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Souch, I.

DOI
10.17892/app.2017.0004.18
Publication date
2017
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Apparatus
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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Souch, I. (2017). Notes on Sincerity in Russian Auteur Cinema of the 2010s. *Apparatus*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.17892/app.2017.0004.18

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Download date:11 May 2026

APPARATUS
FILM, MEDIA AND DIGITAL CULTURES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Notes on Sincerity in Russian Auteur Cinema of the 2010s

Irina Souch

Abstract

Whereas the notion of sincerity has already for quite some time been employed in Western film theory to describe a certain style of filmmaking, in Russia this tendency has only recently become manifest. The point of departure of this essay is to examine the discursive uses of the concept of sincerity in regard to the films of three young Russian directors: Oksana Bychkova's *Eshche odin god / Another Year* (2014), Nigina Saifullaeva's *Kak menia zovut / Name Me* (2014), and Natalia Meshchaninova's *Kombinat "Nadezhda"/ The Hope Factory*. Although grouped together with the so-called new wave of auteur cinema ("novaia rezhisserskaia volna"), these directors' position vis-à-vis their predecessors as well as contemporaries both in Russia and the West defies easy classification. The analysis undertaken here offers insights into how the filmmakers go about expressing their generation's social and emotional preoccupations honestly and realistically. The analysis also underscores the differently shared stylistic, narrative, and thematic elements they deploy throughout the films. Sincerity in this sense can be said to return not only as a discursive phenomenon but also as a variable performative cultural practice. The different ways each film strives to provoke an affective response in viewers justify classifying such aesthetic tactics as sincere.

Keywords

Russian contemporary film; sincerity; auteur cinema; cinematic realism; emotion

Notes on Sincerity in Russian Auteur Cinema of the 2010s

Chronicle of ordinary life: Eshche odin god

Vernacular exigence: Kombinat "Nadezhda"

Excessive bodily presence: Kak menia zovut

Sincerity: the promise of intensified experience of the present

Bio

Bibliography

Filmography

Suggested Citation

Notes on Sincerity in Russian Auteur Cinema of the 2010s[1]

In the course of the 2010s, the Russian film industry witnessed a strikingly confident and welcome arrival of a young generation of directors whose productions almost never failed to stand out on the lists of titles broadly discussed and acclaimed in national and international cinema competitions. The present analysis focuses on three films that won multiple awards and attracted much critical and public attention in the course of 2014. *Eshche odin god / Another Year* (2014, Russia) directed by the Oksana Bychkova, received The Big Screen Award at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Nigina Saifullaeva's debut film *Kak menia zovut / Name Me* (2014, Russia) was awarded The Kinotavr Special Jury Prize "for the light breath and artistic integrity". The first full-feature by

Natalia Meshchaninova, *Kombinat "Nadezhda"/ The Hope Factory* (2014, Russia), was granted The Best Film Award in the programme "Baltic Gaze" at the Vilnius International Film Festival, the Best Debut Award of the Russian Film Scholar's Guild, and "The Voice" special prize from the young Russian film critics association.

From the start, a diverse community of film reviewers and bloggers grouped the trio together, inscribing them as representative of "a very free, very honest, very energetic and authentic cinema of a new generation [of filmmakers]" (Kuvshinova 2014a).[2] Russian film journalists praised the three "new wave directors" ("novaia rezhisserskaia volna")[3] for their unreserved and honest portrayals of Russian reality (Relm 2014) and for developing a distinctive cinematic language—a discordant description that, for some, connects Bychkova, Meshchaninova, and Saifullaeva with bygone traditions (Kasianova 2014) and, for others, distinguishes them from their early-2000s predecessors (Tsyrkun 2014, Kartashov 2015).

As the three films occupy a central position in the debates around the developments in Russian cinematography of the 2010s, it is opportune to ponder how critics and pundits discursively cohere them historically, thematically, and even stylistically, as well as imprint them as belonging to the new wave movement. Ad hoc as it may continue to be, the attempt to define the emerging directors as one group of like-minded artists is not a very recent phenomenon. Efforts to define a "new wave generation" of Russian cinema already manifested from the start of the new millennium, when a large number of filmmakers noticed the trends in political and social engagement as well as formal experimentation they shared with their contemporaries. One of these trends was an intense desire to "snatch […] the 'tail of life unawares'" (Moskvina-Iatsenko 2012) and to depict life "as it is," which the film festival "Kinoteatr.Doc" succinctly expressed in its manifesto:

> The films, we are interested in, be it fiction films or documentaries, must primarily be closely connected to contemporary reality, instead of being products of their authors' imagination […]. We find that today, when our perception is […] strongly influenced by the clichés […] of the mass culture, the attentive and respectful

observation of real life might offer a remedy against superficial judgement. “New naturalism” as the critics sometimes define our concept […] must return objectivity to the view, and sincerity to the impressions. (Kinoteatr.Doc 2005)

The “sincerity of impressions” was transmitted in the early 2000s through a number of stylistic innovations, of which the growing fusion between narrative and documentary genres was the most significant. Acclaimed documentary directors, such as Sergei Loznitsa and Vitalii Manskii, made a transition to fiction filmmaking where the use of documentary footage became an integral part of their aesthetic practice. Others, like Boris Khlebnikov, sought to develop an individual voice by divorcing from audiences’ preconceived expectations and to make the films “for themselves” (Khlebnikov et al. 2010). Others again, like Aleksei Popogrebskii, explored the power of live speech intonations, natural colours, ambient noises and the possibilities of improvisation “to help the actor unfold what is hidden inside him” and to create “social-philosophical, or rather religious, cinema of the ‘new wave’[…][representing] a life on the verge of ‘existence and non-existence’” (Moskvina-Iatsenko 2012). The aesthetic innovations and desires these trends engage enfold various interdependent and competitive discourses.

