

# “The Grinding of Sand on Tiles...”

## Forms of Female Subjectivity in *DAU. Katya Tanya*

author: Rachel Morley

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abstract: This article offers a close reading of *DAU. Katya Tanya* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia), one of the seven DAU films which Jekaterina Oertel co-directed with Ilya Khrzhanovskiy. After first surveying a broad range of responses to the position and role of women in the DAU project from journalists, film critics, cultural commentators, academics, project participants, crew members, and the directors themselves, I discuss the film’s representation of the protagonist, Katya, in the light of this context. Approaching *DAU. Katya Tanya* as cinema, as an aesthetic object, but also considering the ways in which it reveals the project’s tension between the ‘real’ and the staged, I argue – contrary to most existing responses – that the female subject does, at times, occupy a meaningful and active place in the film (and, by extension, in parts of the project), but that this is not sustained. To do so, I examine the ways in which female subjectivity is expressed formally (that is, cinematically) in the film. My analysis falls into two main parts. I focus initially on the film’s first, self-contained nine-and-a-half minutes, which function as a prologue, outlining how Khrzhanovskiy and Oertel make use of formal cinematic means of expression connected with the symbolic actions of speaking, looking, and feeling to express their female protagonist’s subjectivity. In the second part, I consider the ways in which, and the extent to which, the directors succeed in incorporating a woman’s perspective – what we might term the “female gaze” – and in privileging the “female subject-position” across the film as a whole. My focus here is on Khrzhanovskiy and Oertel’s representation of sex, both heterosexual and lesbian, in the film’s four sex scenes. Finally, I consider the impact of the film’s ending on the representation of the female protagonist and its significance as part of Khrzhanovskiy’s stated aim in DAU to use the past as a vehicle for talking about the problems of the present day.

keywords: Jekaterina Oertel; Ilya Khrzhanovskiy; Denis Shibanov; Ekaterina Uspina; Tatiana Polozhy; female subjectivity; female gaze; cinematic language; feminist film theory; cinematic sex; pornography; Russian women’s cinema; lesbian cinema; lesbian gaze; LGBT rights in contemporary Russia.

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## Introduction: Women and DAU

### Jekaterina Oertel

Since the mid-2000s, the number of women directors working in Russia has increased dramatically, as has their success. At the 2014 Kinotavr, Russia’s largest and most prestigious national film festival, eight of the fourteen films in the main competition were directed by women, for the first time in the majority. Since 2010, when Svetlana Proskurina became the first woman to win Kinotavr’s coveted Grand Prix, three further women have done so: Anna Melikian (2015), Oksana Karas (2016), and Nataliia Meshchaninova (2018). Russian women are also increasingly active in other filmmaking roles, as scriptwriters, production designers, cinematographers, editors, and producers. Against the background of this “женский взрыв”

[female explosion], to borrow Anzhelika Artiukh's evocative term (2015: 128), it is noteworthy that a significant number of the DAU films were co-directed by a woman: Jekaterina Oertel.<sup>1</sup> A graduate of the Moscow Film and Theatre School and an established make-up artist with over 50 national and international film and television productions to her name, Oertel joined the DAU project in 2008, as the head of make-up and hair design. She remained in this position throughout the three years of filming (2008-2011), but her role gradually evolved and grew. Realising that Oertel was usually the last crew member to talk to the participants before shooting began and seeing from his conversations with her during playback that she had "a profound knowledge of human nature" and "a very interesting point of view on people", the project's director, Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, increasingly discussed with Oertel the aims of each shooting session and the participants' preparation (Zvonkine 2022). Their discussions covered not only what style of make-up she should use, but also "what kind of conversation, what kind of mood she should initiate" (Zvonkine 2022) in order to, as Oertel (Morley 2022) puts it, "prepare them mentally" for the shoot. This, she told Philippe Bober (2020a: 17), meant "steering them emotionally into [sic] a particular direction and being with them all the way." Oertel's contribution during the filming process was therefore already a form of direction.

When the filming was over, Khrzhanovskiy (Zvonkine 2022), feeling that Oertel could offer – by virtue of her being a woman – a "completely different experience and understanding of feminine behaviour" (what he refers to as "a kind of 'female wisdom'"), invited her to participate in the post-production editing, as his co-director. As noted on the @DAUinstitute Facebook page (2020), given that filming was undertaken without scripts, "[p]ежиссерская работа, своего рода «проявление» сюжетов фильмов из 700 часов отснятого материала, во многом проходила на этапе монтажа" [(t)he directorial work, which was a kind of "developing" of the films' plots from the 700 hours of footage, largely took place during the editing stage]. Thus, "монтаж каждого фильма в определенном смысле и был его режиссурой" [to edit each film was, in a certain sense, to direct it].<sup>2</sup> Khrzhanovskiy stresses the importance of Oertel's contribution in this role when he refers to her as his "real co-author" (Zvonkine 2022).<sup>3</sup> The project's only woman co-director, the only co-director to have been on set with Khrzhanovskiy throughout the entire three years of filming (Zvonkine 2022), and the only co-director to be profiled on the @DAUinstitute Facebook page (2020), Oertel is credited on seven of the fourteen DAU films (all produced in Germany, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Russia), namely: *DAU. Katya Tanya* (2020); *DAU. Natasha* (2020); *DAU. Nikita Tanya* (2020); *DAU. Nora mama / DAU. Nora Mother* (2020); *DAU. Nora syn / DAU. Nora Son* (2020); *DAU. Sasha Valera* (2020); and *DAU. Tri dnia / DAU. Three Days* (2020).<sup>4</sup> None of

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<sup>1</sup> I transliterate Russian words and names using the Library of Congress system, except when an alternative spelling of names is either commonly used or preferred; therefore, when referring to people attached to the DAU project, I adopt the spelling used on [the DAU cinema platform](#). All translations from Russian and French are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on editing as a form of direction is often presented as peculiar to the DAU project, but it arguably applies much more broadly, a fact that the historical insistence on the primacy of the (usually male) director as auteur has consistently obscured. For a thought-provoking feminist analysis of why the contribution of contemporary Russian women film editors – such as Iuliia (Julie) Batalova, Dasha Danilova, and Anna Mass, who have regularly worked with (respectively) Boris Khlebnikov, Vasilii Sigarev, and Andrei Zviagintsev – should be considered a form of directorial work, equal to that of the director himself, see Khodyreva (2018).

<sup>3</sup> For Oertel's detailed account of her work in this role, see Morley (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Oertel was also the co-director (with Khrzhanovskiy) of two of the project's six serials, *DAU. Nora* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) and *DAU. Menu / DAU. Menu* (2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia); the co-screenwriter (with Khrzhanovskiy) of *DAU. Natasha*; and a participant, appearing as the wife of Krupitsa, the Director of the Institute between 1938-1952, in *DAU. Imperia / DAU. Empire* (Khrzhanovskiy and Vasiliev, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) and, most memorably, as his forthright widow in *DAU. Teoriia strun / DAU. String Theory* (Khrzhanovskiy and Slusarchuk, 2020, Germany,

Khrzhanovskiy's three men co-directors – Alexey Slusarchuk, Anatoly Vasiliev, and Ilya Permyakov – has even half as many credits. Oertel's centrality to the project is therefore clear.

## #MeToo

Several years before DAU was released to the public in Paris, in late January 2019, rumours began to emerge about, among other things, the demeaning treatment of women involved with the project. In 2010, the cinema section of the Russian Internet site OpenSpace.ru (whose editor-in-chief at the time was Mariia Kuvshinova, the film critic and the co-founder – with Tat'iana Shorokhova – of the feminist cinema website [Kimkibabaduk](#)) published a series of accounts from seven people (five of them women, the majority speaking anonymously) who had worked on DAU in various roles (Prilepskaia 2010). While not all the contributors reported negative experiences, a woman identified only as A., who briefly worked as an interpreter on the project in 2008, described the conditions as a form of “рабство” [slavery], with people required to work exceptionally long days, often for very low pay and with the ever-present threat of being fired on the spot hanging over them. There was a culture of late-night drinking with the director, she notes, recounting how the only questions Khrzhanovskiy asked during her interview were “люблю ли я выпить и что я пью” [if I like drinking and what do I drink], and the atmosphere was also highly sexualised (“очень распущенные люди там” [people are very promiscuous there]), with project members encouraged to develop close relationships. She illustrates her suspicion that she was given tasks that had no practical necessity, and were instead intended to place her in a “специально простроенный момент какого-то интимного контакта” [a deliberately constructed moment of some kind of intimate contact] with male crew members, with an account of how she was instructed to accompany a foreign cameraman from his accommodation to the set and back again, despite the fact that he, unlike her, had already visited Kharkiv and socialised with Khrzhanovskiy many times before.<sup>5</sup> To do well on DAU, a friend apparently told A. after she had left the project (from which she was fired, allegedly for not being the type of person they needed), “надо просто переспать с режиссером” [you just have to sleep with the director] (Prilepskaia 2010).

The publication of these first-hand accounts was followed by Michael Idov's (2011) now well-known *GQ* article, which introduced DAU to the non-Russian-speaking world and recounted – among other things – the experience of Yulia, “a wispy, beautiful graduate of a prestigious directing workshop”, one of many dozens of young women interviewed by Khrzhanovskiy for what Idov describes as “seemingly limitless ‘assistant director’ jobs”:

They had a two-hour conversation about art, after which she was sent to the wardrobe department to be dressed in 1952 garb. (“Make her a beauty,” ordered Khrzhanovsky.) The hairdo alone took two hours. Finally, by 1 a.m., Yulia was shown the set. [...] There they talked for two hours more, until 3 a.m., this time in private. The questioning quickly switched from art to sex. When did you lose your virginity? Can you come up to a guy in a club and fuck him without finding out as much as his name? Are any of your friends

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Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia). For a list of all the DAU films and their co-directors, see [About DAU](#). For brief critical responses to each film, see Gusiatsinskii et al. (2020).

<sup>5</sup> A. does not implicate the cameraman in this set up: on the contrary, she describes him as “нормальный, очень приятный дядечка” [alright, a very nice guy] and adds: “По ощущениям, мне кажется, он был обескуражен происходящим. То есть он приехал работать, он профессионал. Ему как оператору интересно. И я не думаю, что ему, как молодому отцу или вообще как европейскому оператору, интересно участвовать в этих оргиях. Но по-человечески он был очень-очень мил и приятен.” [My feeling is that he was discouraged by what was going on. I mean, he came to work, he's a professional. He found it interesting as a cameraman. And I don't think that he, as a young father or, generally, as a European cameraman, was interested in taking part in these orgies. But as a person he was very, very nice and pleasant.” (Prilepskaia 2010).

whores? [...] “When I got out,” remembers Yulia, “everyone was like, ‘Did he ask you about sleeping with other women?’ That seemed to be an important part of his interview process.”

The build up to the opening of the DAU project installations in Paris generated another flurry of press coverage. An article published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* in mid-January 2019 anonymously cited several women participants alongside women who had interviewed for other roles on the project, one of whom suggested that DAU resembled a cult both in its use of “[l]es mécanismes psychologiques de l’embrigadement” [psychological recruitment methods] and in the type of participants selected to join the project: “beaucoup de gens jeunes, frais, beaux” [lots of young, fresh, and beautiful people] (Tonet and Salino 2019). Albina Kovalyova (2019), who had worked on DAU as a casting assistant from 2006 and who had, at Khrzhanovskiy’s request, begun making a documentary about the project in 2016, recounted – in an article published in the British newspaper *The Telegraph* – how interviewing numerous participants and viewing much of the project’s 700 hours of footage caused her to have a nervous breakdown and left her “extremely troubled” that Khrzhanovskiy might have “overseen behaviour that crossed the line from fictional abuse to the real thing”.

The Paris events were met with feminist protests against the project’s treatment of women and the films’ representation of them (Pinkham 2020a: 122).<sup>6</sup> Writing in early February 2019, Samuel Goff (2019) asked a question posed by many: “after the painful advances in accountability and representation manifested in movements like #MeToo, are we still willing to excuse the excesses of men in the name of artistic ambition or ‘genius’?” One year later, when *DAU. Natasha* was screened at the 2020 Berlinale, the film critic Zinaida Pronchenko (2020a) described the project’s approach to women as “киновивисекция” [cinema-vivisection] and five Russian journalists, four of them women (Shorokhova et al. 2020), wrote an open letter to the festival’s creative director Carlo Chatrian and its executive director Mariette Rissenbeek, also referencing the #MeToo movement and protesting the inclusion of *DAU. Natasha* in the competition programme on ethical grounds, thus:

At the time when Harvey Weinstein is found guilty of sex crimes, in an era marked by the struggle against the culture of violence and abuse in the film industry, does the Berlinale see any ethical issues in screening a film that (by its own authors’ stark admission) contains scenes of real psychological and physical violence against non-professional actors, as well as unsimulated sex between people under the influence of alcohol?<sup>7</sup>

In response, the festival directors pointed out that Natalia Berezhnaya and Olga Shkabarnya, the film’s female leads, had repeatedly refuted these charges of abusive treatment (Belikov 2020a; Davis and Keslassy 2020; Pinkham 2020a: 123), as the two women again did at the Berlinale press conference. Khrzhanovsky also dismissed the suggestion that women had faced harassment and a violent on-set environment, describing such accusations as “a bit fashionable” (Davis and Keslassy 2020). The rumours did not go away, however. In his Berlinale 2020 review of the film, Marc van de Klashorst (2020) highlighted that there had been “[a]ccusations of sexual assault on set, including the rape of an assistant of performance

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<sup>6</sup> For critical assessments of the Paris installations, see especially Beumers (2019), Bird (2019), Desjardins (2019), Donadio (2019), Pronchenko (2019), and Zvonkine (2019).

<sup>7</sup> On the backlash that Shorokhova and the film critic Mariia Kuvshinova experienced in Russia for submitting this letter, see Kostyleva (2022) and Kuvshinova (2020). Kuvshinova did not actually sign the letter, but she published it on Kimkibabaduk, the feminist film website that she runs with Shorokhova.

artist Marina Abramovic”, who participated in *DAU. Degeneratsiia / DAU. Degeneration* (Khrzhanovskiy and Permyakov, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia).

When, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic closed film festivals and cinemas all over the world and Khrzhanovskiy launched, on April 21, 2020, the DAU Cinema platform (with the rather opportunistic tagline “DAU: The first cinematic project about isolation, filmed in isolation, for people in isolation”), commentators – now able to watch more of the films – increasingly questioned the ethics of the project’s production methods,<sup>8</sup> and especially the treatment of the non-professional women participants.<sup>9</sup> For their part, Khrzhanovskiy, Oertel, and the project’s other co-directors and crew members responded by stressing that the women participants had always been given complete freedom to decide for themselves what they would or would not do during filming (Dragaeva 2022; Morley 2022; Porton 2020; Elstermann 2020; Tonet and Salino 2019) and by explaining the systems they had put in place on set to protect the participants. Both Oertel (Berlinale Talents 2020: 1:05:15-1:05:41) and Khrzhanovskiy, for example, have outlined how Khrzhanovskiy – in a departure from his usual practice of delegating pre-filming briefings to Oertel and his assistant directors – would himself warn the participants in advance when a scene was likely to include “hardcore” violence or sex or a “very complex psychological moment” and would discuss this with them (Zvonkine 2022; France24 2020). Natalia Berezhnaya (Belikov 2020a; Bober 2020b) – the eponymous participant in *DAU. Natasha* – has confirmed this, recounting how the contentious and much-criticised interrogation sequence was discussed with her before filming began and noting that “Это было оговорено до мельчайших тонкостей.” [It was agreed down to the tiniest detail.]. When pressed on this by her interviewer, Egor Belikov (“Вы были готовы к пощечине, к бутылке – вы ко всему были готовы и согласились на это? [You were prepared for the slap, for the bottle – you were prepared for everything and you agreed to it?]), she insists: “Да. Все действия оговаривались, и если люди поверили в происходящее, то это значит, что мы все очень хорошо сыграли. [Yes. All the actions were agreed to, and if people believed in what was happening that means we played everything very well.] (Belikov 2020a). The project’s executive producer, Svetlana Dragaeva (2022), has also stressed this, describing the sequence as “one of the most prepped and constructed scenes we filmed”.

Other high-profile women participants – including Olga Shkabarnya from *DAU. Natasha* (Sobchak 2020: 1:08:04-1:10:02), Viktoria Skitskaya, who played a cafeteria worker who has sex with the convicted neo-Nazi Maksim Martsinkevich, also known as Tesak (Russian for cleaver, hatchet, machete) in *DAU. Degeneratsiia* (Rozovsky 2020), and Ekaterina Uspina and Tatiana Polozhy, respectively Katya and Tanya in *DAU. Katya Tanya* – have given interviews in which they attempt to dispel the rumours about the project’s abuse of

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<sup>8</sup> For overviews of the genesis of DAU, its funding by the Lviv-born billionaire Sergey Adonyev, and its production processes, see Beumers (2020), Pinkham (2020a), Zaezjev (2020: 69-74), and Koretskii (2019). For analysis of how many of the methods used in DAU can be seen, in embryonic form, in Khrzhanovskiy’s debut feature film *4 / Chetyre / Four* (Khrzhanovskiy, 2004, Russia), see Kozlenko (2022).

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of this and other areas of ethical concern, see Kostyleva (2022), Drubek-Meyer (2020), Gerritsen (2020), Kuvshinova (2020), Pinkham (2020a), Riley (2020), and Lavretskii (2019). For a counter view, which argues that “we, as scholars, should be especially careful with the concept of ethics as a tool to judge films and their creators, especially in the ‘short term’, which is usually that of critics and journalists and not scholars”, see Zvonkine (2020b). For a measured account of how DAU’s production methods have their roots in the practices of Soviet cinema, see Kelly (2020). On the almost wholly negative reaction to DAU in Ukraine, where a criminal investigation was launched to investigate the charge that the film crew tortured babies during the shoot, see Kozlenko (2022), Kuvshinova (2020), Spivak (2020) – who describes the “prosecutory” and “accusatory” tone of initial responses to DAU and identifies only two statements ‘for’ the project” – made by the Ukrainian scholar and translator Andrii Ryepa and the well-known Ukrainian scholar and writer, Mykola Riabchuk – and also Bryukhovetska (2020), who summarises the “thoughtful and well balanced” analysis by Riabchuk (in her view “the most perceptive commentator on the controversy”) of the reasons why DAU generated such “moral panic” and “harsh moral criticism” in Ukraine.

women (Melikova 2020a; Melikova 2020b). Asked by the journalist Liza Rozovsky whether she had experienced “fear and humiliation” during the filming and whether she had felt the need to seek “psychological treatment after participating in the project”, Skitskaya responded: “I didn’t go to a psychologist [...]. I don’t think I needed help [...]. There was no harassment there. [...] Yes, there was fear, but it was my choice to come to the institute.” (Rozovsky 2020). Uspina (Melikova 2020a) is particularly direct in this regard:

Хочу, кстати, уточнить, почему я согласилась давать интервью. Мне важно обозначить свою позицию, как это было на самом деле. Хотя бы попытаться сделать так, чтобы прекратилось вот это постоянное поливание говном, что все мы якобы были в безнадежной ситуации. Что женщины в проекте – это или женщины из борделя, или порнозвезды, или эскорт, или находящиеся в стесненном финансовом положении. Это не так. [...] [В]се это было оговорено, мы соглашались на те процессы, на которые были готовы, и не соглашались на те, на которые не готовы. Мы абсолютно отвечали за себя. И нам не было больно. Физически и психологически со мной ничего не произошло непоправимого. [I want, by the way, to spell out why I agreed to be interviewed. It is important to me to state my position, to express what it was really like. To at least try to put a stop to this constant tide of shit about how we were all supposedly in a hopeless situation. About how the women in the project were either women from a brothel, or porn stars, or escorts, or in financial difficulty. This is not true. [...] [E]verything was agreed to. We agreed to the things we were prepared to do, and did not agree to those that we were not prepared to do. We were absolutely responsible for ourselves. And we did not get hurt. Nothing irreparable happened to me, either physically or psychologically.

