

## Autumn Marathon: An Existential Critique of the Era of Stagnation

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### Abstract

This paper examines the existential aspects of Georgiy Daneliya's films during the Soviet Era of Stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev. By looking at certain thematic elements employed by the director, we can see a larger critique of the time and place in which these films were created. Coupling Daneliya's films with theories posited by existential philosophers such as Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus, this paper draws on the thematic similarities and pinpoints specific examples in the films that may apply to the Soviet society at large.

**Keywords:** Daneliya, Existentialism, Russian Film, Soviet Film, Brezhnev, Nietzsche, Camus, Sartre.

### Introduction

Daneliya, a screenwriter, director, and producer of Georgian descent, rose to prominence during Brezhnev's reign. His first two films, *Splendid Days* (*Серёжа*) and *Walking the Streets of Moscow* (*Я шагаю по Москве*), were experiments in subject matter and film techniques displaying elements of great Soviet filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Vertov. This experimentation moved away from steep perspectives, unconventional camera angles, and dramatic scene framing towards a subtlety in techniques and philosophy as censorship tightened under Brezhnev (Beumers, 2009: 146). Georgiy Daneliya's *Autumn Marathon* (*Осенний марафон*) serves as an excellent example of Soviet tragicomedy, what Daneliya himself refers to as "Sad Comedies." It is also a brilliant yet subtle critique of the Soviet Union in what Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed as the Era of Stagnation.

### Purpose and Scope

The period of stagnation followed Khrushchev's Thaw as an aimless time where, as colloquially put, the era was "not loveable but livable." The utopian vision of the socialist project became farcical as consumerism, individualism and the constraints of geopolitics began to tighten. The purpose of this study is to illustrate *Autumn Marathon* as a rare work of art that holds a mirror up to society and criticizes it through its subtle reflection. The importance of this reading of

Daneliya's *Marathon* is paramount in a historical context where political dissidents were increasingly imprisoned, and when censorship regressed towards the Stalinist past (Beumers, 2009: 147). Daneliya offers a biting critique of the existential crisis in which the Soviet Union found itself by means of auteur mastery. Existential elements, as seen in the works of Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus, are interwoven in Daneliya's work of the period; confronting the audience with the most fundamental question of "Why?" *Autumn Marathon* can be enjoyed as a simple comedy, but a closer reading reveals it to be an existential critique in a time of existential crisis.

## Subtle Critiques

The plot of the film centers on a translation teacher, Buzykin, stuck between two women. His wife Nina, a strong matriarch who feels herself to be “needed by no one,” is aware of her husband’s affair yet hopes he will change (Daneliya, 1979). Alla, Buzykin’s mistress, is a younger woman living alone who desperately seeks the constant attention of her lover. These two women represent different moments in Soviet history. Nina is of the older guard where family and propriety are of the utmost importance. Despite his infidelities, Nina would rather reclaim Buzykin to be a part of ‘something’ and become necessary once more. Alla, on the other hand, is ready for change. This is seen in her gift to Buzykin of a Western style jacket as well as in her constant inclination to leave him for a different man, as well as in her fickle personality. She represents the population who is ready to leave behind the socialist vision of the past to adopt Western media and material culture. Other characters integral to the story include Bill, a Danish translation professor visiting to work with Buzykin, along with Buzykin’s neighbor, Vasily, an older man who interrupts Bill and Buzykin for a long day of drunkenness and mushroom picking. From the plot and characters of the film, the audience is immediately aware of the static environment in which the film takes place. Buzykin is pulled in many directions, yet he remains unmoved. Through this perpetual stasis, he effectively represents the paradoxical stagnant everyman. He smokes before jogging, lies incessantly, and tries to uphold the patriarchal nuclear family while the walls of domesticity collapse in on him. He is stuck between Khrushchev’s Thaw and Gorbachev’s reforms. He is the sad clown of the era of stagnation.



Figure 1: Buzykin standing before the painting of a sad clown.