Notwithstanding the investment for commonality observable in the contemporary moment, differences in artistic practices have continued to stoke discussions on the appropriateness of umbrella terminology like “sincerity” and “new wave”. To that extent, film editor and composer Ivan Lebedev remarked at a roundtable of the student film festival “The Beginning”/“Nachalo”: “Something happens right now and suddenly we all jointly reacted to it […]. We do absolutely different things but suddenly everyone started talking about the same […]. This is simply the registration of certain [external] changes that we all feel” (Khlebnikov et al. 2010). In spite of Lebedev’s particular reservations, Russian cinematic communities continued to invoke new wave as a term, and it freely travelled into the second decade to accommodate other emerging directors. The anointed “newest” wave includes a large and diverse group of both auteur and mainstream cineastes in terms of aesthetics, thematic interests, and genre. Apart from Bychkova, Meshchaninova, and

Saifullaeva, the term encircles Zhora Kryzhovnikov, Dmitrii Kubasov, Nikolai Lebedev, and Mikhail Mestetskii, to name but a few (Kuvshinova 2014b).[4] Whether or not this fresh generation merits the title “new wave” is beyond the scope and interest of this essay. To heed Ivan Lebedev’s view on the Russian cineculture of the new millennium—as a broad, amorphous movement of filmmakers united by their wish to reflect on and intervene in contemporary cultural, social, and ethical conditions[5]—is to acknowledge cineculture as a productive site of discursive and cultural complexity. If one explores the stylistic, narrative, and thematic practices that the simplicity of a common term calcifies, and if one considers how these practices relate to the developments in the larger field of national and international cinema, then we might come to regard more remarkable configurations of sharing, circulating, or negotiating contemporary aesthetic interventions and affective investments.

One possible entry is to investigate the three filmmakers’ preoccupations with sincerity and to consider the critical and artistic discourses that have been building up around it since the start of the new millennium. The three films upon which I focus here can be neatly positioned within these discourses, because, in spite of many differences, their directors generously draw on personal life experiences to depict everyday existences of young people in Russia and infuse their stories with “peculiarly childish, spontaneous and emotional” energy (Ukhov 2014). Although a claim to experience-based realism does not necessarily equate to innovation here, realism acquire a novel quality owing to these works’ “freshness and self-confidence” (Miller 2014), “sensitivity and ingenuousness” (Dolin 2014) and “integrity and clarity of expression, which can at times be angry or ironic but also invariably touching” (Obolonkov 2014). Further, these films exemplify a certain responsibility, action, and commitment to the sincerity of impressions, which Kinoteatr.Doc announced as its artistic credo a decade ago. To emphasize this, film scholar Anzhelika Artiukh, in her discussion of Meshchaninova’s work, argues: “[T]he focus on texture, authenticity, realism, sincerity, and even naturalism allows us to perceive the sore spots of [contemporary] Russian reality as testimonies of the need for social therapy and political

transformation” (Artiukh 2015). Artiukh’s quote also illustrates that in today’s discussions on literature and art sincerity often tends to be used in the same breath with realism, authenticity, seriousness, engagement, honesty, and naturalism as different labels for the same phenomenon. Apart from the ability to integrate the meaning of the above terms, the reason that the films incite sincerity as this essay’s central concept is twofold. First, since the appearance in 1953 of Vladimir Pomerantsev’s influential essay “On Sincerity in Literature,” sincerity enjoys a solid reputation as a critical notion in Russian cultural history. Second, the concept allows me to place the Russian films in the broader context of Western cinema, where it is used to denominate specific tendencies in contemporary filmmaking.

Traditionally, sincerity is understood as a “congruence [of] avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 1972: 1) and is equated with the absence of pretence, deceit, or hypocrisy.[6] Russian language dictionaries define “iskrennost’” as a freedom from duplicity and an ability to be genuine, honest, and straightforward.[7] Today, however, the understanding of sincerity has become considerably more wide-ranging. Ellen Rutten, in her extensive study of the post-communist revival of this notion, explains that the turn to the new post-postmodern sincerity, which happened almost simultaneously in Russia and in the West (particularly in the United States), is usually theorised as a consequence of the crisis of state socialism in the former case and by the events of 9/11 in the latter (Rutten 2017). Poet and artist Dmitry Prigov and literary critic Mikhail Epstein, in relation to contemporary literature and visual arts, first conceived the advent of new sincerity (“novaia iskrennost’”) as an artistic principle in Russia. Prigov and Epstein primarily saw new sincerity as the disavowal of postmodern irony and cynicism in favour of the “post-postmodern” aesthetics, “defined not by the sincerity of the author or the quotedness of his style, but by the mutual interaction of the two, [by which] the elusive border of their difference [...] allows even the most sincere utterance to be perceived as a subtly quoted imitation, while a commonplace quotation may sound like a piercingly lyrical confession” (Epstein 1999: 457).

From the start of the 2000s onward, the term became more and more associated with authenticity, purity, emotionality, and spontaneous self-revelation, and, thus, was gradually taken up by different public and cultural fields, disciplines, and media where it freely circulates up through the present. Reflecting on this phenomenon's unabated currency, Alexei Yurchak echoes Prigov and Epstein's views by remarking that in a broad sense today's "new sincerity takes the form of a close and interested attention to the subject matter; cynicism or sarcasm are avoided" (Yurchak 2008: 258).[8] Rutten, following the travels of the concept from the perestroika-era underground to 2010s popular culture, also shows how, in the relevant debates, emotion repeatedly appears as sincerity's faithful companion (Rutten 2017). Since contemporary critical theory no longer considers emotions as psychological states but as "social and cultural practices" in circulation (Ahmed 2004: 9), Rutten's spotting of the intertwinement between sincerity and emotion unveils the theatrical quality of the former, which problematizes the classic understanding of it as an outer expression of one's inner state for others to ascertain based on the binary distinction between the inner self and the outer body. This urges us to acknowledge that "the issue of sincerity is no longer one of 'being' sincere but of 'doing' sincerity" (van Alphen, Bal and Smith 2009: 16). Accordingly, the purchase of the concept for me lies in the potential of its concrete manifestations as a cultural practice that can be related to a specific sociohistorical moment in which it occurs. I am not pursuing an exhaustive theoretical definition of sincerity that would once and for all translate ethical concerns into a particular aesthetics in a work of art. Rather, what counts for me are exactly the differences between the usages of the term within the present-day filmmaking practice and concomitant discourses.[9] In my analyses I am interested in how the films search to provoke in viewers an emotional response which in turn prompts the categorisation of these works as sincere.[10]

