Walking the Streets of Daneliia's Moscow

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Soviet director Georgii Daneliia's 1963 film *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* follows Volodya, an aspiring writer from Siberia who travels to Moscow to discuss his work with a famous author. The film begins with Volodya's arrival at the Vnukovo Airport as the Kremlin's bells toll in the background, signaling a change in both time and state power. The camera then pans to a woman singing alongside her reflection in the airport's window, with Volodya moving in unison with her. Both figures are mirrored in the puddles on the wet tarmac. Encased between glass and water, the characters stand in a liminal space of (self-) reflection, detached from the chaotic action of the background. This scene's dialog reveals the major thematic arc of the film:

You feel good?
Really good!
No, that can't be!
Yes, it can be! ... Yes, it can be!

Although this exchange satirically jokes about doubt, sincere skepticism lies in the repetition of the line "Yes, it can be!". It is as if the characters need reassurance that "feeling good" is possible in the aftermath of Stalin's brutality. The conflict of this scene is further developed compositionally as an otherwise amiable morning on the tarmac is foiled by puddles of a recent rain shower. In conjunction, these first elements of the film allude to how characters' inner-worlds are speckled with doubt and disbelief. Daneliia transforms the physical landscape of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* through weather, camera movement, and other visual techniques into a subjective landscape influenced by the internal struggles of the charac-

ters. Although Daneliia created *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* in response to the confusion of the post-Stalin era, his film is relevant to the city's current situation—one of major political and cultural change.

BACKGROUND

Stalin's death in March 1953 triggered a shift in Soviet culture and politics away from the oppression that had defined his totalitarian regime. Stalin's dictatorship began in the late 1920s with his first Five-Year Plan, which allowed him to seize control of the USSR's industrial and agricultural sectors, with the goal of transforming the Soviet Union into a global superpower. Although Stalin brutalized the Soviet population via the secret police, the Gulag system, and the Great Purge, he successfully developed a cult of personality that shifted public conversation away from these atrocities. Coined by novelist Ilya Ehrenburg, the term "The Thaw" refers to the post-Stalinist period—1953 to 1967—as well as the socio-political movements it encompassed. Khrushchev's Secret Speech, which took place on February 25, 1956 at the Twentieth Party Congress, anathematized the cult of Stalin and opened the floodgates for individual self-expression and self-reflection within Soviet culture. Cultural liberation during "The Thaw" permitted the proliferation of uncensored books, foreign films, art shows, and novel forms of entertainment.

The Soviet film industry, in particular, underwent rapid stylistic and structural changes during this time. In the words of Russian cinema scholar Aleksandr Prokhorov, "The last years of Stalin's rule became known as the time of cine-anemia [. . .] due to strict ideological control over the industry and relatively low financing of film production and exhibition. After Stalin's death in 1953, the industry received more resources and was decentralized." The cinema of "The Thaw" drew on the avant-garde aesthetics of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave, which disrupted the propagandist state script of Stalinism that had commonly focused on the Eastern Front of World War II. Thaw-era directors often explored individualized experiences of trauma in Soviet history in unprecedented ways that, only a few years prior, would have been unimaginable, such as in Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying* (1960) and Grigoriy Chukhray's *Ballad of a Soldier* (1959). Whereas other films, for instance—Eldar Ryazanov's *Carnival Night* (1956) and Leonid Gaidai's *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures* (1965)—sought to foster a jovial narrative and sustain cinematic escapism by thematizing cheerier romantic and comedic tropes. *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* synthesizes both these light and dark elements of Thaw cinema. Scholars have often considered the optimistic, gleeful themes, and somewhat superficial plot of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*, which are, indeed, closely related to the tropes of the Stalinist musical, yet an intentional, heavier undercurrent discloses itself upon further analysis, which makes *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* unexpectedly resonate with the dire political situation in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

