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Horror Cinema in Belarus: An Unlikely Case Study

Volha Isakava

"Why do you need our legends coming from the dirty minds of the savages?"

— *Savage Hunt of King Stakh*, 1980

"Belarus is not sexy." This is the title of a short essay that is also part of the script for the award-winning play *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker* by the founder of Belarus Free Theatre (BFT), Natalya Kolyada. BFT, now based in London, is a theatre of resistance in exile, known for its provocative and politically charged performances. Kolyada continues: "A country's sexiness is gas, oil, diamonds, access to seas and mountain ranges. Belarus is the only country in Europe that has no seas and no mountains. It is flat. It is attractive to no one, including its close neighbors […] To attract attention to your country it wouldn't hurt to have some mass killings. Like in Iraq, Rwanda, Libya, Tibet… It is so attractive to have a husband cut up his children, and roast them over the fire, and feed them piece by piece to his wife who has just given birth. And if she refuses, how about cutting her up across the fresh scars of a Caesarian and stuff those child pieces back into her womb, then sew it shut. Is that what the world expects? It does." (my translation from original Russian).

Belarus briefly seized international attention in August 2020 as millions of people poured into the streets to peacefully protest the fraudulent election of the dictator who has ruled the country since 1994. Protests were subsequently brutally suppressed with ordinary people sentenced to months and years—and activists to decades—in prison. Since Kolyada's piece appeared in 2011 many people in Belarus have been tortured and abused; a lot of people were imprisoned; a lot of people left; people died. This year (2023) the Nobel Prize went to a Belarusian activist, Ales' Bialiatski, in absentia, since he is serving a ten-year prison sentence. If you follow deep into the back pages of international news, you will find out more about Belarus: an Eastern European country whose leadership is in cahoots with the Russian regime and complicit in the war

in Ukraine; a country where government—metaphorically speaking—cuts up and roasts its children over the fire.

I want to tell you about horror cinema in Belarus, my home country. But I don't want to tell you that Belarus *is* horror. It is easy to imagine the entirety of Belarusian cultural production having a single-minded impetus of showcasing life in a repressive totalitarian state, be it through the rosy lens of official propaganda or the dark lens of underground resistance. What I want to tell you is how horror cinema invites us to imagine Belarus in an "unlikely" way. Let me explain the choice of the word "unlikely." One of the chief global cultural exports from Belarus is a post punk band *Molchat Doma* [Houses Are Silent]. A viral sensation with a meteoric rise to fame, the Minsk-based trio is the most listened to Russophone music group in the world today. For one of their first global appearances at a 2019 festival in Tallinn, Estonia, an arts digest publication wrote that "finding another world-class band from *so seemingly unlikely a country* brings even more of a pause for thought than seeing fighter planes at such close range" (Tyler 2019, my emphasis). The fighter planes in question are NATO forces, there to deter potential Russian aggression: their intrusive presence represents the dangers of having your home in imperial borderlands. In the public imagination Belarus is forever stuck between the Scilla of totalitarian regime at home and Charybdis of Russian colonialism that dates back centuries. Belarus is supposed to be voiceless like the silent houses: an unlikely home to anyone and an unlikely place for anything.

This essay presents a case study of three Belarusian horror films from a perspective of belonging, calling oneself Belarusian and calling Belarus home, but also, following Kolyada's inquiry, how this belonging is reconfigured by being "known" in the world. Belarusian horror films in this essay come from different eras and range from state-sponsored mainstream productions to underground cinema. What they all have in common is working with the notions of home and belonging in relationship to the hegemonic other. All three films have a basic premise of a foreign visitor coming to Belarus where horror ensues. All three films conceptualize "knowability" in the face of the other, and work with notions of omission, silence, and voicelessness. These themes of silence and omission are not unique to Belarusian horror: scholars who analyze cultural production by minoritized communities, including in postcolonial studies, identify employment of omissions and silences as a strategy to demarcate boundaries of what is knowable and accessible in the text to the cultural

outsider, and what is not meant to be known.[1] Through withholding knowledge and strategic deployment of omission, ranging from narrative and visual obfuscation to resisting normative prescription of what Belarusianness means, the films discussed below create different visions of home. More significantly, they also contemplate the stakes of such representation—what it takes and means to have one's own voice. I want to tell you about an unlikely vision of belonging that speaks at the heart of Belarusian horror cinema.

In what follows I examine three films: *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh*, a 1980 Soviet mystery drama; *Masakra*, a horror comedy from 2004, before the dictatorship took a more violent and repressive turn; and *Sasha's Hell,* an underground low budget production from 2019. Each of these films handles the themes of omission and belonging differently, representing an evolution of Belarusian Gothic horror as a vehicle for negotiating identity and home as complicated concepts. *The Hunt* follows traditional Gothic narrative tropes most faithfully and examines colonial erasure through visual techniques that create a world full of obfuscation and confusion, where truth remains hidden. *Masakra*, on the other hand, deconstructs Gothic tradition through carnivalesque means, affirming dissident tenets of Belarusian search for national identity, and championing colonial emancipation. Yet the film also points to the unresolved and silenced complexities of belonging in today's Belarus that do not fit easily into familiar categories of nationhood and homeland. Finally, *Sasha's Hell* is an experimental feature film that questions and brackets binary categorizations and meta-narratives of national identity and belonging. Instead the film centers everyday lives and spaces where national and social prescriptions, including those of the far reaching authoritarian regime, are no longer relevant or of interest to the filmmakers. Each film, working with the themes of voicelessness, suppression, and omission, gives us a complex vision of what it means to be Belarusian, what it means to belong, and to tell our stories in our own words.

