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ARTICLE

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## The waning of the young sincere hero in Averbakh and Maslennikov's *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin*

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### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the 1967 film *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin*, directed by Il'ia Averbakh and Igor' Maslennikov. The film belongs to the Thaw period of Soviet filmmaking, defined by cineastes' pledge to sincerity. This idea aligned with the cultural transformations launched by the Khrushchev administration at the end of the 1950s, which encompassed radical changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the Soviet youth. Sensitive to the current political climate, Soviet filmmakers populated their narratives with the new, honest and self-reflective young heroes. Our detailed analysis of *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin* demonstrates how it critically interrogates and destabilises the popular sincerity discourse of the time. Engaging in a complex dialogue with Marlen Khutsiev's iconic 1962 production *Ilyich's Gate*, the film also foreshadows the imminent appearance, on the Soviet screen, of a radically different character. In the 1970s, the introspective flaneurs of the Thaw are slowly replaced by their cynical and shallow, two-dimensional copies. Remarkably, this evolution of the contemporary protagonist coincided with similar tendencies in French and British cinema.

### KEYWORDS

Thaw cinema; post-Stalinist sincerity; cinéma vérité; Il'ia Averbakh; Igor' Maslennikov

One of the central scenes in Igor' Maslennikov and Il'ia Averbakh's *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin* (*Lichnaia zhizn' Kuziaeva Valentina*) features the protagonist, the teenager Valentin (Viktor Il'ichev), in the process of working on what seems to be a questionnaire of sorts. Visibly taking great pains to complete this assignment in the best way possible, he consults a school friend. The following dialogue ensues:

Valentin (reading a question aloud): 'How many friends do you have?'

Friend: Say 'many'.



Valentin: But if I don't have very many?

Friend: Write down: 'many'! But if you'd rather not, don't write this down.

Valentin: But why?

Friend: What do you mean, 'why'? They'll never ask you why. They'll never ask you anything.

Do you think that they are very interested in you?<sup>1</sup>

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The viewers know that the purpose of the questionnaire is to prepare Valentin for his appearance on a popular television show, in which teenagers share their preoccupations, thoughts and desires with a live audience. To be part of this event, the young hero is expected to provide a sincere account of his most recent noteworthy experiences in a diary. The above dialogue testifies to how laborious this supposedly simple task can be. The film subsequently shows the process of diary writing and Valentin's tribulations in the days before the show.

*Kuziaev* was directed in 1967 by two fresh graduates of the Directing Course at the Lenfilm Studios, Averbakh and Maslennikov.<sup>2</sup> The film consists of three separate episodes narrating how the main character uncertainly navigates the areas of romantic love, family and friendship. Directly related to one's private life, these spheres are traditionally considered conducive to sincerity which, as the cultural historian Ellen Rutten emphatically claims, can also be regarded as a central marker of both the socio-political and cultural arenas of the post-Stalinist Thaw (Rutten 2017). *Kuziaev*, however, takes issue with this notion, setting out to interrogate the tendency of Thaw cinema to depict its young protagonists as honest, self-reflective and, therefore, sincere individuals. To understand the effects of this endeavour, in this article we consider how the film enters into a complex dialogue with the contemporary film-scape, and especially with Marlen Khutsiev's famous 1962 production *Ilyich's Gate* (*Zastava Il'icha*) that helped the 'new' young Soviet citizens, the so-called *shestidesiatniki* (sixties' generation), to give voice to their aspirations and concerns.<sup>3</sup> This intertextual relationship illuminates the gradual waning of the Thaw devices of sincerity, signalling *Kuziaev's* rupture with *Ilyich's Gate's* social pedagogy and foreshadowing the emergence, on the Soviet screen, of radically different characters than the ones depicted in Khutsiev's film. From the start of the 1970s, the detached, introspective, 'sincere' flaneur slowly gives way to his shallow, two-dimensional copy, which would animate the screens of the so-called period of Stagnation.<sup>4</sup>

### Post-Stalinist sincerity and the cinematic hero of the Thaw

The beginning of the Thaw in Soviet culture is usually linked to Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of the cult of Stalin in his Secret Speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, while this period's gradual decline takes place in the middle and end of the 1960s (Prokhorov 2013; Woll 2000; Oukaderova 2017). Khrushchev's comprehensive campaign of sociocultural transformations included serious ideological revisions and a certain alleviation of censorship. The new measures allowed for the unprecedented flourishing of public and artistic discourses meant to address critically the historical past and the unfolding present. In her study of Thaw cinema, Josephine Woll aptly describes the effects the reforms had on the filmmaking scene:

After years of imposed aesthetic homogeneity, film-makers were able to explore a spectrum of artistic approaches. Instead of one way to depict objects and individuals on screen, they could choose a variety of ways; instead of a single, predictable and judgemental authorial stance, they could offer multiple perspectives. New physical types made their way on to the screen, and very gradually the preternaturally sharp outlines of character and characterisation typical of Stalinist cinema blurred and thickened into something closer to human beings, just as the irreproachably clear diction of actors slurred into something resembling normal speech. (Woll 2000, 12–13)

