melodramatic bourgeois heroines and the departure abroad of a number of their heroes. Let us then examine the intertextual affinities and their implications for the self/other dynamic in Balabanov more closely.

7.8 The Literary Intertext: Three Comrades and The Lady of the Camellias

On the plane of characterisation, Oleg, Misha and Alia present a narrative link with Remarque’s drama, Three Comrades. Oleg is an ex-soldier like Robert, who, in turn, like Misha is the first-person narrator of the drama. Oleg, like Robert, is still influenced by his recent military past. Misha, like Robert, sets up a business together with his two comrades. In It Doesn’t Hurt, they redecorate flats. In Comrades they repair cars. Alia displays overtly masculine traits and is treated like a comrade even after she chooses her own way and leaves the community. One of the original three comrades, Gottfried, likewise chooses another activity – politics – as a result of which he ‘leaves’ the group by being murdered. The heroines of both Comrades and It Doesn’t Hurt, Pat and Tata, are of higher social rank, dependent on a rich shady bourgeois man and succumb to disease, bouts of which they have had before. Each work concludes with a departure. Robert and Otto leave for South America, as the new Germany has nothing to offer. Alia goes to Finland, since her own country does not need her yet.

Remarque’s story is a social drama set in the ‘Golden Twenties’. The term describes a period of economic upswing in Germany after the immediate post-war years that had seen a steep slump in the German economy resulting in mass unemployment, poverty, declining birth rates and rocketing numbers of suicides. It Doesn’t Hurt depicts a similar period of economic stability coinciding with the passing of the social plight and economic destitution associated with the aftermath of the Chechnia wars as depicted in Brother. Germany’s ‘Golden Twenties’, moreover, saw the rise of the ‘new woman’, who took on increased responsibilities in Germany’s economy due to the lack of men. Alia develops along analogous lines. She is, in business terms, the most important and assertive member of her ‘brotherhood’ and emancipates herself from, but with the help of, her male comrades. Her biographical path advances the collapse of the collective but it also
results in her discovering her (and Russia’s) new self. Balabanov’s melodrama is thus more ambiguous than Remarque’s.

Several references in the film direct the viewers’ attention to the German drama. The German other had already received a dominant role in Brother through the voice of Goffman. In It Doesn’t Hurt, Misha discovers a tea-table in the run-down flat, he, Oleg and Alia live in. The table’s cover bears the name of Friedrich Sander (in Cyrillic script), which is the name of both a German engineer and a musician/composer. The fact that the German name is written in Cyrillic on what, consequently, is a Russian tea table, indicates Russia’s historical link with German culture (the table has the year 1893 written on it). The table’s location in a run down St. Petersburg apartment undergoing redecoration corroborates this view. Oleg, furthermore, brings along to the flat a Russian girl whom he had earlier picked up during the Day of the Paratroopers. During their evening get-together (vecherinka), she proposes to be their ‘Gruppenfuehrer’ (Ia budu vashim Gruppenfuehrer) for a session of group sex.

Here It Doesn’t Hurt merely touches upon the alarming political theme of Remarque’s exile-novel, which describes life and society during the Weimar Republic and indicates how the transition to National Socialism became possible in post-war, opportunist Germany. Comrades’ political activist, Gottfried, is chased by a squad of SA men (the SA later helped the German Nazis rise to power) and is shot dead. The Russian girl’s use of the word Gruppenfuehrer, which means squad leader, is a (para)military term and invokes Remarque’s description of the murder. It refers implicitly to the growth of right-wing organisations in Russia and, particularly, St. Petersburg, which has rapidly been gaining a reputation as Europe's neo-Nazi capital. Members of these paramilitary organisations receive combat training (hand-to-hand and squad tactics) and work as security professionals. The Russian character’s readiness to prostitute herself indiscriminately may be read as a hyperbolic critique of the country’s right-wing populist inclinations.

It Doesn’t Hurt’s adaptation of the socially critical drama Three Comrades, first adapted as a film melodrama in 1938, included the two main melodramatic modes which it shares with The Lady of Camellias. Both dramas were widely known in the Soviet Union and subsequently in post-Soviet Russia. They were also taught at schools all over the Eastern Bloc countries. The target audiences of It Doesn’t Hurt
would thus have been fully attuned to the intertextual references with which the film is replete.

Moreover, the intertextual references contribute to the film’s self/other representations. Marguerite Gautier’s alienation to her masters reflects that of Tata’s. Roland Barthes observes that ‘the central myth in The Lady of the Camellias is not Love, it is Recognition.’424 So, Tata, like her predecessor, feels more than anything recognised by her young lover. Like Marguerite’s and Armand’s passions, also Tata’s and Misha’s are of two different natures: she needs his recognition and he, the entrepreneur, needs to possess her. Misha’s, like Armand’s and Sergei’s ‘passion’, to use Barthes words, ‘... is bourgeois in type, and appropriative, is by definition a murder of the other...’425 Both Marguerite and Tata (Mother Russia) know themselves to be objects of their bourgeois masters but only Tata takes an ambiguous step towards freedom: she leaves Sergei only when she understands that she is terminally ill and under surveillance. If Russia’s conflict was expressed solely through Tata and Misha, it would remain exterior and melodramatic due to the arguably different natures of their passions.426 But, since Mother Russia is also depicted through Alia, who feels equally alienated by the dominant male collective and, crucially, lack of professional perspectives, the Russian motherland is shown as internally split between the courtesan’s ‘lofty’ past and the bourgeois entrepreneur’s budding independent future. Alia does not share Tata’s and Marguerite’s ‘blindness’ and, thus, the new Mother Russia becomes, to reapply Barthes’s observation, a ‘Brechtian character, which is an alienated object [turned subject (FW)] but [and thus (FW)] a source of criticism’.427