[1] For an example of this scholarship see Clare Bradford's "Reading Indigeneity: The Ethics of Interpretation and Representation." Referencing the work by Patricia Linton (1999) Bradford writes: "…minority texts incorporate silences and omissions on certain topics and details, so constructing boundaries that alert cultural outsiders to their outsider position. In this way cultural outsiders are reminded that they are not entitled to understand all that there is to know of the worlds of these texts." (Bradford 2010, 334)

"Why do you need our legends coming from the dirty minds of the savages?": Gothic Horror in Soviet Belarus in Valery Rubinchik's *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (1980)

The Savage Hunt of King Stakh (*Dzikae paliavanne karalia Stakha*) is a late Soviet film directed by Valery Rubinchik, shot at Belarus' flagship studio Belarusfilm in 1980. It is an adaptation of an eponymous Gothic mystery novel published in Belarusian in 1964 by a celebrated Belarusian writer Uladzimer Karatkevich, who also wrote the script for the film. Set in the Belarusian provinces of the Russian empire at the turn of the 20th century, the film adopts a familiar trope of a metropolitan visitor coming to the backwater provinces at his own peril. The young folklorist, Andrei Belaretski (played by Boris Plotnikov), collects local legends and settles in the spooky mansion of Countess Yanouskaya (played by Elena Dimitrova), a fragile young woman in poor mental and physical health. It is revealed shortly after his arrival that Yanouskaya is expecting an imminent death from a century old curse of King Stakh. The curse is based on her forebearer's betrayal of a fictional king, a champion for regional independence. Because of that betrayal the ghost of Stakh and his "savage hunt" haunts the entire region. No one in Yanouskaya's family has died a natural death for generations, and she is the last of the line. The film is structured as a mystery-adventure like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) by Arthur Conan Doyle including similar plot twists. In the end it is revealed that the ghostly hunt was staged by Yanouskaya's legal guardian to drive her mad and to terrorize the people of the region so he could inherit her land with no consequence. *The Hunt* is much bleaker than *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: several secondary characters die before the truth is exposed, and the common people of the region bear the brunt of violence while the Russian imperial authorities look away.

The film presents a bleak world narratively and visually. It is shot in monochrome grey and brown colors to reflect the rainy autumn season on the Belarusian marshes. There are many long shots that linger on the foggy, empty countryside with sparse trees that mysteriously fall by themselves (figure 1, next page). Similarly morose are the inhabitants of that land, mostly impoverished peasants and their children who narrate the legend of King Stakh in tears. Yanouskaya's mansion is equally depressing. Presented in traditional Gothic form, the mansion is expansive, cold, and dark, with gloomy portraits of ancestors. The labyrinthian house is visibly decaying and is ready to give in to the dried out branches, dead moss and other vegetation that have made an incursion into the house. The dialogue in the film revolves obsessively around

the cursed hostile land, the vengeful ancestors, and death as deliverance from this nightmarish existence.

Figure 1. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik, 1980)

As if the colonial critique was not clear enough, the film also has a negative emphasis on the word "savage." The local nobility talks about the "savage minds" of the common folk, the imperial authorities about "savage customs" of revenge, and the peasants about the "savage hunt" as punishment for the sins of those who were supposed to be good stewards of the land. The hunt itself is staged as an eerie cavalcade of medieval knights straight out of the much mythologized Belarusian medieval state, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, before the Russian colonial conquest. They solemnly move through the marshes in search of revenge for their lost land, their eerie galloping heard off screen at various moments. In line with the Soviet understanding of colonial struggles the colonial critique in the film is coupled with class critique that presents Belarusian nobility as the true agents of exploitation and injustice. The guardian is murderous and treacherous, while the countess lacks any agency and is constantly paralyzed by fear. In a darkly funny twist Yanouskaya's aunt is portrayed as downright crazy, carrying chickens with her like pets, sometimes on her head, and speaking in riddles. The imperial authorities are only interested

in stopping a possible revolutionary insurgency. The premonition of the revolution is in the air of the film and is presented as the true path to liberation in the region. Our visitor is eventually "radicalized," arrested, and taken to Russia as a political prisoner. Liberated from the curse, Yanouskaya follows him like a dutiful wife.

Both characters in the end leave the provincially coded Belarus for the metropolitan Petersburg. Belarus appears in the film as a gloomy landscape filled with fog and bog, where things are expected to take a bad turn. The isolation of the characters is made palpable through long shots that emphasize small human frames set against vast, desolate landscapes.

Figure 2. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

People tend to suddenly disappear from view only to be found dead later: their slayings portrayed through jump cuts that add to the foreboding horror atmosphere. In fact, solving the mystery in the end comes a little unexpectedly, since our protagonist is perpetually confused and outsmarted. The story also does not build enough coherent clues or linear narrative to make the film a compelling detective story. Rather, *The Hunt* feels much more at home with a poetic foreboding atmosphere of the decaying nature and dwellings, the

expansive empty landscapes, and dialogue punctured by long silences. In this respect the film's vision aligns with the poetic masters of late Soviet cinema like Russian Andrei Tarkovsky and Armenian Sergei Parajanov. Judging by the tonal make-up of the film, the provincial lands of Belarus appear fraught, depressing, and haunted. Narratively, the film is a straightforward match for the Soviet colonial critique—the main Russian character from the metropolis is the agent of progress, rationality and, eventually, the revolution, whose mission is to carry the torch of enlightenment into backwater lands. Visually, however, things appear more complicated.