At the same time, the tentative lifting of the Iron Curtain provided the possibility of establishing productive exchanges with a wide range of cultural spheres in the West.<sup>5</sup> These developments proved to be of great significance for the contemporary Soviet cineastes' aesthetic, stylistic and thematic innovations. We trace characteristic elements of such crosspollination in the preference for location shooting, the avoidance of seamless editing and classic narrative structure, intelligent engagement with contemporary social life, employment of relatively unknown actors and relatively untried directors and, most remarkably, in the organisation of stories around 'rather complex, spontaneous young characters' (Neupert 2007; xviii; see also Bulgakowa 2017; Prokhorov 2013; Taylor 2012).

Despite their visible congruence with Western cinematic strategies, these features served a different purpose in the Soviet context. While we will be addressing these dissimilarities in more detail later, in our close reading of *Kuziaev*, at this stage it suffices to note that the crucial difference resides in the Thaw cinema's emphatic engagement with sincerity. Sincerity was first promoted by Viktor Nekrasov in his 1959 essay 'Words Great and Simple', published in *Iskusstvo kino* (Nekrasov 1959). The essay clearly resonated with Vladimir Pomerantsev's seminal 1953 article 'On Sincerity in Literature' (Pomerantsev 1953), wherein the author criticised the superficial, undialectical and inauthentic works of Socialist Realism and championed, instead, sincerity, which he saw in the artists' ability to resist placing their talents at the service of state ideology.<sup>6</sup> Nekrasov applied similar rhetoric to the realm of cinema. His piece called for disavowing the conventional epic forms of representation typical for the Stalin era in favour of focusing on individual life stories, everyday human experience, emotion and the heightened subjectivity of the gaze.<sup>7</sup> Following this appeal, the Soviet film industry witnessed an epochal curtain call of the sincere contemporary protagonist. This individual departed in a radical way from the ideal hero of the preceding era, whose demeanour fully corresponded with the official political, ethical and cultural rhetoric upheld by propagandistic media. With the purported liberalisation of the cultural climate, as Oksana Bulgakowa convincingly argues, '[f]ilms of the Thaw updated the Bildungsroman narratives typical of Stalinist cinema with a new visual style and flipped the vertical axis of the plot to point not upward to "the father," but down, to the son, at times a child' (Bulgakowa 2017, 438). In retrospect, one can observe that, as the new protagonist, the young son ultimately conveyed the same idea as his predecessor but was granted a larger narrative space and a longer time to articulate it. Now, the ideological content was produced through a series of errors and failures that heightened the 'reality effect' of the fictional events and convinced the viewers of the unmitigated sincerity of the hero's beliefs. In other words, while the altered type of plot did expose the pre-Thaw authoritative discourses as inauthentic by thematising the discrepancy between the sincere subjective engagement with reality and the 'received' official values, the new films, in the end, did not aim to deconstruct the past ideological devices completely. As Liubov' Arkus fittingly remarked in her reflection on the complexities of Thaw-era liberating practices, 'the [sixtiers'] denunciation of Stalinism and totalitarianism took place under the flag of the return to the so-called Leninist norms' (Arkus 2010).

The ways in which Thaw cinema's aesthetic and thematic preoccupations were entangled with the Stalinist representational style can be illustrated by Mikhail Kalatozov's production *Letter Never Sent* (*Neotpravlennoe pis'mo*, 1959).<sup>8</sup> Revolving around the demise of a geological expedition set out to explore diamond resources in the

Siberian tundra, the narrative starkly juxtaposes the Soviet pathos of self-sacrifice for the greater communal goal with the subjective gaze and ethics of individual survival. In formal terms, the film was strongly influenced by the tradition of the Soviet 1920's avant-garde, emblematised by Dziga Vertov's famous concept of *kinopravda* (later translated by French New Wave cineastes as *cinéma vérité*). The early episodes of *Letter Never Sent* undermine the pathos of the authoritative word, drawing attention to the dire material circumstances of the expedition. The geologists' suffering appears not to be heard on the 'mainland'. Overcome with the feeling of abandonment, the group receives the gratuitous congratulations for their 'outstanding achievements' with bitter irony and even irritation. Typically for the time, however, the characters still embrace the authoritative Soviet rhetoric but, contrary to the Stalin-era narratives, this happens only towards the very end of the film, and only after the expedition has endured major ordeals and deprivations. The film emulates the narrative and visual strategies earlier applied by Kalatozov and his cameraman Sergei Urusevskii in the internationally acclaimed production *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*, 1958). But, while in *The Cranes Are Flying* the innovative techniques harmoniously aligned with the melodramatic plot, in *Letter Never Sent* (as well as in the later project by Kalatozov and Urusevskii, *I Am Cuba* [*Soy Cuba*], released in 1964) the same formal experiments misfired. The overt ideological message of the later projects precluded the immersion of the audience in the diegetic reality, leading to a generally negative critical reception and, subsequently, to a very limited distribution in the theatres.<sup>9</sup>