The current theorisation of sincerity in terms of what it does rather what it is, and the subsequent broadening of this concept's applications, can be detected in the many ways with which Western film scholarship engages it.[11] In the US, new sincerity is associated with either auteurist film—

characterised by particular affinities with social realism[12]—or with "smart" director Wes Anderson (Buckland 2012), or, more often, with the so-called mumblecore cinema, a cluster of independent, low-budget films, in which the narration focuses on minimal tales of the everyday lives of twenty-something youngsters (Santià 2013). Mumblecore films are also believed to share a similar aesthetics comprised of frequently improvised dialogues, a cast of nonprofessional actors, and a discernible narrative looseness (Horton 2011: 23). Accordingly, to give just one example, the film *Frances Ha* (2013, USA) by a prominent mumblecore director Noah Baumbach was praised by journalists and viewers as outstandingly authentic, sincere, and "punctuated with dozens of tiny moments that are explosive in their truthfulness" (Sluis 2013).[13] The sincerity of Baumbach's aesthetics, as many critics claim, derives from his affinity with French new wave filmmakers from François Truffaut to Eric Rohmer and Jean-Luc Godard (Pols 2013, Kartashov 2016). In European film scholarship, the term sincerity regularly features in relation to the so-called Berlin School (Abel 2013) and to the Dogme 95 movement originated by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg (Christensen 2011).[14] It is not surprising that in identifying sincerity as a prominent feature of the new generation of auteur cinema, Russian critics and scholars eagerly draw parallels with the Western traditions and innovations. Thus, the discussions of Bychkova's films often revolve around their perceived affiliation with the French nouvelle vague and with Baumbach's oeuvre (Miller 2014, Kartashov 2015), whereas Meshchaninova's directorial debut is compared to the early productions of Grisebach and Ade (Rymbu 2015).

In spite of their work's recurring characterisation as sincere, the Russian filmmakers are reluctant to acknowledge sincerity as a distinct hallmark of their projects. To that effect, screenwriter Lubov' Mul'menko, who wrote the scripts for the three films on which this essay concentrates and who therefore can be seen as an indispensable contributor to their successes, in an interview with the "Séance" critic Maria Kuvshinova explicitly denounces sincerity as a worn-out, empty signifier (Mul'menko 2014). The writer's aversion to sincerity is understandable considering this term's abundant unreflective use in political, academic, and popular discourses

both in Russia and the West, which always bear a risk of diluting its artistic or critical potential. Yet in the same interview Mul'menko emphasises the importance, in the present, of defying the fear to express one's true feelings, "to call things by their own names", and to take responsibility for one's emotions, which, paradoxically, puts sincerity right back at the centre of the discussion of the films she co-created (Mul'menko 2014). It can be argued that Mul'menko unconsciously makes a distinction between sincerity as a pervasive and indiscriminative buzzword and the "sincerely intended core" of a film that "can ultimately be described as a kind of 'message'" (King 2011: 143) related to a desire to put forward the issues vital for Russian culture and society and close to her heart.

Her views reverberate with the arguments advanced by film scholar Zara Abdullaeva and poet and publicist Lev Rubinstein in their 2010 dialogue in "Iskusstvo kino" about the motivations, addressees, and political significance of contemporary art and literature. Here, Rubinstein, too, points out new sincerity's indiscriminate usage in various discourses, whereas Abdullaeva contends that this concept gradually becomes a property of mainstream entertainment motivating the "sincere" (Western) filmmakers to move on and to look for alternative simple form and unsophisticated filming techniques in order to show the everyday life of ordinary people in all its complexity. At the same time, Abdullaeva admits that the abandonment of sincerity as an overarching concept also makes it difficult to find an appropriate name for the emergent new approaches, which comprise but cannot be limited to such definitions as "cinematic ontology", "long takes", and "the chronicle of the everyday" (Rubinstein 2010). However, as I demonstrated above, Abdullaeva's disavowal of sincerity is contradicted by the term's continuing reappearance in many recent auteurist film reviews in the West as well in Russia proper.

This calls for a reconsideration of sincerity's value for bringing out the specific characteristics of contemporary filmmaking and for revealing the connection between an artwork's aesthetic and a particular subject matter it searches to flesh out.[15] In spite of the heterogeneity of the international cast of the filmmakers listed above, their work invariably testifies to the

quest for new ways of depicting and analysing the present. Creating micro-itineraries of lived everyday experiences that occur in the here-and-now, these directors strive to affect viewers not solely on an intellectual and psychological level but also emotionally.[16] This drive suggests that the "sincere" realism—here—is one based on lived experience, and is geared toward an intensified connection with audiences (who are encouraged to identify with its ordinary characters, and to explore extraordinariness at heart of the everyday).

Seen from this perspective, the sincerity of impressions, declared by Kinoteatr.Doc in their manifesto and pursued by Russian filmmakers since the beginning of the 2000s, reveals itself in the attempts to produce a critical overview of Russia's present by means of reflecting on everyday histories of young people who can be utterly different in terms of geographic location and socioeconomic and cultural status. The claim to sincerity of impression also enfolds emotion as a condition to reinforce the viewers' identification and to ensure their willingness to engage with the ordinary stories which otherwise might come over as insufficiently dramatic and therefore unappealing. In what follows I consider the three films with an eye on the stylistic and narrative strategies Bychkova, Meshchaninova, and Saifullaeva deploy in order to achieve this effect.

I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Yaczo for comments and suggestions that greatly improved the essay.Here and thereafter translation from Russian into English is mine.See, for instance, Dolin 2014, Kuvshinova 2014b, Rezin 2014.The temptation to subsume different directors, scriptwriters, and actors under one category can be partly explained by an oft-cited observation that they form a distinctive network and tend to appear in each other's films. See, for instance, Kuvshinova 2014b.See also for a similar view on the Russian film culture of the 2000s, Condee 2012.Source: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sincerity.See, for instance, the definition of "iskrennost'" by Efremova 2000.This definition of new sincerity heavily relies upon the perceived dominance of cynicism as a hegemonic discursive practice of the previous decades. To that extent, Rutten makes a relevant point arguing that the kind of