German culture has long influenced Russia. Both countries’ recent histories have been marked by war, militarisation and post-war economic struggles. Dumas’s depictions of a Parisian démimonde inhabited by socially integrated and now respectable criminals found their way via Remarque into Balabanov’s portrayal of Tata’s New Russian adulators. This implicit social criticism is amplified by Balabanov’s emulation of Remarque’s depictions of reactionary capitalists and incipient Nazism in his own portrayal of the contemporary Russian Zeitgeist. Both

425 Ibid: 104.
426 See Barthes’ observations (Ibid: 104-05).
works depict the spiritual revival and physical death of an upper-class woman, who has turned away from her former values for the love of a young hard-working entrepreneur. Balabanov, however, is admonitory rather than fatalistic in his approach: whilst Nazism became a bitter historical truth, Russian fascism remains an emergent, and hence, still defeatable, threat. *It Doesn’t Hurt* adopts a subjunctive ‘if … then …’ modality which still leaves room for the hope that tragedy will be avoided.

### 7.9 Conclusion

This chapter’s main aim was to examine the final chapter in Balabanov’s exploration of the vicissitudes of the post-Soviet Russian self in its multiple encounters with otherness. Like the other films in the cycle, *It Doesn’t Hurt* counters mainstream culture’s tendency to disambiguate historical complexities. It self-critically depicts the ills of post-Soviet Russian society and of Russia as a symbolic and imaginary concept. Through its adoption of the melodramatic mode, and its invocation of specific melodramatic intertexts, Balabanov consolidates his allegiance to Western cultural forms as a means of complicating his depiction of the fate of the Russian self. Through the mechanisms of intercultural dialogue *It Doesn’t Hurt* acknowledges the continued influence of the American other, whilst simultaneously striving to jettison that other’s overbearing influence. The old gangster has failed in his task and is fading away, as is the rich American cinematic legacy he reflects. Balabanov’s acute awareness of the piquancy of Russia’s failure to internalise the American ideal, however, demonstrates its residual appeal to him as director, and to Russian society.

Through his account of the mellowed character of Sergei, Balabanov traces the *dénouement* of the epic gangster drama, a *dénouement* which was missing in *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s gangster trajectory. Like all of its predecessors, *It Doesn’t Hurt* adopted popular generic modes of expression, only to undermine them by inserting them into in a challenging, countercultural dialogue about Russian national selfhood and its troubled relationship with alterity. Its apparent embrace of melodramatic polarities is deceptive, since, through its awkward encounter with gangster themes and types, boundaries between categories – ethical, national, cultural and cinematic - become blurred and uncertain.
The sentimental (and thus melodramatic) old gangster fails to save his terminally ill mistress and unceremoniously disappears. His benign filial successor is driven to succeed commercially but his dependency on, and love for, the old gangster’s mistress has tragic outcomes. Theirs is the last in a succession of relationships between symbolic mistress(es) and their wayward, interim champions. The kept motherland is succeeded by an emancipated but selfish ‘new Russian woman’. She blossoms under the attention of a Westerner, but cynically exploits the latter in order to find abroad the purpose which she lacks at home. The ambiguous empowering of female characters (including, in part, the ethnic female other from Central Asia) exposes them to threats from Russia’s state (police). Together these women deconstruct both the myth of the Soviet working collective and the familiar image of Russia’s eastern other as the virile, but barbaric, male of the Caucasus region. The only melodramatically whole character is Vasia. He, like Boris in Brother-2, may be regarded as Balabanov’s impossible Russian ideal, sentimentally, and stubbornly, perpetuated against all the cinematic odds and all the sociological evidence.

It is (paradoxically, given its Western provenance) through the Three Comrades intertext that Balabanov ultimately acknowledges the dangerous reality of the socio-historical developments that post-Soviet Russia shared with the Golden Twenties of post-World War I Germany. Both dramas depict periods in previously militaristic societies now experiencing a spell of national economic improvement. But It Doesn’t Hurt can only allude to what Remarque’s work (written in exile) could depicted explicitly: an opportunistic, reactionary capitalism which, as the beneficiary of democratic liberalism, did little to prevent the decline of the old country, the rise of right-wing nationalism on the popular and state levels, and the return of repressive, autocratic structures. Balabanov’s adaptation of The Lady of the Camellias, in turn, alleviates this picture of pending ‘capitalist doom’ by helping to demonstrate the outdatedness of Russia’s past as an alienated mistress to the state and her predecessors’ discovery of bourgeois ‘wings’ that free her from the burden of a male dominated collective but also prevents the selfish individualist from creating a family at home, for now.