It is remarkable how Marlen Khutsiev's iconic *Ilyich's Gate* follows an analogous strategy, setting out to challenge the conventional discourses of the preceding period from the very start but communicating the first 'new' sincere idea only in the coda. Multiple instances of ironic detachment, hesitation and silence postpone this crucial moment, which makes it difficult for the audience to access the hero's ostensibly stable inner core. Through these devices and the story's situatedness within the contexts of the personal, the family-related and the quotidian, the final message is imbued with the quality of a sincere revelation. *Ilyich's Gate* illuminates how the contemporary viewers' empathic investment could be manipulated throughout the story. The film's three protagonists (played by Valentin Popov, Nikolai Gubenko and Stanislav Lubshin) are portrayed as taciturn, closed personalities. Yet, the frequent use of close-ups, voice-over monologues and long tracking shots of interior spaces and urban environments during the heroes' rambles around the city generate an atmosphere of intimate co-presence. In these scenes, viewers' perspective coincides with the characters' gaze, while the voice-over makes them privy to the young men's continuous, self-reflective meditations.

What is more, the three friends maintain a similar, although differently coded, distant attitude towards their surrogate fathers who, in the film, represent the disavowed legacy of the late-Stalinist nomenclature and the repressive structures of the KGB. The film brings these conflicted intergenerational interactions to the fore in a surrealist episode featuring a sincere conversation between one of the heroes and his biological father, a war soldier who perished in action twenty years earlier. The imaginary father is reluctant to share his wisdom with the son because, at the moment of their encounter, the latter is already one year older than he was. And so, the father passes the responsibility for life choices to his descendant and, by extension, to the viewers, who by now identify fully

with the untalkative young character and easily accept his ideologically sound choices while believing them to be their own.<sup>10</sup>

### **The opening sequence of *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin*: undermining Thaw cinematic conventions of authenticity**

*Kuziaev* destabilises the narrative formula that *Letter Never Sent*, *Ilyich's Gate* and many other films of the Thaw carefully establish. Here, the 16-year-old protagonist reveals his sincere essence at the very beginning, when he unexpectedly receives an invitation to take part in a live television programme entitled 'Share Your Secret'. The programme, we learn, is designed to appeal to the Soviet youth because of its claim to spontaneity and random selection of participants directly from the street. Yet, as it quickly transpires, this ostensibly simple procedure is, in truth, based on a number of fixed criteria targeting predictable and compliant Soviet individuals. Just like many other passers-by, Valentin Kuziaev remains unaware of the fact that his chance encounter with the filming crew is elaborately orchestrated and registered on candid camera, which here operates as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Thaw cinematographers' affinity with the *cinéma vérité* aesthetics frequently used by Western filmmakers of the time.

The film playfully subverts the familiar conventions of *cinéma vérité* even before the protagonist enters the stage. For example, the opening sequence is comprised of a series of 'natural' street shots obviously intended to create the sensation of a colourful and animated urban atmosphere. The shots exemplify a visual strategy that constitutes one of the artistic hallmarks of Thaw-era cinema.<sup>11</sup> We see an open truck with a poster column loaded on it slowly moving through the busy traffic. The column functions as a textual collage, invoking a large array of public performative events, such as a concert by the popular comic-singer duo Rothman and Makovskii and the circus act 'Sunda Island Tigers'. While the column's surface defines the visual (and cognitive) limits of the collage, the movement of the truck gives it a certain dynamicity, transforming an everyday street scene into a theatrical show. The moving poster column also provides a background for the film's title, suggesting the idea of a private life being exposed to the public view and thus foreshadowing the narrative's events. The way the film's opening employs the quick shifting and readjusting of allegedly random images is reminiscent of the French tradition of *cinéma vérité*. This particular intervention can, for instance, be traced back to Albert Lamorisse's 1956 film *Le Ballon Rouge* (Mikhailin 2021). But, whereas Lamorisse used *recadrage* (originating from the surrealist principle of counterintuitive juxtaposition of various objects within their environment) to represent and to sentimentally acclaim the Ménilmontant neighbourhood in Paris, in *Kuziaev* the same device is deliberately employed to mislead viewers. The attentive long tracking of the poster column's progression through the cityscape is, in fact, carefully planned. As the truck arrives at its destination, we see that the posters covering the hollow column are outdated and, instead of serving its original purpose, the contraption provides a hideaway for an operator of the candid camera. Despite this discovery, what follows is staged as a series of 'authentic' interviews with the potential participants of the television event.