The camera work in the film features a consistent visual technique: almost every shot is partially obscured. Trees and vegetation obscure the view outside, and inside doorways, walls, and interior objects intrude on the frame. The technique is so persistent that at several points in the film it feels almost haptic. The viewer might experience a strong urge to reach into the screen and remove the obstruction: to brush away out-of-focus branches, or to move an object placed right in front of the camera (figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

Figure 4. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

These obscured, partial views are usually presented at a moderately low angle as if the camera were peeping in on the action from the height of a tall child. The camera work, in short, destabilizes the assumptions of agency and perspective in the film. We never find out who is watching from the camera POV, and the film consciously teases the viewer about it. *The Hunt* features a little person character, the brother of the housekeeper hidden in the dungeons of the mansion, who initially is presumed to be a vengeful "little man" spirit haunting the countess. When the brother is discovered by the others, we quickly realize that it is not his perspective we see. In fact, we never find out whose obstructed perspective the camera adopts so rigorously in so many sequences in the film. I believe the film intentionally plays with the conventions of knowable and visible, erecting barriers to visibility and casting doubt on what is truly knowable in the story.

The camera work is analogous to an unreliable narrator, a literary device often employed in Gothic and neo-Gothic fiction. If we consider the film's visuals, the colonial critique appears to be a much more nuanced endeavor: when the very knowability of the colonized land, its people and their stories is put into question. This potential knowability is not necessarily presented as

latent or imminent epistemology, but rather as intentionally obscured and silenced. To that point, early in the film there is a scene when our protagonist accidentally spies on the countess. He sees her naked and asleep, laid in the large pile of feathers with an old woman muttering some sort of incantations over her.

Figure 5. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

The scene is haunting, supernatural seeming, and never explained. Perhaps, this is just what the "savages" do; perhaps, someone wishes the countess harm or, maybe, healing; she might have consented to it, or not—it is impossible to find that answer in the world of the film. Again, while narratively, the film adopts a perspective of the enlightened metropolitan visitor who vanquishes "old ghosts," visually the film contends that this privileged perspective is incomplete and obstructed, literally out of focus, unable to grasp the realities of the place and its people. The motifs of obfuscation and unknowability take over the film visually and narratively.

In the end, after the ruse is exposed, the local peasants burn the perpetrator's house, which causes the imperial police to respond. Behind the bars of the police carriage's window, our protagonist observes a shadowy

mounted figure from the hunt: unclear if it is a straw puppet, a person, or an actual ghost. The figure quickly disappears into the whiteness of a snowstorm.

Figures 6 and 7. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

A police officer happily intones that this is the first day of the 20th century, and he is excited to travel to Petersburg even if for police business. The film ends with a long shot that tracks across faces of the local children. They stare silently and emotionlessly at the panning camera and through the branches and twigs that grow from off screen space to obscure the frame. They are neither afraid of the close ghostly presence nor saddened by our visitor's departure. Suddenly, it is less clear if the ghostly cavalry truly exists, and if the children, whose plight of living in fear moved our visitor to action, are in the know about it.

Figure 8. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* (Rubinchik 1980).

It figures that our visitor never really knew that his view was always partial. A tiny fogged-up window of a police carriage is an excellent metaphor for his perspective and a coda to the film: he has always been just passing through in a fog. *The Savage Hunt of King Stakh* provides a lesson in omission as a "clap back" of the oppressed. On the one hand, it features an atmospheric Gothic horror story that is in line with the Soviet tradition of poetic art cinema and Soviet views on colonial emancipation. On the other hand, the film presents a vision of the world known only through deliberately curtailed perspective that boxes in both the viewer and the characters into an uncomfortable, stifling, and scary

world of the film that insists on embodying the effects of epistemological erasure. Its horror resides not in Belarusian landscapes or Belarusian legends, but how Belarus and its people are rendered invisible and unknowable.

"These people are scary—they just stare in silence": Belarusian Gothic Reimagined in Andrei Kudzinenka's *Masakra* (2010)

Masakra, directed by Andrei Kudzinenka in 2010, is billed as the first horror film of independent Belarus. The Belarusian cinema industry suffered significant setbacks following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its state-supported cinema. This was true of other national cinemas of the former Soviet republics, all of which suffered from the dramatic economic downturn during the 1990s with drastically reduced numbers of new releases. One of the strategies of survival for Belarusfilm was to offer grounds for Russian television and film productions in Belarus, similar to how Canada is a shooting ground for Hollywood. The Soviet-era architecture of Minsk serves as a backdrop for various Russian productions set in the Soviet era. Belarusfilm's extensive facilities for shooting WWII films are well known across the former post-Soviet space. The pace of productions recently has picked up at Belarusfilm, however, the authoritarian regime that has been in place in Belarus since the mid-1990s has had a pronounced chilling effect on the arts, including cinema. This has led to a flourishing of the underground arts, but also to discrimination against, and the persecution and exile of the artists. Throughout the 2000s, but particularly after the protests of 2020, Poland and Lithuania have increasingly become the hubs for Belarusian culture in exile. This includes a television network, Belsat (founded in 2007), broadcasting from Poland, the European Humanities University exiled to Vilnius in 2004, and political entities such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia's post-2020 government in exile based out of Lithuania. As Belarusian state censorship has increased over the years, Andrey Kudzinenka is now part of a network of independent Belarusian filmmakers through a project entitled "Bulbamovie:" an archive and a festival dedicated to Belarusian independent cinema based out of Poland. *Masakra* is not part of the list of Belarusfilm productions on the studio's official website even though the film was produced by Belarusfilm.

