

Interview with Vassily Sigarev and Yana Troyanova, 6th November 2012-11-29

Participants:

Samantha Sherry: Project Assistant, Princess Dashkova Russian Centre, University of Edinburgh

Vassily Sigarev: dramatist, film director

Yana Troyanova: actress

Samantha Sherry: Vassily Sigarev and Yana Troyanova. I would like firstly to welcome you to Edinburgh, to the Russian film festival and, secondly, thank you very much for speaking to us about the film 'Living', which is being shown tonight at the Filmhouse cinema here in Edinburgh.

Vassily, in 'Living', there are three intertwined stories. Why did you choose three different stories, and how did you decide on these three stories specifically?

Vassily Sigarev: It seemed to come to me almost by chance and then it became clear that there were three possible kinds of love being described in them: love for one's children, love between a man and woman and love for one's parents. I didn't really do it consciously, but it became clear later when I read over the script.

SS: You have said that you started to write a script about the apocalypse, and then changed your mind. Why did you change your mind?

VS: Well, the story itself sort of changed its mind; it wanted to be about a personal apocalypse.

SS: The film is called 'Living', but it seems that death is the main theme of the three stories; do you think you have made an optimistic film or a pessimistic one?

VS: Well, it really is what the viewer makes of it. One viewer might see it as pessimistic; another might see it as optimistic. For me it's optimistic.

SS: You say a lot about family in the film, about the loss of someone close and, it might be said, about the spiritual life of a person. Does the film have a more global theme, and is there, perhaps a social or humanistic point of view in the film?

VS: There is a kind of 'official' theme: that is the attitude to death in society is homogenous, especially in cinema. That is, when a death is shown, it is always so easy, and no-one pays any attention to it. That is, a person is killed, but five minutes later the viewer remembers nothing about it. And we wanted to show, the 'greatness' of death, as it were, and from that show the greatness of life, because life is an enormous treasure.

SS: How important are social themes for you?

VS: In this case, there aren't really social themes, those that deal with things that are happening in Russia, because it's not important here, and I didn't want to make social cinema at all.

SS: Do you think that social viewpoints are important to Russian filmmakers in general?

VS: Recently, everything, especially documentary film suffers from this social subtext. But really, I got tired, to be honest, with everything 'social' and wanted to work in a kind of ancient Greek genre. They are all quite petty, these social problems; they change and flow and, in principle, have nothing to do with eternity. And I wanted to say something eternal.

SS: The film has already been shown at festivals in Rotterdam and London. How, in your opinion, do foreign viewers relate to a story about typical Russian people. Do they understand it correctly or not?

VS: I think they understand the story correctly, but they don't understand it fully, because we perceive grief and everything associated with it differently. So I have a feeling that this is cinema not for foreigners, but for Russians.

SS: How important are foreign viewers to you?

VS: In general, what is important for me is a viewer who understands. If they don't understand, then, we probably live in different worlds.

SS: And how important for you is the opinion of critics? Russian and foreign?

VS: There are critics whose opinion is important. I can't say anything about foreign critics, because don't even read what they say, linguistically it is impossible for me. But there are some Russian critics whose opinion is important. In general I am a little puzzled when critics become personalities. That is, if they are allowed to do that, then I'll be allowed to hit someone in face one day. [Laughter]

SS: Now I'd like to ask Yana a question. Yana, you came to the cinema from theatre. What differences are there between working in the theatre and in cinema?

Yana Troyanova: Well, I think that it seems to me that in principle there's no difference except the fact that I don't have a permanent ensemble. From the point of view of the artistic work, there is no difference. Because I work in 'auteur' film I can justifiably consider myself an actress who approaches a role artistically – it is very important, after all, to be an artist, albeit in a small way. But in theatre, I cannot live in an ensemble, in a large... Somehow I am not designed to live in a large family, and so in cinema I like that I arrive, give everything I can give from myself and leave again and then have some kind of break. I film very little – very little – and am very picky about roles because I think that one should not destroy creative work. And in theatre, of course, maybe there is more of that kind of work but the kind of cinema that I am in also has it.

SS: And how did you prepare for this role in 'Living'?

YT: You know, broadly, I don't really rehearse, don't prepare... It starts to live itself. You read the script, and you already, in principle, you are there or not. In his scripts, this is already the second, in fact the third, time that I have worked with him, with Vasya Sigarev. I immediately see myself and discover myself. All that's left is to take this person into you. So we always have a

long period of preparation, no less than a year. And during this year I gradually turn into the person that I am preparing ... preparing to live in his movie and, therefore, it's not rehearsal, but the most creative moment. On the set you give out all that you took in.

SS: Is it difficult playing this kind of role, from a psychological point of view?