postmodernism “the propagators of a new sincerity object against, [is] what one could called an imagined postmodernism”—in particular, “one that is [...] radically cynical” (Rutten 2008: 203, original emphasis).Rutten, in particular, demonstrates the impossibility of pinning sincerity down as a solid theoretical concept. Instead, she systematically emphasises sincerity’s discursive quality by using the term in a collocation with rhetoric, discourse, debate, discussion and talk (Rutten 2017).That sincerity comprises such performative dimension, is, for instance, argued by cultural anthropologist William Beeman who conceives it as “a paradoxical affective expression in that its presence or absence is ultimately ascertained not by the expressor(s), but by the persons to whom it is expressed” (Beeman 2001:49).See, for instance, Collins 1993, Garlinger 2004, Barton 2007, Macdowell 2012.This type of realism is usually associated with the work of Kelly Reichardt, Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck and Ramin Bahrani (Scott 2009). See also King 2013.See also, for the discussion of Baumbach’s *Frances Ha* from the vantage point of sincerity, Cheshire 2013, Iuisreviews 2014.In some cases the list of directors believed to be sincere is extensive, encompassing all kinds of experimental and documentary style of filmmaking and containing names such as Todd Louiso, Sofia Coppola, Charlie Kaufman, Zach Braff, Jared Hess, Michel Gondry, Aki Kaurismäki, and Pedro Almodóvar. See film site MUBI. https://mubi.com/topics/a-guide-to-essential-post-ironic-cinema.In view of sincerity’s longevity on the critical horizon, I find it more productive to treat it as a recurrent—albeit evolving—concept without distinguishing between its old and new manifestations.By focusing on intensely personal dramas with which the viewers can empathise these cineastes re-evaluate the merits of emotional realism often denied by arthouse cinema owing to its association with popular entertainment. Dogme 95, for instance, criticise contemporary auteur cinema for the lack of attention for the human psyche: “Having the characters’ inner lives justify the plot is too complicated and not ‘high art’. As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise” (Vinterberg and von Trier 2002: 83-84). See also on emotional realism in mumblecore, Christian 2011.

Chronicle of ordinary life: Eshche odin god

Directed by Oksana Bychkova, *Eshche odin god* is loosely based on Aleksandr Volodin's play *S liubimymi ne rasstavaites' / Don't Part with Your Beloved* (1972), and this play's screen adaptation by the same name by Pavel Arsenov (1979, USSR). It relates a story of a young married couple Egor (Aleksei Filimonov) and Zhenia (Nadezhda Lumpova) living in a small tower flat apartment in Moscow. Zhenia's immersion in a trendy work-related social environment changes her ambitions and interests, which gradually estranges her from Egor, who persists in a more conventional lifestyle. Initially only slightly disturbed by small domestic disagreements, step-by-step their relationship becomes permeated by jealousy and injured pride, eventually making divorce look like the only possible outcome.

In terms of style, Bychkova privileges a sparse photographic setup and meditative long takes that capture not solely the diegetic action but also surrounding movements, ambient lights, and atmospheric noises of the place. These emphases prompt critics to see her work as inheriting the aesthetic innovations of the French 1960s new wave cineastes,[17] and, by extension, to relate it to the contemporary mumblecore cinema. The opening frame of *Eshche odin god* encompasses a bird's-eye view of a Moscow motorway at night. The panoramic sight accompanied by a muted hum of a distant traffic evokes an atmosphere of a calm, detached, almost documentary observation. This particular technique is applied throughout the film, where the long shots of Moscow streets and yards are taken from above and often from a tower flat window with a camera occupying a static position. The big city, which contemporary cinema usually presents as a crowded, busy, and chaotic place, here registers as almost deserted and lifeless. Throughout the film the same technique applies to the interior locations—be it private apartments, a supermarket, a shopping mall, a hospital, or an office—and reflects a desire to ascertain the real time and space of daily life in all its repetitions and routines. In the beginning, the young lovers, attractive in their "next-door" ordinariness and naiveté, thoughtlessly float from one unremarkable day

to another. They leisurely engage in domestic chores, walk through a vast shopping mall, or peruse the aisles of a supermarket, where Zhenia only pauses to idly contemplate the living fish in a huge bowl. In the same vein, the lovemaking, shown explicitly in close up and in long shot in two extended scenes (3:30 and 1:30), has a quality of an easy-going intimacy and often spontaneously evolves from simple household activities.

The decision to portray a year of the couple's life in a series of separate episodes omitting intervals and passing over major events to concentrate on the tiniest quotidian details of the characters' existence initially produces a feeling of a narrative incoherence. But the unhurried meticulous rendering of mundane activities, trivial objects, and decors requires the viewers' absorption, triggering their ability to discover the newness and strangeness of things that seem self-evident and to tune in to the particular qualities of otherwise rather ordinary lives. The viewers are discouraged to form hasty, clichéd ideas about the characters and prompted to live through their experiences in the time that evolves in front of their eyes. To justify the lack of a linear narrative progression Bychkova argues in an interview that today's feature films need to approximate the style of documentaries and cease being melodramatic cautionary tales: "For the film to be closer to the viewer it needs to be maximally honest [...]. It is important to be with the heroes in every scene and not to be distracted" (Bychkova 2014). The wish to follow the characters on their own terms without being distracted or, rather, seduced into applying conventional codes of dramatic narrative production, is akin to how André Bazin (whose work laid a foundation for the nouvelle vague aesthetic) defined truthfulness of cinematic representation. Opposed to editing (montage) as a means to render reality easily cognizable for the viewer and thus to programme identification and emotional response he, instead, foregrounded collage as a principle of realism, which implied that "the equality of the elements of concrete contiguity must be privileged over the hierarchy of compositional motives" (Chevrier 2011: 47). Accordingly, Bazin took issue with traditional modes of narration: "The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists;

it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis" (Bazin 2004b: 81).

In *Eshche odin god* we witness this tempering of more dramatic elements with the minutiae of the everyday life so that the narrative, in spite of the strictly chronological sequence of episodes, loses the predictability of the conventional love stories. As a result, the emotional response is not pre-programmed by editing interventions but emerges as an effect of viewer investment in uncovering the meaning of the "fragments of concrete reality" (Bazin 2004a: 37) that accumulate as the narrative progresses. One of the most appealing examples of how this meaning becomes available only retrospectively is the film's central scene where the couple is shown cleaning an old carpet in the fresh snow covering the communal yard of their housing estate. The conventional significance of the virginal whiteness of the snow, often used to metaphorise purity and new beginnings, is carefully downplayed when an old woman's voice interrupts Zhenia and Egor's elated frolicking in the sparkling flakes. First perceived as a fleeting remark, the woman's reproach that "tomorrow the children will come and will eat the snow" later reads as an ominous sign making apparent the illusoriness of the characters' carefree adolescent existence and foreshadowing their separation and a transition to a status of adulthood filled with self-reliant choices and responsibilities. To that effect, the snow reappears as a metaphor in the scene that takes place immediately after Egor and Zhenia formalise their divorce. By that time they have already split and Egor is living with his new girlfriend Olga. In spite of its far-reaching consequence, the divorce act is shown as an utterly undramatic, even convivial procedure. Engaged in a cheerful banter the characters easily answer the official's questions. In an improvised attempt to celebrate they go to sit on a wooden bench in the middle of an open white field surrounded by distant tower flats and steadily moving city traffic. Here, the cosy intimacy of the inner yard of their home has given place to a detached coldness of an open and deserted plane. The awkwardness of the situation is accentuated by Zhenia's forced joviality and Egor's decisive reticence. Looking down he

busies himself with opening a bottle of sparkling wine and pouring it in the incongruous-looking cheap plastic beakers. When finally he reaches to touch Zhenia's beaker with his own, she playfully interrupts him.