It Doesn’t Hurt completed Balabanov’s extended, and ambivalent, lament on Russia’s post-Soviet fate – a lament articulated through the hybrid vocabulary of cinematic genre. In fact, Balabanov implicitly surmises, the epithet ‘post-Soviet’
disappears with the old gangster and its failed charge, the motherland. In correspondence with the centrifugal forces of its St. Petersburg setting, the film imagines a new post-post-Soviet Russia that has declared irrevocable, yet, contradictory, allegiance with a Western other-become-self promising atomisation and, for better or for worse, the final dissipation of Danila’s doomed male fraternity.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit the research objective and questions raised in the Introduction, in light of the theoretical/methodological discussion in Chapter 2 and the subsequent analyses in Chapters 3 to 7. It begins by addressing the core research objective and the four research questions. Finally, it outlines the original contributions of the study.

8.1 Revisiting the Thesis Objective
The main research objective of the study was to provide an analysis of the character of self/other representations in Balabanov’s five Zeitgeist genre films through an examination of the films’ deployment of genre and intertextuality.

Film genre theory was introduced in Chapter 1 and presented in Chapter 2 as both a theoretical context and a precise methodological apparatus. Encompassing all films with a narrative dimension, this approach regards genre as cinema’s principal organiser. Allowing for the primarily visual character of the medium, a film’s genre is recognisable from its iconography, its genre-typical themes, its characterisations, its plots, and its use of certain (meta-)cinematic devices and techniques indicative of its ideological/cultural leanings. Genre film theory is inherently linked to the concept of intertextuality (the corpora constituting a genre) and allusion (direct references to particular members of those corpora). Genre theory is particularly suited to investigations of cinema’s self/other representations because of its attention to reassuring rules and expectations (and thus to identifications and prejudices), and because it recognises that narrative films ‘through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations’ that include reflections of the ‘contemporary Zeitgeist’.428

The application of film genre theory was accompanied in my thesis by a step-by-step approach to the filmic texts. Before making judgements regarding the genre, close film-textual readings and detailed analysis of the iconographies, themes, character constellations and plots were required. This analysis included the identification of intertextual works impacting on the films under investigation. These works belonged to the same generic corpora as the films and were either directly alluded to, or shared their plots, themes and cultural concerns to such a significant

428 Grant (2007: 1, 5-6).
extent that they could be identified as direct intertextual influences. By following this approach and comparing my own detailed findings with the conclusions of established genre studies, my thesis was able to identify and make sense of the genre fields in which Balabanov’s films operated.

The filmic text, rather than the appropriations of the films by wider audiences and critics, was treated as the primary object of investigation. For it is the filmic text rather than a plurality of more or less informed opinions on, and studies of, the film, that is the nexus of the relationships that genre entails. Thus, genre hybridity and variations, along with the iconography and syntactic/semantic composition of genres were of paramount importance for understanding self/other representations in Balabanov’s films.

I was careful to distinguish ‘film genre’ (a concept applicable to all cinema) from ‘genre film’ (a particular kind of popular cinema oriented towards formulaic repetition and narrative predictability). In the case of the latter, it was shown that their ideological/cultural leanings can be ascertained by analysing their narrative structure. The reactionary nature of genre movies means that they subscribe to an ideology of representations – the achievement of the illusion of an ideal, natural reality – and in so doing unproblematically broadcast dominant cultural ideas and representational practices in fixed ritualised forms such as closed/reassuring order-chaos-order structures with happy endings, stereotypical representations and uncritical disseminations of mainstream myths. Progressive filmmaking, like Balabanov’s, deconstructs these standard formulaic-reactionary texts. It tends to be self-reflexive, engages with historical complexities, casts characters representing the self and others as socio-historically specific, rather than eternal, types, and even criticises aspects of the self. Finally, my application of genre theory has enabled me to unite Balabanov’s ‘genre movies’ and his ‘art-house’ output within a single, coherent oeuvre possessing an overarching narrative and shared concerns, themes and techniques. For Balabanov’s self/other representations are the result of the director’s subtle self-positioning within various narratives and of his films’ active, multi-layered dialogue with Hollywood genre film, with the contemporary post-Soviet Zeitgeist, and with his own audiences.

The first, introductory, chapter justified the choice of Balabanov’s five Zeitgeist films by placing them in a broad socio-historical and cultural context and
provided a step-by-step approach to narrative film analysis. Chapter 2 contained an overview of film genre theory and established the methodology by which to identify the character of narrative films’ ideological alignment and self/other representations. Chapters 3 to 7 showed – by detailed, sustained analyses of the films through the prism of genre – how, in the process of deploying genres, cinematic modes and intertextuality/allusion, the writer-director responded to developments in the post-Soviet historical context. Balabanov, it transpired, constantly deconstructed dominant ideas of Russian identity and alterity as well as mainstream myths, changing his position/perspective under the influence of a changing historical context.

8.2. Revisiting the Research Questions

8.2.1 Research Question 1

The core aim of the thesis generated four research questions. With regard to an examination of the interplay of self/other representations and film genre, the first research question addressed the relationship between the self/other representations embedded in Balabanov’s Zeitgeist films and their deployment of genre. The thesis addressed this question in the following ways.