In the post-opening credits scene, Buzykin sits beside a piano in an emotional state the audience can deduce as sadness or melancholy. As he stands to answer the knocks on the door, the painting of a frowning clown above the piano enters the frame. He walks to the door, forces himself to smile, then lets Bill, the visiting Danish translation teacher, enter. As Bill enters, he displays a conscious effort to smile in the face of melancholy. He must not only wear the makeup of the sad clown, a mask, but must maintain the illusion of happiness to a Western guest. Buzykin's performance is particularly elucidating in his relationship to Bill, the place holder for the larger entity of the encroaching West. Soon after Bill, Buzykin, and Nina sit at the table; Daneliya holds the painting of the sad clown in the frame of the shot. The viewers are to understand the position of Buzykin, and the Soviet Union as represented by Buzykin, as a sad clown smiling. In the argument at the dinner table spawned by a silent phone call from Alla, Buzykin, and Nina keep up the illusion of a cohesive family for Bill. They both smile and laugh while they address the accusation of his infidelity in one of the funniest sequences of the film. After the phone rings a second time, which Buzykin answers, he lies to Bill and Nina about who called, then sits down. Nina promptly leaves, still maintaining a smiling cheerful presence in front of Bill, to which Daneliya frames Buzykin with a portrait of a smiling charismatic man, who will be referred to as the "shining man," on the wall. (Figure 2) The shining man represents a possible version of Buzykin as he tries to console

Nina by offering his help. These two examples of framing characters with paintings are examples of Daneliya at his best as an auteur.

Daneliya's usage of this cinematic technique is profound for several reasons. While his early films were clear examples of the Eisensteinian school of montage: strong verticals, perspective-driven, epic in scale, this example of domestic juxtaposition between paintings and characters is what the author would like to refer to as *internal montage*. "Internal" here refers to the act of montage enacted within the frame of the shot as opposed to the classic example of juxtaposition between shots. "Montage," as classically defined by Eisenstein, is formally quite different than Daneliya's subtlety in paintings on walls of domestic homes. Instead of cutting to altogether disjointed subjects to elicit sensations in the viewer, as seen in *Battleship Potemkin* (*Броненосец «Потёмкин»*) and *October* (*Октябрь [Десять дней, которые потрясли мир]*), the paintings serve as a subtle adaptation of a traditional film technique. Under the constraints of Brezhnevian censorship, directors were forced to obey censorship that regressed towards the standards of the Stalinist era. Prokhorov and Prokhorova observe that "Stalinist comedy avoided formal experimentation, such as intellectual montage or theatrically mise-en-scene and acting, as well as any allusions to sexuality and bodily humor" (Prokhorov and Prokhorova, 2017: 107). This puts Daneliya in a rarified position of critic when he employs his own subtle film technique that the Stalin of a previous era would have considered unacceptable. The auteurist move on part of Daneliya supports his genius, conscious or unconscious, as a critic in a censored era.

## Contextualizing Daneliya's Films

In looking back to Daneliya's films preceding *Autumn Marathon*, one can track his experimentation with different film techniques as he finds his way as an auteur. We see an example of explicit usage of montage by Daneliya in the film immediately preceding *Autumn Marathon*, *Mimino* (*Мимино*). Towards the end of *Mimino*, the Georgian pilot protagonist is asked a question of his intentions upon returning home. After a short silent shot of Mimino's face, the scene cuts to a clip of a ram chasing another ram it had just beaten, a scene that happened earlier in the film, then back to Mimino's face. (Figure 2) Instead of relaying the thoughts in the character's head, we see an image that elicits a powerful response: a response that forces the viewer to parse out the meaning of a ram chasing another to finish him off. Is Mimino the one doing the chasing or the one being chased? In a cut wholly unrelated to the context of the scene, Daneliya enacts true Eisensteinian juxtaposition.