Zhenia: No, wait, you don't touch glasses for the dead.

Egor: I didn't realize we were burying someone.

Zhenia: Well, we are burying Mozzy.[18] (after a pause) She is not going to call you Moz, is she? Actually, what does she call you? Egorushka or Egorun'ka? (laughs). What?

Egor: She calls me Gosha.

Zhenia: And what do you call her? (with an ironic smile) Oh, you should call her Golly! She is that kind of a person after all. You'll be Gosh and Golly! Cool, right?

Egor (defiantly): Hey, she is a nice person, all right?

As the dialogue continues, the words become saturated with excruciating jealousy and hurt pride. Owing to its careful capturing of the nuances of body language and facial expressions, the scene's minimalist dialogue succeeds to convey the characters' ultimate failure to communicate with each other. When, in the end, Egor leaves to meet Olga we see a close-up of Zhenia's profile. Her eyes fill with tears as she lets her head fall in her hands, clad in the fluffy white woollen mittens Egor gave her as a New Year present. Zhenia's silent tears, at odds with her light-hearted parting phrases and the endearing cheerfulness of the mittens, mark the definite end of an unencumbered existence we witnessed at the beginning. The lingering of the camera's eye on the heroine's lowered shoulders and head create a moment of intense intimacy allowing the viewers to relate emotionally to her inner state. Next, the shots of Zhenia's fallen face become alternated with the view of Egor's figure moving away across the stark surface of the snowy field. The camera, following him from Zhenia's perspective registers the opening physical distance between them. It solicits the feeling of indecision, not allowing the viewer to take sides and effectively suspending the moment of closure.

The cumulative significance of trivial events, casual gestures, and remarks becomes particularly apparent when we start to ponder the reasons for the couple's separation. The unsparing depiction of Egor and Znenia's multiple spontaneous arguments first suggests that it is their similar—at times, unaccountably narcissistic—behaviour that forecloses true emotional and physical intimacy. However, the film does not grant its viewers the comfort of character judgement easily conceived on the basis of the starting episodes. As the time passes we also become aware of the growing rift between their class-related preferences and aspirations.[19] Commonplace decisions—such as whether to celebrate the New Year at home with old school friends or at a glamorous party with Zhenia's new colleagues, whether to buy original Coca-Cola or a generic brand soda, what colour parka to wear, and which shows to watch online—help us to realise that as Zhenia inevitably gravitates towards the new world of the young creative elite she becomes more and more alienated from Egor, who stubbornly refuses to part with his working-class dispositions.[20] Consequently, the couple's final impassioned reunification does not come over as a lasting condition but rather as one more impulsive outburst of yearning and regret.

The ambiguous ending adds to the atmosphere of the continuously unfolding present that the film emanates. Bychkova's sparing use of conventional genre-related plot elements, together with her rigorous-yet-thoughtfully-distant registration of her characters' mundane tribulations, offers viewers a privileged perspective of a curious observer without becoming voyeuristic. In the end, it is not only the film that comes closer to reality; it is also the viewer, who acquires a deeper insight in the intricacies of life's daily routines and cyclical progressions. Apart from the application of particular filming techniques meant to ensure the "here-and-now" effect, the film's thematic engagement with the world of a generation of young people whose aspirations for a thriving and fulfilling existence in a big city are challenged by economic insecurity and alienating dilemmas of social belonging, make it consistent with the contemporary Russian filmmakers' investment in the conditions of the present that accompanies their desire to induce the cinematic language

with the sincerity of impressions. Although different from *Eshche odin god* stylistically, Natalia Meshchaninova's film equally pursues the above goals.

For a detailed account of the essential traits of the French New Wave, see Marie 2003.Zhenia calls Egor Mozzy ("Komar"), which is the Russian word for "mosquito" and a derivative of his surname Komarov.This is the most significant difference between *Eshche odin god* and the original screen adaptation of Volodin's play. Arsenov's film scarcely informs us about the characters' work and social environment. It emphatically focuses of their relational drama juxtaposing it to multiple ministories of other couples whose paths they briefly cross in various situations.Retrospectively, even the ironic slang name Zhenia uses for Egor's illegal operation of a personal cab: "bombit'" (to bomb), betrays her embarrassment with his choice of the way to earn money. This becomes apparent only when Olga, by contrast, introduces him to her family as a taxi driver (taksist).

Vernacular exigence: Kombinat "Nadezhda"

Whereas *Eshche odin god* follows relational permutations between two young metropolitans, *Kombinat "Nadezhda"* is concerned with the same generation's problems but focuses on the much more trying life circumstances of the "'mama's boys' behind the Polar circle" (Kuvshinova 2014b). The film chronicles the life and times of a group of youngsters in the Arctic industrial city of Norilsk. While some of them have already come to terms with the prospect of spending their entire life there, two girls, Sveta (Daria Savelieva) and Nadia (Polina Shanina), zealously plot to get away from home. Sveta's wish to join her boyfriend, who is convalescing from a freezing injury somewhere in the south of Russia, is sabotaged by her parents who buy her an apartment with the money she wanted to spend on the plane ticket to the mainland. Nadia, who lives with an alcoholic father, saves money by selling her body and comes close to escape when her regular customer Yurii (Sergei Ovchinnikov) offers her help. The rivalry between Sveta and Nadia results in the latter's death. In

the end, Sveta steals her brother's savings to buy a one-way ticket to Moscow.