As mentioned earlier, the introductory sequence encompasses a multiplicity of ingredients that accord with Thaw-era cinematic conventions. The supposed spontaneity and documentary filming technique help the audience to focus on the quotidian environment

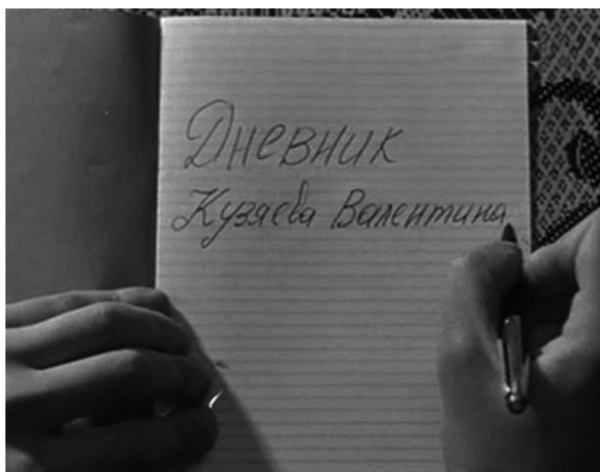
and the ordinary urban dwellers' unprompted reactions that alternate between confusion, surprise, fascination and trusting curiosity. The use of an upbeat jazzy tune as an accompanying soundtrack, too, suggests the relaxed and even festive vibe of the public space.<sup>12</sup> Yet, this anticipated effect shortly becomes unsettled as we start catching glimpses of the less gullible passers-by, who seem to notice the hidden camera's eye and hasten away to avoid its unwelcome attention. Suddenly, the motley crowd reveals the slim figure of a female film star of the 1960s, Galina Polskikh, which makes viewers briefly (and wrongly) assume that she might be the story's heroine when she, again, disappears from view.<sup>13</sup> Further on, the seriousness of the allegedly spur-of-the-moment conversations is undermined by one of the interviewees' comical remark that the only purpose of television is to provide the possibility to turn it off. Despite these ironic interventions, the protagonist continues to believe in the serendipitous nature and the genuineness of the situation. He gladly accepts the invitation and promises to truthfully relate his daily impressions to a diary in order to prepare for the show.

### **Valentin's diary: the failure of sincere revelations**

Valentin's commitment to keeping a written record of his experiences is crucial for the narrative structure, yet, from the start the film emphasises the ambiguity of the proper notion of a diary. Whereas a classic diary is meant to offer a space for intimate thoughts addressed to an imaginary, ideal reader, in the Soviet cultural context this object also had a more quotidian significance. The word 'diary' (*dnevnik*) referred to a school pupil's logbook in which teachers entered grades, evaluated behaviour and marked special achievements. As part of the educational system, the diary effectively functioned as an instrument of disciplinary control, with the registered grades operating as a communication code between the school and another important hierarchical structure: the family. For the duration of ten compulsory years, young Soviet citizens were confined within the school's authoritative frameworks that demanded absolute transparency without guaranteeing any form of reciprocal response.<sup>14</sup>

Valentin is fully aware of the word's double meaning, which becomes apparent when, in response to the interviewer's question about whether he keeps a diary, the hero seemingly naively exclaims: 'Of course, I do! Where else could the teachers enter my poor grades (*dvoiki*)?' Deliberately foregrounding the meaning associated with discipline and control, he perfectly understands that the question concerns another type of diary: a journal to which one confides one's private ruminations. From this early scene onwards, the viewers intuit Valentin's capacity to reinterpret random everyday events ironically, in order to create a distance between his own subjective self and the official speech acts believed to be appropriate in a given context. What is more, Valentin's aloofness indicates his caution towards sincerity discourse as a whole, because he subconsciously connects it with the Soviet school's oppressive regime. The dialogue with the interviewer attests to his belief that, in public situations, it is more opportune (and probably safer) to manifest oneself as a subject of a disciplinary system rather than reveal one's genuine inner self.

With the diary as a leitmotif of the story, all three episodes commence with an act of writing. In each opening shot, Valentin's focalisation coincides with that of the



**Figure 1.** The diary of Kuziaev Valentin. Still from the film.

viewer, who sees the blank ruled page of a school notebook and the hero's hand unsteadily moving across it (Figure 1). As a narrative device, shared focalisation usually facilitates viewers' affective identification with the character. Yet in *Kuziaev*, this operation misfires, producing an estranging effect instead. The order in which Valentin carefully inscribes his name on the front page (last name followed by first, as taught at school) shows that he struggles with distinguishing between the various meanings and purposes of a diary. While expecting a moment of deep self-reflection, we see the hero attempting to conjure a correct and socially desirable memoir of sorts, relying on discursive clichés rooted in his mind through years of inculcation both in school and at home. This is especially exemplified by the entries replicating the genre of a school composition with the theme 'How I spent last summer', a simple type of essay in which pupils routinely catalogued the activities they undertook during the holidays. In the first two episodes, writing performs an additional narrative function, generating an ekphratic frame for a story that features Valentin as an unappealing, two-dimensional figure, quite unlike the complex, introspective male protagonists of classic Thaw cinema. The film thus makes it impossible for the viewers to experience an intimate connection with the main character or to accept any type of sincere message he might articulate at the end.