MOVEMENT

The diegesis of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* consists of a predominantly realistic day exhibited through the meanderings of Volodya and several other supporting characters. Toward the beginning of the film, the audience is introduced to Sasha, a young man whose narrative pivots on a moral struggle between his duty to the Soviet state (i.e., military service) and his personal life (i.e., a wedding). His character raises questions on the importance of individualism—in this case, romance—versus responsibility to the Party. The competing tensions in Sasha's life can be mapped onto the larger sociocultural "debate" between Stalinism and "The Thaw." The one yet unmentioned character is Kolya, a mischievous young Moscow Metro worker who becomes "the subject and object of Moscow's visual exploration." Kolya's navigation of the city is encapsulated through recurring scenes of him in the street; on buses and in cars; or in proximity to various forms of urban transportation. These images disclose Daneliia's intention to use Kolya as both a vessel of movement on whom the camera relies to physically experience Moscow and the character driving the film's plot. The uniting factor between all of Kolya's movements is that they are largely aimless, even desultory. Thus arises a distinctive query that lingers with us throughout *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*: In what direction, if any, is Moscow heading?

Shots focusing on transportation, industrialization, masses of citizens, and the modern New Arbat Street in contrast to the Red Square are all intentional elements making Moscow itself a character in the film. Under Stalin, Moscow's cityscape grew vertically through mass industrialization and the postwar construction of skyscrapers. Allegorically understood, society's obligatory upward growth demonstrated linear compliance to Stalin's hierarchical communist agenda. This vertical movement proclaimed the "achievement" of the communist utopia. By contrast, the "kino-eye" of the 1960s— a recycled term from the 1920s avant-garde—moves horizontally, traversing a promising new cityscape as a liberated flâneur: "a connoisseur of the street, who enjoyed a mobile form of perception capable of synthesizing the transient fragments of modern life through urban strolls and willingness to immerse himself in the crowd." Indeed, in the opening shots of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*, the camerawork physically thaws from a stagnant bird's-eye view into a fluid pan, representing the cultural movement unfolding within Moscow itself. The very cinematography of the film re-enacts Soviet society's passage from Stalinism (1930s-1940s) into "The Thaw" (1950s-1960s): stolid verticality to fluid horizontality.

A variety of Eastern and Western elements also percolate throughout *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* in various chance encounters, such as the corner-shop boy learning English; a young Japanese tourist in a taxi; and the gaggle of European tourists on Red Square. The transformation of Moscow's physical space is complemented by its changing "social architecture" during "The Thaw." This dynamism is sustained because of the characters' explorative movement. Russian film scholar Lida Oukaderova has explained this concept further: "Static structures become renewed with each human passage

through them, their feel and appearance affected by pedestrians' routes, bodies, minds, and modes of mobility." The film's subtle inclusions of non-citizens insinuates Moscow's reconstruction on a global scale, not just within the country itself.

The effect of Moscow's dynamism in *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* substantiates through an experience analogical to a museum, not unlike Aleksandr Sokurov's famous 2002 film; Russian Ark explores the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg at a watershed historical moment as Russia transitioned into the new, post-Soviet millennium. In Daneliia's case, the openness of Moscow during "The Thaw" attracts spectators, similar to a new exhibit, and the city offers viewers an experience of self-education by exhibiting the characters' journeys through the urban environment. It is here we can appreciate Daneliia's optimism for a modern utopia on the cutting edge of reinvention. In summary, global travel begets cultural migration, and furthermore, *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*—like other contemporary films, such as Marlen Khutsiev's *July Rain* (1966)—illuminates Moscow as a centripetal destination. The film celebrates Moscow's transformation into a bustling, energized metropolis following its suffocation by the Stalin regime.

Within the horizontal plane of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*, the plot, which itself is a function of motion, proves to be neither circular nor linearly progressing toward a goal. As Daneliia's title reveals, leisurely movement is of utmost importance in and to this film. The meandering characters, whose motives are somewhat arbitrary, allow spectators to rediscover Moscow on their own terms in the early 1960s. The film's ambling quality releases viewers from "following" the plot. The film depicts reconfiguration of spatial and societal relationships "through the free movement of people," and, furthermore, the "space becomes multiple and heterogeneous, just as its structural unity remains dynamic—understood as an individual, sensory experience of the passage." From the opening scene at the airport to the closing scene at the metro station, the film highlights transition rather than destination.