Various crew members have also outlined the safety systems adopted during the filming sessions, in case the participants changed their minds once on set. Jürgen Jürges, the project’s director of photography, has talked about establishing “a safety vow” between cast and crew, meaning that the participants could signal their desire to “stop at any time” (Roth 2020), “[a]s in BDSM practices”, Olga Bryukhovetska (2020) observes, somewhat wryly. Oertel has offered more detail about these “garde-fous” [safeguards], explaining that the participants knew to “s’extraire du champ de la caméra, la regarder pour interrompre la scène” [move out of the camera’s field of vision, to look at it to interrupt the scene] (Tonet and Salino 2019). Berezhnaya has described these same measures and revealed that she never felt the need to avail herself of them during filming (Belikov 2020a).

Oertel (Morley 2022) has also detailed the project’s post-filming support system, which paired every participant with “a person [...] from the director’s department, who was kind of a close person to them, so if anything happened, you knew that you had someone who was responsible for you, who could take everything on and give you advice, or hold you”, a role she fulfilled for Radmila Schegoleva (Nora), the project’s only professional actress, but which was, she explained in an interview published in the Berlinale press kit (Bober 2020a: 17), even more important for the non-professional participants, who made up 99% of the cast members. As they did not possess “the arsenal of tools an actor can fall back on”, it was the crew’s responsibility “to help to prep people as much as possible for difficult scenes and to be there for them the whole time during and after the filming.” When Nataliia Zhuk, a journalist and qualified clinical psychologist, asked – during the Berlinale Talents roundtable (2020: 1:08:33-1:10:01) – whether there had been any professional counsellors or psychologists on the set (for which she received a round of applause from the audience), Khrzhanovskiy argued (Berlinale Talents 2020: 1:10:02-1:14:14) that the fact that members of the director’s team fulfilled this role made the project’s support system more effective, as, in his view, what qualified people to

provide psychological support to the participants was not their “education” but rather “the amount of love” they had for them and their sense of being “responsible” for the people in their care. “Because the project [was] original,” Khrzhanovskiy concluded (Berlinale Talents 2020: 1:13:17-1:13:20), “the [protection] system was also original.” Finally, Oertel notes (Morley 2022), the protection system continued after filming had ended, as during the editing process the filmmakers were always careful to avoid using footage that might “hurt” the participants, a fact that Berezhnaya confirmed in her interview with Belikov (2020a), when she recounted how the directors had asked her whether she was happy for her unsimulated sex scene with the French astrologer Luc Bigé to be included in the film.

Sophie Pinkham (2020a: 123) has argued that these safeguards could actually have prevented struggling participants from speaking out, suggesting that thus “DAU benefitted from the exculpatory patina of the avant-garde: by protesting, one risked looking like a philistine as well as a prude.” Carmen Gray (2020), however, has suggested that the women participants’ refutations of the allegations of coercion and exploitation should not be dismissed out of hand, arguing that it is “patronising to merely disregard [their] own assertions and [their] right to define [their] own experience, as if a film critic from Berlin, Moscow or London knows better what [they] went through”. The anarchist, performance artist, and poet Seroe Fioletovoe / Grey Violet (2022) – in the context of their discussion of feminist responses to DAU – has gone further, arguing that ignoring the women participants’ accounts of their experience is a form of manipulation, “форма скрытого выстраивания иерархий заботы, сведения субъекта до определенной идентичности и использования её в собственных политических целях” [a form of covertly constructing hierarchies of care, reducing the subject to a specific identity and using it for one’s own political ends]. Amanda Barbour (2020), the artistic director of Fem&ist Films, an organisation that offers feminist media services in order to explore and undermine asymmetrical power dynamics through film and the broader media apparatus, suggests something similar when she argues that many of DAU’s women participants in fact took advantage of the project’s unconventional production methods to exercise autonomy. Giving several examples (and there are more than Barbour can mention in her short piece) of occasions when different DAU women “use the fact that the film wasn’t scripted to tell the belligerent men around them that they’re not as tough as they think they are”, she concludes:

it would be reductive and paternalistic to frame the women in these films as victims and nothing more. Like sex workers, actresses operate within inherently asymmetrical power dynamics. This schema doesn’t condemn them to victimhood, some use it to subvert the rules of the game.

Unsurprisingly, Oertel (Morley 2022) and Dragaeva (2022) share these views. Moreover, Barbour’s reading of the project’s dynamics as serving to demonstrate “the strength of Soviet women” accords with Oertel’s analysis of *DAU. Natasha*, which she describes in similar terms as “un voyage à la soviétique suivant une femme battue et humiliée mais qui reste forte, comme des millions de femmes russes jusqu’à ce jour” [a Soviet-style journey that follows a woman who is beaten and humiliated but who remains strong, like millions of Russian women to this very day] (France24 2020).

The individualist feminism implicit in the reactions of Gray, Seroe Fioletovoe, and Barbour mark them out as exceptions, however. Most commentators cannot either overlook the fact that the vast majority of women participants were not actually professional actors – as Barbour appears to do, when she refers to them as “actresses” – or allay their concern that this made them particularly vulnerable (Riley 2020). Russian journalists, for example, suggested that Berezhnaya’s behaviour was marked by post-traumatic stress disorder, as a consequence

of the stress she experienced on the set (Belikov 2020a) and, as Philip Cavendish (2020: 1:13:39-1:13:53) details, “some observers” (he does not name them) felt that she, and other participants, had “clearly been traumatised by their experience and should be considered victims of the cinematic equivalent of Stockholm syndrome”. In this context, the project’s extensive use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) has also been criticised. As Heleen Gerritsen (2020), the Director of the goEast Festival of Central and Eastern European Film, has argued, their use meant that the participants were prevented from talking not only about the contents of the films – the usual reason for requiring cast members to sign NDAs – but also about the conditions in which they were required to live and work. Moreover, the fact that the NDAs covered the six years when the films were in post-production as well as the three-year filming period meant that the participants were forced to observe “nine years of silence” (Gerritsen 2020).<sup>10</sup>

Many commentators also find it impossible to overlook the impact of the project’s alleged structural inequalities and hierarchy – this “чудовищный дисбаланс власти” [monstrous imbalance of power] (Kuvshinova 2020) – on those women who found themselves, for whatever reason, at the bottom of the ladder, as members of the “proletariat”, as Tonet and Salino (2019) put it, rather than of the “nomenklatura”. Khrzhanovskiy and Ilya Permyakov, the co-director of three DAU films, have both been accused of implying that certain women participants were less deserving of good treatment on set than others. For example, when an anonymous French actress apparently refused to dub Natasha’s voice in protest at the suffering she believed Berezhnaya had endured during filming, Khrzhanovskiy is alleged to have yelled: “On s’en fout! C’est une prostituée, je l’ai trouvée dans un bordel sadomasochiste!” [Who gives a damn! She’s a prostitute. I found her in a sadomasochistic brothel!] (Tonet and Salino 2019). Likewise, of Kristina Voloshina, who appears in *DAU. Degeneratsiia* as the secretary of Aleksey Trifonov, who continually hounds her for sex, Permyakov is reported to have observed, “Kristina, comme tous les participants, n’a tourné aucune scène contre son gré. [...] Par ailleurs, c’est une ancienne escort-girl.” [Kristina, like all the participants, did not shoot a single scene against her will. [...] What’s more, she’s a former escort.] (Tonet and Salino 2019).

It must be noted, however, that, according to the project’s English-language Wikipedia page (Dau (project) 2022), the production team filed a lawsuit against *Le Monde* for including these anonymous allegations. Moreover, Khrzhanovskiy and Permyakov have rejected the veracity of these accounts, notably in a joint letter to *Le Monde*, which was posted on the newspaper’s website under Tonet and Salino’s article in April 2019 and which concluded by stating that “‘les vives critiques’ dénoncées dans votre article au sujet de ‘la violence de certaines scènes’, ‘concernant notamment les femmes’ du projet DAU reposent sur des déclarations dont nous contestons formellement la véracité” [the “strong criticisms” reported in your article about “the violence of certain scenes”, “particularly concerning women” in the DAU project, are based on statements whose veracity we formally contest]. Indeed, Berezhnaya herself, in her interview with Belikov (2020a), dismissed the *Le Monde* journalists’ account as “бред сумасшедшего” [the ravings of a mad person], among other choice words. Khrzhanovskiy, meanwhile, addressing both the misreporting of his words and the factual inaccuracies about Berezhnaya’s previous employment, reported in *Le Monde* and then repeated extensively by other media outlets, would later state: “In fact, it was not the project

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<sup>10</sup> For an alternative and extremely interesting perspective on the problem of the NDAs’ purposeful silencing of the participants, see Bryukhovetska (2020), who argues that shutting out the participants’ voices in this way weakens the project’s artistic import and its message, for it means that DAU remains “an acting-out” rather than “a working-through”, because it fails to allow polyphonic reflection on the experience of the project and instead empowers “only one voice” to speak “for all”. As Bryukhovetska points out, press conferences are not “conducive to such reflections” as they are not “a safe space”.



that hurt [Natasha], it was the press [...] that hurt her.” (Berlinale Talents 2020: 1:23:53-1:25:42).

Nevertheless, such criticisms did not die down. Khrzhanovskiy has continued to be cast, even if at times flippantly, as a “русский Харви Вайнштейн” [Russian Harvey Weinstein] (Sobchak 2020: 1:02:17-1:02:39) and the project has continued to be condemned for knowingly “capitaliz[ing] on [...] the myth of grandiose male artistic genius” and enthusiastically embracing all “its inevitable phallic implications” in order to offer “a new frisson of excitement” in the current context of the #MeToo movement, thus enabling “a form of sexualized masculine totalitarianism: abuse in the pursuit of kink” (Pinkham 2020a: 126-127). As the film critic Zinaida Pronchenko (2020b) observed in her Berlinale blog:

Говорят, без жертвы не бывает преступления, а проститутку и порноактрису невозможно изнасиловать, у них же работа такая, секс за деньги и на камеру. Наверное. Но ведь эксплуатация людей остаётся мероприятием аморальным, хоть импровизацией её назови, хоть «проектом» «Дау». [It is said that there’s no crime without a victim and that it’s impossible to rape a prostitute or a porn actress, as it’s their job to have sex for money and on camera. Perhaps. But exploiting people remains an immoral activity, even if you call it improvisation, even if you call it the “Dau” “project”].<sup>11</sup>

### The Institute

Commentators who have focussed primarily on the project’s architecture and aesthetics rather than on its production methods also overwhelmingly characterise the DAU universe as an aggressively patriarchal space, highlighting the fact that the set designed by the art director Denis Shibanov objectifies women and reduces them to little more than disembodied body parts, by including stylised and grotesquely sized features that are explicitly (and unapologetically) modelled on the female sexual organs and other, often sexualised, parts of the female body (Murawski 2022a, 2022b, 2020: 1:06:03-1:07:30; Makarova 2022). As Shibanov himself put it, when describing the elongated-oval vents and round porthole-like protuberances that line the exterior walls of the Institute’s courtyard: “Первая стена неофициально называется ‘вагина’, вторая – ‘соски’.” [The first wall was unofficially named “vagina”, the second “nipples.”] (Kashin 2010). In conversation with Evgeniya Makarova and Alexandre Zaezjev, Shibanov added even more detail, pointing out that the two apartment blocks at one end of the Institute “look just like two legs with a vagina in between” (Makarova 2022; see Fig. 1). Once made aware of this, Makarova (2022) observes, “you cannot unsee a massive crotch crowned with volutes of pubic hair.” Moreover, she continues, “the sunken form of the stadium reminds us of a womb”. The female body is also inscribed into the set’s interiors. Asked by Michał Murawski (2022b), an anthropologist of architecture, about his use of the hammer-and-sickle door handles, Shibanov explains: “I’m not sure if you noticed, but if you turn the left and the right one together, they produce the image of a really nice ass [laughs].” And “the residential complex, B1 and B2, [...] were joined by this hole in the wall. There was also the image of a lady’s hand, with little hairs.” This all adds up, Shibanov concludes, to create “this kind of bodily, dense, juicy, fertile concrete... a concrete fertile terrain [betonnoe plodorodie] [laughs]”.

For Murawski (2022a), however, the set is a “terrain of toxic masculinity” that literally makes concrete the project’s role in “consolidating and reinforcing dominant ideological

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<sup>11</sup> Pronchenko translated the contested *Le Monde* article into Russian, but her version contained several significant errors and was widely discussed in Russia (Pronchenko 2020a). For Khrzhanovskiy’s reaction to the translation, see Pronchenko (2020c).

constructs of normalised misogyny”. Likewise, Makarova (2022) notes that Shibarov’s focus on yonic symbolism can be read as “the working of the heteronormative fetishising male gaze, a form of patriarchal sexploitation”. Indeed, in this connection it is revealing that, while yonic symbols abound in the set design, the phallic is almost entirely lacking. As Makarova (2022) details: “There are no towers in the Institute, no obelisks, no spires, not even remotely phallic structures or sculptural elements, except, maybe, for the puny bombs and missiles caught up in the folds of vulvar flesh to the left of the Nipple Wall.” Instead, the male body is represented through non-sexual imagery that emphasises bodily strength and power, specifically the three huge, muscular, steel arms, which protrude menacingly from a structure reminiscent of Lenin’s Mausoleum, placed next to the wall of “nipples”, and whose hands grasp a hammer, a sickle, and a human brain. On the opposite wall are twelve pairs of smaller, outstretched arms, which again appear, through their musculature, to be masculine.<sup>12</sup>

The gender politics of the set design are not, however, the main focus of Makarova’s analysis, which sets out to propose a Bakhtinian reading of the architecture in DAU. Aligning Shibarov’s design of the Institute’s exterior walls with the suggestion made by the crafty trickster Panurge – in Chapter 15 of François Rabelais’s 1532 book *Pantagruel* (Rabelais 1969: 95) – that the best and cheapest building materials for the walls of Paris would be “les callibistris des femmes de ce pays” [literally, the sexual organs – or, as rendered by Jacques LeClerq in 1936, the “pleasure-twats” (Bakhtin 1984: 313) – of the women of this country], Makarova (2022) reads Shibarov’s focus on female genitalia as an attempt to evoke “the grotesque body” and thereby to imbue the space and the project’s themes with “the orgiastic spirit of the Bakhtinian carnival”. There are, however, significant differences between the imagined construct of Panurge’s ‘muraille de callibistris’ and its apparent namesake, Shibarov’s actualised ‘wall of vaginas’, not least the fact that, while the phallic is entirely absent from Shibarov’s wall, Panurge envisages that his wall would include “tant de bracquemars enroïdys qui habitent par les braguettes claustrales” [the same number of erect phalluses – or, in LeClerq’s translation, “horny joy-dinguses” (Bakhtin 1984: 313) – which now dwell in cloistered codpieces]. Moreover, the grotesque building-block genitalia described by Panurge are of flesh-and-blood and thus, in Bakhtin’s reading, a representation of the power of female “fecundity” and its regenerative potential, a necessary characteristic of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1969: 313-315). As David Matthew Posner puts it (1993: 105), the elements from which Panurge’s wall is to be built are “the very emblems of life itself and of the propagation and replication of that life. This is a fecund wall, one which will reproduce

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<sup>12</sup> According to Shibarov (Murawski 2022b), the arms were inspired by Vera Mukhina’s 1937 sculpture “Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa” / “The Worker and the Kolkhoz Woman”. They therefore also invoke, by association, another post-Soviet Russian film about the socially engineered creation of the New Soviet Person, Sergei Livnev’s *Serp i molot / Hammer and Sickle* (1994, Russia), in which the peasant woman Evdokiia Kuznetsova undergoes a forced operation to change her into a man, Evdokim Kuznetsov, who is recreated as a Stakhanovite worker on the Moscow metro, rises through the Party ranks, poses as Mukhina’s model worker and is gradually transformed into a petrified, living monument of New Soviet Personhood. This reference to early post-Soviet cinematic culture, which was deeply concerned with dissecting the Stalin era and discrediting its myths, appears to be intended to associate DAU not only with the film’s camp, parodic aesthetics, but also with Livnev’s critical analysis of 1930s Soviet society. Indeed, in their representation of the violence that the Soviet state visited on its citizens in order to stifle any sense of their subjectivity and to recreate them as New Soviet People, some of the DAU films – especially *DAU. Novyi chelovek / DAU. New Man* (Khrzhanovskiy and Permyakov, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Russia) – have much in common with Livnev’s film. On *Serp i molot*, see Kaganovsky (2007; 2008), Larsen (2000; 2002), Prokhorov (2000), and Plakhova (1995). An interesting irony in the context of DAU is that a primary source for Mukhina in formal terms was the 5th-century BC Roman copy of a sculpture titled “The Tyrant-Slayers” by Critias and Nesiotes (Salys 2011), which celebrated Harmodios and Aristogeiton for bringing an end to the tyranny of Hippias and Hipparchos and restoring democracy in Athens in 514 BC and of which the very clear message was that tyrants should beware in a democratic society. Whether Shibarov was aware of this source for Mukhina’s sculpture when he designed the set of the Institute is not known.

itself exponentially, one which promises not separation and sterility but interpenetration and fertility.” By contrast, the vagina wall realised by Shibanov is lifeless and sterile, a stark row of stylised concrete abstractions. Thus, as Shibanov himself observes (Murawski 2022b), the Institute is in fact figured as a space that “doesn’t really give birth to anything, it’s a dead end”.