Made thirty years after *The Hunt, Masakra* draws extensively on its Soviet antecedent to make a more light-hearted comedy-horror hybrid within the parameters of a similar Gothic story. *Masakra* and *The Hunt* have similar sensibilities, even though officially *Masakra* is based on Prosper Merimee's short

story *Lokis* (1869) and "old Belarusian legends" with no mention of Karatkevich's novella or the 1980 film. *Masakra* tells a story of a Petersburg visitor, Nikolai Kazantsev (played by Andrei Nazimau), who pretends to be a professor, but in reality is an aspiring artist with a troubled past. Nikolai's intention is to sell off an extensive library of a local Belarusian count Pazurkevich (played by Dzmitry Miller) under pretenses of cataloging it for the university. The Petersburg fraudster falls in love with a local Polish-speaking noble woman, Anna (played by Maryia Kurdzianevich), who is betrothed to a Belarusian count, but is ambivalent about her engagement. She is both drawn to and frightened by the count and his family curse—they are werebears (this is directly from the Merimee's story). The ability to turn into a bear is presented as a power granted by the Belarusian lands to the Pazurkevich clan, who live unnaturally long lives and must wed their siblings to sustain power and pass it on to their heirs. Count Pazurkevich, who in traditional Gothic form appears tortured and brooding, desperately wants to get out of Belarus and the curse, and escape to Italy with Anna, who is not his sister and therefore represents the end of the cursed line. The Petersburg fraudster also wants to escape to Italy with Anna and the count's money. Anna tries to escape Belarus and both men, but is compelled to return, since her flight triggers the proverbial *masakra* of the title—the massacre of everyone by the count-turned-bear. Much of the action in *Masakra* is spent establishing back stories and following a multi-day celebration of the Count's and Anna's engagement at the mansion. The party is filled with unsympathetic guests practically begging to be murdered in an homage to the *Masque of the Red Death*, Edgar Allan Poe's short story (1842) and its 1964 cinematic adaptation directed by Roger Corman. The guests include a Russian general who has just participated in brutal suppression of Kastus' Kalinouski's rebellion, a perpetually drunk and giggling noble woman, and a handful of count's neighbors. The party quickly turns deadly, and all guests are murdered one by one in supernatural fashion. Anna is driven mad and the count himself mysteriously disappears after being shot by Nikolai. The film ends with the post-masakra life at the mansion. Nikolai stays in the mansion to take care of Anna, who now only communes with the bear the count turned into, and we see the arrival of the count's mother from abroad with a young son, who now carries on the family line and the curse.

Masakra and *The Hunt* share a narrative premise of an outsider-visitor entering an unfamiliar land, but treat this traditional Gothic set up very differently. *The Hunt* is told from the perspective of a Russian folklorist, who appears sympathetic and noble. *Masakra*, on the other hand, mocks its Russian visitor. Everything about Nikolai is ridiculous: he is a con artist but not through

any cunning of his own. In fact, most of his skills and ideas come from his servant, Grishka (played by Siarhei Ulasau), who, unlike his master, studied at the university. It is Grishka who knows how to stop the werebears: he has read up on the whole curse situation in the count's library. Nikolai himself is a walking cliché—he constantly recites Aleksandr Pushkin, Russia's most famous poet whose veneration has been extensively supported by the Russian state through the ages. Known in the Russian collective imagination as "our everything" [nashe vse], Pushkin, a romantic poet from the early 19th century, has become larger than life—his work enshrined in Russian public life and education as part of Russian national identity. Nikolai, who has few articulate words of his own, offers Pushkin as an unparalleled genius to the count, Anna, and anyone who would listen, eliciting a contemptuous response. Nikolai is oblivious to the fact that everyone around him is forced to speak Russian, let alone appreciate Russian poetry. One of the greatest accomplishments of *Masakra*, especially in comparison to *The Hunt*, is its use of linguistic diversity in the film. The Belarusian nobility and local people speak Belarusian, Anna's family speaks Polish, and only through the presence of imperial outsiders, such as Nikolai himself, does Russian become the language of the film. *The Hunt*, by contrast, is a Russophone film despite being an adaptation of a Belarusian-language novella.

Figure 9. *Masakra* (Kudzinenka, 2004)

Masakra amplifies the polyphony of Belarusian borderlands: not only does it feature characters who speak in their native language consistently, but it also features cross-linguistic dialogue. One of the most notable examples is a steamy romance between Nikolai's servant and the count's maid, whose

continuous sexual escapades provide great comic relief in the film. Thus, the mansion becomes much less of a foreboding space and more of a kinky backdrop to raunchy sex scenes, reminiscent of Decameron (figure 9, above).