WEATHER

On multiple occasions throughout the film, Moscow's climate changes abruptly from sunshine to rainstorm. This fickle weather motif culminates forty minutes into the film when the camera focuses on a woman strolling, heels in hand, amidst a downpour. There is an artistic interplay between the images of her legs and the spokes of a bicycle. The serendipitous joy of this scene emerges as the characters' movement is no longer restricted by the fluctuation of the atmosphere. This scene is a coming-of-age for Moscow, growing out of recent dark times. The city cleanses itself, re-emerging from the storms of World War II and Stalinism as a landscape of new beginnings. In *Weather, Climate, and Culture*, Sarah Strauss and Benjamin Orlove explore the transformative effect that weather has on human perception: "All humans experience the variations in atmospheric conditions and in meteorological phenomena that we call weather and climate [. . .] Our complex forms of collective life influence the way that we are affected by weather and climate, creating both forms of vulnerability and capacities

to reduce impacts." The film narrative's interaction with climate, as well as the symbolic implications for cinematic weather, produce a more intimate portrayal of the life of Soviet citizens and reveal thematic elements of reflection, time, and subjectivity.

Similar to the acclaimed postwar filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, Daneliia's cinematic floor is often wet or mosaicked by shallow puddles. Such use of water unifies both earth and atmosphere, creating a singular plane of infinite reflective depth. Mirrored surfaces throughout the urban environment reveal the tense history of "The Thaw" by reflecting images of architecture. For example, a "Stalinist skyscraper behind a 1960's modern glass cafe" forms a compositional contrast in the skyline. However, the abstract refraction of Stalinist architecture in the accumulated puddle below reflects the metaphysical reimagining of the city's architectural identity. In *Cinema As Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Changes*, Kristi McKim explains: "Self-reflexive film posits the weather as not only comparable to but also inextricable from the transformative capacity of cinematic expression." In other words, just as *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* sought to portray civilian life on the movie screen, the reflective capabilities of rain and puddles throughout the film's landscape likewise disclose The Thaw's inner-turmoil of re-evaluating both selfhood and statehood.

In an anthropological sense, discussion of climate implies discussion of time. Strauss and Orlove explain: "In societies around the world, people talk about the recent weather and the weather that is to come, they remember the conditions months ago, and anticipate future seasons, and they discuss the weather far in the past as well." In *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*, Daneliia uses sunlight to unite climate and plot during Volodya's stopover in Moscow, just as the political climate in Russia constantly influences individual lives. Furthermore, if the weather is a somatic manifestation in part representing the unstable relationship between state and society, *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* demonstrates the events of "The Thaw" through capricious weather patterns and indifferent characters. For example, Sasha arrives at his wedding during a late-afternoon downpour, a step toward individualism in Sasha's moral dilemma between official state duty to the military and his personal affairs. By sunshine or in downpours, Daneliia's characters forgo adjusting or adapting their behavior to atmospheric conditions. Movement forges onward through lashing rain, and dialog utterly abstains from addressing the weather. A possible interpretation alludes to Soviet citizens' vaunted stoicism. Just as Daneliia's narrative advances in spite of the weather, society itself lives on through generations, while political trends (Stalin's totalitarian regime, World War II, The Cold War) are revealed to be finite and fleeting.

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To Western viewers who associate Moscow with the extreme cold and brutal weather of the tundra, the sun may

be a somewhat surprising element. In reality, comfortable temperatures and sunny weather are somewhat of a rarity in Moscow. In *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*, this weather alludes not only to a providential day in the forecast, but an entire climate evolving and changing toward more temperate conditions. Indeed, a "thaw" refers to the nascent beginnings of spring, with sun and warmth overtaking the dark cold. As "The Thaw" was adopted as shorthand for the historical period in Russia, the term implies that change is a constant state. The fickle atmospheric conditions in *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* rely on weather as a poetic metaphor signaling both seasonal and sociocultural changes.

