Little Vera (Маленькая Вера, Malen'kaia Vera, 1988)

Oleksandr Zabirko

dir. Vasilii Pichul; screenplay Mariia Khmelik; photography Efim Reznikov; music Vladimir Matetskii. 35mm, color, 135 mins. Gorky Film Studio, distrib. Gorky Film Studio.

Little Vera is a late Soviet melodrama, widely renowned as one of the key movies of the Perestroika era. The film's female protagonist, Vera (played by Natalia Negoda) is an emancipated teenager with bright makeup and a trendy hairstyle who is rebelling against her parents, against the men in her life more generally, but also against the grinding poverty and the dull routines of the Soviet way of life.

Advertised as a film about youth rebellion, *Little Vera* shocked the Soviet audience with its painstakingly naturalistic approach as well as its unprecedented amount of violence, nudity, and sex. The film's release in March 1988 marked the ultimate collapse of the Soviet censorship system. Only two years earlier, during the »Leningrad-Boston TV conference,« a Soviet woman, Liudmila Ivanova, coined the proverbial »There is no sex in the U.S.S.R.,« meaning the complete absence of sexual content on TV and in other media. Indeed, even in the foreign films broadcasted in the Soviet Union sexual scenes had always been carefully erased by censors. Unsurprisingly, the explicit sexual images helped *Little Vera* to become a commercial hit both in the U.S.S.R. and in the West, where Natalia Negoda posed nude for the *Playboy* and told her story to *People* magazine.

However, as Roger Ebert aptly noticed in his review on the release of *Little Vera* in the U.S., the film's real fascination comes not from the sex (which is sweaty and passionate but hardly erotic) but rather from its portrait of everyday life in the Soviet Union. Set in the rotting port city of Zhdanov (now Mariupol, Ukraine), the film's opening scene presents an urban skyline dominated by ugly, standardized apartment blocks in front of a gigantic steel plant. Zooming in on one of the apartments, the camera shows the daily chores of Vera's grumpy parents, whose conversation is eclipsed by the energetic beats of the pop song »This Is Not Enough« (performed by Sofia Rotaru).

The story gains momentum when Vera's parents find US$20 in her bag and start a fight about their daughter's going off the rails (in Soviet times, possession of foreign currency was a criminal offense). The parents threaten Vera with Viktor (played by Aleksandr Negreba), her older brother, who had left to be a doctor in Moscow and is now summoned back to talk some sense into his little sister. Unimpressed by these threats, Vera goes to an open-air disco, where she meets handsome and smart Sergei (played by Andrei Sokolov). A fight between rival gangs and the subsequent police raid bring Vera and Sergei together and their relationship takes off. However, Sergei is arrogant and awfully rude to Vera's father, Nikolai (played by Iurii Nazarov), an aggressive drunkard, who is frustrated with his life and is always looking for a fight. The drama culminates when Sergei defies the family rules and Nikolai stabs him with a kitchen knife, causing life-threatening injuries. The young couple faces a dilemma because to testify against Nikolai would mean to send him to jail and to leave the family without a breadwinner. Vera can no longer cope with the situation and tries to commit suicide with pills, but she is saved by her brother and Sergei. While Viktor returns to Moscow and Sergei reconciles with Vera, none of them notices that in the meantime Vera's father has died of heart failure in the kitchen.

The mode of a chamber play, suggestive music, and the excessive emotionality anchor *Little Vera* firmly in the tradition of Soviet melodramatic cinema. However, the popular Soviet melodramas of the 1970s, such as *Stepmother* (1973) and *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979), foregrounded the family as the site of affective discourse without confronting the political and social exigencies of the Soviet reality (First 21). A product of Perestroika, *Little Vera*, on the contrary, targets both the Soviet society and the communist ideology with its sarcastic criticism, but it also subverts some conventional patterns of melodramatic plots to re-define notions of the public and the private.

For instance, the threat of an unplanned pregnancy, a frequent companion of melodramatic love affairs, loses its dreadful aura, as Vera merely pretends that she is pregnant to quarter Sergei as her future husband in the parent's cramped apartment. Instead of focusing on the loving couple's coming to terms with the pregnancy, the film thus makes the housing shortage in the Soviet Union one of its central themes and offers a setting, in which none of the characters can count on a single moment of privacy. Against the backdrop of such inadequate (yet typical) housing conditions, *Little Vera* shifts its focus to the realm of intimacy, where sex functions not as a pinnacle of romantic love but as an activity devoid of intersubjective and emotional involvement (Shcherbenok 141). Finally, the film also inverts the traditional gender roles by portraying Vera as the one who takes the lead in the relationship with Sergei. This inversion, however, remains flat and all too obvious, making the very idea of female emancipation a balancing act between involuntary humor and intentional sarcasm. In a variation of a typical scene of serenading a woman at a window, the film shows Vera in a boyish pose in front of Sergei's house, shouting her lover's name, until Sergei finally shows up and climbs down the ladder.

The Soviet world turned upside down is ultimately represented by Vera's parents, Nikolai and Rita, played by two stars of Soviet cinema, Iurii Nazarov and Liudmila Zaitseva. Their typical roles were staunch party officials and flawless heroes of labor; in *Little Vera*, however, they turn into a violent, alcoholic father who flies into ugly, xenophobic rages and a frustrated, whining mother who is unable to accept that her daughter has a life outside of the home. Both place their hopes in Viktor who somehow

managed to escape the stagnant backwater of the provincial town and built his life in Moscow. Yet Viktor's victory is an illusion: He is, in fact, a broken man, tired of his wife, family, and work. Viktor's pathetic »How I hate you all!«, thrown into the face of his family, resonates with Vera's confession »This is supposed to be the best time of my life, and I want to howl.«

The film's defeatism and hopelessness effectively counterbalance the aspirations of the Perestroika era, which placed the hopes for a better life in political reforms and social changes. *Little Vera*, on the contrary, offers a metaphysical message that is accessible only on the level of symbols. The name of the film's protagonist, Vera, which means »faith« in Russian, is obviously burdened with symbolical meaning. The constant lack of even a »little faith« culminates in the scene of a family picnic on the beach: A storm suddenly comes up and as the family prepares to leave, Vera (and »vera«) is nowhere to be found. While the aimless youth is not capable of producing a »faith« of their own, they treat the »old faith« of the parents with bitter irony. For example, in an erotic interlude on the beach, Vera and Sergei interrupt their lovemaking to discuss their aims in life, and Vera says sarcastically, »In our country, we have but one aim: communism.«

However, the dark pessimism of *Little Vera* does not only result from the political or social situation in the late U.S.S.R. but rather from the film's virulent economy of emotions, where everything turns into feeling and where every feeling acquires the rank of value. Ultimately, even abuse and domestic violence receive a sentimental touch: for instance, when Vera's father shares a sweet memory of how his daughter used to put him to bed, when she was a child (meaning, of course, that he was too drunk to make it there on his own). Yet it is precisely the combination of violence and sentimentality that made *Little Vera* one of the taboo-breaking movies of the 1980s. After *Little Vera*, a growing number of films on previously tabooed subjects, such as crime, prostitution, and domestic violence, began to appear on the screen in the U.S.S.R. and later in the post-Soviet countries.

References

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