This use of montage happens once more in the film where Mimino stares into space after speaking to the stewardess on a jetliner he is co-piloting. The scene cuts to a quick shot of his former helicopter, then to a dog sitting beneath it. This short sequence of montage again forces the viewer into the mind of the protagonist, but also makes the viewer establish the connection between Mimino and his personal images of montage via flashback and their unique meaning to him. This is a clipped use of Eisensteinian techniques in both instances of montage because we are confronted by the montage *within* another character. We find this same use of montage when Eisenstein compares Kerensky to a peacock in *October* (Eisenstein *et al.*, 1927). The audience sees the man in his uniform cut with the mechanical peacock spreading its feathers while Kerensky dreams of becoming a Napoleonic figure. The audience sees Eisenstein's juxtaposition of the peacock on a different level than the montage happening within Kerensky's mind. We must not only find the meaning of association Daneliya intends, but we must do it from within the mind of the character. Analyzing these various forms of film techniques, without forgetting Daneliya's experimental techniques in his early films such as *Splendid Days* and *Walking the Streets of Moscow*, establishes Daneliya as someone refining his skills as an auteur.



Figure 2: In Eisensteinian montage, Danliya cuts to a scene of a ram chasing another ram when Mimino is asked about his intentions upon returning home.

Another aspect of internal montage in *Autumn Marathon* which needs to be addressed is the setting of the paintings within domestic spheres. In a close analysis of the late-soviet period comedies, Prokhorov and Prokhorova (2017) make an astute observation comparing Daneliya to a contemporary comic film director, Eldar Ryazanov. They observe,

*Finally the community of viewers finds comfort in the stability of the good Soviet life and, if desired, the illusion and the unearned moral comfort of temporarily breaking with the conformism of this life...this is the same plot as enacted in the so-called 'sad comedies' of Daneliya...The difference [between Daneliya and Ryazanov] is that Ryazanov creates the illusion that this lack of narrative development—plot stagnation on screen and not just in life—is comforting” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova, 2017: 122).*

As noticed by Prokhorov and Prokhorova (2017), and as glaringly obvious in Daneliya’s film, *Autumn Marathon* aptly depicts the crushing weight of domesticity. Most of the moments of internal montage found in *Autumn Marathon* are within the domestic space, apart from Buzykin’s boss’s office. This explicit critique of domesticity through Daneliya’s various choices of paintings exemplifies the stagnation of all forms of Soviet life through juxtaposition.

A frame-by-frame exploration will further explore this analysis. As previously mentioned, we see the sad clown that is Buzykin’s reality, and the reality of the Soviet Union in the opening post-credits scene. Through those first moments, the audience associates Buzykin’s resting face with the painting of the sad clown. While the sad clown is only shown in three scenes throughout the film, the association of Buzykin’s lax melancholic face as the sad clown remains with the viewer throughout. The internal montage between Buzykin and the portrait of the shining man only comes through when Buzykin tries to be his best version, but fails. This happens when he tries to console Nina before she leaves, when he tries to prevent his daughter from moving to the Arctic, when he chastises Vasily for his drunken behavior with Bill, and when he tries to decide in favor of Nina at the end of the film. (Figure 3) All these instances are ones in which he tries to uphold what is expected of him but fails. The shining man is the man Buzykin wants to be, but his natural self is that of the sad clown.



Figure 3: Buzykin tries to console his wife Nina as the “shining man” portrait hangs in the background.

Looking at the paintings of flowers on Alla’s wall, and the actual flowers seen in multiple scenes throughout, we see the ephemerality of the affair and her love for Buzykin. She is the aspect of domestic life Ryazanov finds comforting, albeit stagnant and ultimately unrewarding. Daneliya on the other hand, finds these flowers as fickle representations of a love easily replaced. The comfort of Alla as a beautiful flower exists only if she is still there. Flowers and paintings of flowers are placed next to Alla throughout the film. (Figure 4) Buzykin gives Alla flowers when she is sick, as seen when Daneliya frames the painting of flowers above her bed, a painting foreshadowing the break between Buzykin and Alla with its absence from the wall later in the film. (Figure 5) These uses of internal montage reveal the ephemerality and abject emptiness of Buzykin’s domestic existence.