Much of the film's comedy is derived from carnival elements, extending the conventional excesses of dark Gothic fantasy to subvert its more conservative tropes. Both *The Hunt* and *Masakra* feature a fragile young noblewoman on the brink of insanity, a victim of a tragic fate. Anna is also a victim of the irresistible, sexually charged allure of the forces of evil—the analogies to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in *Masakra* are particularly abundant. However, the film is adept at poking fun at these tired conventions. After Anna has lost her mind, Nikolai is still writing her letters filled with pathos and poetry. Yet immediately following his waxing poetic to catatonic Anna is the discussion on how to feed her: if you feed her porridge with jam "she will get it all over herself and ruin her dress." This carnivalesque defamiliarization layers the Gothic tale of horror plot with ironic distance. At the same time, *Masakra* does not downplay the supernatural impetus behind its story as *The Hunt* does. In *The Hunt* the ghostly possie is discovered to be a ruse: the straw puppets mounted on horses and dressed as knights with animal skulls or skeletons. The ghosts turn out to be straw men, literally. Metaphorically they are the ghosts of a past that is no longer relevant or remembered. Empty of meaning and connection to the living, the legends become scary puppets. In *Masakra* there is no ambivalence about the stories that come out of "savage" minds: the supernatural is out there in the open for everyone to see—including in the local church where an icon of Saint George features him slaying a bear instead of a dragon. In *The Hunt* the supernatural as superstition exists on the periphery and is vanquished by the power of enlightenment coming from the imperial center. In *Masakra* the supernatural is vanquished through local solidarity and anticolonial insurgency. A curious side plot in the film features a local priest, who defends the locals from the werebear clan and, in general, speaks truth to power. He is the only character who actually makes it to Italy—we see him join the Garibaldi rebellion at the very end of the film. Garibaldi, a hero of Italian national independence, is a symbolic nod to Kastus' Kalinousky, a 19th century leader of a rebellion for Belarusian independence, who is sympathetically mentioned in the film. Like *The Hunt, Masakra* also explores themes of obfuscation through camera work. Instead of an obstructed frame, however, it uses the jump cut, mostly in the beginning to signify how out of place Nikolai is at the mansion. Russian visitors routinely experience spatial disorientation as the count and his butler seem to move about in imperceptible ways, always defying Nikolai's expectations of where they are. In short, Belarusians in

Masakra are adept at resisting colonial power and making the imperial visitors feel disoriented and confused.

Perhaps the most interesting parallel between these two incarnations of Belarusian Gothic horror is the portrayal of the Gothic mansion. The decaying mansion in *The Hunt* is overrun by desiccated vegetation, while the mansion in *Masakra* is overrun by straw that is oddly everywhere: it is the material of sculptures, interior objects and even a gate to the mansion. The straw even acts as an agent in a supernatural murder, crashing the Russian general between the closing walls of hay.

Figures 10 and 11. *Masakra* (Kudzinenka, 2004)

The introduction of straw in *Masakra* does not seem to be connected to the incursion of nature like in *The Hunt*, where the creeping vegetation symbolized decay and outmodedness. The prominence of straw is less self-explanatory. Everyday objects and architectural features made of straw are

fragile and flammable, falling apart like they are made of sand and serving as the fuel for the final *masakra*. I believe the straw objects represent the disconnect at the heart of our characters' struggle. Like the straw puppets of the ghostly hunt, they represent the failure of Belarusian landed gentry to be faithful stewards of the land. The Belarusian nobility like the count or his fiancée appear to have a tortured relationship to the land that surrounds them and people who live on it. The count exemplifies it particularly clearly: his desire to escape the curse is a desire to stop being who he is, which is both a bear and a Belarusian. The same can be said about Anna: not only she is ambivalent about her engagement, but her escape and return are not of her making. Instead, her descent into insanity is engineered by the local women. One of them approaches Anna in the church and urges her to return to the mansion because Anna is the only one able to set things right. The woman then utters the word "masakra" with a satisfying smirk.

Figure 12. *Masakra* (Kudzinenka, 2004)

The stage for the massacre is set and the wheels of the curse are in motion: the werebear family cannot escape the *masakra*. The locals, from the shrewd women in the church to the rebellious priest, seem to be very much in the know about the curse and the ways it can be used to their advantage, however obscure their intentions might be. We see the local nobility flailing again, having only partial insight into their environment and the people who inhabit it. A house built of straw cannot stand.

Masakra in many ways is a reimagining of *The Hunt* in a comedic and anti-colonial vein that valorizes a quest for national identity rather than communist international sensibilities. Kudzinenka himself defined *masakra* as a gestalt of Belarusian history—its one constant. Belarus has always been the

"territory of blood" (Kudzinenka 2010). It is no coincidence that in his first film, the controversial *Occupation Mysterium* (*Akupatsyia. Misteryi)* (2004), Kudzinenka's focus was on untangling the ideas of Belarusianness from the Soviet myths that got the film promptly banned for a brief portrayal of a Nazi collaborator who "wants to shoot Belarusian movies, not Soviet and not German." Throughout the Soviet era, WWII was officially regarded as the primary symbolic legacy of Belarusian history and the lynchpin in modern Belarusian identity. Publicly recognized as the "Partisan Republic" Belarus bore the brunt of the Nazi invasion and the Holocaust, forming a strong insurgent "partisan" movement. The Soviet authorities valorized WWII in an ideologically compromised way through the excision of various historical truths—from mass killings in Kurapaty, to acknowledgment of the Holocaust and persecution of the nation's minorities. The authoritarian regime in Minsk today continues to use Soviet mythologization of WWII to its benefit (Marples 2014). To speak about Belarusian identity in Belarus today is fraught and dangerous. These kind of memory wars are not unique to Belarus and are subject of controversy in Ukraine as well. One of the prime examples is the debate around activities of OUN-UPA insurgent armies in Western Ukraine who allegedly fought for Ukrainian independence while also participating in the Holocaust, the genocide of Roma and Poles, and mass killings of communist Ukrainians during WWII. These controversies, in turn, are not merely for scholarly debates: they are actively used and reshaped by various political forces, most notably authoritarian regimes in Russia and Belarus. These regimes use memory wars to solidify domestic power and justify military aggression, as we witness in the current Russo-Ukrainian war, a humanitarian catastrophe of unspeakable proportions.

