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Death and the Plague in *The Story of Wanderings*

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ABSTRACT

Little known beyond the Russian speaking world, *The Story of Wanderings* is a dark fantasy film produced in the late period of the Soviet cinema. The film was classified as a children's film by the director, film critics, and the state. Produced by Mosfilm, the third oldest and the most influential film studio in Soviet Russia, it is a rare example of Soviet children's horror, featuring several death scenes and a personified plague. Death's presence in *The Story of Wanderings* stands in contrast to idealised Soviet pioneers self-sacrificing themselves for the good of others, by presenting a world of flawed characters stymied by the ambient ever-presence of death. In post-Soviet Russian-speaking territories, the film is understood critically as a masterfully constructed 'adult' horror disguised as a state-sponsored family film. This article examines the way Alexander Mitta's film serves a 'dual audience' in the context of a socialist 'cultural industry' that lacked an established horror genre. It also highlights how the contradictions of late Socialism are revealed in the specific power dynamics between the adult and child characters of the film.

KEYWORDS

Soviet cinema; children's horror; era of stagnation; Plague

Introduction

The critically acclaimed Soviet and Russian director Alexander Mitta made his first films during the Khrushchev Thaw in the 1960 s. His early work established him as an acknowledged creator of children's films in the eyes of film critics (see Agisheva, 1982; Maslovskiy, 1984). Mitta's contribution to the genre were often inspired by his own childhood, scarred by the Second World War and Stalinist terror (Nikolaychik, 2016). As a filmmaker he was fortunate to benefit from the establishment of 'Yunost' ('Youth'), a new creative division of Mosfilm (one of the largest and oldest Russian Federation's film studios) that specialised in children's cinema. During the 1960 s–1970 s, Mitta's early films (e.g. *My Friend, Kolka!*, *They're Calling, Open the Door, Moscow, My Love*) comprised school dramas that directly sought to appeal to young adult viewers, whilst also communicating to, and receiving the approval of parents. Mitta's debut film, *My friend, Kolka!* (1961), used the story of a Soviet pioneer to address social exclusion of nonconforming individuals (Markov, 2013). In his follow-up, *They're Calling, Open the Door* (1965), Mitta gained international recognition for conveying the challenges of love in adulthood. Later in his career, Mitta admitted that, as a child, he would have preferred a popular adventure film over the didactic films made for

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children (Markov, 2013). Theatrically released in 1983, *The Story of Wanderings* is Mitta's last Soviet era film in which he implemented a different approach to engage young audiences.

The Story of Wanderings (1983) is arguably one of the most emotionally demanding Soviet children's films (even for adult viewers) due to the uncomfortable realism with which it depicts poverty, desolation and child abuse in addition to the unnerving allegory evident throughout the narrative conveying different modes of political entrapment and deterrence. Mitta scripted the film in collaboration with his established team of screen-writers, Yuli Dunsky and Valeri Frid, who also co-authored his three critically acclaimed films for adult audiences (*Shine, Shine, My Star* (1970), *How Tsar Peter the Great Married Off His Moor* (1976) and *Air Crew* (1980)). *The Story of Wanderings* was inspired by late 18th and early 19th century European fairy tales and Romantic literature (most obviously, *The Snow Queen* (1844) by H. C. Andersen). As a story that takes place in a magical world with real world horrors and deaths, the film neatly fits the canon of 'dark fantasy'. It contains dark fantasy tropes that were later popularised by Guillermo Del Toro in films such as *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and *The Shape of Water* (2017).

The Story of Wanderings' is an account of orphan siblings Martha and May, who exist in poverty in a fictionalised late Middle Ages in Eastern Europe. The film follows Martha's quest to reunite with her brother May after their separation. During her search she meets a wandering scholar named Orlando (inspired by the historical figure of Leonardo da Vinci he possesses an interest in engineering and anatomy, Montiglio, 2000). In a relationship analogous to the characters in Fellini's (1954) *The Road*, Orlando becomes a temporary guardian to Martha that ends in his death. Orlando's death is the outcome of a nightmarish battle with the Plague, personified as an Eastern European goth femme fatale. After witnessing his death, the horror is extended, as terrifying masked figures armed with giant pitchforks commit his body to flames. Additionally, the film also features realistic portrayals of medieval torture (mitigated to a certain degree by the absurdist depiction of a Kafkaesque inquisition court trial prior to the execution of the punishment). Respected and well-known Russian film critic Anton Dolin (2020), editor of the oldest Soviet and Russian film magazine *Art of Cinema*, included *The Story of Wanderings* in a 'best of' list of films that address pandemics (20 March 2020). In doing so, he rated the film alongside more widely viewed and appreciated films such as Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) and Lars von Trier's *Epidemic* (1987). Remarkably, Dolin commented that he found *The Story of Wanderings* so disturbing that he was afraid to re-watch the film.