Figure 4: Flowers hang on the wall above Alla's bed as Buzykin and Alla's relationship is lively.



Figure 5: The flower painting above the bed has been removed following Alla and Buzykin's breakup.



In true existential distress, Buzykin struggles to find meaning in anything he does, being constantly torn from his job, wife, mistress and friendships in an attempt to establish meaning in others through true Sisyphean fashion. His failures define him throughout the film; his efforts never satisfy anyone involved as he consistently fails to change the status quo. In this failure to impute meaning onto Buzykin's life, Daneliya critiques the regression of Brezhnevian ideology. He effectively flips the mirror onto a society going back to an unsuccessful social process. This, in turn, created an existential crisis not only on the level of the individual, but also at the level of society. The questions Daneliya proposes throughout the film push the audience to ask the more glaring ones. Is Alla better than Nina? Are Buzykin's translations better than Bills? Is Buzykin a sad clown or a shining man? Is he the man he wants to be? And most importantly, is the socialist project still worth pursuing?

So far, the author has shown Daneliya as a director using subtle auteurist film techniques to hold up a mirror to the period of stagnation. This critique is understated in its causticity but even more effective when reified as a specifically existential critique. Buzykin is the sad clown in the same way Camus' Sisyphus is a sad clown in his eternal hopelessness of never completing his task. Despite Buzykin's repeated failed attempts, he continues to push the boulder up the hill. The audience may see this absurdity as endearing or comical: the tragic character stuck in perpetuity, the professor stuck between two women, the fickle man-child trying to be the powerful patriarch, but it is Daneliya's exacting critique to say this is a multitude of existential hells for Buzykin, and the people of the Soviet Union.

## Looking through an Existential Lens

Daneliya reveals the prison of domesticity as especially existential. Looking at the themes beyond his use of internal montage, Daneliya positions Buzykin in domestic spaces. Consider this fact when thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre's tragicomedy play *No Exit*. In the play, Sartre's approximation of hell is three people in a locked room. Within the first few minutes of the play, the audience quickly realizes the man who has entered the room has just entered hell. This bears striking similarity to Buzykin opening the door for Bill to observe his own personal domestic hell. Bill has come into Buzykin's world to do the same work as Buzykin, rendering him unnecessary, and has the freedom to leave once he's finished his work. The West has come to observe the Soviet hell, with the exceptional privilege of being able to leave. Sartre's famous quote in *No Exit*, "Hell is other people," does not simply refer to other people as bothersome or being nuisances to the individual



consciousness as it is often misunderstood (Sartre, 1989: 36). The “Hell” in Buzykin’s case is rather being subjected to other people’s objectification of oneself. Buzykin’s hell is the possibility of his being seen or judged as second rate in the eyes of Bill, as unfaithful to Nina, as disrespectful by Vasily, and as noncommittal to Alla. Keeping in mind Buzykin as a representation of the Soviet Union, we see Sartre’s hell not only from an individual perspective but from a global perspective whereby the East, West and USSR sit in a room, aware of each other’s sins and failures, waiting patiently for the other to collapse under their own existential crisis. The period of stagnation acts as a moment of reflection where the “bourgeois” questions of existence force themselves to the surface. Domesticity is instrumental in this existential question because of the confines domesticity places on us as individuals. While Ryazanov may find comfort in these nuclear confines, Daneliya depicts the existential hell in which the USSR has found itself. If the fundamental nuclear family loses meaning in the scheme of the socialist project, then everything constructed upon it will also falter.

