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Slot Machine presents
A GENTLE CREATURE
A FILM BY SERGEI LOZNITSA

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a film by **Sergei Loznitsa**

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SYNOPSIS

A woman lives alone on the outskirts of a village in Russia. One day she receives a parcel she sent to her incarcerated husband, marked 'return to sender'. Shocked and confused, the woman has no choice but to travel to the prison in a remote region of the country in search of an explanation. So begins the story of a battle against this impenetrable fortress, the prison where the forces of social evil are constantly at work. Braving violence and humiliation, in the face of all opposition, our protagonist embarks on a blind quest for justice.

INTERVIEW WITH SERGEI LOZNITSA

What was the genesis of *A Gentle Creature*?
My initial idea was to tell the story of a woman, of this woman. Her husband is in prison, she sends him a package and the package is returned to her. She doesn't understand why. She starts to inquire and the film begins… I didn't have an ending, I only had this plot outline. The ending I intended to write in the first draft of the script was very different from the one I ended up with. It took me several years to develop this story, and what remains now from the initial idea is the stoicism of the heroine and the dispassionate expression of her face: she doesn't smile once throughout the whole film.

What does your film share with Dostoyevsky's short story *A Gentle Creature*?
Apart from the title, not much. I wanted to tell the story of a "gentle" woman, but not in the sense the word is used in Dostoevsky's title, and not in the sense which is usually ascribed to it in the Russian tradition. I have, however, used a direct quotation from Dostoevsky's *Demons* in the script. It is *The Cockroach*, the poem recited at the end of the banquet scene. One could also find many references to Gogol and Saltykov-Schedrin in my film.
Dostoevsky was interested in wounded ambitions, humiliating loss of self-esteem and the relationships that stem on such foundations and end up in a catastrophe. My interest lies in a different area. I was not going to do a study of a psychological profile of a repressed and abused person. I was interested in a space, in a habitat, in which such creatures are forced to exist. We know next to nothing about my heroine, we only know the principles, according to which the space she lives in exists. We study the habitat, in which she has to function.
In my story, and, just like Dostoevsky, I prefer to call it a "fantastic story", the victim retains her role of a victim, while the torturer is not personified by one single character, but takes on a somewhat different shape – the sadistic qualities are distributed among a multitude of characters, and the physical space in which the victim exists is itself menacing and aggressive. She is not particularly "gentle", she is a passive woman who lets herself get pushed around.

What does "gentle creature" mean here?
For me, this film is a metaphor for a country where people are constantly violated by each other. The country is bursting with all forms of violence. On the one hand, have total hypocrisy, gigantic lies and double standards, a perfect omerta… and on the other hand, you have horrendous things that continue to happen every single day. For me, this remains a painfully irresolvable enigma. Instead of living and going about things in a calm, friendly manner, at every stage of our lives we are forced to take a difficult, dishonest and sometimes terrible path. This is a horrible paradox, the worst of paradoxes, that I have been aware of since the age of five and that I still don't understand today.
The film's point of no return comes exactly an hour in, when the heroine is outside the prison. She stages a little private protest in front of the prison. A constellation of characters begins to appear around her and the story starts to unfold.

You have a solid scientific background and we can sense this rigor in your work. What was your method?
I like to prepare things beforehand. Before tackling the shoot, I spend a lot of time working with my technicians: the cinematographer Oleg Mutu, the sound engineer Vladimir Golovnitski and my production designer Kirill Shuvalov. We decide on everything together. We agree on the general way in which the film will evolve visually but also the precise way in

which every scene, every shot, will be filmed; we also agree on the camera positions. Months before filming, we create a storyboard which includes the locations we have scouted and the chosen scenery. Always all together. I then organise rehearsals with the actors, which take place on location. In the end, we follow the shooting script. Things change of course, but not a lot. I even calculate the duration of each shot as we are creating the storyboard.
There is a particular scansion to every story. Between the 23rd and 25th minute for example. At the 45th minute also, important things must happen. All these conditions are met in *A Gentle Creature*, you can check! These are not my whims or inventions. Before I was even born, our great filmmakers had already devised how a film should be divided up, and I conform to it. It is very difficult anyway, to create something truly innovative in terms of cinematic language. If we can create films like this today, it's only because we are little crickets standing on the shoulders of giants.