While there are no known systematic reception studies of *The Story of Wanderings*, the author of this article can anecdotally attest that for them and their peers, from the last Soviet generation, they recall the film as some kind of 'positive' trauma that significantly affected their childhood. The film was shown in local cinema theatres, specifically scheduled during the day for children to attend. Until very recently, Soviet and post-Soviet schools would organise free or discounted (but often obligatory) collective viewings of the film so that children would attend together with their teachers, sometimes siblings and friends. Unlike the more mediocre didactic films that comprised children's cinema at the time, *The Story of Wanderings* offered an intense experience that called for reflection on difficult subjects such as the meaning of life and death. Mitta has expressed astonishment over the fact that the first generation of his young viewers cherish the film, as he initially evaluated the film as a creative failure (Markov, 2013).

Prior to the production of *The Story of Wanderings* (1983), Mitta's preceding children's films were dramedies about wholesome Soviet pioneers that formed the foundation of the 'school drama' genre in the USSR (Kostiukovich, 2020, pp. 151, 186). Typical of films released during the Khrushchev Thaw, they featured school-aged characters on a quest for truth. In doing so, children were free to roam throughout Moscow as if it was their playground (Oukaderova, 2017, p. 101). The capacity to use film in order to openly address social problems quickly diminished during the rule of Brezhnev (1964–82), dubbed the 'era of stagnation' for its authoritarian control over intellectual life (Bacon & Sandle, 2002, p. 136). The cultural logic of late socialism traded the desire of a better future for domesticated 'developed socialism' and offered relative safety and stability at the cost of self-expression, authenticity, and, in the end, individuality (Kaganovsky, 2009). In *The Story of Wanderings*, Mitta used the world of a fairy tale as a metaphor to achieve creative freedom under censorship (Kichin, 2008), following his mentors and predecessors (Alexander Rou & Alexandre Ptushko) in the genre of Soviet fairy tale films (Lipovetsky, 2005). Even though *The Story of Wanderings* constituted an unusual release under late Soviet cinema, its several cinema runs and repeated airing on television has contributed to its lasting contribution.

Dragons and the end of socialist realism

The Story of Wanderings was conceived as a formal experiment in the children's fantasy genre (Kichin, 2008; Mitta, 2010). It was intentionally horrifying and dark. As a result, the film appears less overtly political than other films produced by Mitta in the 1960 s–1970 s, or later Soviet fantasy films that were clearly intended as a critique of totalitarianism, for example, *To Kill a Dragon* (1989) by Mark Zakharov. The overarching quest in *The Story of Wanderings* is somewhat more familiar and straightforward. Similarly to the plot of *The Snow Queen* by Hans Christian Andersen (also a Soviet film from 1966 with a sequel in 1986), the heroine is required to save her brother from robbers who have kidnapped May for his unique gift (he feels sick when near gold). The root of their evil lies in greed, as well as in the lust for power that accompanies enormous wealth. This message remains as relevant today as it was in its original context. Defeating the robbers and destroying their castle in the finale of the film presents as a pro-Socialist message.

By comparison, evil is much more difficult to defeat in the dark fantasy world of Soviet-German parable fantasy film *To Kill a Dragon* (1989). This film uses a Dragon as transparent metaphor for, and bears a chilling likeness to, an authoritarian bloody dictator, still applicable to some post-Soviet regimes (Gel'man, 2015). The film adapted an earlier theatre play for children, written by Alexander Svarts between 1943–1944 (available in English as *The Dragon: A Satiric Fable in Three Acts* (Svarts, 2005)). In both versions of *To Kill a Dragon*, the dragon is an utterly dreadful villain capable of shape shifting. Director Mark Zakharov fundamentally reinvents the dragon's visual image in the cinematic version (played by the famed and extraordinarily versatile Oleg Yankovsky), as both an evil ruler and a flamboyant showman. The Dragon carries himself like a Nazi commander for the most of his screen time, but also exchanges this persona for a more colourful character reminiscent of Batman's The Joker (Burton, 1989 portrayal of the villain) or David Bowie's (1975–79) Thin White Duke. This does not excuse the atrocities of the dragon's rule, but gives him a psychological and emotional complexity that appeals to a critically thinking

audience. Still, even this, very ‘adult’ and openly political horror ends with a symbolic scene, added by Zakharov himself, in which the otherwise hideous dragon hesitates to fight Lancelot while children are watching, – likely, because children should not see death.