A second existential theme found in *Marathon*, and Daneliya’s other films of the period, is that of eternal return. This idea can be best seen when comparing *Marathon* to Daneliya’s other films of the period. To return to *Mimino*, the protagonist leaves his position as a helicopter pilot delivering chickens and cows in the Caucasus to become a commercial pilot. This acts as the driving plot of the movie only to have Mimino return to the mountains as a helicopter pilot once more at the end of the film. This is also apparent in the sci-fi cult classic film *Kin-dza-dza!* (*KUH-ð3a-ð3a!*), when the two protagonists are transported to an alien world and after a long 128 minutes, are then transported back to the streets of Moscow, seconds before they met at the beginning of the film. *Autumn Marathon* is no different in this respect. After attempting to decide between his wife and mistress throughout the entirety of the film, in the end, the film seats Buzykin alone in his apartment. The phone rings with Alla on the other line and seconds later Nina walks through the doorway after having threatened to leave him forever. Despite the comedic trials placed upon Buzykin throughout the film, he finds himself in repetition. In all the films, the protagonists end where they started. The audience is forced to question the meaning of the films, and meaning more broadly, through this cyclical repetition.

If we are to understand the nuances of Nietzsche’s eternal return, we must look carefully at the question he posits in *The Gay Science*. He asks how the reader would react if a being came to us and said we were to repeat every moment of our lives *ad infinitum* (Nietzsche, 1974: 341). Would the being be an angel or a demon in our eyes? Keeping with Daneliya, we see Buzykin as the sad

clown, Mimino as the eternal helicopter pilot in the Caucasus, and Soviet society as stagnant. Here Daneliya not only holds up the mirror to his social milieu but shines a light onto it. The answer as to the identity of Nietzsche's being, for Buzykin, is a demon. This can also be said of the place of the party as well as Soviet society at large. The wave that had been building over decades to form a new and better society had come crashing down. The dream of a better world, despite its obvious missteps in Stalinist purges and various forms of violence, still lived on until Brezhnev. Daneliya reveals the Atlantean weight of the possibility of eternal return in his "sad comedies." The sacrifices made were permissible, even under Nietzsche's proposal, on behalf of the greater socialist vision. When the regression began, however, the accepted *ad infinitum* struggles of the people lost their meaning and instead became *ad nauseum*.

It is here that Daneliya resonates with aspects of Eisensteinian circularity. Eisenstein states "[a]s for the last chapter, it must provide a *dialectical explanation* of this story without referring to its real (fictional) theme" (Eisenstein, 1928). This "dialectical explanation" of the three films of the period, is that of circularity, of Nietzsche's eternal return. Daneliya's endings place the viewer exactly where they started, if not in the same exact moment, as in *Kin-dza-dza!*, then in mental and emotional spaces, as in *Autumn Marathon* and *Mimino*. If nothing material is achieved during these films, what is it the audience is supposed to have experienced? In Jacques Aumont's *Montage Eisenstein*, he addresses circularity by stating that "[t]he most interesting aspect of this is probably the sense in which the last chapter would act as an ideal or intellectual resolution of this endless imbrication as opposed to a fictional one" (Aumont, 1987: 164). Aumont's analysis of Eisenstein aptly describes Daneliya's existential use of circularity. The intellectual objective of the films mentioned is never about the story itself, but rather the perpetual stasis in which these characters are cursed to reenact forever.

Elements of Daneliya's films of the period—internal montage with paintings, existential philosophical tropes through domesticity and repetition, and the theme of circularity—actively reflect and criticize the conservative politics of the era. Daneliya develops a method of filmmaking that undermines the regressive policies and tightening Stalinist censorship of Brezhnev. In an era of stagnation and of existential crises, it is no surprise Daneliya critiques the greater unified social vision—a social vision lost.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

As Peter Wollen reminds us through Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*: "One essential corollary of the [auteur] theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author's work are not necessarily those which are most readily apparent" (Wollen, 2013: 82). It is worth remembering here that Daneliya was not an underground avant-garde filmmaker of the period, and *Autumn Marathon* was a financial success. Daneliya's accessibility lends itself to his subtlety. His technical decisions in the film as well as thematic elements make *Autumn Marathon* much more than a simple tragicomedy for the masses, but as a subversive work of film in a regressive time.