In the final chapter, the story seems to take a new direction, to change tone – it then returns the heroine to her starting point before its cruel ending.
When I was writing, the conclusion became problematic. I thought that I didn't know how to end the film; in fact, I had an idea that I didn't dare express. And then I went for it… This led to the big scene towards the end, this sort of grotesque official banquet which is in fact the heroine's dream and which I consider to be a film within the film.
This little tour de force, however, wasn't enough to end on. It was a vital counterpoint but it didn't give the film its ending. I have my ideal definition of an ending: it needs something of the unexpected inevitable. It's like when something happens in a book, a film or in life and you say *"I didn't expect that…"* Then when you reflect on it later, you think: *"Ah yes, in fact it makes sense that things ended this way."* It's therefore the very end, the real final scene, that literally makes the film, gives it its catharsis.
Before that, there's also a kind of first ending, when the character understands, and so does the audience, that everything she has been undertaking will lead to nothing, that she might as well have banged her head against the wall repeatedly: it's in this moment that she leaves the human rights activists, who can do nothing for her and who may even represent a threat.
There is also the theatrical joke, the dream of the banquet. And finally, the emotional culmination of the rape. I could have ended here but it might have been interpreted as a way of labouring the point about this world, this place, this cruel and horrible life, and it wouldn't have gone any further. I wanted to go further. I wanted to set in motion the idea of a cycle. What can be worse than the hell that is rape? It is the incessant repetition of this hell, to be raped your whole life.

When the story turns into a dream, the style also changes radically.
In my mind, the big banquet scene is a film within a film, where I can choose to change style completely. I can draw attention to humour, the grotesque, to distance and to irony, which are purely self-defence mechanisms, a protection from harsh reality. In a film, as with any artistic project, what we refer to as ornaments are not only decorative: they also mark a territory to fend off evil sprits. This film should be seen as an ornament, a chalk line that we draw over and over again to ward off the evil spirits, to oppose them with a positive influence. I think there is something very interesting in this film, something that can touch the Russian soul: not only the intellect, but also the soul.

The film's territory is both concrete and hazy: it's Russia, but is it also a mental space?
What drew me to this project was this space, this location, the people, their way of thinking, their way of life and their way of doing things. A country that is Russia, but considered as both a geographical and mental territory. Filming took place in Daugavpils, in Latvia, a small

town with a 90% Russian population. We filmed there for logistical reasons: it is a European territory which doesn't require a special visa but which still has traces of its Soviet administration. There are also two large prisons in this area including the one we see in the film. You can find these types of prison all over Russia; they look like fortresses. They look strange, like solemn and romantic castles; rather attractive sights in the landscape, though they are also repulsive because no one really knows what happens inside. Stalin ordered these brick buildings to be painted white, probably to make them look like monasteries *(laughs)*. The one we filmed is nicknamed "the White Swan". There is another one called "the Black Swan"…

I always start with the big picture to then concentrate on the finest part, the tip of the needle. Making films is about starting with an idea and then obtaining a solid result with people, actors, locations, set designs. It is vital to stick to the initial idea to be able to do things properly once you are confronted with the reality of filming.

When I watch this film again, something never fails to surprise me: the harmony of the nightmare. We witness this horrible situation, we see all these atrocious circumstances succeed one another, but they occur in a sort of harmonious whole: everything seems to be perfectly balanced. Even our heroine, who is nothing like a Hamlet protesting against everything he witnesses, is part of this harmonious ensemble. This is why the idea of progress as we know it in Europe, does not exist in Russia, because things are experienced like a cycle, an infinite spiral.

The Stalinist show trials of the twenties have never been seriously studied or documented. All the innocent people who were tortured for their confessions knew that they were going to be shot; they cried *"Glory to Stalin!"* as they died, they accepted to play the game and to "confess" to treason. It's a very peculiar psychological state and one that only occurs in this territory. By comparison, I would say that the European or French psyche is similar to the one expressed by Robert Bresson in *A Man Escaped*: there, as an individual, you are not part of the hell in which they want you to sink. In Russia, yes: you are a stakeholder in hell. This is why in Russia, it's so hard to discuss an individual's guilt in specific terms: guilt is always collective, shared by the entire population. Everyone knows this, understands this, feels this, and no one can – and no one wants to – redeem themselves.

We often talk about the "fatalism" of the Slavic soul, which makes it endure everything. With your film, it seems we have gone from fatalism to complete nihilism.