A dragon also forms a key metaphor in *The Story of Wanderings*, according to the authorial intent of Mitta. Mitta has explained that his dragon is a symbol for Earth (Mitta, 2010) – for Martha and Orlando enter a city built on a dragon’s back. This metaphor allows an orientational dualism for both an audience of children and their parents (Fedorov, 2016, p. 188), in which the youngest audiences see a monstrous beast, while critical adults perceive the social commentary. In his book on filmmaking, Mitta (2010) explains that his goal as an ‘auteur’ when making *The Story of Wanderings* was to experiment with narrative device that he termed ‘detail-system’, in which a meaningful cinematic detail is scaled up to create the dramatic conflict. As he states: ‘I created a ‘detail-system’ as big as a small country … the fat opportunists have colonised the dragon. They eat the meat that is the soil under their feet, suck life juices out of the dragon’s body. Their happiness continues until the dragon rebels, and an ecological catastrophe occurs (p. 410).¹

When the dragon is eventually wounded by the greedy villagers, he burns down the village in response and causes a great storm that brings Martha and May together for mere seconds before being parted again (until they are eventually reunited at the end of the film). We see them holding hands for a second in the middle of the storm – a memorable dramatic scene that appeals to the emotions of a viewer of any age. Despite the underwhelming practical effects of this sequence, it makes the audience reflect on the wrath of the dragon in its response to the villagers’ greed and the advantage they have taken of the dragon as a life sustaining resource. The dragon is more than a foe for demonstrations of heroism and personal growth of the hero.

The land of death

In the second half of the film, the Plague is introduced as the cause of many terrible deaths, the ultimate evil that has to be destroyed. Most likely in support of an ‘adult’ reading of this character Orlando has an affair with the Plague in the Mitta’s earlier versions of the script (Xapo, 2019). It is understandable that, as a scientist, Orlando may have gotten too intimately close to his subject, but his mission and civil duty as a natural sciences scholar is to exterminate the plague and to save the city, – a heroic deed that is typical for fairy tales and fantasy films, but also reinterpreted in Lars von Trier’s *Epidemic* (1987). In the final cut of the film, the Plague still acts as if she has met Orlando before, while Orlando pretends that he does not recognise her. This interaction between the characters retains the reference to a past relationship.

The death count of the film intensifies when Orlando and Martha arrive in a plagued land. In this section of the film, Mitta experiments with the devices of ‘adult’ epidemic horror. In a scene reminiscent of *The Seventh Seal*, Orlando and Martha peek into the house whose inhabitants have died from plague. Through the window, they see three corpses sitting at the table, covered with cobwebs. Intense fear is conveyed with a prolonged static shot of the interior. Then, ‘plague doctors’ arrive and burn down the house. From the same fixed vantage point, viewers watch the fire slowly devour the room and the corpses. This scene does not imply a hidden meaning; its aim is to evoke a particular feeling of dread in the viewer. Later on, in the same way, the tragic demise

of a random little boy is staged as a refined psychological horror. The audience only hear the boy's voice as he talks from under a cloth. The Plague convinces him to show his hand and kisses it. The end of the conversation suggests that the boy has died and the anxiety evoked by the scene is never really resolved. The boy's appearance in the film creates the effect of impending doom, as death extends its reach with little cause or justification. In *The Story of Wanderings* death is presented as indiscriminate and endemic, something that will rob kith and kin, something to be anticipated.

Liberation through fear?

As a genre, children's horror was incongruous with the nature of USSR cinema for two reasons. Firstly, death and suffering were seemingly the province of clichéd (super-) heroic characters such as the Red Commander Chapayev and other war heroes, including idealised Soviet pioneers (Kostiukovich, 2020; Leontyeva, 2005), with ordinary death given ambient presence on rare occasions in children's literature (see Oushakine, 2008). Secondly, children were encouraged to consume realistic, rather than fantastic media from the early years of the USSR until Nadezhda Krupskaya initiated the infamous 'war on fairy tales' (Maslinskaya, 2017). As Maslinskaya (2017) has outlined, in the 1930s writers such as Samuil Marshak and Korney Chukovskiy eventually succeeded in advocating for the right to produce fantasy literature for children. A similar process took place in children's cinema, which initially had to compete with foreign adventure films, immediately labelled as harmful and detrimental by Soviet educators (Beumers et al., 2009; Kostiukovich, 2020). Eventually, distinguished film directors Alexander Rou (*The Magic Weaver*, *The Night Before Christmas*, *Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors*) and Alexandr Ptushko² (*Scarlet Sails*, *A Tale of Time Lost*, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*) also reasoned for the rights of children to engage in fantasy, paving the way for films that would set the standard for fantastic storytelling for young audiences in the 1960s.