Chapter 2 provided the theoretical framework and methodology needed to approach this question by a) justifying the means (a methodology grounded in genre theory) to the end (the analysis of self/other representations). The chapter outlined concepts of film genre and genre film, arguing that these are inextricably linked with the concept of intertextuality (narrowly, through explicit allusions and, broadly, through the existence of genre corpora comprising film and literature). It illuminated these concepts from theoretical and historical perspectives, explained phenomena like genre evolution, variety and hybridity and, within the context of Russian film studies, emancipated the concept of genre movies from their subaltern relationship with art-house movies. The relationships of genre with viewers’ expectations/hypotheses and receptions were scrutinised and the existence of specifically generic and broadly cultural verisimilitudes explained. The chapter also outlined genre films’ relationship with ideology, ritual and myth as well as representations of stereotypes and social types. Chapter 3 discussed Brother’s deployment of the gangster genre in its subversive neo-noir mode, blended with Dostoevskian psychological crime drama and presenting a late case of Russian
chernukha. This eclectic genre blend was shown to be influenced by *Crime and Punishment, Macbeth, Mean Streets, Taxi Driver* and *Luna-Park*. It presented Balabanov’s first deconstruction of the art-house/genre – film/movie hierarchy. The allegorical genre hybrid’s self-critical representations of post-Soviet Russian identity deployed a drifting, neo-noir gangster figure whose oedipal proclivities and psychotic behaviour aligned him with Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov. Danila was shown to be in dysfunctional relationships with two representatives of the Russian motherland: a tragic, vulgar mother figure and rape victim (Sveta) and a young materialistic prostitute and drug abuser (Kэт/Cat). The socially critical neo-noir/chernukha idiom also depicted destructive family relationships between anti-heroic (Soviet-)Russian brothers of two generations. Danila’s voice was thus revealed as lacking authority, making it impossible to equate his statements with Balabanov’s views. *Brother*’s ethical voice was shown to belong to a German, Goffmann. But his authority was also undermined through his inability to provide viable guidance to Danila. The fact that the gangster genre focuses on the community shed new light on *Brother*’s purportedly stereotypical, marginalising representations of Russia’s Caucasian other who, according to the conventions of the gangster genre, still belonged to the peripheries of the Russian community (that of the self) in the early-to-mid 90s. *Brother*’s self-reflexive approach to those conventions, I argued, meant that the Russian protagonist’s relationships with his ‘Eastern’ other (internally differentiated between an Armenian-Christian and a Chechen-Muslim hypostasis) were revealed in their full ambiguity and historical complexity. The film, I contended, deconstructed fixed stereotypes in favour of nuanced and fluid social types. Finally, I linked the use of Hollywood-style neo-noir and gangster motifs with the implicit imaging of an overarching American otherness.

In Chapter 4 I suggested that, far from representing an unproblematic sequel, *Brother-2* parodies *Brother*, whilst also mirroring *The Untouchables* by conflating the structure of the Western with aspects of the gangster genre, and by submerging these genres in the semantics of a late 1990s boevik-action movie satire which echoes Kuleshov’s *Mr. West*. Through the satirised Western genre, which thematically focuses on representations of the community’s frontier conflicts with external others, *Brother-2* tells the story of post-Soviet Russia’s partially self-inflicted loss of Ukraine, whose representative left the community to live the American dream. Ukraine and its criminal elites are satirised as harshly as are their
Russian, Polish and American counterparts. The satire’s use of caricature also supports the narrative’s allegorical level through the deployment of ‘black’ Americans as symbolic representatives of Russia’s own ‘blacks’ (chernye; representatives of the Caucasus region). The film, furthermore, creates a parodic distance from two classics of Socialist Realism (Cement and Chapaev) and the entire Socialist Realist canon, thus casting a further shadow over, and ‘othering’, the Soviet past and contemporary ‘restoration nostalgia’ in post-Soviet Russia.

The film War (Chapter 5) deploys the Eastern (a Western-war genre blend) and thus indicates a shift in Balabanov’s cultural positioning by its almost complete exclusion of representations of the American other, whose cultural and geopolitical influences are restricted to the adoption of features of the Western format, and the occasional mentioning of NATO. War’s blend of docudrama and Eastern is attributable to its self-conscious deployment of both literary, and wider media, intertextuality. Russian and British mainstream media are scathingly mocked and ‘othered’ along with the governments of these two countries and NATO. An unconventional sequel to the Brother films, War follows its forerunners’ technique of representing Russia and its others as complex, developing social types through a symbolic narrative, which is supported by a double-coded voice adapted from Tolstoi’s Khadzhi Murat’s istoriia-style of representation and the blend of fiction and history that characterises Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans’. War’s anti-colonial voice articulates a critical commentary on all war participants and differs from The Mohicans by critically questioning binary colonial representations.