The comparison between Panurge’s wall and that of Shibanov also raises other questions, namely the ethical appropriacy of using the female body as a source of humour. In the “amoral comic climate” (Screech 1979: 49) of *Pantagruel*, Rabelais’s giant finds Panurge’s grotesque design idea humorous – “Ho, ho, ha, ha, ha! (dist Pantagruel)” [Ho, ho, ha, ha, ha! (said Pantagruel)] (Rabelais 1969: 95) – as, we assume, did the contemporary reader; M.A. Screech, a scholar of early modern French literature, has argued that through the reactions of Pantagruel “Rabelais does give us guidance” about what we should laugh at (Screech 1984). However, as Screech has also acknowledged, it is “difficult for a modern reader to appreciate with unbuttoned guffaws [...] the comic anifeminism [sic] of parts of *Pantagruel* which is closely associated with gross ‘body’ humour.” (1979: 52); such “anti-feminist laughter” is, he notes – writing in the 1970s, not a decade associated with ‘political correctness’ in gender politics – “an area of laughter we may even now be losing” (Screech 1979: 53). However, while some scholars did subsequently describe Panurge’s wall as “highly indecent” (Clark 1983: 8), “pornographic” (Gubar 1987: 712), and “unsettling for the woman reader to say the least” (Tolley 2019: 109) or read it, in various ways, as an example of Rabelais’s misogyny (Charpentier 1986: 205-207; Broomhall 2011: 234), others – such as Hope H. Glidden (1991), Diane Desrosiers-Bonin (1996), and Nadine Kuperty-Tsur (2017) – have argued that we should “résister à la tentation de faire de Rabelais un écrivain misogyne” [resist the temptation to label Rabelais a misogynist writer] (Desrosiers-Bonin 1996: 45) on the basis of this episode, offering interpretations that suggest, as do those of Bakhtin and Posner, both that the function of Panurge’s architectural innovation exceeds the merely comic and that its intent is not to objectify women or, in fact, to express an “anti-feminist” stance.

It is, however, difficult not to conclude that this is the intention of Shibanov’s design, which, in its use of female sexual organs does not appear to contain any particularly profound meaning beyond that of being “some sort of crass reference to Landau’s interest in polyamory” (Murawski 2022a). Asked whether the sexualised DAU set design could have been intended by Shibanov as a (misplaced) attempt to create humour, Oertel does not respond directly, but does appear to accept the suggestion (Morley 2022). It is, however, telling that Shibanov, during his interview with Murawski (2022b), not only laughs his way through their discussion of the sexual elements of the set design, but also explicitly identifies himself as what Screech would term an “anti-feminist”; when asked whether he “look[s] towards women [...] as a feminist”, his response is categorical: “No, I am absolutely not a feminist.” So, do we – can we, should we, as twenty-first-century, #MeToo-era viewers – laugh at Shibanov’s “anti-feminist” set design, knowing, as we do, first, that the DAU project was originally inspired by a ‘real’ woman’s account of a marriage spent accommodating her husband’s insistence, against her will, on polyamory; second, that some DAU films – *DAU. Natasha*, *DAU. Katya Tanya* and *DAU. Degeneratsiia*, for example – feature scenes (both ‘staged’ and ‘unsimulated’) in which the women participants appear to be raped or otherwise sexually assaulted as part of the films’ ‘narratives’;<sup>13</sup> third, that there were accusations of sexual assault on set, including the alleged rape of an assistant of performance artist Marina Abramović (Klashorst 2020); and, finally, that some women viewers described even the experience of watching DAU in these terms? According to the journalist Andrew Roth (2020), the film critic Tat’iana Shorokhova (one of the authors of the open letter to the organisers of the 2020 Berlinale), “admitted to

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<sup>13</sup> In the question-and-answer session after the 2020 Berlinale screening of *DAU. Degeneratsiia*, Khrzhanovskiy told reporters that “there were no real rape scenes on the set of DAU” (Rozovsky 2020).

feeling sick and ‘physically afraid’” while watching *DAU. Natasha*. “In fact,” he adds, “she likened the experience to rape.” The answer to this question has to be no. There may be many moments of humour in the *DAU* films, but – for this viewer at least – they are not located in Shibarov’s appropriation of the female body. Instead, once we are alert to this approach, which – as Makarova noted – insinuates itself into the viewer’s mind, it is impossible not to feel uncomfortable about the way in which the set design appears to attempt to make a joke out of or, at least, a “crass reference to” (Murawski 2022a), the abusive and debasing attitudes that many of the project’s male participants display in their relationships with their female counterparts.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Makarova (2022) has shown that the “sexual connotations” of the Institute’s design had an impact on the male participants’ language, describing how, in *DAU. Imperia*, the director of the Institute, Anatoly Krupitsa, refers to his office as “vagina number fifteen” when showing guests around the building.

Asked how she felt, both as an artist and as a woman, about this loaded use of the female body in the design of the Institute, Oertel replies dispassionately (Morley 2022):

[I]t was never something that bothered me at the time. Maybe I’m not politically correct enough. I can laugh about the vaginas when they are on the walls. I think there are much more important things in life than being bothered by something that could look like a vagina. If the guys have fun seeing female sexual organs in something that looks like a potato to me, of course – please do.<sup>15</sup>

However – and for my interest in the project’s representation of female subjectivity this is significant – Oertel goes on to recount that, while some crew members did use the term “nipples” to describe the wall’s porthole-like protuberances, others (whom Oertel does not name) referred to them instead as “penises” (Morley 2022). If these structures can indeed be read as priapic, they represent the male organ only partially and, what is more, as being of diminutive proportions by comparison with the “vaginas”. This alternative naming therefore stands as an interesting subversion of Shibarov’s stated intent performed by (I assume) women members of the cast and crew, serving to undercut the Institute’s identity as a space that celebrates patriarchal power. It is another example of the type of table-turning – identified by Barbour (2020) – practised by those women participants who take advantage of the lack of script to knock the arrogant *DAU* men down a peg or two.

### **The Camera, the Male Gaze, and Pornography**

Power in *DAU* is also expressed through the project’s structural mechanisms of watching/filming and being watched/filmed. Kuvshinova (2020) has argued that “Хржановский в «Дау» принципиально не является участником эксперимента. Он остается ‘за стеной’, его позиция – вуаеристская.” [Khrzhanovskiy is not, as a matter of principle, a participant in the experiment in *DAU*. He remains “behind the wall” – his position

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<sup>14</sup> For a reading that argues that the Institute’s feminised and sexualised set design has a thematic function beyond that identified here and by Murawski (2022a), and, indeed, one that is more positive, see Makarova (2022). Pursuing her Bakhtinian reading of *DAU*, Makarova suggests that “the complementary masculine component of the grotesque body”, required to fully express Bakhtin’s understanding of this concept, was to have been provided by the phallic high-rise ‘City in the Sky’, which was conceived by Shibarov as a separate part of the *DAU* set but which was never built. Instead, she argues, the “masculine component” is provided by “the ‘collective body’ of the Komsomol born in an act of ritualised carnivalesque violence”, in *DAU. Degeneratsiia*.

<sup>15</sup> For another example of Khrzhanovskiy’s apparent enjoyment of seeing the female sexual organs in ordinary objects, and of his desire to both entertain and shock by doing so, see the final section of his interview with Sobchak (2020: 1:53:18-1:53:35), subtitled “Final. I snova o vagine” [Finale. And once again about a vagina], in which he interrupts his discussion of *DAU. Sasha Valera* in order to point out a tree that he describes as looking “очень похоже на вагину” [very like a vagina].

is voyeuristic.]<sup>16</sup> Commentators have also observed that the DAU camera overwhelmingly adopts a voyeuristic male perspective, especially in the frequent explicit sex scenes, which were all unstimulated (Gordon 2020: 1:18:12-1:20:36). Daria Ezerova (2020: 0:41:56-0:54:26), for example, argues that when filming sex Khrzhanovskiy typically replicates the staple genre elements of heterosexual male porn. Indeed, Olga Shkabarnya – one of the principal women participants – was recruited by the project’s casting director on the basis of her appearance in Internet porn videos (Sobchak 2020: 1:03:25-1:06:15; Pinkham 2020a: 124). Thus, commentators argue, most sex scenes are shot voyeuristically, from the scopophilic perspective of what Laura Mulvey (1988) describes as an active, controlling male gaze. Exploiting female nudity and the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of the female participants’ objectified bodies, sex scenes in DAU are pornographic “not by content, but by *form*” (Ezerova 2020: 0:42:06-0:42:09; emphasis in original). Pinkham (2020a: 124) also reads the fact that the women’s bodies are “anachronistic” and “blatantly un-Soviet in their depilation” as “one of the signs of DAU’s strong affinity with pornography, which regularly trumps pretensions to authenticity”.<sup>17</sup>

### The Female Subject

As already intimated, however, Khrzhanovskiy’s involvement of Oertel as a co-director, and the extent of her contribution in this important role, appears to indicate an interest in incorporating a woman’s perspective into a significant number of the DAU films, and in emphasising what the philosopher Christine Battersby (1998: 7) terms a “female subject-position”. Indeed, Khrzhanovskiy has confirmed this in interviews, saying of this collaboration: “It was [...] important to me that she is a woman [...], so she has a different view of the world. For example, I can’t tell the story of Nora. I don’t understand it. I am not a woman. I am not 50 years old. I do not understand many aspects of female psychology.” (Cronk 2020; Zvonkine 2022). It is also notable that most of the films that Oertel co-directed have female protagonists and focus on telling the women’s stories. The fact that Khrzhanovskiy’s interest in Lev Landau began with the memoirs of his wife, Kora Landau-Drobantseva, published in Russia in 1999 as *Akademik Landau: Kak my zhili. Vospominaniia / Professor Landau: How We Lived. Memoirs*, perhaps also suggests an interest in the female subject across the project as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

The remainder of this article therefore sets out to argue, contrary to the majority of existing responses to DAU, that the female subject does, at times, occupy a meaningful place – and a position of strength – in the project’s universe, by offering an analysis of some of the ways in which female subjectivity is expressed formally – that is, cinematically – in DAU.

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<sup>16</sup> Oertel (Tonet and Salino 2019), perhaps predicting that such interpretations might be made and that they might be taken literally, has stressed that “le moniteur de Khrzhanovsky était éteint à chaque rapport sexuel” [Khrzhanovskiy’s monitor was switched off during every sexual encounter].

<sup>17</sup> Kuvshinova (2020) also draws attention to this, specifically in DAU. *Natasha*: (“у Наташи эпилированы подмышки и лобок, они не похожи на подмышки и лобок советской женщины 1950-х годов” [Natasha’s waxed armpits and mons pubis are unlike those of a Soviet woman in the 1950s]), arguing that in this way the project fails to say anything meaningful about the lived bodily experience of Soviet women: “отсутствие средств гигиены, отсутствие контрацепции, выпадение матки от ношения тяжестей, карательные аборт без наркоза, отсутствие концепции женского удовольствия, легитимное насилие – какая невероятная, неизведанная территория, до которой никому нет дела; советская цивилизация запустила человека в космос, но так и не дошла до изобретения гигиенической прокладки” [no hygiene products, no contraception, uterine prolapse from carrying heavy weights, punitive abortions without anaesthesia, no concept of female pleasure, legitimised violence – what incredible, uncharted territory that no one cares about; Soviet civilization launched man into space but never got round to inventing the sanitary towel.]

<sup>18</sup> For discussion of the DAU films as (loose) adaptations of Landau-Drobantseva’s memoirs, see Zvonkine (2020c: 319-321). One of the few academics (along with Birgit Beumers) to have watched all the project’s films, Zvonkine highlights events and characters that feature in both the memoirs and the films, but does not consider whether Landau-Drobantseva’s subjectivity, as expressed in her memoirs, is given a voice in the films.

*Katya Tanya*. Indeed, this concern with the female subject is signalled in the title: it is the only DAU film to bear the names of two women, from the outset suggesting that it will satisfy at least one of the Bechdel Test's three rules.<sup>19</sup> The film's official synopsis also emphasises the fact that its narrative trajectory follows the protagonist, Katya, in her quest for self-fulfilment and happiness (*DAU. Katya Tanya* (18+) 2020). And, moreover, Katya is unusual among the women we meet in DAU for being neither a wife nor a mother. This potentially places her outside the usual gendered hierarchy of patriarchy and thus she might be felt to represent what Tamsin Lorraine terms (in her analysis of the philosopher Luce Irigaray's critique of Freud) "the feminine on her own": the only "type of feminine other" capable of avoiding "women's traditional destiny of 'play[ing] a supporting role in a sexually differentiated economy of subjectivity, which privileges masculine subjects'" (Ince 2017: 13-14).<sup>20</sup>

Cavendish (2022) has noted that "[t]he tension between the cinematic representation of authentic, spontaneous, and unmediated experience (the documentary or reality principle) and the contrived, manipulated, fabricated, and choreographed (the principle of the fictional or invented) lies at the very heart of Ilya Khrzhanovskiy's DAU project." As Pinkham (2020a: 123) has astutely observed, this means that "[t]he films are hard to interpret, because it is never clear where artistic intent ends and reality begins. Should they be assessed by the aesthetic criteria of feature films, or of experimental documentaries, or of video installations?" Approaching *DAU: Katya Tanya* in the way that I have chosen – as cinema, as an aesthetic object – is therefore not entirely unproblematic, as I shall discuss.<sup>21</sup> This approach is, however, actively encouraged by both the directors and the participants, in various ways. One of the project's most obviously staged films, *DAU. Katya Tanya* exhibits – on the surface at least –

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<sup>19</sup> From the perspective of the film's lesbian theme, to be discussed later in this article, the fact that the title includes the names of both women is significant and unusual. In her discussion of *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015, UK, USA, France), Clara Bradbury-Rance (2019: 125-126) bemoans the fact that, while the two women protagonists, Carol (Cate Blanchett) and Therese (Rooney Mara), are accorded similar amounts of screen time, the title names only one of them; this "division of the lesbian couple into 'lead' and 'support'", she argues, "replicates the binary oppositions that have marked and stuck to the lesbian both with and without her consent: active/passive, masculine/feminine, top/bottom, dominant/submissive, butch/femme, leading/supporting." The title of *DAU. Nora mama* features two eponymous women, but refers to one through her social role of mother not by her name. *DAU. Natasha* is also noteworthy for foregrounding the woman protagonist in this way. Oertel co-directed both these films.

<sup>20</sup> This aligns Katya with another interesting woman participant, the never-married Maria (played by the Greek actor Maria Nafpliotou, a former real-life partner of Teodor Currentzis) in *DAU. Tri dnia*. Maria, who would rather be "alone and free" than in a relationship that lacks "love, respect, and communication" (0:15:29-0:15:55) and thus can also be said to represent "the feminine on her own," is arguably the most emancipated woman in DAU. Despite the fact that she does sleep with Dau, she holds him to account in a way that few other women do and, indeed, gives viewers the satisfaction of watching him face not only rejection but also censure for his treatment of Nora. In this connection it is doubtless significant that Maria is not Russian, but explicitly foreign. In Russian cinema, foreignness has long been used as a marker of women's behaviour that is outside the expected and approved social norms, and not always positively. For an early example, see Evgenii Bauer's *Ditia bol'shogo goroda / Child of the Big City* (1914, Russia), in which the protagonist's decision to change her name from the Russian Mania to the foreign Mary is one marker of her moral decline, but also of her growing sense of autonomy (Morley 2017: 80-106). It is also noteworthy that when, at the end of *DAU. Teoriia strun*, a group of women – Sveta (Svetlana Dragaeva), Liuba (uncredited), and Katya (Jekaterina Oertel, in her role of Krupitsa's widow) – unite to hold a self-serving, philandering man to account, this time the polyamorous scientist Nikita Nekrasov, it is Katya (Oertel) who takes the lead in challenging Nekrasov about his selfish and infantile behaviour, providing an interesting moment of meta-commentary on her role as the co-director of films that highlight the stories and points of view of DAU's women participants. On this film, see Bittencourt (2020a).

<sup>21</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion about what DAU actually is, with contributions from Daria Ezerova, Alexander Genis, Max Lawton, Mark Lipovetsky, and Sophie Pinkham, see Lipovetsky (2020: 0:10:11-0:52:02). See also Gershovich (2020).

little of the documentary *vérité* aesthetics that dominate in others.<sup>22</sup> As Tatiana Polozhy (Tanya) highlights in an interview (Melikova 2020b): “мы же понимаем, что фильм – это художественное произведение, в котором проделана большая работа (в первую очередь, Катей Эртель) по интерпретации, по созданию драматургии.” [we understand very well that the film is a work of fiction, of art, in which a lot of work has been done (first and foremost, by Katya Oertel) in interpretation, in creating drama]. Ekaterina Uspina (Katya) has made similar comments, noting: “Это действительно очень постановочный фильм.” [It really is a very staged film.] (Melikova 2020a).

In the sections that follow, I therefore outline how Khrzhanovskiy and Oertel make use of formal cinematic means of expression connected with the symbolic actions of speaking, looking, and feeling to express their female protagonist’s subjectivity. My analysis falls into two parts. I focus initially on the film’s first, self-contained nine and a half minutes, which function as a prologue and which can be read, if not exactly as a manifesto, at least as a self-conscious statement of intent that aims to signal two key points to the viewer: first, the fact that we are watching a film; second, the fact that Katya’s subjectivity is the film’s centre of gravity. In the second part, I consider the ways in which, and the extent to which, the directors succeed in privileging the “female subject-position” and in incorporating a woman’s perspective – what we might term the “female gaze” – across the film as a whole. Scholars disagree about both what the female gaze is and whether it even exists. Throughout this article, I use the term with the broad meaning of the expression of a point of view (both formally and at the level of narrative) which represents women’s experiences, which is, crucially, marked as different from the conventional male gaze, and which challenges its dynamics of voyeurism and objectification and resists the rigid binaries of active-male-subject / passive-female-object around which it is structured, without simply reversing them.<sup>23</sup>

## Part 1: The Prologue

### Setting the Scene (I): Cinematic Intertextuality

Ekaterina Uspina has emphasised the fictional nature of the events depicted in the film’s prologue, noting that it is “про первую любовь с мальчиком, которого я видела в общей сложности двадцать минут: мы поиграли в шахматы, прошли под звездами, и всё.” [about my first love with a boy whom I saw for a total of twenty minutes: we played chess, walked under the stars, and that was it.] (Melikova 2020a). Even for those who have not read Uspina’s remarks, however, it is clear from the outset that *DAU. Katya Tanya* is, first and foremost, cinema, rather than an authentic reflection of the ‘real’ world of the project. The prologue, set ten years earlier than the film’s main action, in the autumn of 1942, has a clear plot and is immediately recognisable as a pared-down remake of the opening sequences of Mikhail Kalatozov’s war melodrama *Letiat zhuravli / The Cranes Are Flying* (1957, USSR), one of the most acclaimed Soviet films of the Thaw era, admired particularly for its dynamic, innovative cinematography and its compassionate depiction of an emotionally complex woman. Thus Katya – like Kalatozov’s Veronika – falls in (chaste) love with a sensitive young man, the junior research scientist, Alexander Efimov. As Uspina noted, they spend their evenings playing chess, strolling along the Institute’s dark walkways, and looking up at the stars, until Efimov, distressed by the constant news of conscripted friends’ deaths, signs up

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<sup>22</sup> For information about the film’s many staged elements, which range from the obvious (Katya’s attempted suicide and Tanya’s death by hanging – the only sequence in the project that was shot twice [Morley 2022]) to the less so (the fact that the 1952 sequences were filmed before those set in 1942), see Melikova (2020a).