The third, concluding episode is constructed according to a different principle. Instead of retrospectively animating the events reported in the notebook, this narrative unfolds directly in front of our eyes, and the act of writing reveals Valentin's struggles with the questionnaire. Whereas in the first two cases the viewers were encouraged to assess the young Valentin's personality, judging him by the situations that occurred recently, here they become privy to the very act of the character's self-description. Yet once again, as the dialogue quoted at the beginning of this essay makes clear, he appears ill-equipped for assuming a genuine self-reflective stance and is compelled to use the interiorised codes of appropriate behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, a friend to whom Valentin appeals for help obviously perceives the questionnaire as a mere formal procedure without any expectations

of sincerity, and he readily comes up with a series of politically correct formulations to portray his classmate as an average, 'one-of-many' Soviet teenager. And so, while Valentin initially painstakingly tries to correlate the entries with his genuine experience, he soon returns to the more familiar routine of providing the right answers his cunning friend supplies.

Averbakh and Maslennikov's film not only deliberately inverts the approved narrative structure of Thaw-era cinema, but it also subverts the notion of sincerity as a hallmark of the cultural (and political) reality this cinema depicted. Each episode sets out to prove the dire absence of the hidden kernel in Valentin's psyche, demonstrating instead a void filled with commonplaces and incoherent fragments of official language. Towards the end, the character emerges as someone completely incapable of significant self-reflection. Playing the part, the actor Viktor Il'ichev effortlessly re-enacts the known mannerisms of the conventional Thaw protagonist: he stands against atmospheric backgrounds, he holds a pause, ironises, breaks off undesirable exchanges and even displays a clownish, self-alienating behaviour. These conventional formal features, however, generate rather unanticipated outcomes. Whereas, for instance, in *Ilyich's Gate* the young heroes organically fit into their (urban) environment, their emotional turmoil remains invisible and the vital thematic concerns are negotiated in their internal monologues (or distancing silences) at the moments of assumed flânerie, Valentin, on the contrary, seems to be radically alien to the social contexts he inhabits. The narrative underlines this on the level of plot, *mise-en-scène*, and the actor's gestures and facial expressions (Figure 2). In a paradoxical way, such incongruity between the 'hollow' character and the well-known-to-the-audience diegetic environment (supposedly conducive for sincerity) makes him remarkably more complex than the standard cinematic protagonist. Instead of simply consuming a formulaic plot, we are now confronted with narrative unpredictability and a multiplicity of meanings that refuse to be organised in the recognisable generic patterns.



**Figure 2.** Valentin Kuziaev. Still from the film.

### Interrogating the sincere realms of love, family and friendship

The stories of romantic love, family relations and friendship at the core of *Kuziaev* relate to the realms of human existence conventionally believed to encourage sincerity of (self-) expression. Understandably, these realms were also deemed crucial for engendering sociocultural changes under the Khrushchev administration. Sensitive to the political climate, contemporary Thaw cinema strongly invested in the related themes, pursuing narrative unity and ideologically appropriate finales to establish the new, aspirational image of a sincere protagonist. Yet, *Kuziaev* maintains its unwavering focus on the character's failures, unfinished endeavours and unfulfilled desires. Thus, the opening episode entitled 'Stranger' starts with Valentin's first effort to confide an important recent memory to his diary. Relying on the genre of school composition mentioned in the previous section, the hero reconstructs the events of the evening after a summer trip to the forest with his friends. Unable to find a companion for the night in a tent, Valentin decides to catch a late train back home. At the railway station an unknown young woman (Tamara Konovalova) implores him to telephone her date, who failed to appear without any notice. In a surge of chivalrous feeling, Valentin makes the call and shortly thereafter walks his new acquaintance home, visibly anticipating a romantic ending (Figure 3). This is not what the night has in store for him, however, as the woman's delayed lover eventually arrives at the spot and forces the hero to leave. The end of the story finds him back in an empty waiting room talking to another girl, who also missed the last train to town.

This episode proceeds as an odyssey of sorts in that it depicts the protagonist uncertainly navigating the outside world, travelling from one situation to another and confronting a variety of thresholds, such as a gate, a closed door, a railway track, a train platform, a waiting room and an entrance into another person's camping tent. Although reminiscent of Homer's *Odyssey* (the hero's multiple trials are directly caused by his attraction to different female characters), the plot lacks a satisfying denouement, as



**Figure 3.** Kuziaev makes a call for an unknown woman. Still from the film.

Valentin's amorous adventures constantly result in disappointment. This type of chance encounter in a transitory space, represented by a railway station, airport or bus, frequently featured in the cinema of the time because it provided an impromptu stage for bringing forward sudden flows of sincere emotions. To name but a few examples, this happens in Lev Kulidzhanov's *When the Trees Were Tall* (*Kogda derevia byli bol'shimi*, 1961), where the establishing scenes are set on the stairs of an apartment building and in a hospital ward. A chance bus encounter drives the plot of the film *Long Happy Life* (*Dolgaia schastlivaia zhizn'*, 1966), the only directorial production by the poet and scriptwriter Gennadii Shpalikov.<sup>16</sup> In the same vein, in Mikhail Romm's film *Nine Days in One Year* (*Deviat' dnei odnogo goda*, 1962) a brief episode in an industrial setting is followed by a crucial scene at the airport.