Chapter 6 examines the neo-noir/black gangster comedy Dead Man’s Bluff, which cuts off the gangsters’ trajectory at their peak of success. It parodies Danila’s rise to fully-fledged gangsterhood in the Brother films through retrospective comic strip-like, caricatured representations of the rise of post-Soviet Russia’s political elites. The film’s genre blend is also attributable to its self-conscious deployment of well-known works of Russian and American cinema, such as Antikiller, Assa, Tycoon and Kill Bill, by which it continues Balabanov’s inter- and intracultural dialogue with the American other and with various Russian films, audiences and critics. Its parody of Brother works by incorporating the chernukha style but distancing itself from it through its farcical edge. The film’s comic, neo-noir presentations of racism, sexism and rampant violence assume truly grotesque forms in their mockery of contemporary political leaders who worked their blood-spattered
way up from Komsomol membership to positions of power in Moscow. These pathetic excuses for mythic gangsters, Balabanov claims, are the Russian people’s ‘true’ other who has returned to rule the motherland once again.

Finally, Chapter 7 examines the gangster melodrama, *It Doesn’t Hurt*. By adopting the melodramatic mode and invoking the renowned dramas *Three Comrades* and *The Lady of the Camellias* the film evinces Balabanov’s fondness for Western cultural forms as a means of finalising his representations of the post-Soviet self under the influence of its Western others. Through the mechanisms of intercultural dialogue *It Doesn’t Hurt* recognises the continued influence of the American other on the plane of genre, whilst simultaneously depicting its own ageing New Russian gangster’s inability to save an age-old mother Russia from her illness. The melodramatic disappearances of the old gangster and his courtesan make way for Russia’s final liberation from its temporary infatuation with, dependence on, and suffering from, the American gangster’s way of life and its own corrupted past. The price is a partial submersion into the melodramatic form, i.e. bourgeois/capitalist ideology, which promises limited freedom and self-realisation, yet at the expense of some degree of humanity and sense of collectivity. The film’s genre blend demonstrates Balabanov’s willingness to use the voice of the bourgeois other to reflect upon the end of an exclusive, centripetal post-Soviet (gangster) era and the beginning of a new, more inclusive and centrifugal Russian (bourgeois) period. *It Doesn’t Hurt* thus concludes Balabanov’s attachment to the gangster film as a generic means of representing the internal aspects of post-Soviet Russia’s violent transition to a market society.

My analysis revealed a line of interrelated concerns, themes and techniques running through this ‘genre movie’ sub-section of Balabanov’s *Zeitgeist* films. I identified the dominant role of the gangster genre in focusing Balabanov’s self/other representations on the rapidly changing post-Soviet society (Chapters 3, 6 and 7), and that of the Western genre in representing Russia’s conflicts at its Eastern and Western frontiers (Chapters 4 and 5). These varying, yet interrelated, representations depicted an evolving post-Soviet Russia struggling with the impact that various dominant others and the country’s own past had on its search for a viable identity. The manner of these representations was influenced both by the historical context and by a network of cinematic phenomena (genre, style and intertextuality, intercultural and intracultural dialogicity, ideologies and myths) at whose nexus
stood a director deeply aware of his, and Russia’s, ever-changing position. Balabanov’s ingenious modification of two dominant Hollywood genres with the help of various cinematic modes, and his profound explorations of the ways in which genre hybridity can contribute to the articulation of self-critically ambiguous self/other relations, demonstrated his mastership of cinema’s subversive potential. His critical modifications of the figures of the gangster and the Wild Westerner and his depiction of their fall from grace and transformation into the vigilante-turned-mercenary-turned-businessman points to the next research question.

8.2.2 Research Question 2

The second question addresses the interaction between self/other representations, myth and cultural tropes, and their mediation through these films’ ideological alignments, all of which can be traced through their reflections of the contemporary Zeitgeist.

In the Introduction, I noted that Zeitgeist means ‘spirit of the time’ and refers to the ideas and concepts prevalent in a cultural space during a particular period. Zeitgeist films, I argued, actively engage with, rather than passively reflect, these ideas, which are linked to ideology via their expression in myths, cultural tropes and self/other representations.

Section 2.7 of the methodology chapter was dedicated to the interrelationship of genre, ideology and representation. I used the term ‘ideology’ in the sense of the means by which dominant groups construct the limits of ‘primary lived reality’ for subaltern groups by ensuring that their own ideas, concepts, representational concerns and practices prevail. In a binary manner of speaking, reactionary genre movies deploy and propagate reactionary mainstream myths, cultural tropes and stereotypes, while progressive, ‘rebel’ films deconstruct them and challenge the dominant ideologies. Genres, like myths, favour the formulaic and the rule-bound. If conventional, reductive phenomena such as the formulae utilised by popular genre are deconstructed, I demonstrated, there is a reasonable chance that narrative myths and artistic tropes are likewise challenged, together with the mainstream culture that ‘hosts’ them, its dominant ideology and its stereotypical self/other representations.