In spite of the official position of the Communist Party, the darkest scenes in Rou's films can be interpreted as 'children's horror.' As Vyugin (2015) writes: 'The fragments of construction of the Soviet factory of [cinematic] horror are most easily recognized in children's films' (p. 64). Scary and dramatic moments are supplied by memorable evil characters, usually originating from the Russian folklore, the queer witch Baba Yaga, the king of the undead Kashchey, and the evil water demon Vodyanoy. Yet, the emotion of fear is only a means to an end. The directors of fairy tale films, during the Thaw, instantly channelled this fear and anxiety through comic relief and/or positive resolution (Fedorov, 2016, p. 188). In *Snow Queen* (1967), for example, Gerda escapes from the robbers' prison after the Reindeer tells her to 'use her fingers' to untie herself.

The Story of Wanderings belongs to the later generation of fantasy cinema: a distinct group of films for children and young adults produced in the 1980s. Many of them transgress the earlier taboo of presenting Western culture as appealing or interesting, by using distinctly European settings (Fedorov, 2016). For example, *The Black Hen, or Dwellers of the Underground* (Victor Gres, 1980) is an adaptation of a dark fairy tale of the same name by Antoniy Pogorelski, written in 1829. It takes place at an eerie boarding school around Christmas and comes as close to a Gothic aesthetic as it was possible when the preferred theme of all children's media was triumphant Soviet pioneers fighting against evil capitalists. Similarly, *A Fairy Tale Told at Night* (Irina Tarkovskaya, 1981) pays homage

to the mystical fairy tales of German romantic writer Wilhelm Hauff. This unique subgenre of humble but artful Soviet Gothic films discontinued after the fall of the USSR, with, probably, one last exception: *Josephine the Singer and the Mouse Folk* (1994) produced in Ukraine and based on short stories by Franz Kafka. Fantasy films produced in the 1980 s were often dark and psychologically rich, if somewhat ambiguous as to their 'implied viewer'. It was only during the 1980 s that Soviet cinema began to envision the teenager, or adolescent, as an age-category in which individuals are developing some level of personal agency within an otherwise strictly ideologically regulated society. Such developments in representation of young people lost momentum and focus in contemporary post-Soviet children's cinema (Kostiukovich, 2020).

In the official discourse of Soviet communism, *The Story of Wanderings* was recommended as an example of a 'worthy' film for young audiences by the popular *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of a Young Viewer* (1989) (EDYV). The encyclopaedia served as a guide to appropriate and popular genres of screen media and performative arts to young people interested in theatre and film. In 1989, 500,000 copies were printed and distributed. To explain the genre of children's films to its readers, the EDYV describes a classification of film content as follows:

Of course, the interests and needs of young viewers mostly depend on their age. For example, pupils of primary schools love fairy tale films most of all. Those who are in the fifth to seventh form (11-14 years old - my remark) watch films with an intriguing plot, especially adventure films ... Upper-form pupils (age 16-18 - my remark) prefer the films in which protagonists are looking for their place in life, deal with the problems of choice - whom to be, what kind of person to be and what to do" (EDYV, 1989, p. 76).

As long as *The Story of Wanderings* could be classified as a 'fairy tale' with an 'intriguing plot' about 'adventures', it still formally served children, rather than to adolescents, who are expected to begin considering their place in the real adult world as young adults.

The EDYV (1989) also endorses *The Seventh Seal*, stating that the 'children of Perestroika' would learn that these films 'are filled with reflections about the meaning of life and the eternal quality of such feelings as love and kindness, excite minds and souls of viewers' (p. 274). Even if the cinematic language of *The Seventh Seal* is more complicated, it is essentially a much kinder, warmer and a more hopeful film than *The Story of Wanderings*. Max von Sydow's character possesses a contagious love of life (a direct opposite to Mironov's performance in *The Story of Wanderings*). However, both films apply a low fantasy setting (medieval Dark Ages), are set during a plague and contain a personification of death who follows a wanderer with whom s/he shares an intimate connection.