At first glance, Valentin's actions fully comply with the desired codes of conduct. He behaves courteously towards a stranger, escorts her home, leaves when asked and readily stands up against his adversary. But the hero is verbally inarticulate and often takes recourse to banalities to express his feelings. His physical appearance, too, produces a sense of embarrassment owing to his uncoordinated, clumsy gestures, and the unchanging, puzzled look on his face. As a result, Valentin's heartfelt attempt to protect a vulnerable woman against emotional abuse misfires exactly because both she and her lover do not take his actions seriously. The final scene returns to the dimly lit, deserted space of the train station's waiting room, which can be read as a parody of the Thaw cinema's chance encounter cliché, in that it features a tall, dark young man with a cigarette (Valentin) addressing a lonely young girl with the phrase 'now you are not alone anymore'. Although the story is left open-ended, viewers soon discover that this adventure, too, will inevitably fail. Indeed, when the new act of ekphratic framing initiates the second episode, titled 'Daddy', we see the protagonist tear the previously filled pages out of the notebook and throw them in the paper bin.

'Daddy' shows Valentin yet again utilising the worn-out school formulae when he commences his fresh entry with the words 'a stranger suddenly appeared in our yard'. The stranger, it transpires, is Valentin's own father, who left his family long ago and whom he barely remembers. As the story moves on, the father (played by Georgii Shtil') repeatedly tries to initiate a sincere, confidential conversation with his son. His pointless attempts, however, only highlight the awkward shallowness of this relationship and, with it, of Valentin's experience. Both thematically and stylistically, the episode refers overtly to another crucial element of the Thaw cinematic tradition: homosociality. This encompassed such features as unflinching male self-confidence, mastery of the outside world, senior mentorship, unconditional (cross-generational) friendship and, most importantly, an ability to engage in deep, meaningful thoughts exchanged over a drink or some other uncomplicated, common activity. Dutifully reproducing these traits, 'Daddy' exposes them as banal and even farcical. For example, practical skills and mastery of situations here appear in the form of endless, unsuccessful mending of a broken moped bike that one of Valentin's best friends cunningly sold to his other close friend. The story also obviously ridicules the ritual of an older man passing on wisdom to a younger boy; while the father simply doesn't know what such wisdom is supposed to entail, his offspring categorically refuses to listen to his worthless pontifications. When father and son finally sit down for a quiet conversation, it happens in a shabby snack bar where both are shown

consuming cheap wine they clandestinely pour under the table. The unappealing setting and the constant faltering of their heart-to-heart talk make the trope collapse disastrously.

Towards the finale, the narrative delivers the definitive blow to the established iconography of the hero's sudden reunification with his long-lost father.<sup>17</sup> This is achieved through the use of a Stalin-era cliché of a scene in which the bearer of the vital ideological message is an outsider who unexpectedly comes to the aid of other characters struggling to resolve a practical problem.<sup>18</sup> Portraying Valentin's father as an outsider of sorts, *Kuziaev* subverts this conventional plot device by pointing out the futility of his attempts to resuscitate the moped bike. Provisionally fixed, the bike serves as the means of transportation for the father and son's inauspicious trip to the café, after which it breaks down forever. Ironically, this short-lived repair also reminds the viewers of the prodigal father's other singular 'achievement' that took place 17 years before, resulting in Valentin Kuziaev's clearly unanticipated birth.

### Conclusion, or 'do you want a million?'

The third episode, with the telling title 'If You Don't Mind My Asking', also sets out to expose Valentin's unfortunate lack of a sincere essence, but it does so differently. The friend who initially helped the hapless hero to complete the questionnaire now discloses the document to a group of peers, making Valentin the subject of collective mockery. To add to the sense of embarrassment, the next scene depicts two slightly freakish-looking classmates helping Valentin to try on other people's ill-fitting clothes in anticipation of his appearance on television. After they depart, Valentin stands alone in front of the mirror clownishly taking up various poses and enacting bits of an imagined interview with the show presenter. Despite the ridiculous nature of this performance, it surprisingly brings to the surface another, previously unknown facet of the young man's identity. The two sides of his persona – the diary writer and the character within his own stories – now literally face one another, engaging in a dialogue that inverts the logic of the preceding narration and implies that Valentin does have an almost tragic capacity for self-reflection after all. The dialogue goes into depth and becomes increasingly serious as the protagonist moves away from the mirror while unbuttoning the ugly, second-hand jacket.