Chapter 3 demonstrated the challenges that Brother poses to the image of a heroic Russian self, to the trope of the functional family, to mainstream representations of Russia’s other and, consequently, to a host of related Russian
cultural myths. Thus, post-Soviet ‘restoration nostalgia’ and Khrushchevian revisionism are undercut through the labelling of Lenin as a common criminal. Both sides of the Slavophile/Westerniser dichotomy are subverted through the internal split within Danila, through the drug-taking, Westernising prostitute Kэт/Cat, through the more Russian self-abusive Sveta, and the powerless German Goffman, as well as via presentations of St. Petersburg as a barred window to the West and of Moscow as Russia’s actual crime capital. The myth of a Russian army and fatherland that care for their (half-)orphaned sons is placed in question by depictions of an abusive fraternal relationship which also has an oedipal, father-son dimension to it. The gallery of legendary heroes is sullied by representations of the Russian soldier as an assassin. The mythic Russian family is represented as dysfunctional and, like the infertile relationship between the nation as motherland and the state as fatherland, determined by abuse and self-abuse. Finally, Brother’s criticism of banality and bad taste (poshlost’) as effects of the daily grind in Russia (byt; Sveta) and of a destructive techno- and drug-culture (Kэт/Cat) exposes the illusory nature of the myth of Russia as a highly cultured nation.

Chapter 4 demonstrated Brother-2’s parodic-satirical deconstruction of the Danila myth, but also its reinforcement of the subversions carried out by the earlier film. The substitution of Slavophilic Moscow for Westernising St. Petersburg underscores the frontiersman’s antagonism towards, rather than interaction with, his others. The film challenges both glorifications and vilifications of the USA. It emphasises that the true ‘others’ of Russian, American and Ukrainian society are its ruling gangster elites (transnationally cooperating and competing fraternities of capitalist and political criminals). The Socialist Realist canon is invoked, only to be mocked, casting, as is the case in Brother, a large shadow over the nostalgic myth of a better Soviet past. Brother-2 adds to its mythological challenges the myth of Ukraine as the birthplace and brother of Russia. Russia’s irredentist claims on Sevastopol and love of the American dream are simultaneously undercut through the paradoxical caricature of the nationalist policeman-gangster-figure, Viktor. Brother-2’s satirical gangster-frontiersman, Danila, turns himself into an American-style capitalist, demonstrating that the American, and now Russian, way to success is to have the ‘sharpest elbows’, the most cunning mind and the fastest (cowboy) and most remorseless (gangster) gun.
Chapter 5 analyses how the Eastern-docudrama *War* exposes the harmful effects of Russian-Chechen conflict on post-Soviet Russian society. The film problematises the Romantic myths of a free, authentic Caucasus and a much-vaunted Russia. The Russian-Chechen and Russian/Western-Muslim conflicts are represented as highly unconventional wars between colonisers and colonised. For the familiar coloniser/colonised dichotomy cannot withstand the affront to it posed by Balabanov’s refusal to conform to standard versions of the tropes of the prisoner, the captive and the corpse. The romantic myth of frontiernship is shown to hide the reality of transgressive, geopolitical military conflicts for the profit motive, and of pure shortsightedness, naiveté and narrowmindedness. The colonialist tropes of noble and/or demonized savages cannot withstand their re-rendering as complex, social types. Within the allegorical framework, the mythic Russian war hero – traceable to the *bogatyry* figure of the Russian oral epic, *bylina*, already invoked (and sabotaged) in *Brother* and *Brother-2* – is, *pars pro toto* for the Russian nation, depicted as an alienated hybrid. Thus, we find combined into one image the mercenary, the scout and the vigilante in the service of his Western paymaster, and victimised by the Russian state.

Chapter 6 showed how *Dead Man’s Bluff*’s neo-noir/black comic mode critically defamiliarises domestic versions of mythical figures like the glamorous gangster, the hard-working businessman, the honest helpful state bureaucrat, the incorruptible detective and other representatives of Russia’s 1990s. The film continues the *Brother* films’ critique of the heroic national self and exposes Russia’s purported need for a strong leader as nationalist myth-making. Both Slavophilic and Westernising tendencies in Russian thought are ridiculed through the caricatures of the two main characters, Sergei and Simon. The Russian myths of St. Petersburg (the window to the West) and of Moscow (the centre of the regenerative Russian heartland) are, via the ultra-violent action committed by misanthropic, xenophobic, ill-educated ex-Komsomol psychopaths-turned-politicians, displaced in disorienting fashion onto the Russian provinces. The gangster-politicians’ status as ex-Komsomol members continues Balabanov’s assault on the myth of a better state-Socialist past. Their use of drug-money to purchase positions among Moscow’s elites deepens his exposé of the illusion that Russia’s government consists of democratically elected representatives of the people.
Finally, in Chapter 7, *It Doesn’t Hurt*’s melodramatic voice was shown to conspire with the gangster tragedy in countermining any sense of a cosy transition from mainstream Soviet to bourgeois mythologies. ‘Mother Russia’ is, here, depicted as a childless courtesan incapable of love, permanently ill, dependant on, but also alienated from, a well-meaning but oppressive gangster/state. The satirised development of Alia from Soviet-style working-class woman into a materialistic individualist bourgeois person, shatters both the age-old, but still prevailing, Soviet myth of the working collective and, through her destructive influence on this collective, that of a wholesome capitalist economy. Representations of Russia’s eastern other through the minor, but positive, roles allotted to Central Asian women in the film breach the bounds of the familiar image of Russia’s eastern other as the virile, but barbaric, male of the Caucasian region. The American dream finally and conclusively makes space for pragmatic relationships with the European West. The fantasy of a better, capitalist/bourgeois world is all but gone, but for sporadic hints at its enduring potential.