I do not believe *Masakra* is very convincing when it aims to conceptualize Belarusian identity or what it means to be Belarusian. Kudzinenka labeled *Masakra* as the first example of a new genre of the national "bulba" horror (*bulba* means potato, the Belarusian national vegetable), a name inspired by the Spaghetti Western or Kimchi Western. Like these genres, Bulba Horror presumes a level of genre mash up, playfulness and ironic appropriation coupled with local inflection of the genre. Public response to the film was largely negative because its many ambitious intentions did not come together: neither as a satisfying meta-genre horror film, nor as a sophisticated exploration of horror as a reflection of identity and belonging (Zhbankov and Rasinski 2010). *Masakra* presents its ideas like an assemblage or a kaleidoscope of disparate threads competing for one's attention. A viewer might feel overwhelmed by everything she sees in this genre mash-up of comedy, horror, and romance;

archetypal Gothic characters; nationalist and anti-colonial struggles; insurgent priests in cahoots with Garibaldi; werebears pursuing their agenda; hot sex—the list goes on. If in *The Hunt* epistemological erasure is articulated through the metaphysics of the unknown and absence, in *Masakra* it is buried under the smorgasbord of abundant answers, none of which feels satisfying. In the last sequence of the film, we are transported to sunny, picture-perfect Italy, where our priest is recognized as a fighter in Garibaldi's army. He switches to Italian and is greeted by his Italian wife and child, or so it seems. The world of *Masakra* begins to feel like a distant dream.

Figures 13 and 14. *Masakra* (Kudzinenka, 2004)

Why?, one might ask; and Why not?, one might answer. Perhaps Belarusians are a lot like Italians or bears. What does it mean to be Belarusian? Herein lies the problem *Masakra* encounters: how to articulate "I do not know" in answer to that question. *Masakra's* carnivalesque drive, its penchant for "everything,

everywhere, all at once," so-to-speak, points to the fact that there are no ready answers to the voicelessness, oppression, and complexity of identity and belonging in Belarus. True to form, however, *Masakra* offers all possible answers and ultimately none. It would rather escape to Italy than say "I can't tell you what's it about."

"I can't tell you what's it about: I am not interested in history": "Terminal Cinema" and Underground Horror in Nikita Lavretski's *Sasha's Hell* (2019)

Nikita Lavretski's film *Sasha's Hell* (*Sashin ad*)—shot on a VHS tape with no funding, professional crew, or equipment—is labeled by the author as "*konchenoe kino,*" or terminal cinema. "Terminal" here reflects a Russian slang word *konchenyi*, which Lavretski correctly identifies as meaning "hopeless, fucked up, done for" (Lavretski 2021). It refers to cinema that has no ties to any entity, corporate or state; no professional network, or extensive fan support; no viral success. Lavretski labels his cinema "terminal" because: "we are [in Belarus] stuck in a dead-end, where we've got nothing to aspire to, nothing left to prove, and nothing left to lose. But this doesn't mean nothing interesting can happen here" (Lavretski 2019). Art for art sake, of course, comes to mind, the freedom of authorial intent curtailed only by a complete lack of any resources whatsoever. Lavretski's films are made with personal gadgets and with the help of friends and virtual international collaborators like Rei Koz, who wrote the script under a pseudonym. Very much like the other two films discussed in this study, *Sasha's Hell* is not particularly scary; it treads onto horror territory only as it suits the film's experimental cinema spirit. In short, it is another unlikely horror film from an unlikely place: its world premiere happened at the Moscow International Film Festival literally in the category of "Films That Were Not Here."

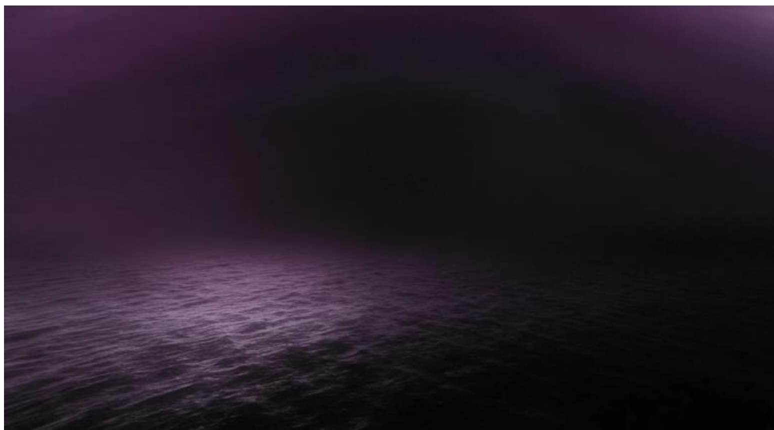
Sasha's Hell tells a story of a Brussels-based hip hop artist Olie, played by a musician who composed the songs in the film, Vlad Lullaby. Olie comes to Minsk to give a concert and to meet his collaborator, Sasha (played by Aleksei Svirsky), for the first time in real life. Sasha writes music for the artist and hosts him at his shared flat in Minsk. Music discussions and music references are abundant in the film, and Lavretski himself talks about various artists and songs that influenced him in the creation of *Sasha's Hell* as emo-horror (Lavretski 2020a). The film uses English and Russian intermittently as the characters interact with Anglophone Olie, or with each other. The camera follows