This is not nihilism, it's annihilation. Absolute destruction. A total dehumanisation has occurred since the 1917 revolution. The Western view of Russia is defined by art, painting, literature, film. It's a view that belongs to a long-gone past. The great Russian writers remained in the past. This country's culture really began to take off in the nineteenth century. Considering Russia's pioneering art of the turn of the 20th century, the country could have come out on top at that time, but everything was swept away and we must forget this lost civilization. Rachmaninov was once asked whether he missed his country, if he was nostalgic about it. He replied that he didn't. Why? *"Because that country no longer exists."* I think there was a period of long goodbyes to this broken country, and this farewell ceremony lasted until the end of the sixties. Since then, none of this exists anymore. The economy, medical science, healthcare, and education: everything has been totally destroyed. Just look at the average life expectancy of a Russian man: it is constantly falling and is now around 56 years. In certain fields, the government continues to apply the Bolshevik methods. Let's not forget that the idea of terrorism emerged in Russia: to carry out a public act involving innocent people so as to share the guilt of this act, this is an idea which could only emerge somewhere where life has no real value. Not just any mind can conjure up this idea. It's a sort of budding pseudo-philosophical intellectualism that claims*: "We kill not for our own good, but for the good of others."* It is in Russia, with Nechayev, that this idea was born and it was he who carried the ideology of terrorism to its logical conclusion. It's very interesting to study or try

to understand the intellectual structure of people who act this way today, to try and understand where it stems from.
To understand contemporary Russia, I recommend *Demons* by Dostoyevsky and *Dead Souls* by Gogol: all the principles at work in these novels are still active today. Everything that is said in these books still rings true. As soon as you cross the line that separates humans from the inhuman, it is almost impossible to turn back. Bearing this in mind, the Germans were lucky because the occupying forces forced them to "de-Nazify" German society. Whereas the people of this post-Soviet world continue to exist in the same hell. We thought that with Perestroika the radiant face of the future would emerge, but they were just the same! That was all just another illusion.

Do your films reach their audiences? How are they distributed, how are you perceived in Russia?
I was last in Russia three years ago. I haven't been back since the war began in 2014 and I really don't think it's the best time to return. However, my films have been presented there on a number of occasions: in small festivals, sometimes in rather 'hip' venues. Nonetheless, there is one film that's perhaps too risky to screen: *Maidan*. It's easier to show my documentary *Austerlitz* that has recently been released there. And of course, I hope to share *A Gentle Creature* with Russian audiences very soon. I know that some Russian filmmakers are very interested in my work. I left the country in 2001, sadly aware of the direction it was going in. It all made sense when the parliament was bombarded in 1993 and the tanks arrived. I lost all my illusions after these bombings. There was an idea, a wonderful movement emerging, a unique opportunity, but there was no one there to seize it and make it happen.
I gave up on the idea of changing the state of things with a film a long time ago, but I still believe that a drop of water falling on a stone continues to erode it. If you can develop an idea into a film and share it with the world, this is already a sort of political victory. If you can formulate a story in a country where nothing is ever expressed, this is also an accomplishment. Of course, I'm first and foremost addressing a Russian audience. So it's very sad and extremely disheartening to see the unfortunate situation that the country is in. This war between Russia and Ukraine is senseless and horrendous and will end up destroying both countries. In this case, my sympathy goes to Ukraine because this is where people are fighting for their freedom.
I am not immune to the anxiety that comes with critiques and reviews: how will a film like this be perceived? No one knows and I don't try to second-guess it. We always perceive the world differently from how it really is. I often tell myself that all I'm seeing is a sketched world and I can just tear up the drawing.
I also often have this strange feeling of making films for audiences that are already dead… As if I was turning up too late, always too late, as if all of this should have been done long before. Think of the Gulag, which is probably one of the greatest taboos. There are no longer any Russian films about the Gulag; there have been maybe three or four, that's it. However this is where the fate of hundreds, of thousands, of millions of people, was cut short. But it's taboo. Maybe the ultimate taboo. The whole country is filled with taboos which are never mentioned or even described, and we continue to move forward blindfolded.
The philosopher Alexander Piatigorsky was asked if philosophy was something useful, to which he replied: *"Not in itself. But on a personal level, it can save you".* If we think about this, we can change our way of functioning and learn to open doors which no one else can close. Once you've started thinking, it's difficult to stop. *(Laughs)* That's why it's urgent that we make films dealing with important themes.

You make both fiction and documentary films. How do you draw a line between the two?