My analysis joined the line of interrelated concerns, techniques, themes and countercultural forms of self/other representations running throughout all of Balabanov’s *Zeitgeist* movies. The study also showed that Balabanov’s critique of Russian nationalist ideologies goes hand-in-hand with his problematising of stereotypes and his creation of historically complex, ambiguous social types. All these fixed formulae are expressions of Russia’s dominant nationalist ideologies and they share their inflexible form with reactionary genre movies. The challenges to such movies posed by progressive, ‘rebel’ filmmaking entailed corresponding challenges to nationalist ideology. Balabanov’s oeuvre is testimony to the fact that such countercultural genre films not only passively reflect but also actively refract the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, together with its ideologies, myths and self/other representations. These five films bear witness to problematic ethnic and cultural issues, which are generally masked, naturalised and disambiguated by the dominant ideology that governs public discourse. This leads me back to my third research question, requiring me as a consequence to revisit the received view of Balabanov’s ‘genre movies’ and the impact of my study on the reinterpretation of his work as a single oeuvre.
8.2.3 Research Question 3

My third research question reflected on what the present historical implications of the interplay between genre and representation tell us about the received, bipartite, view of Balabanov’s oeuvre.

As discussed in the Introduction, Balabanov’s films have been subjected to numerous oversimplifications by critics, who have tended to underestimate these films’ artistic complexities, and thus inadvertently to collude with misappropriations of a crucial sub-part of Balabanov’s oeuvre by an ill-informed nationalistic audience. The outstanding exceptions represented by Brandon (hypermmodernity), Hope (the Caucasus theme), Klimova (melodrama) and (contradictions notwithstanding) Condee have been brief, concerned with only one film (Hope and Klimova) and unsupported by systematically applied concepts from film theory.

Furthermore, these five genre movies have been almost universally contrasted with Balabanov’s art-house creations. This has had obvious ramifications for readings of their ideological and representational significance and has tended to preclude recognition of both their countercultural orientation and their thematic affinity with the art-house films. The thesis has outlined several factors cautioning against such a tendency. First, these films simply do not conform to the conventional separation of art-house and ‘genre’ cinema, nor to the resultant hierarchy placing the latter beneath the former. Second, it needs to be recognised that Balabanov’s prolific oeuvre has generally been read in fragments by critics who, in order to ‘complete’ their view of their object of study, have tended to reproduce the assumptions of others, in a self-perpetuating cycle of misreadings. The third unsatisfactory reason for the largely dismissive treatment of the films in question relates to Balabanov’s own reluctance to explain his art – an unfortunate inconvenience, perhaps, but not one which should influence our understanding of the importance of his work.

Because of the omissions and oversights, Balabanov’s work has been subjected to stereotyping, which has resulted in the establishment of a bi-partite view of his work, influenced by an equally bi-partite understanding of film genres. I noted in the Introduction that the most common (mis)conceptions, and replications thereof, of Balabanov’s overall work have often been shaped by the belief that, with Brother, the director mysteriously turned to making reactionary genre movies. The standard view of Balabanov’s work presents it as a haphazard mix of art-house films and
genre movies. The latter, it is argued, collude with dominant Great Russian ideologies, myths and representations. As such, the term oeuvre has, like the genre labels, so far been applied to Balabanov’s work without justification.

My study has questioned and demythologised the dominant bi-partite view of Balabanov’s work. It concentrated on Balabanov’s five most controversial and misappropriated films, released between 1997 and 2006, offering, on the one hand, meticulous analysis and, on the other, a theoretical/methodological framework with which to approach the remainder of his oeuvre, and other Russian films. In addition, and benefiting from the intuitive findings and leads offered by previous studies, the thesis has provided a new perspective on that part of Balabanov’s oeuvre which has been hijacked by nationalist Russian discourses and misunderstood by most critics. Consequently, it has transgressed the received view of Balabanov in three ways.

First, although Balabanov’s genre films do not conform to the image of art-house filmmaking prevalent in Russian film studies, I interpreted them as intrinsically artistic, conceptually sophisticated and counterculturally subversive in their alignment against the dominant Great Russian ideology. Balabanov’s healthy disrespect for genre hierarchies and related rethinking of the relationship between identity and alterity in Russian culture enables him to reject clear-cut notions of Great Russian-ness. The five films I have analysed are eloquent testimony to the past and present complexities of Russia’s ethnic, cultural and religious heritage, and to Balabanov’s understanding of the fact that, defined by hybridity, modern identities exist in more than one form, that the ever-ambivalent self resides in several places and is split from within. Balabanov’s criticism of homogenising representations of Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, Western Europe and America prevalent in the media, East and West, rests on a transposition of the principle of hybridity to the level of the nation. But Balabanov’s commitment to hybridity and ambivalence never entails an absence of moral values. A vigorous antagonism to materialism, opportunism, drug culture, aggression and violence runs throughout his Zeitgeist films. The director’s countercultural approach to genre is intrinsically linked with his deeply ethical hostility to the distortions wreaked upon human relationships by mainstream ideologies.