Viewers will inevitably perceive this plot twist as the one intended to offer true insight into Valentin's inner life – but they are misled. The mirror scene is followed by a coda composed of several situations that reaffirm the young man's burning (and unmitigated by introspection) desire to feature on the small screen. When, after having overcome a series of practical obstacles, he finally arrives on the set, he finds the recording already in full progress. Despite the show's earlier debunking as an insincere, propagandistic charade, Valentin remains oblivious to the pretence. He is fascinated by the event that, for him, represents the quintessence of the official public discourse.<sup>19</sup> This discrepancy between the fabricated reality of the television programme and the hero's sincere investment in its objectives acquires a particular meaning at the very end, when we see an extended close-up of Valentin's face. The long close-up, originally introduced by the French *nouvelle vague* cineaste François Truffaut in his celebrated film *400 Blows* (1959), was frequently employed by Thaw filmmakers to draw attention to their young protagonists' complex interior worlds.<sup>20</sup> Here, however, despite all deceptions and humiliations – and with the chorus cheerfully singing 'Do you want to go camping? Yes! Do you want a million? No!' –

Valentin's face unchangingly displays a radiant, happy smile without any visible traces of internal doubt.

As noted in the introduction, the influence of the European cinema on the coming-of-age films of the Thaw cannot be underestimated. In that sense, Truffaut's *400 Blows* could even be perceived as a matrix for understanding the character arc in *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin*. Throughout most of the narrative, Valentin functions as an impenetrable black box of sorts. His contingent decisions and actions, which regularly result in embarrassment, ultimately foreclose the viewers' seamless immersion in the fictional reality. Although the mirror scene does offer a unique possibility to observe Valentin from an intimate distance and to discern his capacity for self-reflection, it also unveils his inclination to accept the dramatic incongruity of his existence as a given.<sup>21</sup> The effect of Valentin's unsparing confrontation with the mirror is comparable to the one achieved in *400 Blows* during the young delinquent Antoine Doinel's dialogue with a psychiatrist.<sup>22</sup> In both cases, these moments of sudden introspection do not result in a radical evolution of the character. In the end, the protagonists appear to lack the power to adjust to the changing conditions of the world around them and to transcend their roles as mute and solitary outsiders. While the concluding freeze-frame of Truffaut's film gives an intense visual expression to Doinel's irreversible defeat, the final close-up in *Kuziaev* captures the hero's blissful, childish engagement with the garish superficiality of the television performance.

This article started with a discussion of the transformations Soviet cinema underwent with the inception of the Thaw era. A brief period of relative liberalisation and exposure to a wider international cinematic landscape made it possible for filmmakers to develop a new repertoire of narrative and aesthetic devices, which encompassed spontaneous street filming, a conscious focus on the busy rhythms of the everyday, the use of long takes and close-ups and the portrayal of credibly complex central characters. Yet, while compelled to render the social reality in an authentic manner, Soviet cinema still maintained its important educational function by continuing to promote officially sanctioned values, to provide role models and to shape the attitudes of the viewing audiences. Our analysis of *The Private Life of Kuziaev Valentin* demonstrates how it lays bare this remarkable paradox by consistently interrogating the established cinematic strategies of the time and by deconstructing the figure of the young, attractive and convincingly sincere protagonist as a bearer of the authoritative message. Thus, the film ultimately exposes sincerity as a waning signifier and foreshadows the gradual replacement of the introspective and critical cinematic heroes of the 1960s by their often shallow, conformist and cynical successors during the so-called period of Stagnation.

## Notes

1. Here and further all translations from Russian are ours.
2. As a collaborative endeavour *Kuziaev* has an unusual history. It was Maslennikov who initially approached Natal'ia Riazantseva with a request to write a script for his graduation project. Riazantseva came up with a script for what later became an episode about the encounter with the unknown girl. Riazantseva's husband, Averbakh, who was also looking for inspiration, read her script and asked her to write a similar one featuring the same character. It became an episode about Kuziaev's meeting with his father. Shortly thereafter, to meet their pressing production targets, Lenfilm Studios prompted the filmmakers to combine both

projects into one feature film, for which Riazantseva additionally provided an overarching narrative about the television show. Due to administrative and financial reasons, the film was released only in 1968. Maslennikov and Averbakh never worked together again (Terent'eva 2020).