Although the weather in *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* is a great symbolic device, the physical qualities additionally advance the audience's comprehension. McKim defines the dynamism between cinema and meteorology as "...a metaphor by which we read our skies, while meteorology reciprocally enriches our conception of the film." To immerse a subject or action within weather is to encapsulate that subject within the mechanical screen of cinematography and the natural screen of the living world. For this theory's application in *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*, the frequent rainfall not only offers cleansing and reflective attributes, but also the transparency of the rain water itself becomes an ulterior, transfigurative perspective by which the audience can conceptualize cinematic events by applying them to reality. In the analogous thoughts of Erik Barnouw: "'The lens of rain,' as if weather not only affects our spectatorial perception or cinematographic recording but also possesses a subjectivity through which one might see." Through the film's unpredictable meteorology, Daneliia raises themes concerning the nature of Soviet society in transition out of the (stormy) Stalinist past Moscow's uncertainty of "The Thaw" coats *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* in a duality of apprehension and optimism as mutable as the weather.

ERA OF STAGNATION

The Era of Stagnation (1964-85) is the term used to describe the Soviet Union's period of economic hardship succeeding "The Thaw." As the state figure most closely associated with the Era of Stagnation, Leonid Brezhnev condemned himself to social, political, and economic liability by the end of his leadership in 1982. Khrushchev's Thaw dissipated in 1966, considerably associated with the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial in which satirical writings of Soviet life were condemned as anti-Soviet propaganda, thus, inducing a resurgence of Stalinist social policies. Throughout the 1970s, the inert Soviet economy was a result of Brezhnev's anti-reformism and bureaucratic central-planning, which poorly attempted to balance consumer goods and popular demand. Andrei Sakharov, a Soviet nuclear physicist, Nobel laureate, and human rights activist, shared his perspective of the Era of Stagnation in an open letter to the President of the Academy of Sciences:

I have taken a fresh look at our economic difficulties and food shortages, at the privileges of the bureaucratic and Party elite, at the stagnation of our industry, at the menacing signs of the bureaucracy perverting and deadening the life of our entire country, at the general indifference toward work done for a faceless state (nobody could care less), at corruption and

improper influence, at the compulsory hypocrisy which cripples human beings, at alcoholism, at censorship and the brazen lying of the press, at the insane destruction of the environment, the soil, air, forests, rivers and lakes. The necessity for profound economic and social reforms in the USSR is obvious, but attempts to implement them encounter the resistance of the ruling bureaucracy and everything goes on as before, with the same worn-out slogans.

I Walk the Streets of Moscow moves within these inevitable parameters. The film reflects the transition from Stalinism to "The Thaw" and, ultimately, from "The Thaw" into Stagnation. Volodya's day in Moscow ends on an unmistakably plaintive note. His exploration of the city cannot continue indefinitely. Instead, the film foreshadows an end to the liberatory flâneur and, by extension, "The Thaw" in the final scenes of the film. Shortly after Volodya's departure, Kolya finds himself alone in the train station. He stands adjacent to a polished marble wall, his shadow faintly discernible in the reflection, evoking analogous attributes of loneliness to the solitary statues displayed through a forerunner of several images. Indeed, the theme of isolation, despite the bustling city, prevails throughout Daneliia's film. While Moscow surges with claustrophobic flocks of people, characters seem detached and without an obvious sense of belonging or community; the specter of emptiness hovers over this film.