Second, these films’ refusal to accept uncritically a dominant view of post-Soviet Great Russian national identity cannot be disentangled from their opposition to the idea of cultural homogeneity and historical linearity as the means of national survival. This places Balabanov at odds with large groups within the Russian political elites, with the Orthodox church, and with right-wing and other nationalist forms of the dominant ethnic Russian ideology. In contrast to them, he embraces ethnic, cultural and religious multiplicity, welcoming ambiguity and self-contradiction. The explorations of a fluid, internally fractured Russian identity that his films undertake have serious ramifications for at least two generations of Russians, and for both genders. Using the tools of genre and intertextuality they expose the lie behind mainstream society’s efforts to disambiguate historical complexity and to naturalise reductive, binaristic thinking. In short, they confirm that Balabanov’s understanding of cultural identity and alterity is as progressive as his approach to genre.

8.2.4 Research Question 4

But what of the applicability of such tools beyond the works of Balabanov? This, in essence, is the fourth research question I posed: that of how the method of analysing genre can enhance our approach to self/other representations in post-Soviet Russian cinema more generally.

My approach to Balabanov rested on the principle that the structure of a building (to use the central metaphor in It Doesn’t Hurt) needs to be understood before one can safely deconstruct it. There is no reason to assume that the same is not true of directors other than Balabanov. All interpretations need to be based on analysis. The focus on genre acknowledges the filmic text as the nexus of genre relations outlined in Chapter 2 and gives critics and scholars a means by which they can avoid the trap of simplification arising from the failure to distinguish fully between the position of the film director and that of the characters who speak within the films themselves. Importantly, with its attention to the relationship between film convention and audience expectation, this method forces us to acknowledge how our own personal concept of self and ideology relates to the work under investigations. This double perception of the text and the self plays a critical role in our interpretation of meaning, which is based on the examination of the text. Furthermore, it immunises the critic against secondary discourses, such as those of general public opinion, which are eminently worthy of study, but separately from the
kind of close textual analysis practised in this thesis. Armed with such principles, critics and scholars of Russian cinema can set aside their own ‘othering’ and undertake a functional-semiotic analysis of the entire corpus of post-Soviet Russian cinema, safe in the knowledge that the genre method requires a sustained and systematic focus on cinema’s prime mover. This is not to say, naturally, that it cannot be supplemented by recourse to other systematic accounts like, for example, narrative theory, with which it overlaps. Indeed, with its ability to account for, and synthesise, multiple aspects of the cinematic text, the genre method has the merit of not just providing a sound basis for filmic self/other interpretations but also of serving as the ultimate point of reference, or meta-theory, for all other interpretations, be they historical, psychoanalytical, sociological or feminist.

8.3 Contributions of the Study
The study makes a contribution to at least three fields of academic inquiry: (i) Balabanov studies; (ii) post-Soviet Russian cinema; and (iii) cinematic genre analysis. In terms of applying the tools of genre analysis to Russian film this thesis is particularly pioneering.

8.3.1 Balabanov Studies
Being the first book-length study dedicated to a crucial part of Balabanov’s work, the thesis provides a fresh perspective on his more controversial films and, simultaneously, a justification for viewing his work as a single, coherent oeuvre. By focusing on filmic representations of Russian identity and alterity, and by applying a theoretical framework drawn from film/genre studies, the thesis offers a new perspective on one of the most controversial and enigmatic Russian directors of the post-Soviet period. By demonstrating Balabanov’s rejection of a clear-cut post-Soviet identity and his problematisation of dominant Russian ideologies, my research brings a corrective to previous scholarship on his films. It will, hopefully, go some way towards wresting these complex films’ misappropriations back from nationalist Russian discourses, to which they were readily abandoned by many Russian and Western critics.

8.3.2 Post-Soviet Cinema and Film Genre Studies
This thesis also offers the only sustained analysis of self/other representations in Russian cinema conducted through the medium of genre theory. It provides a framework (genre) and an example (Balabanov) that combines systematic analysis of
filmic conventions and forms with focused self/other interpretations or, in other words, an integrated theoretical framework of film semiotics and ideological criticism. As a result, it demonstrates that the genre method can successfully be applied to Russian narrative film. The research also highlights the importance of strengthening the adopted model by synthesising it with tools drawn from other concepts, such as intertextuality, allusion, meta-cinema, narrative (including both plot and characterisation) and hypermodernity.

I suggest that the application of genre theory to Russian cinema could contribute to a reassessment of individual films, oeuvres and corpora, up to and including Russian ‘genre film’ in its entirety, as well as initial critical reactions to it. Such an approach would help us locate the specificity of Russian genres or sub-genres, such as the boevik, and to determine how Russian genre variations differ, or not, from their Western and Hollywood counterparts. Furthermore, it would assist critics and scholars in focusing on the filmic text and establishing a solid grounding for their engagements with audience receptions. Finally, since genre films are the gateway to dominant myths and ideologies, a theoretical approach based on genre is ideally equipped to situating a national cinema in its broader cultural context. Nowhere is this more urgently needed than in Russia, still in the throes of momentous change, and still riven by deep ideological fissures and ruptures. There can be no better guide to the contradictions, the complexity and the significance of that process than the enigmatic films of Aleksei Balabanov.
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228


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