characters around as they meet various people, talk about various topics, prepare for a concert, attend a concert, wander around aimlessly with the mumblecore charm of directionless young people. They meet a Goth Girl, a fan of Olie's, played by Volha Kavaliova, who turns out to be a professional photographer and shoots a music clip for the artist. The trio make the clip on a riverbank, off a bridge, in one of the most tender and heartfelt moments of the film. As friends bum around Minsk, strange occurrences begin to happen. Sasha goes to a secluded place that resembles a small closet, descending into an ominous and claustrophobic space. There, surrounded by candlelight, he cuts himself with a razor.

Figure 15. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

Sasha has a virtual call with a potential love interest, whom he rejects, but only after warning her about the demonic presence in her house. In the long end sequence Sasha walks around leaving objects in different places, drawing mysterious sigils in chalk on the pavement. He finally arrives in his closet, sets his body on fire, and transcends as a flickering digital presence into a dark foreboding space (figure 16, below). If this is Sasha's hell, it is reminiscent of one of the darkly fantastical Lynchian landscapes in *Twin Peaks the Return* (2015) (figures 17 and 18, below).

Figure 16.
Sasha's Hell
(Lavretski, 2019)



Figures 17 and 18.
Twin Peaks: The Return
(Lynch, 2017)

Lavretsky's work draws on Lynchian sensibilities in its more absurd moments, but also the earnestness of mumblecore cinema in its presentation of the everyday lives of Minsk twenty-somethings. The film features long, meandering dialogues about everything and nothing. At one point Sasha and Olie are interviewed by a journalist until their banter is interrupted by a stranger-than-fiction moment—a local dry cleaner calls after a customer about a forgotten jacket. The spontaneous, unrehearsed quality of the film is very appealing and deeply connected to the city of Minsk as it is known intimately by those who live there. The musical clip moment particularly underscores this impression—the casual everyday space of the riverbank right before the sunset, used by fishermen and strolling families, becomes the site of a musical performance that is disarming and jubilant. Olie waves his hands seemingly randomly on the bridge as Sasha and the Goth Girl shoot from afar, as music plays in the background.

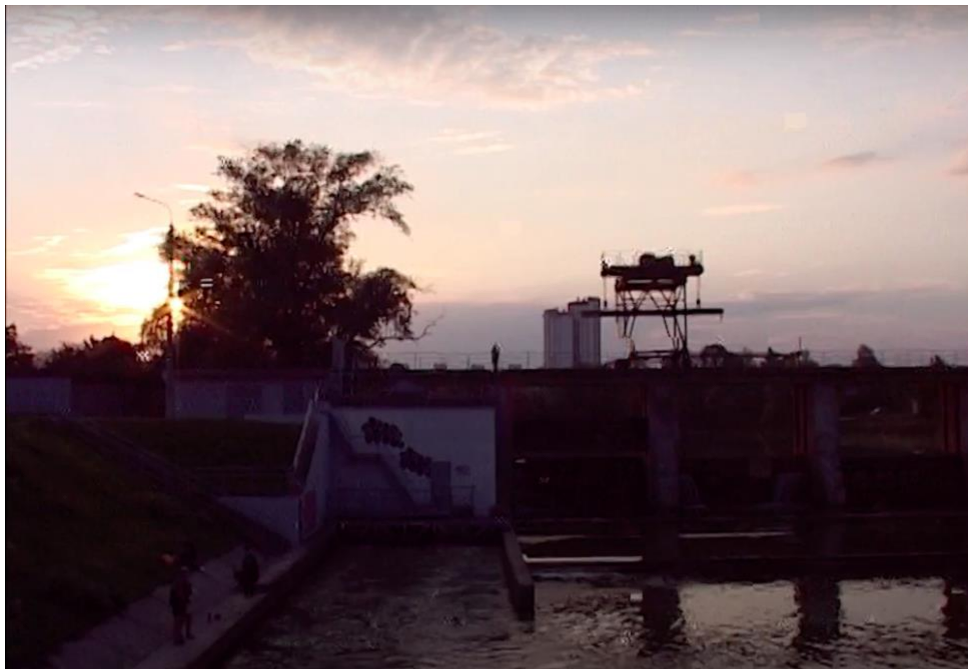


Figure 19. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

Belarus as a place to live is not something *The Hunt* or *Masakra* even begin to approach. In these films Belarus is a fantasy: a dark Gothic fantasy, or the cheeky fantasy of Bulba Horror. In *Sasha's Hell* Belarus is an intimate space of streets and recognizable locations, with real people who happen to pass by floating in and out of frame (figures 20 and 21, next page).