Storytelling vignettes

The paced and somewhat illustrative way of storytelling in *The Seventh Seal* relates to the way the film was inspired by medieval church frescos (in particular those found in Täby church, located just north of Stockholm in Uppland). Indeed, the late medieval artist Albertus Pictor, who painted *Death Playing Chess* (1480–1490), is also featured as a character in *The Seventh Seal*. In drawing on religious imagery Bergman draws on a vocabulary of metaphors and symbolic objects (the film protagonists explicitly discuss

the meaning of similar murals within the film). *The Story of Wanderings* reproduces a similar structure, with mixed results. It can be watched as a series of short stand-alone scenes, each of them fable-like in their content. The experience of watching the film can be compared to late medieval scenes of paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.³ The use of didactic vignettes does not allow for convincing narrative flow, but through the talent of Andrey Mironov the separate sequences enumerate a set of meaningful life lessons. The death of a horse at the beginning of *The Story of Wanderings* is an example of such a vignette. It is shown indirectly, with a distant shot of a large pool of blood on the snow in front of the carriage. The viewer requires a certain level of cinematic literacy to interpret what has occurred. Orlando comments: 'Wolves ... stop whining. Be happy that it wasn't you!' A memorable and morbidly beautiful episode that is barely connected to the main thrust of the plot. The horse only briefly appears on screen before it dies. After its death, the travellers simply continue their journey without the horse moving onto the next 'vignette'.

A third important example of a vignette is the philosophical argument between Martha and Orlando when they are confined in a tower, filled with skeletons of dead prisoners. Pointing at two skeletons of an adult and a child, Orlando presents Martha with one of his most desperate speeches about the futility of any resistance. Defying the rules of framing, there is no cut-away or close-up of the skeletons when the characters discuss them in this theatrical scene; death sits offscreen but a part of the ambience of the scene. The characters explicitly discuss that they will die, like these people, no matter how hard they try.

Throughout *The Story of Wanderings* death remains present in the background.⁴ 'Ambient death' surrounds the dragon's village, which can be read as an authoritarian socialist state that also controls mobility (Burrell & Hörschelmann, 2014). When Martha decides to depart from the village in search of May, Orlando refuses. All he wants is a quiet life in the village where he can carry on his work as a scholar and a philosopher. He states: 'A person should be full. Especially a philosopher. Hungry philosophers are all angry'. Martha feels betrayed and attempts to run away only to learn that, according to local law, those who attempt to leave the village are executed in order to preserve its secrecy. Indeed, in attempting to leave Martha finds herself surrounded by human skulls on poles and scarecrows (see Figure 1), reminiscent of *Children of the Corn* (1984). It is an extremely rare occasion to see such abundance of explicit symbols of death in a Soviet children's film.

Adding to the ambience of death, the development of Orlando's character was shaped by actor Andrey Mironov losing his father prior to filming. Mironov's creative input has been acknowledged by Mitta (Mitta, 2010; Nikolaychik, 2016) who felt that the actor's personal loss strengthened the emotional turmoil that he projected on screen (Xaro, 2019). Mironov's fantasy character is simultaneously heroic whilst weak and flawed. Mitta was initially hesitant in casting Mironov as he perceived him to be an actor of a more 'bright, celebratory, fresh' nature – indeed, the actor had recently starred in a musical adaptation of *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)* (Birman, 1979). Prior to his heroic demise, Mironov's character behaves like a narcissistic coward. Orlando tells Martha to 'go to dragon's jaws' alone, then he refuses to leave the dragon's village and instructs Martha to leave him. When Orlando ends up imprisoned, after a brawl at the tavern, he quickly loses hope and gives up on life and contemplates suicide. His eventual death redeems him as the otherwise questionable hero of the film. Orlando appears to



Figure 1. The first encounter with human death in *The Story of Wanderings* (1983).

sacrifice himself to stop the plague, for his death follows a scene in which Orlando and Martha contemplate their future, and that of the young orphans Martha discovered on the road.

Death of childhood

Paradoxically, and unlike the majority of children's stories (see Trites, 1998), this is the story of a symbolic 'growing up' of its significant adults. Orlando is the real child in the film. Initially, he is self-centred, careless and constantly getting into trouble despite Martha's attempts to keep him out of it. We may infer that 'fatherhood' changes Orlando, despite the problematic nature of the 'family' relationships. In the context of the film's narrative, Orlando's death is the most important event in his life. It is a spectacular, even a beautiful death, and it clearly symbolises personal growth for Orlando.

The evil deeds of the main antagonist, the robber Gorgon (played by Lev Durov) are also later redeemed by his sincere fatherly love for his captive (Fedorov, 2016; Maslovskiy, 1984). Initially, Gorgon forcefully 'adopts' May for utilitarian reasons, but he and his accomplice, Brutus, eventually become a caring family unit for May. Notably, while both caretakers – the 'good' Orlando and the 'bad' Gorgon – are perfectly comfortable exploiting and abusing 'their' children, only Gorgon openly expresses parental love and affection to 'his' child.