3. For a more detailed description of the sixties' generation's ideals and objectives, see, for instance, (Kagarlitsky 2009).
4. In engaging with this trend, *Kuziaev* strongly resonates with a number of other, more well-known films that appeared simultaneously with it. See, for instance, *Three Days of Viktor Chernyshev* (*Tri dnia Viktora Chernysheva*, 1968, dir. Mark Osep'ian), *Save the Drowning Man* (*Spasite utopaiushchego*, 1968, dir. Pavel Arsenov), and *A Literature Lesson* (*Urok literatury*, 1968, dir. Aleksei Korenev).
5. The immensely popular weeks of French New Wave and Italian Neo-realist cinema in 1955 and 1956, the reopening of the Moscow International Film Festival in 1959 and the opportunity for the Soviet filmmakers to show their productions abroad, strongly facilitated the reintegration of Soviet cinema into the international film scene. For a detailed account of this development, see Bulgakova (2017); Prokhorov (2013).
6. In *Sincerity after Communism* (2017) Ellen Rutten demonstrates how Pomerantsev's text not only defined cultural developments during the Thaw but also proved significant for the later revival of the concept in the post-Soviet discourses of new sincerity in the early 2000s.
7. For more on Stalinist aesthetics, see (Mikhailin and Belyaeva 2020), 77–107; (Groys 2013), 25–27; (Dobrenko 1999, 2020).
8. *Letter Never Sent* is a free adaptation of a short story by Valerii Osipov, which in turn is a critical reinterpretation of Jack London's novella *Love of Life*.
9. For more on this film's history, see (Margolit 2012), 404–05.
10. For more on viewers' empathic engagement in the Thaw narratives, see (Mikhailin 2016, 2017).
11. In her comprehensive study *The Cinema of the Soviet Thaw*, Oukaderova (2017) considers the importance of cinematic depiction of cityscapes in the works of such filmmakers as Mikhail Kalatozov, Georgii Danelia, Larisa Shepitko and Kira Muratova, to argue that their project was motivated by the desire to interrogate and reanimate spatial experience by using (urban) space as both filmic trope and social concern.
12. Later, this melody will re-emerge as the show's theme song with a refrain claiming that 'every person is interesting and every person is dear to us'. However, as with many other Thaw cinema conventions, in *Kuziaev* this claim will be subverted in the last episode and rendered with mocking, even humiliating undertones.
13. Galina Polskikh became famous after her successful appearance in such iconic films as Lulii Karasik's *The Wild Dog Dingo* (*Dikaia sobaka Dingo*, 1962) and Georgii Danelia's *Walking the Streets of Moscow* (*Ja shagaiu po Moskve*, 1964). She was considered one of the genuine 'faces of the sixties' generation'.
14. For more on the 'family-level situational coding' in relation to the variety and levels of coded experience of children and young adults, see (Mikhailin 2014).
15. On the interiorisation of the formulaic language of official discourses and its 'sincere' application by the Soviet people, see (Mikhailin and Belyaeva 2020), 513–14.
16. To emphasise the brittle temporality of the characters' relationships, *Long Happy Life*, in fact, is composed completely of a series of scenes staged in transitional spaces: a bus, a theatre foyer, a room in a sanatorium that temporarily serves as a hotel accommodation, an open-air bar at a water front and, finally, a bus stop.
17. This plot device is present, for instance, in Khutsiev's *Ilyich's Gate* (*Zastava Il'icha*, 1965) and *Two Fedors* (*Dva Fedora*, 1958), and Lev Kulidzhanov's *When the Trees were Tall* (*Kogda derevia byli bol'shimi*, 1961). For more details, see (Mikhailin and Belyaeva 2020), 436–45; (Prokhorov 2007), 174–78, 200–04.
18. The most telling example of this narrative element is the scene from Mikhail Chiaureli's 1946 film *The Vow* (*Kliatva*) in which Stalin, in passing, repairs a tractor that happens to break down in the middle of Red Square. Other well-known films that use this formula are Ivan Pyr'ev's

*Tractor Drivers (Traktoristy, 1939)* and Iulii Raizman's *Cavalier of the Golden Star (Kavaler zolotoi zvezdy, 1951)*.

19. The farcical nature of the television show is emphasised by its theme song, which is performed in an exaggeratedly upbeat mode by one of the popular stars of the time, Maria Pakhomenko. She belonged to a group of singers, which included Eduard Khil', Muslim Magomaev, Maia Kristalinskaia and Gelena Velikanova, who were considered to personify the sincere charm of the Thaw musical scene by combining a fresh, contemporary look with the familiar 'folk' tradition of performing.
20. The use of a prolonged close-up to reveal the protagonist's inner essence can be found in such films as Genrikh Oganisian's *Adventures of Krosh (Priklucheniia Krosha, 1961)*, Viktor Sokolov's *Day of Sun and Rain (Den' solntsa i dozhdiia, 1967)* and Stanislav Rostotskii's *We'll Live till Monday (Dozhivem do ponedel'nika, 1968)*. Yet, there are also examples of this technique's conscious subversion. Similar to Averbakh and Maslennikov's film, this happens, for instance, in Mark Osep'ian's *Three Days of Viktor Chernyshev (Tri dnia Viktora Chernysheva, 1968)*.
21. Remarkably, a similar, albeit a fleeting, scene in front of the mirror can be found in another film: Karel Reisz's British drama *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning (1960)*. Reisz's project is even more reminiscent of Osep'ian's *Three Days of Viktor Chernyshev*, which appeared almost simultaneously with *Kuziaev* and which also sets out to deconstruct the Thaw sincerity discourse.
22. The scene with the psychiatrist is particularly disturbing because the questions are delivered by a disembodied female voice. As Marilyn Fabe argues in her analysis of *400 Blows*, this filming technique 'perfectly captures the cool impersonality of the system in which Antoine has been abandoned' (Fabe 2014, 133).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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