Figures 20 and 21. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

If *The Hunt* and *Masakra* work with and problematize Belarusian symbols and narratives of nationhood, *Sasha's Hell* plainly refuses to even factor them in. In the beginning of the film as Olie and Sasha ride a bus from Minsk airport, Olie asks about a WWII monument they see. Sasha responds that he is not interested in history, and he cannot tell Olie what the monument is. The film deliberately eschews most iconic Minsk locations such as the WWII stella in one of the central squares or the famous Red Cathedral in the center. Before the credits roll Olie sends Sasha a message in which he finally remembers the one Belarusian film he watched. It is, of course, one of the few internationally recognized films from Belarus: *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*) (1985), a grueling, masterful WWII drama by Elem Klimov. "Not interested in history" becomes a radical position for a film already radical in its execution. Olie, the foreign visitor, asks about Belarus as it is represented in ready-made narratives and symbols. Turns out they are irrelevant for the locals he is trying to get to know better. At one point Olie begins to make fun of the Belarusian dictator, to which Sasha matter-of-factly replies that it is dangerous, and this is the only sentence uttered about living in a repressive authoritarian society. It is worth noting that the slogan of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's presidential campaign for the ill-fated 2020 presidential election was "This Country Is for Living" (*strana dlia zhizni)*; the implication is that Belarus is not yet for living. Living in Belarus, according to *Sasha's Hell*, can happen in parallel to or outside of any kind of official or dissident discourse of what it means to be Belarusian. This suspicion towards any meta-narratives of identity construction and categorization was a common thread in Soviet underground art of the late Brezhnev era in the 1970s-1980s. Living in a dead-end of interminable socialism, known as Stagnation in the Soviet Union, the Soviet underground also had a cinema with a penchant for horror and the absurd, called necrorealism. In his groundbreaking study of the period and necrorealism specifically, Alexei Yurchak (2008) defines the trend through the lens of "politics of indistinction"—a desire to be outside the system altogether, outside its coercive norms and language that it universally imposed on daily life. These Soviet underground artists wished to be neither pro- nor anti-Soviet, but to be outside the Soviet framework altogether. Yurchak writes:

> In a situation in which the sovereign state held exclusive control over what language and what actions were seen as legal and "political," this alternative politics included, paradoxically, a refusal to see oneself in political terms. Instead of challenging the state by occupying an oppositional subject position, these people carved out a subject position that the state could not recognize in "political" terms and therefore could

> not easily define, understand, and control. This was a challenge to the state's sovereign powers of defining and imposing political subjectivities. Therefore it should be recognized as subversive and political—acknowledging that it could exist only if it refused to identify itself as such." (Yurchak 2008, 200)

I believe *Sasha's Hell* does tell us what it means to be Belarusian today as a lived experience. It is to be outside of any symbolic frameworks that define nationhood, community and belonging. Similar themes are evident in Lavretski's and other underground directors' work. For example, *Drama* (2019) features three underground filmmakers, Lavretski, Yuliya Shatun and Aleksei Svirsky (who plays Sasha), and replays the events in their lives over the span of one week (Lavretski 2019). The mysterious and terrifying space that is accessible through self-mutilation in *Sasha's Hell* is the ultimate bracketing of all outside world and all its categorical prescriptions. The foreign visitor trope, so familiar from the other two films, is decentered through a focus on Sasha and his mysterious comings and goings that exclude Olie altogether. After all, what is Sasha's hell in the film? Is it a mysterious portal to another dimension, or is it a weekend of forced socialization with your Brussels-based collaborator whom you never met in real life? Sasha's secrets remain hidden from Olie and the world; Sasha remains alone.

Figure 22. *Sasha's Hell* (Lavretski, 2019)

While Olie is as clueless as the foreign visitors in the other two films, he really has no objective to enlighten the "savages," and very little preconceived notions about Belarus, its place in post-Soviet world, or its colonial history. His Belarusian friends do not give him any of that information but rather show him a good time—grounding their encounter in lived experiences, ephemeral and resistant to symbolic framing. Interestingly, Lavretski explains the film's appeal through a specific list that demonstrates a certain inside knowledge of hyper-local and generationally specific social relations:

> The film is good for all those, who did not have hope before the pandemic, so they did not lose hope in the pandemic; those who overdo it on baked goods and continue doing it; those who know their own sinfulness; all renters and those who still live with their parents; all Andreis and Nastyas. Film is not good for all those who like self-help, self-motivation, positive thinking; those who have more than two friends and five acquaintances; readers of the music forums, who do not trust their own friends' music recommendations; all Stases and Sofias. (Lavretski 2020b)

The taxonomy of Nastyas and Sofias presented above feels a lot like Jorge Borges' Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge in Borges' 1942 short story "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" which recounts a heterogeneous classification of animals that lies outside of taxonomies we take to be objective reflections and categorizations of the world. The animals in the emporium are classified as "fabulous" or "have just broken a flower vase" or "suckling pigs." Borges' essay famously served as an inspiration to Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966). Foucault starts his book with this passage:

> This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old definitions between the Same and the Other… In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one big leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark possibility of thinking *that*. (Foucault 1994, xvi)

This stark realization of the limitation of our knowledge is at the heart of *Sasha's Hell* and other Belarusian horror films. Going back to Natalya Kolyada's rumination on what it takes to be "known" in the world for an unlikely country such as Belarus, defined through lack of oil and diamonds, seas, and mountains, it seems that being known on one's own terms is the only way of being known. It reminds me of Sarah Ahmed writing on feminism as lifework: "We write ourselves into existence. We write, in company. And we write back against a world that in one way or another makes it hard for us to exist on our own terms" (Ahmed 2022). Belarusian horror cinema is one of the ways we, Belarusians, write ourselves into existence, on our own terms.

I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of a brilliant colleague, Denis Saltykov, who introduced me to many great horror films, including some in this paper. I miss talking movies with you, Denis.

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