<sup>23</sup> There is a large body of academic literature on the female gaze, but for recent work see especially French (2021) and Brey (2020). For a good general introduction to the concept, illustrated with examples chosen by women film critics from 52 films made by women in different countries (although not Russia) and across the history of cinema (1906-2018), see Malone (2018).

voluntarily – like Kalatozov’s Boris – to join the fight. Katya – again like Veronika – asks him to stay, but he – again like Boris – does not. Predictably, the notification of the young man’s death soon appears on the Institute’s noticeboard, leaving Katya grief-stricken.

During one of the couple’s evening walks, the intentionality of this intertextuality is emphasised. When Efimov explains to Katya that the starlight they are admiring could in fact belong to a star that has already died, she responds by asking, “Мы наблюдаем прошлое?” [We’re watching the past?] “Ну, так” [Yes, exactly], he replies (0:04:08-0:04:12), confirming also to the viewer that the filmmakers are deliberately drawing on cinematic antecedents.<sup>24</sup>

### **Setting the Scene (II): Cinematic Intertextuality and Autobiographical Allusions**

The prologue of *DAU. Katya Tanya* also alludes, albeit more obliquely, to another Soviet film set partly in the autumn of 1942, namely Frunze Dovlatian’s *Zdravstvui, eto ia! / Barev, yes em! / Hello, It’s Me!* (1965, USSR).<sup>25</sup> In addition to the wartime setting, *DAU. Katya Tanya* takes from Dovlatian’s film (which itself borrows from *Letiat zhuravli*) the motifs of chess-playing, romantic autumnal walks, conversations about physics between brilliant scientists, the tragedy of a first love lost to the war, and the futility and unhappiness of waiting for a loved one who can never return. Unusually, however, in Dovlatian’s film it is not the woman who is left behind, as in *Letiat zhuravli* and *DAU. Katya Tanya*, but the man. As the brilliant young scientist Artem (played by Armen Dzhigarkhanian) defends his thesis before a panel of older scientists, his beloved Liusia (Natal’ia Fateeva) – a sergeant in the Red Army – receives the order to leave for the front. Unable to say goodbye to Artem, she entrusts a message for him to a young girl she sees at the station. Artem, meanwhile, is sent to set up a research station on the remote Mount Aragats, where he learns, by letter, of Liusia’s death.

The allusions to *Zdravstvui, eto ia!* are also, however, extra-filmic. From Kora’s memoirs, we learn that this film is a creative re-imagining of the real-life relationship between the Armenian physicist Artem Alikhanian and Nina (also known as Nita) Varzar (Landau-Drobantseva 1999: 121). Also a physicist, Varzar had studied in Leningrad with Landau and Alikhanian, before marrying the composer Dmitrii Shostakovich in May 1932. Their marriage, like that of Dau and Kora, was an open one, “explicitly based on the recognition of each partner’s freedom” (Wilson 1994: 106). Unlike Kora, however, Nina was happy with this arrangement and, from the end of the war until her sudden death on 5 December 1954, Nina and Alikhanian both worked together and pursued an affair, while spending a great deal of time with Dau and Kora (Landau-Drobantseva 1999: 116-123; Fairclough 2019: 104). As Elizabeth Wilson (1994: 266) puts it, “Nina’s close working and emotional relationship” with Alikhanian was “an open secret”. Thus, even at this early stage a note of the documentary, of the ‘real’

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<sup>24</sup> Zvonkine (2020a; 2020c) also highlights citations of Soviet cinematic antecedents in various DAU films, as does Cavendish (2022), while Bryukhovetska (2020) identifies a range of international cinematic references and offers an illuminating comparison of the project and the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski’s video *Repetition* (2005), which revisits the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, to which DAU has often been compared. Kuvshinova (2020) identifies references, both specific and general, to post-Soviet auteur cinema, in critical terms: “Во время просмотра не покидает ощущение постоянно наплывающего «уже виденного». Это бледный аудиовизуальный палимпсест постсоветского авторского кино, выполняющего работу трупного червя в разлагающемся теле «советского» — невыносимые диалоги Киры Муратовой; опыты из *Первых на Луне*; закрытый институт *Милого Ганса, дорогого Петра*; фоновое бормотание у обоих Германов; осенняя охра балабановских фильмов.” [As you watch you can’t shake off a constant feeling of “déjà vu”. It’s a pale audio-visual palimpsest of post-Soviet auteur cinema that does the work of a maggot in the decaying body of “Sovietness” – the unbearable dialogues of Kira Muratova; the experiments from [Aleksandr Mindadze’s] *My Dear Hans*; the background mumblings of both German Sr and German Jr; the autumnal ochre of [Aleksandr] Balabanov’s films.]

<sup>25</sup> On this film, see Bashkirova (1966) and Chernenko (1987).



(albeit not of the participants' 'reality'), is introduced into *DAU. Katya Tanya*, complicating its status as a fictional cinematic narrative.

It therefore becomes clear that, while *DAU* can be read as cinema, as Anton Dolin (2019), the former editor-in-chief of the Russian cinema journal *Iskusstvo kino* [The Art of Cinema], notes: “Просто это такое кино, какого мы еще не видели” [It’s just a kind of cinema that we have not seen before], one which “задает принципиально иные взаимоотношения документального и игрового, подлинного и симитированного.” [establishes a fundamentally different relationship between the documentary and the acted, the authentic and the simulated].

### **Speaking: Voiceovers**

Commentators agree that one of the least compelling features of the *DAU* films is their dialogue. For some (Bird 2019), the problem is the stumbling, non-native Russian spoken by Teodor Currentzis, the charismatic Greek conductor whom Khrzhanovskiy cast as the eponymous Lev Landau; for others, it is the improvised, unscripted nature of the dialogue, which frequently results in lengthy, rambling, and inconsequential conversations that are liberally strewn with “verbal garbage” (Lipovetsky 2020: 0:52:43-0:52:50) and “Currentzis’s maanderings on sex and soul” (Pinkham 2020a: 124). This applies to many sequences in *DAU. Katya Tanya*, particularly those that chart Dau’s attempts to seduce Katya with “ear-splitting platitudes and lackluster pickup lines” (Bittencourt 2020b), such as his argument that Katya should show him her knickers, because revealing one’s underwear to another person is a less intimate act than revealing one’s soul (0:36:12-0:36:34).

There are, however, some apparently scripted and carefully mediated uses of speech in this film, and it is significant that these instances mostly involve Katya’s speech. For example, the prologue’s opening sequence, in which we watch Katya at work in the Institute’s library, features a complicated voiceover, a device that is often employed to create a sense of a character’s subjectivity by giving the viewer direct access to their mind.<sup>26</sup> The use of the voiceover (which is also found in Dovlatian’s *Zdravstvui, eto ia!*), is particularly striking in this context, for it is found in only one other *DAU* film, namely *DAU. Degeneratsiia*. If in that film, however, the voiceover is used to express a key theme of the project as a whole and thus acquires an authorial and moral significance, in *DAU. Katya Tanya* its function is different: to enable the protagonist, Katya, to voice her inner thoughts.<sup>27</sup>

The voiceover begins when, as Katya is filling in a library registration card for Efimov, whom she addresses using the formal pronoun “Вы” [you], there is a noticeable change in the quality of the sound (background noise becomes quieter, for example, and Katya’s voice sounds more reflective and somehow closer to the viewer). This is accompanied by a shift to the familiar “ты” [you] in the address “Знай...” [You know...] and the intimate admission that she used to dream of different things, which she goes on to describe, ostensibly in response to a male voice asking “О чем?” [About what?] but in fact as if to herself, as “Наивные, детские мечты... о светлом, о чистом, о добром... ну, о...” [Naive, childish dreams... about things that are light, pure, and good... well, about...] (0:00:39-0:01:21). It is unclear to which of the film’s timeframes these musings belong – the 1942 present of the prologue, the 1952-1953

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<sup>26</sup> This sequence is also significant for its unusual (in the context of *DAU*) use of non-diegetic music, which likewise seems intended to encourage the viewer to respond emotionally to Katya’s situation and which recurs throughout the film’s main part.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Porton (2020) describes the function of the voiceover narration in *DAU. Degeneratsiia*, which is spoken by a Rabbi (Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, an Israeli Talmudic scholar, who died in August 2020), as being to drive home a “potent political theme”: “Asserting that communism is actually a surrogate religion and that Karl Marx’s work announced the arrival of a ‘messianic religion,’ his musings recall the Christian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev’s assertion that ‘Communism persecutes all religions because it is a religion itself.’”

period of the film's main action, or even, perhaps, a time beyond that of the events depicted in the film.<sup>28</sup> It is significant, however, that some of Katya's words ("Наивные, детские мечты...") recur, in another voiceover, in the film's final moments (1:36:00-1:36:08), where they again function as an evocation of Katya's thoughts or memories, as an expression of her "mental subjectivity" (Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 78).

The use of a voiceover continues in subsequent sequences in the prologue. As we watch Katya and Efimov walking together in silence, happy and before any mention has been made of his signing up, we hear Katya's voice reciting Juliet's soliloquy from Act IV, Scene III of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), "Farewell! God knows when we shall meet again." (Shakespeare 1964: 135: 14-30) (0:01:23-0:02:16). A later section of the sequence shows this recitation to be diegetically motivated, in part – we briefly see Katya reading aloud to a group at the library, Efimov among them (0:01:49-0:02:02) – but the associations of the superimposed text, with its references to parting and long-lasting separation, the "cold fear" that "almost freezes up the heat of life", and the "tomb" in which Juliet is to be laid (Shakespeare 1964: 135: 14-16 and 30), create the impression that this is an expression of Katya's subjective response to her life after Efimov's departure and death, her voice speaking from the future, as it were.

This is confirmed subsequently, when the voiceover recurs in the sequence in which Efimov leaves, with Katya resuming her recitation at line 33, "Shall I not be stifled in the vault", as Juliet imagines what her life will be like if she survives drinking the friar's draught and awakes to find herself locked in the vault: "[t]he horrible conceit of death and night / Together with the terror of the place" in which "the bones / Of all my buried ancestors are packed" (Shakespeare 1964: 135-136: 33-41) (0:07:54-0:08:33). These frightening verbal images are accompanied on screen by similar visual images, first of the vast architecture of the mausoleum-like DAU set, looming over the protagonists in the darkness, and then of feet grinding through the muddy sand that covers the Institute's walkways. Katya's voiceover recitation ends immediately before the sequence in which she learns of Efimov's death, with these foreboding lines:

Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,  
Lies fest'ring in his shroud; where, as they say,  
At some hours in the night spirits resort (Shakespeare 1964: 136: 42-44).

Thus, the filmmakers use Katya's words and Shakespeare's text to foreshadow not only Efimov's literal death, but also Katya's emotional death.

### **Looking (I): the Camera – Point-of-view Shots**

Although the rumours, reported by Idov (2011), that Khrzhanovskiy made use of hidden cameras in the Institute are now known to be inaccurate (Rose 2019; Donadio 2019), the role of the camera in DAU is often troubling. The project's director of photography, Jürgen Jürges (awarded the Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution for the cinematography in *DAU. Natasha* at the 2020 Berlinale and known for his work with, among others, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and Michael Haneke), has described his attempts to hide his presence and remain separate from the participants – covering his unwieldy 35mm camera in black fabric, dressing in black, and avoiding making eye contact with them – which led them

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<sup>28</sup> Katya also appears in *DAU. Teoriia strun*, set slightly later in the 1953 than *DAU Katya Tanya*, in one of the episodes of the series *DAU. Nora*, and in several hours of unused footage housed on the as yet unreleased DAU Digital platform. According to Uspina (Melikova 2020a), some of the footage for *DAU. Teoriia strun* was shot at the same time as that used in *DAU. Katya Tanya* and the rest a week or two later.

to dub him and his two-man crew “черные ангелы” [black angels] (Gusiatinskii 2020).<sup>29</sup> He has also spoken of how at times, especially in the first weeks of filming, the requirement that he film from/with “взгляд вовлеченного наблюдателя” [the perspective/gaze of an involved observer] left him feeling like a voyeur (Gusiatinskii 2020).

Commentators have expressed similar reactions to the role of the camera in *DAU*. Max Lawton (2020: 0:25:40-0:31:27) argues that some films, particularly those that unfold in real time and with minimal editing, come close to replicating the experience of watching an extreme version of reality TV (albeit “shot with a golden camera”, like “Peter Greenaway [shooting] *Love Island*”), observing that the viewer often has the impression of “watching a surveillance camera”. Evgenii Gusiatinskii (2020) likewise characterises the *DAU* camera as one that “снимает «не моргая», присутствует как Большой Брат, но и отсутствует одновременно, находится в индифферентной позиции” [films “without blinking”, is present like Big Brother, but also at the same time absent, and in an indifferent position]. Similarly, in a perceptive review of *DAU. Natasha*, Siddhant Adlakha (2020) describes the dominant sensation created by the camerawork as that of “apathy” toward the characters and a lack of “care for the[ir] internal lives”, communicated by the fact that “the camera remains at arm’s length [...] leer[ing] at them from an objective vantage”. This distance, he suggests, confirms Khrzhanovskiy’s main concern to be “the effects of his own gaudy experiment”, which he likens to “photographing a diorama”.

While there are examples of this detached, observing camera in the prologue to *DAU. Katya Tanya* and especially, as we shall see, in the main part of the film, there are also, unexpectedly, two occasions on which the camera adopts Katya’s optical point of view, giving us access not only to what she sees, but also to her emotional response to what she sees. The first occurs when Efimov leaves the Institute to join the army. As he walks alone, away from Katya, towards the Institute’s huge gates, Katya stands watching him momentarily, but she then begins to follow him, increasing her pace as she suddenly realises that he really is leaving (0:07:33-0:07:48). At this point, there is an editing cut and, in the next shot, the viewer moves from watching Katya follow Efimov to actually following him, as the camera adopts Katya’s perspective, a shift signalled by her absence from the frame and by the camera’s jerky, uneven movement, which replicates her increasingly frantic gait and her distress (0:07:49-0:08:10). It is also significant that this shift of perspective occurs during Katya’s voiceover recitation of Juliet’s soliloquy. This cinematographic device is again employed when Katya learns of Efimov’s death. As she approaches the noticeboard, the camera initially follows her (0:08:38-0:08:49), before a cut sees it adopt her devastated perspective, shakily zooming in on the announcement that bears her lover’s portrait, marginalising those that communicate news of other men at the edges of the frame (0:08:50-0:08:59).

These expressions of Katya’s “perceptual subjectivity” (Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 78), which function as moments of emotional identification, or allyship, between Katya and the camera (and, by extension, between Katya and the viewer), are brief. They are also formally unexceptional, especially for viewers familiar with *Letiat zhuravli*, in which Sergei Urusevskii’s so-called “emotional camera” attaches itself to Veronika so evocatively at moments of heightened emotion, becoming “her shadow, her double [...] resonat[ing] with her emotions [...], penetrat[ing] her inner world as much as it records the outer one” (Woll 2003: 43). Their low-key affectiveness could, however, be a deliberate aesthetic choice, intended to highlight the difficulty Katya has in expressing her feelings (emotional suppression remains a consistent feature of her character in the main part of the film), or to allude to the project’s overarching thematics of the difficulty of, to use Khrzhanovskiy’s words, “trying to be free [...] in an unfree country” (Cronk 2020). Moreover, while they may favour formal and

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<sup>29</sup> For a photograph of Jürges and his crew on the *DAU* set, see Zaezjev (2020: 73).

emotional restraint over exuberance, these moments are significant as exceptions to the usual style of camerawork in *DAU*.<sup>30</sup>

### **Looking (II): the Female Bearer of the Look**

In addition to aligning the perspective of the camera with Katya's optical and emotional perspective, the prologue also signals – albeit obliquely – that, like some on-screen women before her, Katya is capable of “agentic looking” (Ince 2017: 73), suggesting that she will not necessarily allow herself to be framed as the object of the gaze, whether that of the camera, the viewer, or the project's male participants.<sup>31</sup> When Efimov walks Katya home one evening, they stand awkwardly on the doorstep, at arm's length. The viewer wonders whether they – like Kalatozov's Boris and Veronika – will share a kiss, but they do not. Instead, after responding affirmatively to Efimov's question about whether he will see her the next day, Katya brings the awkward moment to a close, dismissing him (as he takes a step towards her) with the phrase “Я вас провожу... взглядом” [I'll see you off... with my eyes (literally, with my gaze)] (0:04:56-0:05:04). The noun “взгляд” [look, gaze, stare] is used in the Russian translation of Mulvey's (1988) well-known term “the male gaze”: “мужской взгляд”. Katya's use of this word, part of a standard Russian expression, therefore takes on a symbolic value in this cinematic context: it serves to suggest that she (and/or the filmmakers) is rejecting the active-male-subject / passive-female-object binary proposed by Mulvey, and highlighting instead that Katya is capable of taking on the active/subject position of “bearer of the look”, in Russian “носитель/носительница взгляда”, and of doing so for her own ends.

### **Feeling: Visual Metaphors**

At various points throughout the film, the narrative is paused not only by frequent fades to black, but also by unusual insert shots that focus on seemingly random objects and parts of the set. As we have now come to expect, this device is introduced in the prologue. After Katya sees Efimov off “взглядом” [with her eyes/gaze] (0:04:56-0:05:04), the next shot takes the form of an insert of a section of a brick wall that is partially obscured by a dark, moving shadow that runs across the top half of the frame. At first, these shots puzzle, and their significance is unclear. As the film progresses and these inserts accumulate, however, the viewer realises that they have a metaphorical value and are used to express Katya's emotions or state of mind at certain key points. Their purpose is affective. Considered alongside the voiceover of Juliet's soliloquy, this insert – a visual evocation of the “vault” in which Shakespeare's heroine imagines being “stifled” – acts as an ominous foreboding both of Katya's attempted suicide, and of her emotional death caused by the loss of Efimov.