Little May's fate is a never-ending despair in the first part of the film: he is carried around in the cage, crying loudly, for a large part of the film. While Orlando constantly criticises and diminishes Martha. He views himself as a misunderstood genius in the natural sciences, and her as an object of his research but also a nuisance. When she first sees him, he is holding a lancet, ready to cut her open, – a young viewer might not comprehend this scene, shot from Martha's perspective, but an adult viewer usually knows what a lancet is for. Performing a stereotypical toxic Soviet parent (Teitelbaum, 1945), Orlando repeatedly blames Martha for destroying his life and academic career:

Like I haven't lived before you! I had a wonderful life! I have a thousand important ideas and a thousand important things to do, and I should waste my time with you?

He eases on her when he realises that she is at the point of breakdown, but he still repeatedly addresses her as an inferior being, an 'animal', 'stupid', 'eyeless' and 'handless'. He tells Martha: 'Your ignorance has set science back' when she destroys his flying apparatus to make clothes for the little orphans. He even slaps her on the face when he wants her to escape on the flying apparatus alone and leave him behind. She refuses even under threat and abuse and they fly away together, which normalises the abuse further.

It is possible to equate the dysfunctional 'family unit' in *The Story of Wanderings* with the company of travelling performers in *The Seventh Seal*. While Bergman was never reluctant to bring his difficult relationship with his father to the screen, as seen in *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) and *Winter Light* (1963), the dream worlds of *The Seventh Seal* serve as an antithesis to emotional detachment and mistreatment, for love and happiness illuminates other people's lives and eventually defeats the plague. Nothing can destroy this happiness in the family of wandering actors – not even Death himself.

There is no place for such affection in the grim, menacing world of *The Story of Wanderings*, even if we assume that Martha's love serves as a remedy against death. Even though Orlando takes care of Martha, he does not express kind feelings to her, apart from two or three very brief moments (such emotional estrangement was Mitta's directorial intent according to Haro (2019)). This almost comes as a relief, as they sleep together in their carriage, and he performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on her after an accident (which she then repeats the same technique to revive her brother in the finale). In the dialogue before his death, Martha tells Orlando that he loves him. 'I also grew to love you', he replies, before stating 'although I wouldn't have died without you, my life would be much more boring.' Perhaps this is the highest level of emotional engagement Orlando is capable of, and perhaps the true tragedy of the film is that, in the end, Martha chooses Orlando over May, and May chooses death over life without Martha.

The tragedy of Martha's story is signalled earlier in the film in the way the film establishes the gender roles of its fictional world. While May is able to choose between being a robber, a prince (whom he eventually becomes) or a travelling juggler, Martha's duty is to wash men's laundry and cook. She does not object to this role, even though she consistently demonstrates more strength, courage, self-assuredness and adventurousness than any other character in the film. Unlike Mia in *The Seventh Seal*, she is in the focus of the story from the beginning to the end. Orlando may be the viewers' favourite due to Mironov 'star' status, but he has much less screen time than Martha. As the leading female character, Martha is the true knight, or, rather, the queen in this symbolic game against death.

Assuming that *The Story of Wanderings* is the story of a female heroine, its ending becomes the purest horror. After ten years of wandering, Martha still remembers Orlando, and, despite the abuse (hopefully not because of it), he is the only man whom she ever loved. Her ten-year journey to adulthood is one of stagnation and emotional dependency rather than personal growth. After Martha successfully completes her taxing and life-threatening quest and reunites with May, she compares her brother to the idealised image of Orlando to find him unworthy. May is devastated. He has been socialised in wrongdoing during their years apart. When reunited with his beloved older sister, May regrets the actions and behaviours of his past and vows to change, but Martha does not care. As she sets out to leave May, her brother performs an act of self-destruction – he activates his magical skill of attracting gold, so that gold held in the castle begins flying

around and eventually destroys the castle itself. May dies and is reborn as Orlando, fulfilling Martha's wish. Yet, his first words after the transformation are: 'Yes, girl'. These are the words of a man who does not care to know Martha, as if the person who is present in the body of her brother has suddenly forgotten what role she has played in his life. Although Martha rebelled against Orlando's apathy throughout their journey together, she eventually comes back to him.