Analogously to Bychkova, Meshchaninova is a proponent of the application of documentary techniques within feature filmmaking. But her source of inspiration is different. She falls into step with the Russian filmmakers of the previous decade, such as Khlebnikov, Mizgirev and Popogrebskii whose work, in turn, demonstrates a visible affinity with the Dogme 95 aesthetic by privileging shooting on location, use of hand-held cameras, and direct sound recording.[21] The director's own documentarist background manifests itself through the detailed registration of empirical reality while eschewing artificial colour nuances and retouching. The opening scene of the film thus features an alcohol-laden picnic expedition of an unruly group of youngsters against the background of a dirty riverside and smoking metallurgic factory pipes. The visual language makes no concessions in its employment of unobstructed and unblinking long takes of low sunless skies, scarce vegetation, and the greyish faces of the characters. What is more, the dialogues almost exclusively consist of obscenities (the so-called Russian "mat" vocabulary), which closer resemble eruptions of uncontrolled emotion than coherent speech.

"Mat", which in the Soviet past was considered an absolute taboo and therefore was banned from the public discourse, first appeared as a verisimilar code in cinema during the perestroika years, with the most striking example of it being Kira Muratova's *Astenicheskii sindrom / The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989, USSR). In the early 2000s it was eagerly picked up by the New Drama movement of documentary theatre makers who, owing to "mat's" highly performative corporeal quality, used it to articulate the destructive social and psychological effects of the relations of power in contemporary Russian society (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2010: 623). Next to *Kombinat "Nadezhda"* two most prominent recent examples of the conscious employment of "mat" in film are *Vse umrut, a ia ostanus' / Everybody Dies but Me* (Gai-Germanika, 2008, Russia) and *Leviathan*, shot by Andrei Zviagintsev in 2014. In spite of their jubilant reception at a number of Russian and international festivals the distribution across Russia of

Zviagintsev's and Meshchaninova's films was suddenly impeded by the new Russian law for censorship that banned swearing in films, television broadcasts, books, and public performances and became effective on July 1 of the same year.[22] Although both productions eventually obtained distribution certificates they came at a cost of cleaning the dialogues of certain speech.[23] When interviewed about the effects of the imposed restrictive measures, Meshchaninova repeatedly claimed that obscene language constitutes her film's intrinsic and therefore unmissable quality: "Since we have chosen such style and topic together with the characters who simply do not speak differently, it becomes impossible to do without *mat* to remain honest" (Meshchaninova 2014a, original italics).

Using a particular social group's vernacular situates the aesthetics of *Kombinat "Nadezhda"* in the aforementioned documentary theatre tradition, with its hyper-naturalistic visual arsenal and a strong focus on the technique of verbatim. The latter effectively enables language to replace stage action as a primary representational device: "The plot, character, and composition are not so important [...]. The basic semantic weight is transferred onto language" (Solntseva quoted in Beumers and Lipovetsky 2010: 621). It is not accidental that one of the film's screenwriters, Mul'menko, belongs to the playwrights' collective of the innovative documentary theatre Teatr.Doc, founded in 2002 in Moscow and known to be the first to actively assimilate verbatim as its fundamental working method.[24] Mul'menko, who also has a journalism background and in the past wrote a number of articles on provincial street culture, prides herself on the perfect command of the obscene vocabulary, which she considers as the integral part of the verbatim. In her plea against contemporary media's quotidian use of worn-out platitudes and bureaucratic and literary clichés, she argues: "We need simplicity and [we need] not to be afraid to express strong feelings" (Mul'menko 2014).

In the 2000s verbatim found its way to the cinema as a means to substitute the language of particular (marginalised) social groups for the dramatic conflict and visual engagement, and thus to intensify viewers'

emphatic identification with the characters. The viewers were prompted to consider how in such characters' socium "words have lost the function of facilitating communication", giving way to violence as the only way to connect with the others (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2010: 625). Consequently, such cinema often provokes a critique that in spite of an acute diagnosis of the social ills it narrows the focus to strictly individual misfortunes which exonerates the audience from social responsibility or need for action and thus circumscribes its political potential (Beumers and Lipovetsky 2010: 636-37).

Kombinat "Nadezhda" to an extent repudiates the critique of a limited political value since the documentarist exposure of the self-destructing physical and verbal energy here by no means delimits the social scope of the story told. Critic Galina Rymbu even argues that the film sets out to construct a new cinematic image of a Russian hero, following the trend initiated by Aleksei Balabanov directly after the fall of the Soviet regime and continued, among others, by Khlebnikov and Zviagintsev. To render such an emerging hero utterly authentic, Rymbu remarks, "the scriptwriter and the director focus on the most important thing that can allow us to imagine such a hero, i.e. on his language. [They focus] not only on what the hero talks about but on how he does it" (Rymbu 2015). While failing to convey concrete meaning the obscene speech in *Kombinat "Nadezhda"* still succeeds in communicating a message enclosed in the energy the curses contain. It reaches the viewers on a visceral level in the here-and-now of the material reality of the place the characters inhabit.[25]

Moreover, the abundance of obscenities in the film has a narrative function as it highlights its central theme of longing for escape. The outing to the river, in the opening scene, is set up as a farewell party of one of the gang member's departure from Norilsk for St Petersburg. The wish for the loads of luck in "the fucking Piter" ("chtob tebe përlo v Pitere ëbanom") that one of the friends expresses with drunken ferocity encapsulates the collective envy and desire to break through the circle of social entrapment, which they all feel at the threshold of adulthood but with which they cope in different ways. To safeguard the sincerity of

impressions the director offers views of reality from the interchanging perspectives of different members of the group. Whereas Sveta sees her home environment as an agglomeration of poorly maintained muddy roads, ugly dilapidated buildings, and the “fucking” factory pipes incessantly expelling suffocating poisonous gases, others do not share her perception. The reality as experienced by Sveta’s friends is, for instance, represented in the video that accompanies the song they perform onstage at the public celebration of The Metallurgist’s Day. The video shows their “severe city of happiness” Norilsk’s main street with the rows of brightly painted houses covered with the sparkling snow. For her brother Lesha, in turn, it is the vast view on the mountains from the top point of the city’s sky station that helps him cope with stress.