This reading is reinforced, and complicated, by a comment made by Ekaterina Uspina (Katya) in a recent interview (Melikova 2020a). Asked how the *DAU* world made her feel, she describes experiencing “тоску и грусть” [melancholy/ennui and sadness] and a sense that “место [...] было гнетущим” [the place [...] was oppressive], feelings (or sensations) that

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<sup>30</sup> Adlakha (2020) identifies two moments in *DAU. Natasha* that are exceptions to this general rule and do suggest an interest in evoking the protagonists' subjective point of view: “In one instance, the camera lingers over Natasha's shoulder, as Olya – who Natasha has manipulated into getting drunk – rushes to vomit in a nearby sink. In the other, the camera sits right by the cheek of an imposing Soviet intelligence officer, Azhippo [...], as he interrogates Natasha for sleeping with the foreigner.” In his analysis, these exceptions reveal something fundamental about Khrzhanovskiy's approach in *DAU*, as in both cases the camera “sides” with the characters only “when they are at their most disdainful, as they coerce consent in order to dominate their inferiors.” It expresses their exercise of power, in other words, rather than exploring their subjectivity as individuals.

<sup>31</sup> Since the mid-1910s, the Russian cinematic tradition has, albeit rarely, featured women protagonists who claim the subject position of “bearer of the look”. For discussion of an early example of this phenomenon, in Evgenii Bauer's film *Posle smerti / After Death* (1915, Russia), see Morley (2017: 179-189).

are, for her, encapsulated in a sound: “Звук грязи, которую там постоянно разводили с песком. Эта грязь оставалась на советских неудобных туфлях. А все ступеньки были сделаны из плиточного материала. Скрежет песка по плитке – мелодия моего ощущения там.” [The sound of mud, which was constantly mixed with sand there. This dirt remained on the uncomfortable Soviet shoes. And all the steps were made of tiled material. The grinding of sand on tiles is the melody of my sensation/feeling there]. Shots of sand being raked into the muddy walkways, and of the grinding sound made by cars and people’s feet as they cross them, are repeatedly used as metaphorical inserts, both in the prologue (as previously noted, the sequence of Efimov’s departure concludes with such an insert shot [0:08:24-:0:08:37]) and in the main part of the film. Indeed, the film’s final sequence, which foregrounds Katya’s catatonic despair over Tanya’s death, includes two uses of the prologue’s insert shot of feet in muddy sand (1:35:07-1:35:16 and 1:35:28-38). Uspina’s use of the noun “ощущение” [sensation/feeling] in this context is especially interesting. It was, as Emma Widdis has shown, “a key term in early Soviet psychology”, “[d]efined by Vladimir Lenin himself [...] as ‘the direct connection between *consciousness* and *the external world*’” (cited and translated by Widdis 2017: 5; emphasis added). Thus it seems that these metaphorical insert shots express not only the consciousness of the fictional Katya, but also that of Uspina, the real woman who plays her in this film. These inserts create a moment, therefore, in which two strands of DAU’s intent meet and intertwine: the fictional becomes ‘real’ and the ‘real’ becomes fictional.

### **The Prologue’s Conclusion**

The prologue concludes with a powerful image of Katya’s emotional devastation at Efimov’s death, this time expressed physically, through her posture: after turning a corner, Katya leans against a wall, for support, before slumping to the ground; shrouded in deep darkness, she folds herself up, pulling her legs into her body, bowing her head to her knees and covering her face with her hands. It is a position that she will assume repeatedly throughout the film’s main part, when experiencing emotional distress. In this instance, the camerawork again aligns the camera with Katya: it sticks close to her as she rounds the corner and, as she slumps, the camera follows her, moving down until it is on the same level as the grieving woman (0:08:59-0:09:32). This gentle movement functions as a gesture of sympathy towards Katya, creating the impression of the camera as a concerned presence (the fact that we hear the sound of the cameraman’s feet on the sand strengthens this feeling).<sup>32</sup> This gesture, together with Katya’s posture, encourages the viewer to hope both that the main part of the film will tell the story of Katya’s gradual recovery (her unfolding), much as Kalatozov’s *Letiat zhuravli* tells that of Veronika’s, and that the camera will accompany her on this journey.

## **Part 2: The Main Part of the Film**

The action jumps ten years to the autumn of 1952, and we again see Katya – now the Institute’s head librarian – at work in the library (this time alone), books by Stalin piled on her desk. Walking home with some acquaintances, she mentions that she is looking forward to her first date with Dau. Calling to her, Romeo-like, from under her bedroom window, Dau invites Katya to walk with him, asking about her experience of love and taking photographs of her, which both highlights Dau’s dominance in the film’s hierarchy of looking and reminds the viewer that Uspina is, in her ‘real’ life outside the project, a professional model. Later that evening,

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<sup>32</sup> In its gentle subtlety and strong suggestion of solidarity with and sympathy for Katya, this camera movement recalls a key sequence in Evgenii Bauer’s *Sumerki zhenskoi dushi / Twilight of a Woman’s Soul* (1913, Russia), in which a slight movement of the camera, operated by Nikolai Kozlovskii, towards the female protagonist similarly signals both the filmmakers’ concern to represent her point of view and their sympathy for her story (Morley 2017: 60-61).

Dau tells Nora that he finds Katya interesting, but reassures her that “не говорю для секса, говорю для общения” [I’m not talking about for sex, I’m talking about for socialising] (0:15:29-0:15:43). However, Katya’s apparent indifference to his relentless attention – which she resists over the course of several days – spurs Dau on. Half in jest, he invites Katya to spend the night with him and Nora, and is surprised when she accepts. The next day, overcome with shame and wanting to punish Dau, Katya publicly rejects him at a party before leaving to have sex with his colleague and friend, Alexey Trifonov. Dau’s violent response to this deliberate act of humiliation, Katya’s deepening sense of shame, and the violence of sex with Trifonov push her to attempt suicide, but she vomits up the pills she has swallowed. Winter arrives, and then gives way to spring. Katya begins a sexual relationship with a woman, a journalist named Tanya. Predictably, this comes to the attention of the First Department, whose officers warn the women that their “разврат” [debauchery] (1:24:47) must cease. Ignoring their threats, Katya and Tanya meet once more, which leads to the film’s horrifying conclusion: Tanya’s death, by hanging.

As this synopsis indicates, the directors’ interest in privileging the “female subject-position” is initially evident in the way in which they make Katya the driver of the narrative and the subject of her own story in plot terms, at least for most of the film. It is Katya who decides to spend the night with Dau and Nora, for example; it is she who rejects Dau (something very few other women do);<sup>33</sup> she who decides to sleep with Trifonov, before also rejecting him; and it is she who both initiates the relationship with Tanya and encourages its continuation after the First Department’s interrogation. It is, however, not unproblematic that Katya’s assertion of agency in her own life is represented via a quest for self-fulfilment and happiness in love, for this might be felt to undermine the possibility of seeing her as the “feminine on her own” and to position her instead as a stereotypical romantic heroine. The film’s various literary subtexts also gesture in this direction. Is Katya just another Juliet, awaiting her Romeo, for example, or another passive, dependent woman, like the Queen in Aleksandr Pushkin’s 1833 poem “Skazka o mertvoi tsarevne i o semi bogatyriakh” / “The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Bogatyrs” – which Tanya’s daughter recites for her – who pines for her husband, absent for nine months, only to die when he finally returns home? As Dolin (Gusiatinskii et al. 2020) puts it, these subtexts, and the numerous books that surround the two women remind the viewer “о литературности любого, даже документального, сюжета” [of the literary nature of any story, even a documentary story].

In telling this part of Katya’s story, the directors do not make consistent use of all the cinematic devices that I identified in the prologue – the voiceover, the alignment of the camera with Katya’s perspective and emotions, her agentic looking and the use of visual metaphors. The metaphorical insert shots do continue throughout, however, always with the same function of giving visual expression to Katya’s emotions or state of mind at certain key points. To give just two of many possible examples: the sequence in which Katya returns to her room after spending the night with Dau and Nora, which shows her getting into bed and pulling a pillow over her head, as if to block out her memories of what has just happened, is followed by a night-time insert shot of one of the Institute’s huge brick walls, streetlamps swinging in the wind, and heavy rain, expressive of the tears she cannot shed. Later, Katya’s suicide attempt is followed first by an establishing shot of the Institute blanketed in thick white snow (accompanied by the extra-diegetic soundtrack of Erik Satie’s haunting “Gnossienne No. 3” [1890]), and then by insert shots of feet walking along flooded walkways. In addition to signalling the passing of time, as winter thaws and gives way to spring, these inserts are

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<sup>33</sup> Maria, in *DAU. Tri dnia* is another woman who makes the decision to reject Dau. Like Katya, she does so only after spending the night with him while Nora is away on holiday with their son. However, whereas in *DAU. Katya Tanya* the night Katya spends with Dau and Nora is not shown on screen, the sex scene between Maria and Dau is (0:59:00-1:00:28), albeit in a comparatively understated and unexplicit way.

suggestive of a shift in Katya's outlook: of her decision to live rather than seek death. They suggest that Katya has reached a turning point, and is ready to end her hopeless wait for Efimov. Indeed, it is shortly after this sequence that she initiates her relationship with Tanya.

Despite this continuing focus on representing Katya's emotions through visual metaphors, there are no instances in the main part of the film of the camera adopting her optical perspective in point-of-view shots. This is not to say, however, that Katya completely loses her status as bearer of the look as the film progresses. For example, she is so often shown sitting in silence and simply watching the people around her that Dau comments: "Ты просто ждешь и наблюдаешь. Ты – наблюдатель" [You just wait and observe. You're an observer], using the masculine form of the noun, as is common in nouns that refer to professions (0:36:53-0:37:01).<sup>34</sup> However, despite the fact that Katya is, at times, accorded the subject position of the observer within the diegesis (that is, on the relatively superficial level of the film's plot), in formal terms she is more often cast in the role of the observed object. Thus, while the camera continues to remain close to Katya throughout the main part of the film, it increasingly gives the impression that it is observing her with detachment, rather than supporting her, as it had in the prologue. It also, moreover, becomes a presence from which Katya seems to wish to escape. On numerous occasions, when experiencing emotional distress, she attempts to hide from the camera, whether by pulling a pillow over her head, as already mentioned, or by covering her face with her hands, turning away from the camera towards a wall, or turning her back on it. The camera stalks her relentlessly, however, and it thus comes to embody an oppressive presence, a sinister, lurking double of both the implacable predatory men who are pursuing Katya and the brutal state apparatus that monitors and seeks to control her behaviour. This feeling reaches a high point in the sequence after Katya has had sex with Trifonov. As she stands at the sink, scrubbing her arms, the camera enters the room behind her and the viewer briefly catches sight of the cameraman's reflection in the window above the sink, before he darts to one side in an attempt to move out of view. This creates the sense of the camera as another interloper encroaching uninvited on Katya's misery.

This shift in the style of the camerawork raises other questions about the filmmakers' representation of Katya. What, for example, is the impact of this when combined with the fact that the plot she drives revolves around a series of sexual encounters? Do the filmmakers attempt to represent these encounters, formally, in a way that enables us to read them as liberatory, or as an expression of the female gaze? Or do they simply condemn Katya to spend the main part of the film cast in the conventional role of spectacle, as the to-be-looked-at object of the male gaze? The next sections of this article address these questions by considering the filmmakers' treatment of sex.

### **Sex as Cinematic Language**

Sex features prominently in the DAU films and they are already notorious for their explicit depiction of lengthy and unsimulated sexual encounters, which as Bryukhovetska (2020) notes "stirred some predictable moral outrage".<sup>35</sup> In this, *DAU. Katya Tanya* is no exception,

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<sup>34</sup> This again aligns Katya both with Maria in *DAU. Tri dnia*, who is represented not only as an observer of Dau and his games with women but also as an observer who refuses to play along, and with Katya (Oertel) in *DAU. Teoriia strun*, who says of herself, in the sequence when she rebukes the unfaithful Nekrasov for his selfish, infantile behaviour and callous treatment of women, among them Katya (Uspina), "Я долго за тобой наблюдаю." [I've been observing you for a long time.] (2:29:18-2:29:30).

<sup>35</sup> In interviews, Khrzhanovskiy often argues that there is not actually a lot of sex in DAU, noting, for example that while around 60 hours of the 700 hours of footage contain scenes of a sexual nature, 80 hours focus on science (Gordon 2020: 1:18:46-1:18:59). He also often expresses dissatisfaction with the project's representation of sex, commenting, for example (Zvonkine 2022): "I think the sexual part was not developed enough in the DAU project. I planned to make it more prominent, I planned to make both the sexual storyline and the spiritual storyline more

including one implied sex scene – the night Katya spends with Dau and Nora – and three explicit sex scenes, one between Katya and Trifonov, and two between Katya and Tanya. The film was awarded an 18+ certificate in the UK on the basis that it contains “Sexually abusive behaviour, strong real sex, nudity and very strong language”; of the 29 plot keywords listed for the film on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb 2020), 22 refer to explicit elements of the film’s sex scenes. Surprisingly, however, especially given its explicit depiction of sex between two women, *DAU. Katya Tanya* was not among the four DAU films that were denied a cinema distribution licence by the Russian Ministry of Culture on the grounds that they contain “материалы, пропагандирующие порнографию” [materials that promote pornography] (Kartsev et al. 2019).<sup>36</sup>

Some commentators – Donadio (2019), Ezerova (2020: 0:41:42-0:43:26) and Pinkham (2020b: 0:54:31-0:54:40) among them – have agreed with this view that sex in DAU is overwhelmingly filmed in the idiom of pornography.<sup>37</sup> “If there’s one line between art and pornography,” Donadio (2019) notes, “it’s the line between simulated sex and real sex.” Moreover, Ezerova (2020: 0:43:00-:0-43:15) argues, Khrzhanovskiy is not interested in capturing “sex as it is”, “the kind of voyeurism that he uses is not documentary at all. [...] [I]t’s profoundly genre.” Khrzhanovskiy, however, challenged the Ministry of Culture’s decision to classify his films as ‘propagandising’ pornography, arguing – in a letter addressed to Russia’s then Culture Minister, Vladimir Medinskii – that: “Откровенные сцены, наличествующие в фильмах, существуют там как часть художественного образа и кинематографического языка, а не как пропаганда порнографии.” [The explicit scenes that occur in the films are there because they are part of the artistic image/representation and of *the cinematic language*, not as propaganda for pornography.] (*Vedomosti* 2019; emphasis added). Khrzhanovskiy’s comment is mirrored in an observation made by Dolin (Kartsev et al. 2019), who, speaking about the DAU films en masse, notes that removing the explicit sex scenes would alter their meaning and their import: “картина в хронометраже много не потеряет, но, конечно, это будет другое кино.” [the film would not lose much in terms of its length, but it would, of course, be a different type of cinema]. Mark Lipovetsky (2021: 390) has gone further, arguing that it is only through the representation of sex that the DAU project (“a monumental artistic experiment”) succeeds in its ambitious aim of communicating, through the participants’ genuine (that is, unstaged, authentic) reactions to events that occur in the Institute, the experience of living under the oppressive and violent conditions of Soviet power. That is, it is only through the representation of sex that the project sears “the real into the metaphors and symbols of history”. For, he concludes, “arguably for the first time in Russian cinema, sex scenes are neither pornographic nor repulsive, but convey more about the characters and their epoch than the[ir] incoherent dialogue and clumsy acting.”

With these varied stances in mind, the following sections offer close readings of each of the four sex scenes in *DAU. Katya Tanya*, focusing on their cinematic construction and on

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prominent. But I failed, I ended up with a deeply psychological portrait of something and I never succeeded really in exploring these two high energies.” For Khrzhanovskiy’s analysis of the significance of sex in DAU and his explanation of why he believes that what he terms “sexual cinema” – which he sees as distinct from pornography – is important, see Zvonkine (2022).

<sup>36</sup> These four films were *DAU. Natasha*, *DAU. Novyi chelovek*, *DAU. Sasha Valera*, in which two men have a homosexual relationship, and *DAU. Nora syn*, in which Nora (Dau’s wife) embarks on a sexual relationship with their son which, although incestuous in the universe of the film, was not so in ‘real life’, as the participants who played the roles of mother and son are not related. Oertel co-directed three of these films.

<sup>37</sup> Pinkham (2020: 0:54:20-0:54:52) identifies the sex scene between Andrey Losev and his wife Darya Berzhitskaya in *DAU. Smelye liudi / DAU. Brave People* (Khrzhanovskiy and Slusarchuk, 2020, Germany, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Russia) as an exception to this general rule, describing it as not having “a very noticeable pornographic intention” and “not filmed in the idiom of porn, but [...] with some kind of interest connected to the characters.”



the extent to which they can be said – in both formal and narrative terms – to represent Katya’s perspective or, in other words, to foreground the female gaze.

### **Katya, Dau, and Nora**

In her interview with Anna Melikova (2020a), Uspina talks at length about how Khrzhanovsky deliberately chose for her a costume that would make her look ugly, telling the wardrobe mistresses: “сделайте из нее чемодан” [make her into a suitcase]. The result was “платье с вшитыми поролоновыми бедрами, которые каким-то образом начинались в области нижних ребер” [a dress with sewn-in foam hips, which somehow started just under my lower ribs]. It made her look huge, Uspina believed, which affected the way she felt about herself: “Сначала мне было неудобно, неловко. Когда ты так одет, ты начинаешь чувствовать и вести себя иначе. [...] Я себе очень не нравилась.” [At first I felt uncomfortable, embarrassed. When you’re dressed like that you start to feel and behave differently. [...] I really didn’t like myself like that.].<sup>38</sup> Khrzhanovskiy then set Uspina the challenge of seducing Dau despite her appearance:

нам с Дау нельзя было пересекаться вне проекта, чтобы он видел меня в обычной одежде, потому что он бы понял, что я совсем не такая. А про ту, которую он видел внутри проекта, он сказал: «Катя такая хорошая, такая хорошая, но такая ж страшенькая» [...] И мне, конечно, было обидно. Но там была такая задача. Илья сказал: «Ты привыкла, что ты такая, в тебя влюбляются. А смогут ли в тебя влюбиться, если ты не такая? Если ты чемодан?» [Dau and I were not allowed to cross paths outside the project, because if we had done he would have seen me in my ordinary clothes and would have realised that I was nothing like that. Of the woman he saw inside the project he said “Katya is so nice, so nice, but she’s so very ugly.” [...] And of course that hurt. But this was the task I’d been set. Ilya said, “You’re used to being someone who has people fall in love with them. But can people fall in love with you if you’re not like that? If you’re a suitcase?”].