In consideration of the meaning of Orlando's death, it can be connected to a specific tradition within Soviet children's media. The death of a hero, or narratives of 'Soviet necropedagogy' (Tumarkin, 2011) were a key facet in many Soviet stories regarding pioneers, forming a ubiquitous narrative in literature and film media aimed at young people from the late 1920s to the early 1980s (Leontyeva, 2005). The heroic death of Soviet pioneers are often described in gruesome detail, giving them the character of Christian martyrs (Leontyeva, 2005). Glorification of death in the interest of others, the common good and the future Communist society is valued above the individual. In *The Story of Wanderings* the death of Orlando is reversed by the death of May. May's sacrifice permits Orlando to resume his academic work and contribution to scientific progress. Indeed, May undertakes more transformations than any other character during the course of the film – but his final transformation into Orlando leaves him no opportunity to live as an autonomous adult. His body becomes an empty shell for a selfish and abusive man who has more value to society as a scientist (over a reformed teenage criminal). With this conclusion, Alexander Mitta supports the ideology that children are 'builders of the future' found in Soviet pioneer narratives. In the end, both children are deprived of determining their own futures and even identities because their only purpose was to fulfil the missions of their elders. The dead Orlando devours them both before they are able to craft a life of their own.

Depictions of death in children's and young adult literature often symbolises a rite of passage to adult life (Trites, 1998). This conceptualisation of death does not apply to *The Story of Wanderings*. Although the film's protagonists are very young (at the beginning of the film), being orphans, they have long passed the stage of childhood innocence and naivety. Whilst at a tavern Orlando questions Martha's disposition. He asks: 'Why don't you dance, sing, or play with dolls?' She answers quietly: 'I used to'. To which he replies: 'What are you, a hundred years old?' The audience never learns what happened to the parents of Martha and May except that both children carry a sober perspective on their life, status and prospects. Like many children of the Second World War, to whose generation the director Alexander Mitta belongs, they act as grown-ups in children's bodies. This presents a stark contrast to the naïve children characters of earlier Soviet films.

The writing of Charles Dickens is one obvious influence for the way he partners good cheer, merriment and celebration with painful reality (Hughes, 2018). Indeed, *The Story of Wanderings* begins at Christmas (although this is not openly declared to avoid anti-religious censorship). Yet, in stark contrast to the traditional Soviet fairy tale *Snow Queen* (1966) that features scenes of winter celebrations and cheer in a non-specific European city, *The Story of Wanderings* takes a Dickensian turn, showing May and Martha sharing food scraps, in a bid to survive. The scene is reminiscent of *The Little Match Girl* (2020) by Hans Christian Andersen, a fairy tale in which a little pauper girl freezes to death. Martha tries her best to revive the magic of Christmas for May, but he is scornful of her attempts.

Children's reading and viewing patterns are typically created and managed by adults. Trites (1998) has argued that one possible way to analyse the power dynamic of adult construction and management of childhood culture is to critically evaluate the implied young audience, because 'the very construction of an ideologically positioned implied reader often displaces adolescent readers' potential for empowerment' (p. 55). When considering the implied reader/viewer in Soviet cinema, there is a sense that disillusionment led Soviet authors to willingly pass agency onto the younger generation. As Sergey Oushakine (2008) notes, a relatively free-thinking part of the 'intelligentsia' would often see children and teenagers as 'ideal adults' for they have yet to be subdued by repressive systems. In writing about the typical characters of children's books and TV he argues that 'characters, created by adults' are 'addressed both to those "ideal" adults whom they wanted to be and to those "spoilt" kids whom these adults may have not been, but eventually became' (p. 12). It is not just adults speaking to other adults: it is adults speaking to children in hope that they will understand when they grow up, – and, hopefully, change the world for the better. Returning to *To Kill a Dragon*, this is exactly why Lancelot insists on fighting the Dragon in front of the children: the young viewers must learn about good and evil, no matter how bloody and horrifying this sight might be (see Figure 2).

A peculiar form of breakthrough or transformation occurs when younger viewers find themselves in an unexpectedly empowered position. That is, when young audiences are invited to reflect upon complicated social, political and philosophical topics, sometimes presented in the most sophisticated artistic manner, despite being directed towards entertainment media. As Anna Fishzon (2015) argues, 'children's cultural production' were 'subject to comparatively light state censorship ... and hence became domains of social and cultural critique' (p. 571). This approach cultivated a very specific type of 'dual audience', exemplified in the first version of the screenplay for *To Kill a Dragon* in 1943–1944 (Svarts, 2005).