YT: Yes, it's true, it's very difficult. I am exhausted afterwards. In fact, all the more so, since I had get myself into a particular 'state'. Sometimes, even Vasya remarked a couple of times that I wasn't there, and I had to leave the whole group and look for that state, you know? A state where there was complete solitude, where the world was there and wasn't there, where you shout and no-one hears. You know? In other words, where you're going you're completely alone. It's a very frightening state, and it's through that that I created this role and, of course, it took a very long time to recover afterwards.

SS: And how do you relax after that?

YT: You know it's sort of... Again you need to go back into the solitude. An everyday kind of solitude of course, but you have to be in contact with people as little as possible. For me at least, I noticed that I didn't have the strength to communicate. And so you close up and recover; it even becomes physiological: you start to fill out, first physically and then somehow spiritually. It is an absolute devastation. So you need to be alone for a little longer, but in a domestic environment, so you can understand that it's all finished. Everything's normal. You can calm down. You see? And then bit-by-bit you start to move on to the next role, though it is better, actually, to spend a longer time not filming

SS: Tell me; is it difficult to work with your husband?

YT: Yes, you know, it's interesting working with him. That's the most important thing. It's difficult of course, but nothing is easy. He writes the truth, there are real people in his work, you know? That is, it's not just some character you have to portray; you have to live through a whole destiny. Of course it's definitely difficult, but it's incredibly interesting. You have to do what's interesting in your profession, just as in your interaction with people and in life, don't you? Everything has to be interesting. That's the point of everything: art, and love, to be interesting.

SS: What do you have in common with your heroines? Is there anything?

YT: Yes... the ability to love, right? Not everyone has it. So, let's say, there was the heroine in 'Wolfy', another of Vassily Sigarev's films who wasn't able to love, wasn't there? Who was such a pure egoist, lived only for herself, for her own pleasure. And Grishka [in 'Living'] is very close to me, because of that ability to love and to genuinely suffer and even ... I really love the scene when goes up to the priest, and I would probably have gone up in just the same way. It's those kind of things: they're very subtle, but despite that they're the most important... She's a

recovered drug addict, and of course, I don't have all that. But the important thing is, of course, the ability to love.

SS: And now a question for Vassily: what are the main tendencies in Russian contemporary cinema? What are the main themes of Russian film?

VS: The main issue is learning how to film good mainstream films, so people can go not to Hollywood blockbusters, but to Russian blockbusters. We don't have that yet, and we need to do something about it, and perhaps we will have to have a hand in it, one day.

YT: Yes, we need to get the viewer back.

VS: Yes. That's it, in principle, I don't see anything special... What they call the new way, well, somehow it once put out some pretty one-note films and then everyone went into their own little burrows, in such a way that are no general tendencies really.

SS: What do you like in contemporary Russian or Western cinema? Who are your favourite directors?

VS: In the main, I can watch Hollywood cinema as long as it's well done. It's just that in the last ten years, I haven't seen any good scripts, even in Hollywood because it's all endless remakes and all kinds of stories that just repeat each other that we saw in the nineties. In the nineties the best stories were really effective: 'The Matrix', 'Terminator', but today there are no breakthroughs like that, ones that still stand up after many decades. Now, well, we'll see. Everything is advancing like a sine wave – there are rises and falls. So maybe in five years' time there will be another boom in screenplays. It's just the same in Russia. It's the biggest problem in Russian cinema at the moment, the fact that there are no screenplays; everyone complains about it.

SS: Yana, what are your favourite films, your favourite styles?

YT: You know, we watch everything really. Well, everything in good taste... We have... the mainstream in Russia is really bad right now, shameful even. We watch 'Avatar', we watch everything. All the same, I agree with Vasya, that films used to be better; I can rewatch old films, like those by Lars Von Trier, 'The Idiots' and 'Breaking the Waves', those kinds of movies. And the wonderful film 'Magnolia'? We recently met Petr Zelenka – a director from the Czech Republic – and just watched his film 'Buttoners'. And it turned out that he had made that film a long time ago, in 1997, and Magnolia actually comes later. And it's clear where Hollywood draws from, you know? It always draws upon auteur film. It's interesting to watch where such a powerful move as 'Magnolia' came from. Generally, I really like world auteur cinema.

VS: The one thing we can't stand is arthouse cinema.

YT: Because everything is so harsh.

VS: There's all kinds of things that they think up, I don't know what... A person eats themselves and that's it...

YT: Yes, you remember in 'My Skin', that film...

VS: Yes, somehow or other...

YT: She kept... 'Skin'! Or 'My Skin', no 'In My Skin'! She kept eating and eating... There are some strange Japanese films too, they're arthouse as well... They live like cockroaches...

VS: It's Korean.

YT: No, Japanese. It's where they live in little apartments in Japan, in Tokyo... 'Tokyo!' – that's what it's called. It's strange as well, they scare me to be honest... films like that scare me. So. We have such a powerful heritage, worldwide. And because of what's happening now, we want to rewatch what came before: there's so much of it...

SS: Vassily Sigarev and Yana Troyanova, thank you very much.