The breaks between my fiction films are rather long and I always want to do something else in between. This is when I create my documentaries, as these are not as demanding in terms of production. But fundamentally, I don't really make a difference between the two genres. From my point of view, documentaries don't have anything to do with reality; they are a reconstruction, if not a pure construction. We could say that theoretical physics represents fiction films and experimental physics represents documentary film. So there must be "experimental, theoretical physics" and this is what best describes my work. I really want to continue to do both. Both allow us to discover and understand the world. When cameras were invented, one of the first things we imagined was the scientific value of these instruments. The notion of scientific recording emerges at the same time as the notion of entertainment. People are often scared of the word "science" when it comes to film. It's better to present things in the light of a study. If you claim to be doing something anthropological, you scare the audience away! But that's what I'm doing: visual anthropology, a study of the people around me. All of us can become the subject of a study, whether we like it or not.

SERGEI LOZNITSA

Biography

Born in 1964, Ukrainian filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa grew up in Kiev, and graduated from Kiev Polytechnic in 1987 with a degree in Applied Mathematics. From 1987 to 1991 he worked both as a scientist at the Kiev Institute of Cybernetics, specializing in artificial intelligence research, and as a translator from Japanese.
In 1997 Loznitsa graduated from the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, where he studied feature filmmaking.
Sergei Loznitsa has directed 16 documentary films since 1996 and has received numerous international awards, including festival prizes in Karlovy Vary, Leipzig, Oberhausen, Krakow, Paris, Madrid, Toronto, Jerusalem and St. Petersburg, as well as the Russian National Film awards "Nika" and "Laurel".
Loznitsa's feature debut *My Joy* (2010) premiered in competition at the Festival de Cannes, and was followed by *In the Fog*, which also premiered in competition at the Festival de Cannes in May 2012, where it was awarded the FIPRESCI Prize.
Sergei Loznitsa launched a film production and distribution company ATOMS & VOID in 2013 and continues to work in both documentary and feature genres. His feature-length documentary *Maidan*, dedicated to the revolution in Ukraine, premiered at the Festival de Cannes in 2014. Loznitsa's most recent documentary *Austerlitz* (2016) is a study of the memorial sites open to the public on the locations of former German concentration camps.

Filmography

2016 Austerlitz (documentary)
2015 The Event (documentary)
2014 The Old Jewish Cemetery (documentary)
2014 Maidan (documentary)
2014 Reflections/Bridges of Sarajevo (documentary)
2013 Letter (documentary)
2012 O Milagre de Santo António (documentary)
2012 In the Fog (feature)
2010 My Joy (feature)
2008 Northern Light (documentary)
2006 Artel (documentary)
2008 Revue (documentary)
2005 Blockade (documentary)
2004 Factory (documentary)
2003 Landscape (documentary)
2002 Portrait (documentary)
2001 Settlement (documentary)
2000 The Train Stop (documentary)
1998 Life, Autumn (documentary)
1996 Today We Are Going to Build a House (documentary)

VASILINA MAKOVTSEVA

Biography

Vasilina Makovtseva was born in 14 November 1977 at Touroukhansk, in the Krasnoyarsk region of Russia. Between 1998 and 2003, she studied at the Ekaterinburg State Theatre Institute. Since 2004 she has been working at the Kolyada Theatre. Vasilina has performed in the following roles: Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams. Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya in The Cherry Orchard by Anton Tchekhov Lady Anne in Richard III by William Shakespeare Nina in Masquerade by Mikhaïl Lermontov. Ophelia in Hamlet by William Shakespeare

CAST

A Gentle Creature	Vasilina MAKOVTSEVA
The Compassionate One	Marina KLESHCHEVA
Human Rights Activist	Lia AKHEDZHAKOVA
Blue Face	Valeriu ANDRIUTA
Man With Plaster Cast	Boris KAMORZIN
Gap-Toothed	Sergei KOLESOV

CREW

Scriptwriter and Director	Sergei LOZNITSA
Producer	Marianne SLOT
Executive Producer	Carine LEBLANC
DP	Oleg MUTU, RSC
Production Designer	Kirill SHUVALOV
Sound Designer	Vladimir GOLOVNITSKI
Casting	Maria CHOUSTOVA
Costume Designer	Dorota ROQUEPLO
Make-up	Tamara FRID
Editor	Danielius KOKANAUSKIS
Art Director	Juris ŽUKOVSKIS