In spite of the creative limitations of 'stagnation', *The Story of Wanderings* created an encounter with death and the brutality of existence within the territory of fairy-tale dark fantasy. Formally, Soviet critics (e.g. Markevich, 1984; Maslovskiy, 1984) judged the film's extreme emotional challenges as justified as they 'inspire faith in goodness, love, fairness and devotion' in its young audience (Fedorov, 2016, p. 188). This is the contradiction of the fictional fantasy world developed by Alexander Mitta. Even though his



Figure 2. A young viewer is ready to watch the final battle between good and evil in *To Kill a Dragon*.

youngest characters start as all too realistic ‘children of war’, in the end they choose staying true to their romanticised ideals of love and devotion to survive in the merciless ‘adult’ world. Unfortunately, this is also the opposite of growth and development and more like the repeated rumination on their trauma of losing their closest and dearest ones.

Conclusion

Death comes in a variety of forms in *The Story of Wanderings*. It may be invisible and quiet, as in the horrifying plagued city, – and yet such quietness makes it even more eerie and disturbing. It conveys omnipresence of death through the intense atmospheric anxiety of a pandemic situation (see Trigg, 2021 on Covid-19). Mitta’s cinematic experiments, rooted in European cinema, do not differentiate between the young and adult audience: both are carried away with visceral emotional intensity of such scenes. This is different from the static ambient death that surrounds the dragon’s village and dwells in the prison tower, represented by human skeletons and the stories about them. The threat of death by itself is not the main reason to be scared of these places; human weaknesses and vices are the worst enemy here. Both the village and the tower normalise ordinary death as a part of the background, which also hints at the suffocating atmosphere of the era of stagnation that was more familiar to the adult audience. Finally, the spectacular heroic death of Orlando bears the meaning of the character’s transformation from a selfish man-child to the socially responsible hero. This is a kind of death that is native to Soviet children’s media, even when fantastic storytelling declined during the ‘war on fairy tales’. Soviet pioneers would gladly meet the same kind of death in literature and films in the style of socialist realism.

Despite the hope expressed in the finale of *The Story of Wanderings*, its characters have no safe place to return to, no ‘home sweet home’ if there ever was one. Home is the dangerous place and the road becomes home for many wandering children in the late Soviet films (Gorokhova, 2018). Like *The Road* (1954) by Federico Fellini, *The Story of Wanderings*’ main narrative is the journey of an unlikely couple in a potentially abusive relationship: an older man of questionable morals and a younger woman who acts in a way seen as naïve by her cynical companion. In both films, as well as in many other ‘road movies’, the road represents a transitory ‘non-space’ (Augé, 1995), or, in the context of a pandemic situation, the terrifying void of an ‘un-place’ (Trigg, 2012, p. 121) that exists in a state of flux and is experienced as dynamic and uncertain, rather than static and particular. The state of constant ‘wandering’ becomes the source of spatial anxiety as ‘tremendous effort is required to maintain existential security’ (Trigg, 2012, p. 149). A frightening feature of the Plague is her ability to disappear into thin air and reappear at a random location. This is how Mitta creates the feeling of omnipresent menace with minimal technical means.

The mature complexity of films such as *The Story of Wanderings* have been perceived as contributing to the abilities of young viewers to adapt. According to Alexei Yurchak (2005), ‘despite the seeming abruptness of the collapse, they [former Soviet citizens] found themselves prepared for it’ (p. 1), in part due to cultural transgressions that started as early as the Thaw. Oushakine (2008) reached a similar conclusion in his evaluation of children’s film and TV characters in the late Socialism, with its unstable social systems and

murky perspectives. He states: 'These "merry little people" may have not taught "the art of living", but they explained "he science of surviving" well enough' (p. 52). The 'adult qualities' of media designed for young viewers in the late USSR might have prepared the children of Perestroika for a lifetime of perpetual severe economic and ecologic crises. Sadly, nearly forty years after the film's release, it remains unclear how its legacy should be applied in a world where, just like Orlando, adults do not learn until it is too late.

Notes

1. Knowledge of authorial intent should not prevent further alternative or complementary readings. Indeed, a contemporary reading may interpret the dragon as a metaphor for the Russian oil that drives its predatory economy – an interpretation that Mitta added too, many years later (Kichin, 2008).
2. Alexander Mitta was mentored by Ptushko. His debut film, *My Friend, Kolka!* (1961) credits Ptushko as an Art Director.
3. The dragon village visually references *The Land of Cockaigne* (1567) and the plague-related scenes are reminiscent of *The Triumph of Death* (1562).
4. Similar to 'ambient death' in Soviet children's verse as highlighted by Oushakine (2008).

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