Toward the middle of the film, the floor polisher concludes his charade of impersonation by telling Volodya and Kolya: "I'm writing a novel." Writing, alongside other passions, is commonly perceived as a naturally invigorating and fulfilling craft. However, the floor polisher's vacant gaze upon stating this dissipates any enthusiasm about his personal project. His despondency makes us wonder if, though he is writing, he will be able to *publish?* Daneliia subtly alludes here to the renewed culture of censorship that would set in under Brezhnev in the 1970s, which ousted famous writers like Joseph Brodsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. While walking in the park Kolya encounters his cousin Viktor with the same air of hopeless detachment as the floor polisher. Although Viktor carries his two well-clad children adorned with balloons (displaying abundance and success in his personal familial life), his vapid expression contradicts the scenario's advantageous qualities. Similarly, After leaving his bride-to-be at the altar, a deflated Sasha cradles his head in his hands over a solitary wedding feast: "I feel so bad right now... that I don't feel like going on." The previous analyses accompanied by a multitude of other undiscussed fleeting details of depression further support a possible critique of "The Thaw" from Daneliia: individualism can be isolating.

Returning to the final scene in the metro station, Kolya sings an optimistic farewell alluding to his possible future: "I'll raise a white sail, but don't know with whom. If I start to feel homesick, I'll find a violet in the snow and remember Moscow," the lyric mentions a white sail in reference to Mikhail Lermontov's 19th-century poem "The Sail," which conveys themes of loneliness, uncertainty about the future, and unjustified hopes. Daneliia alludes to these comparative characteristics between Lermontov's poem and Kolya, thus deliberately enforcing (albeit somewhat cryptically) a direction-less, wandering archetype for the protagonist of "The Thaw."

As Koyla's song fades into an instrumental peroration, he then ascends a staircase, leaving us behind. This moment should be recognized for its contradictory implications in a film that otherwise tracks horizontal movements. Kolya's vertical ascension of the escalator augurs the Era of Stagnation (or "refreeze") as Russia was to endure the resurfacing of vertical movements and architecture reminiscent of Stalin shortly after the release of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow*. The narrative elements of *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* manifest a warning, alluding that the irreversible force of time is at hand. In short, Daneliia in this film conveys that things *will* change. There's a subtle tease to an unfortunate end of "The Thaw" below the youthful dizziness of the superficial plot.

CONCLUSION

Within the past two decades Russia has become increasingly detached from the liberal cultural and political atmosphere of "The Thaw." Modern Moscow seems more in step with the Moscow of the Era of Stagnation due to the consequences of Vladimir Putin's dictatorship. Putin's 2000 presidential election was welcomed by Russian citizens due to his assurance of a "strong Russia." The previous years under Boris Yelstin had been tainted by economic hardship, crime, and corruption, which left Russia yearning for the stability and prosperity that Putin pledged to restore. Reminiscent of the post-Stalin period, the change in political leadership was enriched by the optimism that societal progress would surely be evoked in suit of political recovery. However, these hopes were quickly dissipated. In December 2011, an estimated crowd of 25,000 gathered at Bolotnaya Square to protest Putin's parliamentary election fraud. These feelings of disappointment and abandonment swelled alongside Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. Violence coalesced to the current political agenda through intense paranoia, police brutality, and widespread fear – an antagonistic political and statist culture not seen since the Stagnation Era in the 1970s. *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* reflects the rise and trajectory of Putin in the germane setting of the late Soviet period. Presently, the war in Ukraine has stranded Russian society, leaving it starkly "refrozen" in the turmoil of the 21st century and dashing any hopes of a "thaw."

As Russian society is experiencing the resurgence of isolation and stagnation in context to these extinguished hopes they once held for Putin, Timothy J. Colton reminds us "that wrenching change has been the rule, not the exception, in modern Russia. As the Putin era winds down, there is potential for fundamental and meaningful change in Russia, but it is not inevitable." The preluding quote affects the uncertainty: In what direction, if any, is Russia heading? It is in this situation *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* becomes sustenance, as all true art does, for questioning and conceptualizing the present dynamic in Russian society. Volodya's stop-over revealed a frontier of reinvention and serendipitous encounters. The plight of a modern-day Russia raises the same questions that Daneliia's masterpiece did about self-reflection, identity, and apprehension or optimism concerning the future. However, under Putin, the seasons have unmistakably shifted, and it is with great hope that, from the darkness, the streets of Moscow may be walked again.

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