Asked by Melikova (2020a) whether Dau’s aversion to her appearance meant that her romance with him was “искусственно создана” [artificially created], Uspina replies, “Не совсем” [not entirely], before explaining that the sequence in which she accepts Dau’s invitation to spend the night with him and Nora only happened because she took the decision to accept it, for her own reasons, beyond those of the project: “Я это сделала, потому что не смогла дотянуть ту историю, чтобы он полюбил меня во всех этих одеждах.” [I did this because I couldn’t manage to keep this story going and make him fall in love with me in all these clothes.] Melikova continues: “А вы хотели сбросить свой чемодан и показать, что на самом деле...” [So, you wanted to cast off your suitcase and show that, in fact...] “Что на самом деле я очень даже ничего” [That in fact I’m actually quite good looking], Uspina concludes.

That Katya’s decision to accept Dau’s invitation to spend the night with him and Nora was a spur-of-the-moment decision on Uspina’s part is clear even for viewers who are unaware of her comments: completely taken aback when Katya accepts his invitation, Currentzis drops out of character momentarily, widening his eyes, pulling an alarmed face at Schegoleva and muttering, almost sheepishly “А может быть не стоит?” [Or maybe it’s not worth it?] (0:43:07-0:43:26), which elicits gales of genuine laughter from Schegoleva and Uspina, as well

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<sup>38</sup> Shibanov talks about how the costumes were deliberately designed to have “a psychosomatic impact on the actors” (Murawski 2022b), as does Oertel (Morley 2022). For further discussion of the approach to costume design in DAU and interviews with six of the costume designers who worked on the project at different times, see Mingazitinova and Plungian (2022).

as from the viewer – or, at least, from this viewer: it is amusing to see this powerful, patriarchal, misogynistic man, this usually confident, controlling womaniser out of his depth because of a woman’s bold decision. This exchange also creates the impression that this is Currentzis’s real-life reaction, rather than that of Dau, the character he is playing. Once again, therefore, we see a moment in this most staged of films in which the ‘real’ and the fictional coincide: we see a ‘real’ woman making her own decision about what she wants to do, in defiance of Khrzhanovskiy’s instructions, and taking her fictional self along with her, too.

As a sex scene that is implied rather than shown, the night Katya spends with Dau and Nora stands out as an exception in the context of DAU. The sequence begins when Dau leads Katya into his bedroom, where they are soon joined by Nora and Trifonov. As Nora reclines on the bed in her underwear and Dau plays a tune on a mouth organ, Katya sits – fully clothed – in silence, smoking and watching the others. Dau undresses and gets into bed, pulling a sheet over his body. Teased by Nora for hiding himself in this way, he replies that it is only fair that he do so, as the women are both still clothed. As they prepare to undress, Nora rebukes Trifonov for watching uninvited: she and Katya have not given him permission to look at them, so he must turn away and recite a poem by Pushkin.<sup>39</sup> Dau, however, is allowed to watch, which accords him the privileged status of the bearer of the gaze. Once naked, the women sit on the bed, one either side of Dau, and Katya unexpectedly pulls back the sheet, briefly revealing Dau’s naked body and thus literally claiming for herself the active subject position of bearer of the look (0:46:38-0:46:39). Brey (2020: 12; emphasis in original) notes that, while some commentators, for example Sandra Laugier (2019), would consider this an example of the female gaze, she does not, as for her “la représentation du corps comme objet de désir, que ce soit un corps masculin ou féminin, reste une forme de *male gaze*” [representing the body as an object of desire, whether that body is masculine or feminine, remains a form of *male gaze*].

The seasoned DAU viewer expects that Katya’s bold and decisive gesture will mark the start of a sex scene *à trois*, but these expectations are disrupted: a sudden, unexpected editing cut takes us out of the space of the bedroom, into the street and forward in time: it is daybreak, and Katya sits alone on a bench, her head bowed and her arms over her ears. Drowning out the diegetic sound is an extra-diegetic soundtrack of Trifonov’s Pushkin recitation (which soon fades away) and discordant notes played on a mouth organ. It is clear from Katya’s posture that she is crying, and this is confirmed when she wipes tears from her face.

The viewer reads this sequence as set in the present: it is the morning after the night before. What is more, the soundtrack functions to signal that we are seeing things from Katya’s perspective: it is her aural memory of the tune that Dau had been playing before she undressed on the previous evening. This impression is strengthened in the subsequent sequences, in which a series of flashbacks return us (in time and space) to the bedroom: first, we see Dau and Nora’s legs; they are lying side by side on the bed and Katya, whom we see in medium close-up, is lying top to toe with them, propped up on her elbows as she nurses a glass of red wine and smokes what the viewer assumes, based on cinematic conventions, to be a post-coital cigarette (0:46:59-0:47:04). The next cut jumps us forward again, and we watch two brief sequences of Katya alone in the bedroom, slowly dressing: in the first she is seated; in the second she is standing with her back to the camera. Another cut returns us to Dau and Nora lying on the bed, followed by a six-second close-up – which has a blurred, impressionistic quality – of Katya’s pensive face (0:47:14-0:47:24). The sequence concludes with a return to the present: the sound of the mouth organ fades away, and after two more extended shots of Katya sitting alone

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<sup>39</sup> The poem is “Nado pomianut’, nepremenno pomianut’ nado...” / “We Must Remember, We Really Must Remember...” a comic, Gogol-esque *pamiatka* [poem of remembrance] by Petr Viazemskii and Aleksandr Pushkin (written 26 March 1833; published 1880). See Pushkin (1959: 619-621). The recited lines (ll. 4-16) are known to have been written by Viazemskii.

outside, during which we see her sadness harden into anger, we watch her walk back to her room.

The formal elements from which this complex sequence is composed – the impressionistic close-ups of Katya, the soundtrack, the flashbacks, and the disrupted chronology achieved through editing – combine to make it clear that what we are watching is a series of snippets from Katya’s memory, coloured by the emotions she is experiencing, as she relives in her mind the events of the night before. This, then, is sex seen through Katya’s eyes, an evocation of her female gaze. And it is striking that this is shown to take a completely different form from the conventional objectifying male gaze. Instead of treating other people as to-be-looked-at objects of erotic fascination, the female gaze evoked here by the filmmakers positions Katya as subject by telling her story, foregrounding her emotions and enabling the viewer to feel what she is experiencing: we see the deep unhappiness that her decision to sleep with Dau and Nora has caused her, empathise with her feelings of shame and regret, and understand her anger.

The fact that this encounter is represented from Katya’s perspective has other effects, however. This foregrounding of the female gaze places Katya in a position of power over Dau: we see her side of the story not his. Nor do we see the moment at which he succeeds in his aim of possessing Katya sexually; in other words, she is not reduced to an object over which he has control. Katya’s narrative therefore challenges both the patriarchal order of DAU and conventional filmic paradigms. It thus becomes clear that both Nora’s rebuke of Trifonov for watching them undress uninvited and Katya’s act of pulling back the sheets to reveal Dau’s nudity were programmatic: different ways for both the women participants and the filmmakers to signal to the viewer that this sequence would not be presented from the perspective of the male participants.<sup>40</sup>

### **Katya and Trifonov**

The next sex scene takes place almost immediately after the sequence in which Katya returns home after spending the night with Dau and Nora. At a gathering in the scientists’ house, Katya pointedly ignores Dau, who leaves, offended. Trifonov sticks close to Katya and, despite her evident disgust at his alcohol-laden breath, she decides to have sex with him. It is important to note that, unlike her decision to sleep with Dau and Nora, this one was not of Uspina’s own choosing, but “результатом диалога со съемочной группой. То есть это было художественное решение, не мое. [...] Это абсолютно срежиссированные художественные решения.” [the result of discussions with the film crew. That is, it was an artistic decision, not my own. [...] These were completely staged artistic decisions.]. It was the decision of the fictional Katya, therefore.<sup>41</sup> Of Katya’s decision to sleep with Trifonov as revenge on Dau, Uspina comments: “моим решением абсолютно точно не было бы мстить кому-либо. Назло мужу сяду в лужу – это не про меня.” [I would definitely never have decided to take revenge on someone. Cutting off my nose to spite my face is not my style.] (Melikova 2020a).

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<sup>40</sup> Oertel (Morley 2022) has recounted that one of the main challenges of the DAU approach to filming was that the camera would sometimes inevitably not be present when significant events or interactions took place between the participants, which meant that the filmmakers often had to find ways to compensate for the resultant gaps in the narrative thread during the editing phase. The fact that this sex scene between Katya, Dau, and Nora is not shown explicitly was, however, a deliberate choice, not one born of necessity. The camera was present and other footage from this sequence exists. Indeed, the trailer for the main DAU movie, recently made available on [the Russian section of the DAU Cinema platform](#), includes additional footage from this encounter.

<sup>41</sup> Uspina (Melikova 2020a) also makes it clear that even though these were not her decisions, she still had the choice to say no to what the filmmakers asked of her within the context of the project, if she wished to do so.

At just over four minutes long (0:50:56-0:55:03) this sequence is everything that the previous implied sex scene was not. While (the fictional) Katya initiates their encounter, the sequence is structured according to a conventional male gaze, conveyed through the camera's fetishising, objectifying focus on various parts of Katya's naked body (her breasts, her depilated mons pubis, her stomach). The sequence also draws on the idiom of pornography: the camera repeatedly isolates and homes in on moments of male-female penetration (both penile and manual) and avoids showing the man's face, focussing instead on the woman's, a convention of pornography that seeks to make it easier for the male observer to imagine himself in the position of the male protagonist.

To say that this sequence exploits the aesthetics of pornography and many of its conventional shots is not to say that it is pornographic, however. Many commentators have attempted to provide a definition of what makes a film pornographic. Jacob M. Held (2019: 728), in a recent chapter that critically examines numerous historically used definitions of pornography, has argued – contrary to Donadio (2019) – that the best way to determine this is not by looking at “what type of sex is present or how it is shot”, but instead by considering “the role [sex] plays in the narrative structure of the film as a whole.” For, Held concludes (2019: 723):

In pornographic films sex is present for sex's sake alone, whereas in non-pornographic narrative films, which may or may not include non-simulated explicit sex, the sex serves a diegetic role. In a pornographic film, the spectacle of sex is the sine qua non of the film. In non-pornographic, albeit sexually explicit, narrative cinema, the sex is part and parcel to the narrative and enhances it in such a way that the lack of it would detract from and leave incomplete the narrative.

This sex scene has a clear role in the film's narrative: sleeping with Trifonov is Katya's way of wreaking revenge on Dau and, as Oertel (Morley 2022) suggests, of punishing herself for her decision to sleep with him and Nora, thereby “ruining her dreams about the innocence of true love”. It perhaps has a further psychological motivation: it may be that Katya is drawn to Trifonov because she had previously watched him playing chess with his young son, enabling her to make a misguided connection between Trifonov and her first love, Efimov. Thus, while this sequence treats sex as spectacle in formal terms, it arguably does so for reasons of narrative, theme, and characterisation, not for its own sake. The sequence's narrative role also justifies the decision to shoot it in line with the conventions of the male gaze: this encounter is, for Katya, entirely performative, an act of revenge. The use of the male gaze heightens the sense of Dau's humiliation, especially as her sex scene with him was not shown on screen. This is emphasised when, in the middle of the sequence, Dau quietly enters the bedroom. He stands for a moment, a voyeur watching Katya and Trifonov unawares. Then he violently announces his presence, shaking the bed, throwing furniture, and grabbing Katya, who kicks him off before mouthing the word “*цыка*” [bitch, slut] at him (0:53:14). While this vulgar, offensive, and abusive term can sometimes be used to refer to men, as a grammatically feminine noun it is much more commonly used to insult women. Indeed, during the interrogation sequence towards the end of the film, one of the security officers slaps Katya across the face before vehemently hurling this insult at her (1:26:01-1:26:04).<sup>42</sup> It is striking, therefore, that Katya here – in a context in which we might expect Dau to apply the term to her – claims it for her own use. This has the effect of further humiliating and emasculating Dau and of again stressing

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<sup>42</sup> In an interview (Melikova 2020a), Uspina recounts how the man who slapped her apologised for doing so after filming had ended, with the words: “«Катенька, вы же понимаете, это все кино.»” [“Katya, dear, you know this is all cinema.”]

Katya's agency, on both the fictional and the 'real' levels: remember that the films were unscripted. As Uspina notes (Melikova 2020a): "У нас была свобода слова внутри вымышленных обстоятельств." [We had freedom of speech within fictional circumstances.]

This marks a turning point in the sequence, however. Her aim of hurting Dau accomplished, Katya tries to end her encounter with Trifonov, but he refuses to stop. He had previously covered her whole face with his hand, effectively silencing her, as the security officer will also do at the end of the film, when Katya screams at the horror of discovering Tanya's body. Now, dismissing her tears and ignoring her cries that he is hurting her, Trifonov molests Katya against her will. It becomes a rape scene, and again the camera focuses, in close-up, on his violating acts of penetration.

Speaking of sex in DAU in general and in this sequence in particular, Oertel has argued (Morley 2022) that:

if we can separate sex from the act of penetrating a woman, then we're talking about sex as being like an emotional act. These emotional acts can sometimes be violent, or harsh, or self-harming, being used to silence an emotion inside yourself. For me, the scene between Katya and Trifonov is not about him breaking her; this is her punishing herself. This is how I read it. [...] This is something that women do, and it is so easy to say that he abused her vulnerability and raped her, but that's kind of a male approach to this theme, I feel. Because women are so much more complicated than we give them credit for. And then we are used to seeing this in films: it's being a victim.

This reading overlooks, however, the fact that in this sequence it is precisely the moments of penetration that are emphasised by the camera work in the ways outlined above. This means that the viewer is not easily able to "separate sex from the act of penetrating a woman" or to focus on what this part of the sex scene might symbolise in emotional terms, in the way that Oertel suggests. Instead, the sequence highlights the dangers that women face in the violent, patriarchal world of DAU.

Sarah Projansky (2001: 101) has detailed that a common narrative schema in contemporary mainstream cinema sees women protagonists who are identified from the start of a film as "powerful independent agents" endure rape, or the threat of rape, "as a result of [their] determination to remain independent". This can be interpreted in one of two ways, she suggests: "as warning women against living independently" or "as making a feminist statement about men's violent response to independent women". In the case of *DAU. Katya Tanya*, the second interpretation is more appropriate. For, while the sequence's concluding section does, in my view, represent Katya cinematically as a victim of male violence, it is significant that she does not remain in this position for long. Thus, as she had rejected Dau, first by choosing Trifonov over him and then by telling him, when he visits her bedroom, to "оставьте меня" [leave me alone], so she rejects Trifonov. When, in a later sequence, he too follows Katya into her bedroom, she stands her ground and insists that he leave, using the familiar imperative "Уйди!" [Go away!]. It is her space and he has no right to be there. This is a tense moment, as the viewer fears that Trifonov will react with violence and again force himself on Katya. Her strength and resolve are too powerful, however, and he retreats, mumbling "меня не хотят, я не настою" [if I'm not wanted, I won't insist] (1:10:34-1:10:36).<sup>43</sup> On one level, therefore, for all her suffering Katya has emerged victorious: she has rid herself of two predatory men. She remains independent.

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<sup>43</sup> In this context, it is interesting to note that, within the project's diegetic world, Trifonov will eventually (on 9 September 1968) find himself forced to resign as the director of the Institute, a position he took on in 1960, after he is expelled from the Institute by the KGB for his ongoing sexual harassment of his secretary Kristina Voloshina. These events feature in *DAU. Degeneratsiia*.

## Katya and Tanya (I)

This perhaps explains the inclusion of two lesbian sex scenes in *DAU. Katya Tanya*: what better way is there to signal that Katya neither wants nor needs these men's attention? However, the rarity in Russian cinema of explicit sex scenes between two women cannot be overstated. Even before the so-called "gay propaganda law" was promulgated by the Russian President Vladimir Putin on 30 June 2013 (*Rossiskaia gazeta* 2013), making it illegal to promote "нетрадиционные сексуальные отношения" [non-traditional sexual relations] to minors, very few Russian fiction films had even hinted at the existence of lesbian relationships.<sup>44</sup> *Bok*

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<sup>44</sup> Russian and Soviet fiction films that can be read as exploring same-sex desire between women, whether implicitly or explicitly, include: *Dubravka* (Radomir Vasil'evskii, 1967, USSR), about a tomboy teenager's love for an older woman; *Chuzhie pis'ma / Other People's Letters* (Il'ia Averbakh, 1975, USSR), in which sixteen-year-old Zina becomes infatuated with her teacher, who arguably returns her feelings; *Skorbnoe beschuvstvie / Mournful Unconcern* (Aleksandr Sokurov, completed in 1983; released in 1987, USSR), set during World War I and inspired by George Bernard Shaw's play *Heartbreak House* (1920) about a dinner party in an eccentric household, the film features several moments of sexual intimacy between an older and a younger woman; *Schastlivogo Rozhdestva v Parizhe! ili Banda lesbiianok / Merry Christmas in Paris, or A Band of Lesbians* (Ol'ga Zhukova, 1991, USSR), a carnivalesque black comedy with elements of social commentary in which four young women live with an older woman and her ten-year-old daughter in an apartment to which they lure men, with the promise of sex, in order to rob them and which features a lesbian sex scene; *Tri istorii / Three Stories* (Kira Muratova, 1997, Russia and Ukraine), in which Ofa's murder of a woman who has given up her baby for adoption, in the film's second story ("Ofeliia", written by Renata Litvinova), is shot as a lesbian sex scene; *Strana glukhikh / Land of the Deaf* (Valerii Todorovskii, 1998, Russia), in which the two female leads joke about being mistaken for a lesbian couple and recall lesbian experiences they had when much younger; *Dnevnik ego zheny / His Wife's Diary* (Aleksei Uchitel', 2000, Russia, winner of both that year's Kinotavr Grand Prix and the 2001 Nika main prize), set in the South of France in the 1940s and based on a screenplay (by Avdot'ia Smirnova) about the émigré writer Ivan Bunin and his relationships with his wife, his young lover, and the poet Galina Kuznetsova, the latter of whom leaves Bunin for the singer Margo Kovtun; *Vdokh-Vydokh / Inhale-Exhale* (Ivan Dykhovichnyi, 2006, Russia) about a husband and wife whose marriage is destroyed by the wife's lesbian affair; *Zhestokost' / Cruelty* (Marina Liubakova, 2007, Russia), a *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991, United States) type tale that charts the developing relationship of two women, a teenager and a businesswoman in her thirties, which increasingly has sexual overtones and culminates in the teenager's (unrealised) suggestion that they become lesbians; *Potselui sestry / A Sister's Kiss* (Dmitrii Griбанov, 2007, Russia), in which two St Petersburg teenagers begin a sexual relationship, before discovering that they are sisters; *Kokoko* (Avdot'ia Smirnova, 2012, Russia), a female buddy film about the relationship between Liza, a St Petersburg ethnographer, and Vika, a restaurant hostess from Ekaterinburg; despite Smirnova's insistence that the women's relationship is not erotic (Antonov 2012), Beach Gray (2013) has read *Kokoko* as a film about "courtship, desire, and the possibility of romantic love between women", doubtless following Jackie Stacey's (1987: 53) argument that fiction films which dramatise "a woman's obsession with another woman" evoke the pleasures of same-sex desire, even when this obsession is not overtly sexual and even if they cannot easily be described as lesbian films; Trevor Wilson (2020) has also argued that "[t]he precise nature of their relationship remains up for interpretation"; *Intimnye mesta / Intimate Parts* (Natasha Merkulova and Aleksei Chupov, 2013, Russia), in which a woman who finds out that her boyfriend has cheated on her has sex with her housemaid, who has also been involved with her husband; and *Dylda / Beanpole* (Kantemir Balagov, 2019, Russia), which explores life in Leningrad after the Second World War through the story of two women whose intense emotional relationship at times shades into becoming sexual and which was nominated for the Queer Palm at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. Recently, Angelina Nikonova and Ol'ga Dykhovichnaia, who had been planning a screen adaptation of Vladimir Sorokin's lesbian-themed novel *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny / Marina's Thirtieth Love* (written 1982-1984, published 1995) (Condee 2015), cancelled the project because, as Nikonova explains (in private messages to the author via Instagram, November 19, 2021): "[t]here was simply no financing for it"; after spending "more than ten years trying to find financing", she therefore "got tired of it". Given Sorokin's involvement in writing the initial script for *DAU*, this novel might have inspired the lesbian theme in *DAU. Katya Tanya*. Lesbian themes are also explored in the web series *Steklo / Glass* (Mariia Al'kai, 2013, Russia), which focuses on six twenty-something lesbians in Moscow and aims to destroy and partly ridicule the stereotypes of the lesbian subculture, and *Eto proiskhodit riadom s vami / This Is Happening Right Next to You* (Iuliia Fil, 2016, Russia), which celebrates St Petersburg as a place of exceptional freedom for lesbians and features non-professional actors, with many sequences shot in St Petersburg's "girls-only" nightclub *Infinity*. For discussion of these series and an interesting analysis of the differences between the Western approaches to