Due to the revealed existential elements of *Autumn Marathon* and Daneliya's other films, it may prove fruitful to analyze art under the period of Brezhnev through an existentialist lens. This interpretation may strengthen the argument that filmmakers and artists of the period interpreted the Era of Stagnation as an existentialist time for the Soviet Union.

In the final shot of *Kin-Dza-Dza!*, the camera pans up from the streets of Moscow to a dark sky. Slowly, the map of the universe twinkles through the darkness to reveal the shape of the universe to be none other than a spiral. (Figure 6) The audience may ask itself, "Why did I watch two hours of a movie where nothing happens?", "Why can't Buzykin just make a decision?" Or rather, "Why are we also stuck in this never-ending spiral?". Daneliya mirrors the reality of the social realist vision of a smiling Stalin amidst a blossoming field for what it had become; Brezhnev in a murky backwater swamp.

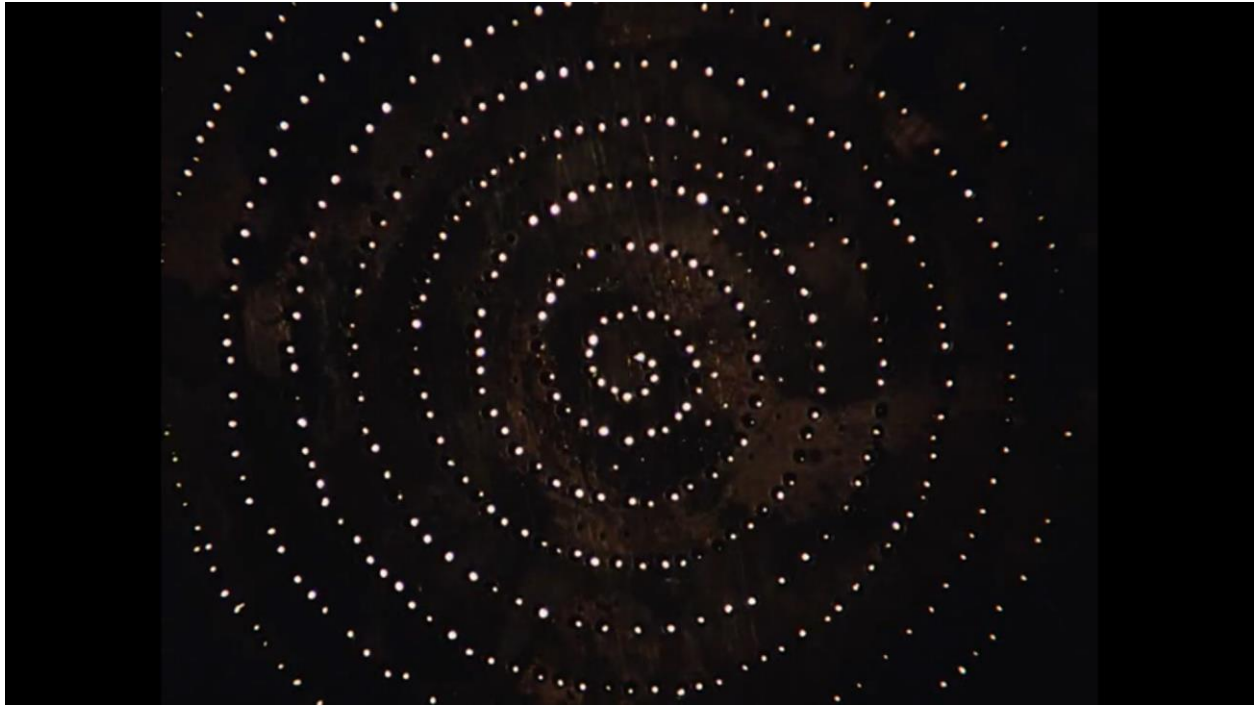


Figure 6: The final scene of *Kin-Dza-Dza!*

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