Given her dedication to documentarist stylistics it is striking that in an interview Meshchaninova asserts that a realist representation of the current socioeconomic degradation of the former leading Soviet industrial sites was not the film’s principal concern. Instead, the hellish portrait of Norilsk was meant to serve as a naturalistic backdrop for the existential crisis of a young girl leaving home to confront an unknown future (Meshchaninova 2014b). Meshchaninova’s declaration reveals a tension between her investment in stylistic and thematic practices propagated by her like-minded contemporaries in order to create a multifaceted picture of the present, and her unwillingness to pledge to political engagement for which she becomes a target of a critique similar to the one at the address of her precursors.[26]

Kombinat “Nadezhda” provides reason to argue that the focus on individual life stories of ordinary people (and the adherence to the kind of realism that seeks to provoke emotional or even corporeal responses from its viewers) does not necessarily reduce the film to a cultural text lacking political resonance. In spite of the director’s attempt to divorce herself from social didacticism or any standardised form of protest, the film’s aesthetics allows one to consider the terms of relation it enjoys in proximity to the concept of engagement. It is Meshchaninova’s dynamic interaction with the depicted real that makes Norilsk function as a striking

epitome of the stark geographic and economic demarcation, limited social mobility, and material dependency of young people in Russia. And it is also the dire circumstances in which the characters live that eventually inform their personal choices and guide the narrative events. The heroine's lack of intellectual capacity to rationalise the reasons of her inner torments only fuels her desire to escape. Thus, as Artiukh argues, the film shows Russia as a country where (self-)destructive radicalisation effectively becomes the only way to offer opposition to the general state of inertia and stagnation (Artiukh 2015). Regardless of its disastrous outcomes, Sveta's radical gesture sets her apart as a person belonging to the new generation of young women in possession of enough determination and agency to pursue her goals at any risk and expense. It is also this kind of agency that propels the plot in Saifullaeva's acclaimed debut *Kak menia zovut*.

For the detailed description of the Dogme filming principles, see "Dogma-95—the Manifest." http://www.dogme95.dk/menu/menuset.htm [29 March 2015].Source: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10810862/Vladimir-Putin-signs-ban-on-foul-language-in-films-books-and-performances.html.Source: http://tvrain.ru/articles/leviafan_zvjagintseva_poluchil_prokatnoe_udostoverenie_-371760/ [30 March 2015]. Although Meshchaninova initially agreed to produce a sanitized version of the film, she later reneged on her promise and decided to stick to the original version. As a consequence the film was never officially released on Russian screens. See, for Meshchaninova's declaration, "Rezhisser fil'ma 'Kombinat Nadezhda' otkazalas' 'urodovat' kartinu radi prokata." Interfax, July 9. http://www.interfax.ru/culture/384907. See also "'Kombinat 'Nadezhda': nikakikh nadezhd na prokat." http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/natalia-meshaninova-russia-art-and-censorship/2412773.html.The film's script was created by Meshchaninova together with Lubov Mulmenko and Ivan Ugarov.The utter concreteness of location and material circumstances of the characters allows one to suggest a difference in the role obscene language plays in Meshchaninova's film and Zviagintsev's *Leviathan*, where the protagonist

represents a specific social type in a narrative that strives to offer a metaphor of reality instead of its crude realist depiction.Critic Galina Rymbu, while expressing her admiration of Meshchaninova's ability to convey material details like the atmosphere, the heroes' emotions, and speech precisely, is concerned with the director's reluctance to go beyond the boundaries of a private existential drama and to reflect critically on the concrete socioeconomic reality presented in her film. Rymbu finds such an approach untimely and unsatisfactory, and asserts the importance of the new generation of directors to be ready to demonstrate a certain degree of political responsibility and engagement (Rymbu 2015).

Excessive bodily presence: Kak menia zovut

In *Kak menia zovut*, two seventeen-year-old Muscovites Olia (Marina Vasil'ieva) and Sasha (Aleksandra Bortich) arrive in the seaside town Alupka in search of Olia's biological father whom she never has met before. The father, Sergei (Konstantin Lavronenko), lives in a small, dilapidated house near the beach and earns money by doing odd jobs and night-time fish poaching. At the last moment, after having observed rough-looking Sergei through a hole in a fence surrounding his humble property, Olia suddenly gets cold feet. Sasha, who also grew up without a father, proposes to switch names and pretends to be Olia. What starts as an impromptu innocent charade quickly evolves in an emotion-laden drama confronting the characters with unexpected desires and making them reconsider their commitments and choices.

The film's title, which literally translates from Russian as "What Is My Name", emphatically drops the question mark at the end and thus broadcasts an announcement more than a question, succinctly formulating the purpose of the adventure the two girls embark upon by deciding to pay a visit to the unknown father living on the Crimean Peninsula.[27] Analogous to the above films, Saifullaeva's characters engage in dialogues crafted by Mul'menko in an unpolished language of the everyday life. She also chooses unprofessional actors to play each heroine's part, to contribute to the genuine impression of the narrative

that unrolls in front of our eyes, in a temporal immediacy of emotional outbursts, mood swings, and impulsive decisions the girls take to control the social realm of Sergei's household.

Saifullaeva is also keen to establish a direct connection with the viewers through an improvisational filming style, and, more importantly, through linking the plotline and the immediate environment in which it unrolls. Many scenes are shot at real-life locations, such as a local convenience store, a café, a funicular coach, a beach tent, and a bazar. The film's characters mingle with the bystanders (who often glance back to the camera) and are constantly exposed to the vagaries of light, surrounding space, and unpredictable human behaviour. In these scenes, street noises and fragments of conversations blur with the fictional dialogues whereas the unsuspecting passers-by move close to and even in front of the camera lens time and again obscuring the view. Although the director demonstrates her mastery of the classic cinematic devices to reveal the characters' psychological makeup through the multiple close-ups in conjunction with visual metaphors of atmospheric movements and changing seascapes, she more often searches to engage the viewers more personally, on a corporeal level. Rather than dialogues, the film abounds with scenes where attention is drawn by gestures, facial expressions, and theatrical bodily exposure. We witness Sasha complacently admiring her naked body in the bathroom mirror or provocatively moving her tongue along her lips in front of Sergei, grainy takes of frenetic sex she has with her local boyfriend Kirill on a yacht after they swim to crash a private party, Sasha falling onto Sergei's bed in a drunken stupor and pushing him off to the floor, Sergei's alcohol-induced brawl with both girls the day after, and his late-night silent execution of uncountable push-ups while Olia covertly observes his bare torso through the door crack. The conscious display of bodies on camera operates as an exhibitionist's dare demanding the viewers to keep looking and to experience the same sensations as the characters.