*o bok* [Side by Side], Russia's only LGBT International Film Festival, which was inaugurated in 2008, has never screened any Russian feature films and began to include short films made in Russia only in 2012, in a programme titled "Nachalo" [The Beginning]; most of these focus on gay male relationships, however.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, official attitudes to films with overt lesbian themes and sex scenes, whether foreign-made or Russian, are hardening. According to an unnamed Russian screenwriter recently interviewed by the BBC Russian Service (Gerasimenko 2021), whose application to make a film set in a women's prison was immediately met with the question "а можно без гомосексуализма?" [but can you do it without homosexuality?]: "Иногда даже кажется, будто бы про Путина снять легче, чем про гомосексуализм." [Sometimes it really seems that it's easier to make films about Putin than about homosexuality].<sup>46</sup> "ЛГБТ – тема не менее проблемная, чем выборы или чиновники" [The LGBT theme is no less problematic than the themes of elections or officials], Gerasimenko (2021) concludes. Further evidence of the Russian authorities' increasing intolerance of LGBTQ+ themes in films and television programmes came on November 11, 2021, when the Federal Service for the Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor), the Russian federal executive agency responsible for monitoring, controlling, and censoring Russian mass media, announced a proposal to prohibit the showing of films and TV series that feature same-sex relationships and scenes of "сексуальные девиации" [sexual deviations] on Russian online cinema platforms, which, being outside the state financing system, have thus far escaped the scrutiny accorded to cinemas and television (Shapatina 2021).<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it was only in 2019 that Russia's then Culture Minister, Vladimir Medinskii, had told Khrzhanovskii that any DAU film that had not been given a cinema distribution licence "на интернет-ресурсах [...] может, наверное, демонстрироваться с соответствующими предупреждениями" [can probably be shown on Internet platforms with appropriate warnings] (Kartsev et al. 2019).

Uspina has stressed – as she did with regard to the sex scene with Trifonov – that the story of her relationship with Tanya is "больше придуманная, чем реальная" [more invented than real] (Melikova 2020a). Oertel has clarified this, stating that "[t]he relationship happened, but it was not a sexual lesbian relationship" (Morley 2022). The question therefore arises as to why the filmmakers chose to represent the women's relationship as explicitly sexual. Would it not have been more 'authentic' and closer to the truth of 'real' life to have represented it as platonic? Oertel (Morley 2022) offers the explanation that "[s]ex is just a way to explain feelings when you can't find words for this", while Khrzhanovskii insists that "*DAU. Katya Tanya* is a story not about lesbian sex but about loneliness." In it sex is "a tool" that enables

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affirming lesbian identity, which largely revolve around the concept of specific forms of visibility (such as Gay Pride and the practice of publicly "coming out"), and the Russian approach, in which "queer visibility does not seem to be a useful tool to gain societal acceptance", see Neufeld and Wiedlack (2020: 54). For more on the history of LGBTQ representation in Russian and Soviet cinema, see Stasya Korotkova's Instagram-based project [Kvir-ekran / Queer Screen](#), which catalogues "Russian and Soviet films that either deal with the topic of non-normative sexuality and gender expression, or have a certain subtle touch of queer sensuality" (Fedorova 2020). See also Majsova (2017), Baer (2011), and Schuckman (2008).

<sup>45</sup> On the festival's difficult history, see Side by Side International Film Festival (2020).

<sup>46</sup> Gerasimenko (2021) also quotes Iuliana Koshkina, a scriptwriter and former teacher at the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK): "Да у нас цензура на реальность. На реальную жизнь [...] Подросток, влюбленный в друга отца? Никогда. Молодые радикальные группировки? Ни за что. Главная героиня наркоманка и лесбиянка? А что с ней такого случилось, что она превратилась в лесбиянку? – пересказывает Кошкина вопросы продюсеров." [Yes, reality – real life – is censored here in Russia. A (male) teenager in love with his father's (male) friend? Never. Young radical groups? No way. A main protagonist who's a drug addict and a lesbian? What happened to her to turn her into a lesbian? – Koshkina recounts producers' questions.]

<sup>47</sup> For responses to this move from the directors Andrei Fenochka, Ivan Tverdovskii, and Kseniia Ratushnaia and the film critics Vasilii Koretskii and Mariia Kuvshinova, see Shapatina (2021).

the protagonists to protect themselves “from loneliness and violence, from this atmosphere, body and soul”. In this case, he stresses, “sex has no gender, so it can just as well be lesbian sex” (Zvonkine 2022).

These responses still leave the viewer wondering why the filmmakers chose this approach, however. Why stage a lesbian relationship to express these concerns? There are several possible answers to this question, beyond those suggested by Khrzhanovskiy and Oertel themselves. In the context of Russia’s censorship of LGBTQ+ themes, are the lesbian sequences intended to provoke and to shock, an example of what Tonet and Salino (2019) term the “*démesure*” [excess] of the DAU project, in which “[t]out, ou presque, [...] sort des normes” [everything, or almost everything, [...] breaks the norms]? Or, might they be a way of attracting more viewers to pay the requisite \$3 to watch the film on the DAU Cinema platform? Do they – like the two-minute lesbian sex scene in Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* (2010, United States) – function as “the ‘spice’ that will transform the film into a more sellable commodity”? (Hubbard 2016: 87). In this connection, comments made by Natalie Portman, the star of *Black Swan*, are interesting: “Everyone was so worried about who was going to want to see this movie... I remember them being like, ‘How do you get guys to a ballet movie? How do you get girls to a thriller?’ And the answer is a lesbian scene.... Everyone wants to see that.” (Hubbard 2016: 86). Maybe, therefore, they served to broaden the audience appeal of this film “для девочек” [for girls], as Uspina described it (Melikova 2020a). Or perhaps the sequences represent the fulfilment of one of Khrzhanovskiy’s fantasies? Recall that his favourite line of questioning, when interviewing young women for roles on the project, was apparently to enquire whether they would sleep with other women (Idov 2011).

These suggestions are perhaps overly cynical, however. It could also be that this long sequence is an attempt by the filmmakers to normalise the cinematic representation of lesbian relationships. Bryukhovetska (2020) has argued that in its approach to the representation of sex, DAU adheres to the logic of what Linda Williams (1999) termed “on/scenity”. In contrast to the logic of obscenity, which sees sex as “a private matter” and demands that “we keep the genitalia and sexual acts hidden”, on/scenity rejects the idea that sex is “private” and instead sees “physical explicitness [and] transgressive behaviour (sexual or violent) [...] simply as facets of human experience” (Bryukhovetska 2020). In an article that set out “to review the place of moving-image sex” in the light of the American reception of three sexually explicit films, which all premiered at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, Williams (2014: 10) returned to this question, wondering (and paraphrasing, as she did so, a question posed, in the same context, by Richard Corliss (2013), the longtime film critic for *Time* magazine who often wrote about the need for more and better sex in cinema): “since sex exists in life, then why not, proportionally so, in movies?”. Indeed, Khrzhanivskiy has expressed a similar belief, noting, in his interview with the Ukrainian journalist Dmitrii Gordon (2020: 1:18:41-1:18-45), who participated in DAU as a brigade commander: “мы снимали все стороны жизни, и секс тоже” [we filmed all sides of life, and sex as well]. *DAU. Katya Tanya* perhaps includes lesbian sex, therefore, simply because it is part of life, in the same way that heterosexual and gay male sex are.

This reading is encouraged by the fact that the first sex scene between Katya and Tanya (1:13:00-1:18:06) does initially suggest the filmmakers’ desire to develop the representation of the female gaze begun in the encounter between Katya, Dau, and Nora, for it starts with a lengthy sequence that emphasises the women’s emotional intimacy, conveyed through words, looks, and touch: as the two women sit face to face in the library, looking frequently into the other’s eyes, Tanya confides in Katya about her fears that she is failing her daughter and her feelings of guilt. Katya listens and offers reassuring words and physical comfort, clasping Tanya’s hands, stroking her hair, wiping tears away from her face, and finally holding her in



an embrace that lasts over two and a half minutes (1:13:00-1:15:42).<sup>48</sup> Then, the two women begin to kiss (1:15:43-1:16:21) and, after a cut, we find them, partially naked, in Katya's bedroom.

From this point on (1:16:22-1:18:06), the sequence does not entirely succeed in avoiding many of the narrative and visual clichés associated with the cinematic representation of lesbian sex scenes. For example, in narrative terms, the women's sexual relationship comes from nowhere, replicating the cinematic cliché of "sudden-onset homosexuality" (Nicholson 2013). This could, of course, be a result of the project's unusual approach to filming. As Oertel (Morley 2022) explains, when discussing the film's representation of the women's relationship:

this was the only way to tell the story in *Katya Tanya* the way we wanted to, because when you shoot as we shot, then you always have the risk that things happen between characters when the camera is not there, so you are not filming and you just lose things. And you can't repeat them. So sometimes things happen in the relationship with two people and you were not there, you haven't seen or shot this on camera. Then that means that you can't cut this together, because there's a big part in between that is missing. And with *Katya Tanya* there were a lot of bits that happened where we just couldn't make it, you know, or film these bits. [...] And then you're confronted with the fact that something has changed and you have to find a way round this. You have to find a cinematic way to tell the viewer about this.

For viewers unaware of this context and these challenges, however, the women's relationship comes across as rushed – Bittencourt (2020b) describes it as "a half-baked after-thought", for example. It also pairs two "acceptably feminine, conventionally attractive" women, frequently a means of ensuring (as in *Black Swan*) that lesbian sequences are "titillating for the kind of heterosexual male gaze that fantasises about (a stereotypical kind of) lesbian sex." (Hubbard 2016: 87). The kind of viewer, in other words, who might ask, as the security officer asks Katya when he brings her in for questioning: "Кто доминирует у вас? Таня или кто?" [Who dominates in your relationship? Tanya, or who?] (1:25:24-1:25:29). The representation of their love making is also problematic in both visual and formal terms, for the choppy editing and regular cuts draw attention to themselves and create the impression that the filmmakers are striving to offer the viewer an ostentatious compendium of as many different sexual positions and acts as they can think of: cunnilingus, performed by Katya (1:16:39-1:16:50); genital rubbing in the missionary position (1:17:00-1:17:04); breast and nipple play (1:17:06-1:17:12); cunnilingus, in a different position and performed by Tanya (1:17:17-1:17:33); manual penetration, performed first by Katya (1:17:38-1:17:51) and then, in a different position, by

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<sup>48</sup> This brief conversation ensures that *DAU. Katya Tanya* does pass the Bechdel Test (that is, it features at least two women, both of whom are named, and who talk to each other about something besides a man), but only just, for Tanya's separation from her husband and its impact on their daughter is the main topic here. Their later conversations are even briefer, but do focus on their relationship and their feelings for each other. This film points to the inherent and well-documented flaws in using this test to assess a film's commitment to telling women's stories in depth, for it does not take account of the cinematic ways in which *DAU. Katya Tanya* does this. It is also worth noting that, by their very nature, lesbian-themed films automatically pass the Bechdel Test; indeed, the Test derived from a 1985 comic strip by Alison Bechdel, in which one lesbian tells another that she has devised a rule to help her decide whether or not to bother watching a film (Caplan 2021). *DAU. Katya Tanya* also passes the Vito Russo Test, which addresses LGBTQ visibility, according to which a film must feature a protagonist who is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender and this protagonist must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity, but must display the same sort of unique character traits commonly used to differentiate straight characters from one another. The LGBTQ character must also be present in the film's larger plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect; they must not be just a colourful secondary protagonist: they must 'matter' (GLAAD 2019).

Tanya (1:17:52-1:18:02); finally, more cunnilingus, in another new position, performed by Katya.<sup>49</sup> For all these reasons, this sequence reads, if not as a “collapse into the pornographic” (Williams 1991: 285), then, at least in part, as lesbian sex as spectacle seen through and for the male gaze. In this it recalls, in some respects, the lengthy and explicit sex sequences in Abdellatif Kechiche’s controversial, Palme-winning, 18+-rated film *La Vie d’Adèle: Chapitres 1 & 2 / Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013, France, Belgium, Spain), which Julie Maroh (2013), the lesbian writer-illustrator of the graphic novel on which it was based, described as offering “un étalage brutal et chirurgical, démonstratif et froid de sexe dit lesbien” [a brutal and surgical display, exuberant and cold, of so-called lesbian sex], which was not only unconvincing for lesbian viewers, but also appeared ridiculous, as if inspired by “un porn dit lesbien” [so-called lesbian porn]. She also criticised the fact that neither of the actresses were lesbians.<sup>50</sup>

It is striking, however, that in this sex scene, which I count as starting from the point at which they begin to kiss, more screen time is given to the women’s emotional intimacy (1:13:00-1:15:42 – two minutes 42 seconds) than to their sexual intimacy (1:15:43-1:18:06 – two minutes 23 seconds). Moreover, unlike in the sequence with Trifonov, the camera does not fragment the women’s bodies with close-ups; rather, it frames them as a couple in medium close-up, ensuring that both women’s face and body are visible. In this way, the focus is on their mutual pleasure. No force is used by either woman and neither is silenced in the brutal way that Trifonov silenced Katya, by placing his hand over her face. On the contrary, they communicate and express their pleasure noisily (although this could, perhaps, be read as part of the sequence’s ostentation). There are also moments of hesitancy and clumsiness in their encounter, which lend it an authentic feel and create realistic moments of humour. For example, as the women move down the bed in an attempt to find a comfortable position, Tanya bangs her head on the wall and they both laugh. This is not, then, presented as a well-rehearsed performance. Thus, despite the intrusive editing, the sequence does succeed in persuading the viewer that this is sex ‘as it could be’ during a first encounter between two women who are, we sense, both anxious that they might be overheard and, at the same time, exhilarated by the novelty of this experience. While it does not entirely succeed in presenting Katya and Tanya’s encounter from the perspective of a female gaze, therefore, this sequence does include some elements that might be felt to be characteristic of such a look, representing sex as being about the mutual pleasure of two active and equal subjects – emphasised by the way in which the women both give and receive pleasure equally – neither of whom is objectified either by the

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<sup>49</sup> I stress that it is the editing that creates this impression, as I do not intend to suggest that the participants were told by the directors to include these specific actions or positions in this sequence. While neither Uspina or Polozhy have spoken about how their sex scenes were directed, Olga Shkabarnya has done so. When asked by Kseniia Sochak (2020: 1:08:36-1:09:33) whether Khrzhanovskiy ever forced her to take part in sex scenes against her will or told her to behave in a certain way during them (for example, Sobchak asks, was she ever told “ты должна сделать это сзади, потом спереди, потом боком” [you must do it from behind, then from the front, then sideways]), Shkabarnya replied with a definite no, before going on to note that the only question he ever asked her was “Хочешь секс?” [Do you want sex?] and, while her answer was often affirmative, if it was ever negative her response was respected; she did not have sex and nobody tried to force her to do so.

<sup>50</sup> Kechiche’s film was screened in Russia (under the title *Zhizn’ Adel’*) at the 2013 Side by Side LGBT International Film Festival, where it was awarded the Best Feature prize. Like Khrzhanovskiy, Kechiche has been accused of abusive working methods, but in his case the accusations were made by the actresses Adèle Exarchopoulos and Léa Seydoux, who played Adèle and Emma, respectively. Both women have said that they will never work with Kechiche again, with Seydoux stating that she felt “like a prostitute” while shooting the film’s explicit sex scenes (Aftab 2019). Unlike Uspina and Polozhy in *DAU. Katya Tanya*, Exarchopoulos and Seydoux wore “fake vulvas” during the sex scenes (Rose 2018). For Kechiche’s response to these accusations, see Kechiche (2016). For a summary of the controversy that continues to surround Kechiche’s film and a balanced, perceptive analysis of the film’s affective or implicit representation of lesbian desire (often overlooked in critical responses, which are generally preoccupied with the explicit sex sequences), which challenges the definitional hold that sex has on the filmic construction of lesbian identity, see Bradbury-Rance (2019: 97-120).

other or (at least not always) by the camera. Daria Ezerova (2020: 0:55.45-0:55:51) seems to reach the same conclusion, when she describes *DAU. Katya Tanya* as having a “slightly... kind of... pornographic angle, but more leaning not towards pornography”. This view is also implicitly expressed by a lesbian viewer who, Uspina recounts (Melikova 2020a), wrote to her to say that she agreed with Khrzhanovskiy’s assessment that “секс в этой картине недожат” [sex in this film is understated], on the grounds that “ее секс не возбудил” [she was not aroused by the sex]. As Uspina puts it, “мне кажется, секс на «Дау» — это не про «Порнхаб». Этот секс в принципе не должен возбуждать. Если не возбудилась, значит, снято хорошо” [it seems to me that sex in DAU is not ‘PornHub’. This sex shouldn’t be a turn-on at all. If she wasn’t turned on, this means that it was shot well].