The use of excessive bodily presence as a means to enforce the immediacy of the viewing experience is most fully realised towards the

end of the film when Olia, in a jealous fit caused by Sasha's unannounced nightly disappearance with her father summons Kirill to take her out "to have a ball". The scene that in its totality lasts almost three minutes [28] was filmed in one take at a popular beach club in the middle of the raving crowd of partygoers completely unaware of the "artificiality" of what was unfolding in front of their eyes. We see Olia enter the club with Kirill at her heels. The camera follows her movements at a medium range, every now and then zooming onto her face lit up by the tinted rave lights. She steps on the dance floor, swaying softly with the music and watching the dancers, then suddenly turns her back to them covering her face with both hands in a gesture of despair and indecision. Kirill arrives with drinks and they go to sit outside. Olia quickly gets up again to join the crowd. Her movements become bolder, she shakes, flails her arms and takes challenging poses in front of male dancers close to her. Then with people laughing and swinging around her, the heroine lifts her singlet and bra to expose her torso. Kirill appears at her side, lifts her over his shoulder and tries to carry her away but she falls on the floor, scrambles up, rips the singlet and bra of her body allowing increasingly excited Kirill to kiss her breasts. Next we see him turn her around, tear down her shorts and push her on all four. The ensuing sequence is composed in a way that denies the viewer the comfort of a distant voyeuristic position. The camera offers a medium close-up view of Olia's upper body and clenched face. Kirill's body is reduced to the image of his naked arms and frenzied, thrusting underbelly and hips behind her. The sequence breaks off and we next see the characters at dawn, their half-naked, near-unconscious bodies sprawled on the sandy beach under the murky skies.

The above scene can be read as transformative in two senses. On the diegetic level, Olia, who throughout the film is shown as inhibited and reserved, suddenly succumbs to uncontrolled emotions and extroverts herself to the extreme. But it has also implications for the viewer, who is encouraged to perceive what happens phenomenologically as a heightened sense of corporeal copresence, framed by immediacy and spontaneity of action. In the absence of a point-of-view of a diegetic gaze (there are no reverse shots: the sex takes place in the middle of

unsuspecting strangers), the viewer is "sutured" into the scene and becomes one of the party goers whose dark silhouettes surround the exhibitionistic bodies of the characters. Saifullaeva recollects in an interview that, as the action went on, some of the bystanders started filming the couple on their mobile phones whereas others tried to prevent the cameraman from recording what they perceived as the young girl's shocking loss of dignity and self-control (Saifullaeva 2014). The spontaneous recording by accidental onlookers who experienced what they saw as real (and possibly later circulated their recordings as such) allows the scene to approximate a theatrical performance where materiality of the unchoreographed and open movement, the "wide range of shifting gazes" and the "collision and disruption of frames" is employed to break the opposition between the act of viewing and the corporeal inclusion of the audience (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 46-48). Thus the sincerity of impressions in *Kak menia zovut* is promulgated not through dispassionate observation of quotidian mores and minute material details of ordinary lives, like in Bychkova's case, nor though a sharpened focus on verbal expression and the visceral concreteness of the space, like in Meshchaninova's film, but through the heightened sense of immediate bodily co-presence it engenders in the viewers.

This particular choice of Crimea as location, as many critics argued, carries greater metaphorical significance (tone) than political reference (coordinates). A small seaside town here represents remoteness, where the heroines become temporarily released from home routines and the emerging responsibilities of adulthood (Dolin 2014, Golman 2014). It does not escape attention either that the girls' travel to a place unknown to them—strongly motivated by a desire to explore their own identities—resembles the story of Meshchaninova's heroine Sveta, who heads for "the continent" for a similar purpose.In the film this sequence is cut in two parts to juxtapose it with the bonding scene of Sergei and Sasha during a poaching expedition.

Sincerity: the promise of intensified experience of the present

This essay's reading of three films directed by Bychkova, Meshchaninova, and Saifullaeva discovered performative dimensions of each film's aesthetic and thematic practices that provoke critics and scholars to describe them as sincere. The prevalent positioning of these films within so-called Russian new wave of auteur cinema allowed me not only to consider the ad hoc purport of sincerity as a discursive category but also to address the issue of the new wave as a common name tag for the current generation of filmmakers. I recognise that perhaps when one speaks of new wave it may be heard as an artistic declaration, a thematic dogma, or an organised movement. But this essay argues that its invocation also makes audible an aesthetic and critical sensibility about filmmakers who are conversant within larger international cinematic developments and who are energised by their efforts to find new ways of analysing and providing a realist picture of the present. Moreover, complimentary desires to return sincerity to the impressions—here, understood as prerequisite to establishing an immediate affective connection with viewers—drive these filmmakers' efforts. Had this essay tracked the discursive formation of sincerity alone, it would have missed the critical and aesthetic entanglements the concept enables.

Analysing the films from the vantage point of sincerity in its performative capacity makes it possible to depart from the simple appraisal of their content in relation to authorial intentions and to concentrate on the question of how these films function on the screen to offer viewers an intensified experience of the present. It became apparent that the directors see their work as a part of the lived social reality that defines their aesthetic choices and against which these choices can be measured. To that extent, they share formal aspects of style, narrative strategies, and thematic concerns albeit deployed in varying configurations. They seek to involve the viewers in the cinematic reality affectively: be it through the episodic style of narration and the manner in which the camera makes extremely long takes of the static poses and the trivial quotidian routines

of the married couple in *Eshche odin god*, the use of obscene speech and grainy images of industrial landscapes in *Kombinat "Nadezhda"*, or the sensorial experience of bodily exposure in *Kak menia zovut*.

Apart from the shared interest in the reality of the everyday, the directors have a related focus on the ordinary young people in Russia at the moments of their confrontation with life-defining choices. The films reveal—not by way of concerted cooperation or categorical coherency but through different interrogations—this generation's lived desires to discover who they are, to break through their parents' clichéd ideas about appropriate behaviour or social and individual security, or to conform to the post-communist society's demands of upward social mobility. These microhistories together create a picture of the social space of the contemporary, which is also the viewers' own.

Bio

Irina Souch

University of Amsterdam

i.s.souch@gmail.com

Irina Souch has a background in Germanic Philology, Translation, Comparative Literature and Cultural Analysis. She is a lecturer at the Department of Literary and Cultural Analysis of the University of Amsterdam and holds a position of Affiliated Researcher at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA). Her research interests include Russian and European film and popular television, contemporary Russian philosophy, critical theory, and new media. Her book *Popular Tropes of Identity in Contemporary Russian Television and Film* is forthcoming with Bloomsbury.

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Suggested Citation

Souch, Irina. 2017. "Notes on Sincerity in Russian Auteur Cinema of the 2010s." *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 4. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17892/app.2017.0004.18

URL: http://www.apparatusjournal.net/

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