The question of whether this sequence can be read as privileging a lesbian gaze rather than, or at least as well as, a female gaze also arises. How to (and, again, whether one can) define a specifically lesbian gaze in film, at the level of form rather than narrative, has not always been considered in theoretical discussions of female spectatorship. The starting point for this discussion is usually seen as the debate between Jackie Stacey and Teresa de Lauretis in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>51</sup> In this connection, the question of whether *DAU. Katya Tanya* can be said to be a ‘lesbian film’ is also relevant.<sup>52</sup> Khrzhanovskiy (“It’s a film about loneliness” [Zvonkine 2022]) and Oertel (“It’s just a film about love. Or, no, a film about longing for love.” [Morley 2022]) have both said that it is not. But it has been described in Russian reviews as a “лесбийская мелодрама” [lesbian melodrama] (Sumarokov 2020) and an exploration of “бисексуальность” [bisexuality] (Shugaev 2020). Moreover, in another example of how, in *DAU*, “Придуманная реальность и реальность документальная не просто соседствуют, но буквально пропитывают друг друга. Объединяются на каком-то молекулярном уровне.” [Fictional reality and documentary reality do not just coexist, but literally impregnate each other. They unite on some molecular level.] (Marina Davydova, cited by Koretskii 2019), Uspina recounts an interesting inversion in some viewers’ reception of the film, according to which the invented, the staged, is in fact assumed to be ‘real’:

Сейчас я получаю какое-то количество фидбэка. Иногда это очень смешно. Мы говорим с вами о том, насколько это откровенно постановочный фильм по сравнению с другими фильмами. Я получила несколько лесбийских писем, в том числе с претензией: как так вышло, что я теперь замужем и у меня есть ребенок. То есть они задают мне вопросы на территории моей реальной жизни. [I am getting some feedback now. Sometimes it’s very funny. We’re talking about how obviously staged this film is by comparison with the other films. I received several lesbian letters, which included a complaint: how has it happened that I am now married and have a child? That is, they’re asking me questions about the territory of my real life.] (Melikova 2020a).

## **Katya and Tanya (II)**

The second sex scene between Katya and Tanya is qualitatively different from the first, although it begins in a similar way: first the two women sit together, then they kiss, then they begin to undress. Unlike in the first sequence, however, the women’s nudity is not emphasised (they remain clothed from the waist down), nor are the explicitly sexual parts of their bodies (the camera overwhelmingly focuses elsewhere, on their faces, their arms, their hands, their

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<sup>51</sup> For an overview of the arguments made by Stacey and de Lauretis, see Hollinger (1998: 3-6). For more recent discussions of the lesbian gaze, see Bradbury-Rance (2019: 121-139), Cairns (2006: 4-13), White (1999; 2008), and Evans and Gamman (1995).

<sup>52</sup> For discussion of the difficulty of defining what makes a film lesbian, see Bradbury-Rance (2019).

backs). While there is some explicit sexual contact between them (represented, again, as a mutual experience of both giving and taking), it is understated. Instead, the emphasis is on a different form of touch, one which foregrounds emotional comfort and tenderness, rather than sexual pleasure: the women hold each other's hands, for example, and the camera repeatedly frames this contact in close-up, offering an eloquent counterpart to the monstrous, steel hands that dominate the Institute, of which a seven-second insert shot (1:26:23-1:26:30) acts as a bridge between Katya's interrogation by the First Department and her final meeting with Tanya. The camera also focuses on capturing the way the women look and smile at each other.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the sequence concludes with a series of three silent, still, and long-lasting embraces (1:28:50-1:29:03; 1:29:04-1:29:24; 1:29:44-1:29:52). In this way, the explicit is never allowed to obscure the affective. Perhaps this is the essence of the female, and/or the lesbian, gaze?

## **Conclusion: From Stalin's Soviet Union to Putin's Russia**

Early the next morning, the camera follows Katya and Tanya as they walk arm-in-arm along one of the Institute's walkways, enjoying a cigarette. "Какой чудесный день, да?" [Such a wonderful day, isn't it?], whispers Katya. "Чудеснейший день" [The most wonderful day], Tanya replies (1:30:20-1:30:26). Before this most wonderful day is over, Tanya will be dead and Katya will find her, hanged.<sup>54</sup>

Asked in an interview (Melikova 2020b) why the decision – which Oertel (Morley 2022) confirms was Khrzhanovskiy's – was taken to conclude the film with Tanya's death by hanging, Tatiana Polozhy explains: "Мы подумали, что в сложившейся ситуации это был бы самый логичный вариант выхода из нее." [We thought that, in these circumstances, this would be the most logical way out]. Whether Tanya hangs herself or is hanged by the First Department is, in my view, ambiguous. Ultimately, however, whether her death is suicide or murder does not alter the fact that through it the film provides a brutally sobering reminder of the difficulties faced by women in same-sex relationships in the Soviet Union in the year of Stalin's death, when, as Francesca Stella (2015: 30) notes: "Both male and female same-sex sexualities transgressed the Soviet gender order and were stigmatised as deviant and perverted." Uladzimir Valodzin (2020: 11) has calculated that between 1946 and 1991 a total of 38,006 people were convicted under Article 121 of the USSR Criminal Code,<sup>55</sup> which made *muzhelozhstvo* – a very precise term meaning "anal sex between men" (Valodzin 2020: 1) – a criminal offence.<sup>56</sup> He has also found archival evidence that shows that very occasionally

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<sup>53</sup> For a recent film that sets out to represent lesbian intimacy without pandering to titillating cinematic conventions and the male gaze, see *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu / Portrait of a Young Lady on Fire* (2019, France), written and directed by the noted lesbian filmmaker Céline Sciamma, who has described it as "'a manifesto about the female gaze,' as a way to produce 'new narratives' that challenge th[e] [patriarchal] power structure" (Larkin 2020).

<sup>54</sup> The film's fictional ending explains a real-life detail mentioned in accounts of the set up in 100 Piccadilly, the DAU project's London office where the films were edited: in a room visible from the street, a silicone mannequin, dressed in a navy blue uniform, could be seen "hanging by its neck from a noose attached to a ceiling light fitting" (Meek 2015). It apparently caused several distraught passers-by to call the police (Tonet and Salino 2019). In the light both of what Oertel says (Morley 2022) about the profound emotional significance that this fictional event had for Polozhy, who was required to perform her own death by hanging (and, moreover, to do so twice, given that the sequence had to be re-shot) and of Uspina's account (Melikova 2020a) – cited at the end of this article – of the impact that stumbling upon the staged hanging without warning had on her, the inclusion of this mannequin shocks and appears cavalier.

<sup>55</sup> As Roldugina (2021: 247) explains, "Article 121 was numbered differently in the criminal codes of the various Soviet republics. From 1934 to 1960, it was Article 154-a in the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (the Russian Republic). In 1960, when a new Code was adopted, the number was changed to 121."

<sup>56</sup> A recent Russian film that addresses this subject is Kseniia Ratushnaia's *Autlo / Outlaw* (2019, Russia), in which one of the film's two plotlines, set during the late Soviet era, follows a General who begins a relationship

women were prosecuted for *muzhelozhstvo*: in 1951 two women were sentenced for this in the USSR and in 1955 one woman was sentenced in Ukraine. He speculates, however, that they were likely “prosecuted as accomplices of a crime” (2020: 3).

Unlike male homosexuality, female homosexuality was not criminalised in the Soviet Union, although women were prosecuted for same-sex “seduction of minors” (girls aged seventeen and below) (Healey 2001a: 225-227). Valodzin has also shown that the Soviet authorities would sometimes try to find ways to prosecute women who engaged in lesbian sex in private apartments, for example by charging the apartment owner with “keeping a den of debauchery” (Valodzin 2020: 5-6). The film’s dialogue perhaps hints at this, for the security officer describes Katya as a “преступница” [criminal] (1:25:44-1:25:46), orders that she and Tanya cease their “разврат” [debauchery] (1:24:47), and threatens to send Katya to a women’s penal colony if they do not. In fact, however, in the 1950s, lesbianism was treated as a mental illness rather than as a crime. As Dan Healey (2001a: 240) has detailed, after 1953 lesbians found themselves subject to a “second wave of medicalization” (with the first having occurred in the 1920s [Healey 2001b]) and it became increasingly common to find discussion of medical and psychiatric ‘cures’, such as “forced hospitalisation, the use of psychiatric drugs and psychological therapy” (Stella 2015: 31).<sup>57</sup>

It is, however, impossible not to interpret the film’s ending as also commenting on the contemporary “circumstances” of Putin’s Russia. After all, not only has it long been commonplace to observe that historical representation in films is “a useful device to speak of the present time” (Sorlin 1980: 208), but Khrzhanovskiy has repeatedly stressed this as one of his main intentions in DAU. In a 2019 interview, he commented that “DAU was less about recreating Soviet conditions than examining the present day” (Rose 2019). Similarly, addressing the oft-reported fact that DAU started out as a conventional biopic of Lev Landau, he observed: “I must say that the film was never just a biopic. From the very beginning I intended this to be a film about today; we would just use a different time – in this case the past – as an opportunity to talk about the problems of the present day more freely.” (Cronk 2020). Alongside this, he has explained that what initially drew him to the life of Lev Landau, as described in Kora Landau-Drobantseva’s memoirs, was “the fact that it covered freedom and happiness – trying to be free and happy in an unfree country.” (Cronk 2020). Katya and Tanya’s doomed relationship, their harrassment at the hands of the First Department, and the film’s distressing ending are also, therefore, stark reminders of the lack of freedom in today’s Russia, not only for women in general, but especially for women in lesbian relationships.<sup>58</sup> Some recent, non-exhaustive, examples: in December 2013, the Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen, who now identifies as non-binary and trans, felt obliged to leave Russia for the United States, with their partner and their three children, after several prominent Russian politicians began talking about the need to remove children from same-sex families (Gessen 2013). Since February 2019, the feminist artist and LGBT+ campaigner Iuliia Tsvetkova has been subjected to aggressive house searches, a lengthy period of house arrest (from November 2019 to March 2020), and has twice been charged with “the production and dissemination of pornographic materials”, which carries a sentence of up to six years in prison. Her crimes were to produce a series of body-positive drawings titled “Zhenshchina ne kukla” / “A Woman Is Not a Doll”

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with Nina, a cross-dressing stage performer, for which he is, ultimately, incarcerated in what appears to be a mental institution. For analysis of *Autlo*, see Garifullina (2021) and Belikov (2020b).

<sup>57</sup> See also Healey (2001a: 244), Sperling (2015: 72), Mole (2019: 4), and Alexander (2021: 12-13). Drawing on previously unstudied archival documents, Alexander (2021: 40-43; 44-45) also discusses non-medical approaches to eradicating lesbianism that were proposed in the late 1950s.

<sup>58</sup> For discussion of the continuing relevance of the project’s broad themes, see the comments made by Zoya Popova, an assistant director for special projects at the DAU project between late 2009 and October 2013, first on set in Kharkiv and then in post-production in London, in Schulzki (2022).

(2019), which make the simple point that women come in all shapes and sizes, and to share on social media a drawing – in support of a same-sex family who, like Gessen’s, left Russia because the authorities had threatened to remove their children – which was captioned “Семья там, где любовь. Поддержите ЛГБТ+ семьи!” [A family is wherever there is love. Support LGBT+ families!] (Cascone 2021). Tsvetkova’s trial is being held in a closed court and as I write, in early February 2022, it has still not been concluded, more than three years after it began (Serenko and Shmyreva 2022).<sup>59</sup> More recently, in August 2021, a lesbian couple and their family were forced to leave Russia for Spain after their appearance in a supermarket advert caused a national scandal, resulting in a public apology from the supermarket, online abuse and death threats directed at the family, and a hastily assembled replacement advert featuring a heterosexual family (Roth 2021).<sup>60</sup>

In ending as it does, *DAU. Katya Tanya* therefore makes clear what the French director Catherine Breillat has expressed thus: “A *morality* that needs guard dogs is not a moral code but an oppression.” (cited and translated by Ince 2017: 162; emphasis in original). And, as Artur Sumarokov (2020) has observed in a review of the film: “В тоталитарной советской системе, которая в ДАУ все же искорежена признаками современности, по умолчанию невозможно быть Другим, наказание неизбежно.” [In the totalitarian Soviet system, which in DAU is nevertheless distorted by signs of modernity, it is by default impossible to be the Other; punishment is inevitable.] However, in the context of a film that strives to represent the subjectivity of its female protagonist in all the different formal and narrative ways that I have identified, the punitive ending is all the more shocking, for it sends the message that there is no possibility of change and, ultimately, no room for the active, self-sufficient female subject. Katya – whom we have come to know as a strong and independent woman – ends the film in the same state as she had ended the prologue: catatonic with grief over the violent loss of a person she loved and literally folded up into herself. This time, however, she is observed by a distanced, indifferent camera.

Moreover, in removing Tanya and, therefore, the possibility of love between two women, the film ultimately denies the possibility of overthrowing the dominant patriarchal structure of the DAU universe. The French filmmaker Céline Sciamma has argued that “[lesbian] stories are really dangerous for patriarchy” (VanDerWerff 2020), hence the prevalence in film and television of “dead lesbian syndrome”, the trope of killing off one half of a lesbian couple (Guerrero-Pico, et al. 2018; Millward et al. 2017). Thus, even though Khrzhanovskiy and Oertel do strive to create space in DAU for the expression of a female subjectivity, the ending of the film in which they set out to do this undermines these aspirations, offering instead a symbolic reassertion of the patriarchal status quo. This is borne out by the fact that Katya’s next relationship – explored in the film *DAU. Teoriia strun*, for which the footage was filmed concurrently with and just after that used in *DAU. Katya Tanya* (Melikova 2020a) – is heterosexual; she embarks on an ill-fated affair with the theoretical physicist Nikita Nekrasov, a married man as obsessed with polyamory as Dau is, and who – as another Katya (Oertel, in her role of Krupitsa’s widow) bluntly points out – causes Katya (Uspina) further

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<sup>59</sup> In February 2020, Tsvetkova was recognised as a political prisoner by The Memorial Human Rights Centre (Memorial 2020), Russia’s oldest and most significant human rights group. For a detailed account of what Tsvetkova has experienced over the last three years, compiled by the feminist poetess Dar’ia Serenko and the activist Kira Shmyreva, see Serenko and Shmyreva (2022).

<sup>60</sup> While the supermarket’s actions were criticised as cowardly and hypocritical by some people on Russian social media, throughout the debate there was hardly any mention of the difficulties that same-sex couples in Russia actually face, which led *Meduza* (Sivtsova 2021) to publish a long interview with two Russian women who are raising a child together, in which they talk powerfully about what it is like to live in a country where portrayals of families with same-sex parents are considered offensive.

suffering, first through his womanising and then through his callous rejection of her (2:27:46-2:29:18).

The ending of *DAU. Katya Tanya* therefore reminds the viewer of what Shibarov's set design makes abundantly clear: that the DAU universe is, ultimately, a space that has the power to reduce women to lifeless objects. As Shibarov (Murawski 2022b) puts it:

it's really a concrete fertile terrain, it doesn't really give birth to anything, it's a dead end. [...] [It's like] having sexual desire for a stone palaeolithic woman [...]. All the distinguishing features of fertility are there; but these features do not constitute a living, quivering body which is in front of you and in which you can delight, love. It's a stone woman, it's a bundle of features.

Small wonder, then, that Uspina – who, as we have seen, frequently allowed her personal reactions to events and people to seep into the film, despite her awareness of its status as a staged art work – decided that it was time for her to leave the DAU project on the very same morning that the sequence in which she discovered Tanya's body was filmed (Melikova 2020a), on the basis that:

[К]огда я увидела висящую Таню, я поверила на секунду. Я никогда не видела самоубийств, не видела мертвых тел, оно было сделано так натурально. И я не видела камер. Не видела Первого отдела. Они были сзади меня. То есть эта секунда... Конечно, я почти сразу поняла, что это постановочный кадр. Но в этот момент я почувствовала, что я не так уж и хорошо разделяю, раз на секунду поверила. А раз я не смогла разделить, значит, мне пора уходить. Потому что, когда ты перестаешь разделять эти два мира и разделять себя, думаю, это может стать опасной территорией [...] [П]осле эпизода с Таней это уже не было вопросом выбора. Это было очевидно. Я поняла, что я могу себе сильно навредить. [(W)hen I saw Tanya hanging, I believed for a second. I've never seen a suicide, never seen a dead body, it had been done so naturally. And I didn't see the cameras. Didn't see the First Department. They were behind me. So, for this second... Of course, I realised almost immediately that it was a staged shot. But at that moment I felt that I hadn't done a very good job of keeping things separate, because for a second I'd believed. And since I hadn't been able to keep them separate, that meant that it was time for me to leave. Because when you stop separating these two worlds and separating yourself, I think that it can become dangerous territory. [...] [A]fter the episode with Tanya, it was no longer a matter of choice. It was obvious. I realised that I could do a lot of damage to myself.]

As Oertel put it, when describing the interplay of the 'real' and the fictional in *DAU. Natasha* and its impact on Natalia Berezhnaya: "Le dispositif est fictionnel, mais son voyage émotionnel est aussi réel qu'il peut l'être." [The environment is fictional, but her emotional journey is as real as it gets.] (France24 2020). While Katya and Tanya's emotional journeys ended badly, therefore, we should be relieved that, by their own accounts, Uspina and Polozhy's did not.

Rachel Morley  
University College London`  
School of Slavonic and East European Studies  
[rachel.morley@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:rachel.morley@ucl.ac.uk)

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## Bio

[Rachel Morley](#) is Associate Professor of Russian Cinema and Culture at University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL SSEES) and Co-Chair (with Philip Cavendish) of the [UCL SSEES Russian Cinema Research Group](#). Rachel's teaching and research interests span the entire history of Russian cinema, from the 1890s to the present, with particular focus on issues connected with gender, sexuality, and identity and their expression through cinematic form. She is the author of *Performing Femininity: Woman as Performer in Early Russian Cinema* (2017), forthcoming in Russian from Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie (NLO) in 2023. Other recent publications include a chapter (co-written with Serian Carlyle) on the representation of abortion in Soviet cinema; an article on the construction of Sakha identity and culture in Siuzanna Oorzhak's 2011 film *Pokidaia blagoukhaiushchuiu gavan' / Leaving Hong Kong* (*KinoKultura* Special Issue 19, *Sakha Cinema*, 2022); and "From Soviet Hairstyles to Contemporary Gender Politics: An Interview with Jekaterina Oertel, Head of Make-up and Hair Design, Participant, Co-Director, and Editor on the DAU Project", which also appears in this issue of *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*. Rachel's current research project – of which this article is part – examines the representation of female subjectivity in contemporary Russian women's cinema and is funded by a two-year Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship (2020-2022).

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