

The Nest of the Turtledove (Гніздо горлиці, Hnizdo horlytsi, 2016)

Roman Dubasevych

dir. Taras Tkachenko; prod. Volodymyr Filippov;
screenplay Taras Tkachenko; photography Oleksandr
Zemlianyi; music Stefano Lentini. digital, color, 111
mins. Insight Media Producing Center.

The Nest of the Turtledove is an adaption of a novel by author Vasyl Mel'nyk, whose original screenplay version of the story received the prestigious Koronatsiia slova Award. In addition to Italian co-funding, the film was sponsored by the Ukrainian State Film Agency—created, it should be noted, under the rule of authoritarian president Viktor Ianukovych—and received several national and international awards, including the Golden Duke for Best Ukrainian Feature Film at the Odessa International Film Festival in 2016 (Nanchino). The start of *The Nest's* production coincided with the outbreak of the Euromaidan protests and the war in Donbas—events that considerably delayed the film's release, but which make it an even more important document of its time. Director Taras Tkachenko viewed the »documentary« quality of his film as an expression of *Kulturkampf* for an ambitious Ukrainian cinema pitted against Russian mass production, thereby echoing the growing military confrontation.

There are a number of reasons to categorize Tkachenko's film as a landmark in the development of contemporary Ukrainian cinema. Being about a migrant Ukrainian woman working as a housekeeper in Italy and desperately trying to keep her family together, the work makes for a remarkable melodrama. First, thematically: the film's focus on migration touches upon an issue that, although an everyday experience of many Ukrainians after the fall of the Iron Curtain, has been rarely addressed in national, even post-Soviet, cinema. Second, its depiction of the challenges and pains of leaving family and home not only lent a voice to the millions who left Ukraine »in search of a better life« since 1991—but the film's female protagonist, Daryna (played by Rymma Ziubina), specifically embodies the crucial dynamic of gender in migration, al-



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ready epitomized in the literature under the snappy name »skype mama« (Brunner et al.). In addition to problems of migrant motherhood, the film furthermore negotiates the issue of abortion and deals with a perceived crisis of hegemonic masculinity that has been exacerbated by Ukraine's difficult post-Soviet transformation. Finally, the cinematic toolbox the film employs to highlight its melodramatic core and its central conflicts also deserves attention. Contradictions emerge from the tension between the heroine's drive for emancipation from the social, moral, and cultural pressures at home and abroad, on the one hand, and her paradoxical reinscription into the patriarchal symbolic order, which she had struggled to escape, on the other hand. Despite the film's unequivocal categorization as melodrama, its generic structure is far from homogeneous—its transnational narrative is mirrored in a hybrid cinematic form, combining elements of Soviet social melodrama, especially the »village film« (*derevenskoe kino*), the arthouse film exploring marginalized social issues, and even of documentary film. Several scenes, such as those showing Easter church services in Ukraine and Italy, were shot with real villagers and migrants—with one, the heroine's house, even providing the film's eponymous location.

The Nest tells the story of Daryna, a Ukrainian woman from a Carpathian village in the historical region of Bukovyna, who, as many Ukrainians do, heads to the West to support her family. Thanks to her immigrant network, notably her shrewd neighbor Halyna (played by Nataliia Vas'ko), she finds a job as *badante*, a caretaker and housekeeper, in the home of the divorced Genovese lawyer Alessandro (Mauro Cipriani) and his mother, Vittoria (Lina Bernardi). Nevertheless, the heroine's arrival in the West is marred by a cold and unwelcoming reception. Alessandro's mother rejects the newcomer, making Daryna's arduous job emotional torture. For instance, at the beginning of their relationship Vittoria begrudges Daryna for calling her family in Ukraine, suspects her of stealing jewelry, and generally dehumanizes her. Meanwhile, Alessandro develops a passion for Daryna, whom he, unlike his autocratic and ill-tempered *mamma*, treats fairly from the very beginning, introducing her step by step into his bourgeois Italian home.

The images of the refined and rich (but distant and cool-colored Italy) alternate with episodes from Daryna's humble Ukrainian home. On the one hand, the viewer immediately feels the abyss between the living standards of both countries. Yet the inconveniences of the rural life in a bitterly poor mountain village are—somewhat stereotypically—compensated by the warmheartedness of its dwellers. The rural community still functions as a big family, indicating Daryna's first »nest.« Consequently, the protagonist's self-sacrifice abroad is primarily motivated by her will to support her student daughter and her husband, Dmytro (played by Vitalii Linets'kyi), both representing Daryna's immediate home—her second, but most important, »nest.« In this respect, the film's ornithological title goes beyond mere tribute to Ukrainian folklore and popular culture, with their traditional metaphorization of women and mothers as *horlytsia* (»turtledove«) destined »to build a nest.« The money Daryna earns abroad is not only spent on food but is invested into a new country house that will be rented to tourists and thus create an economic basis for her loved ones. Daryna's husband, though jobless and often drunk, does his best, too, to realize this goal.

Hence, the humble but humane microcosm of the post-Soviet Ukrainian village and the isolated private household of Daryna's Italian employer represent the central melodramatic extremes that tear apart the film's protagonist. To complicate the situa-

tion, the relationship between Alessandro and Daryna becomes an intimate one. After two years in Italy, Daryna is not only more fluent in the language of her hosts and assimilating to their habits, but she is also pregnant from Alessandro—a narrative twist that contributes considerably to the melodramatic pathos of the film. Daryna's best intentions to better the economic situation of her family result in a double life and an unwanted pregnancy, threatening her family life's very existence. To solve this intractable melodramatic dilemma, she decides to return home and abort the baby—one of the film's many moments of verisimilitude that point to migrants' dependence on deficient domestic health care.

At this point, the film's narrative doubles in a characteristic way. Having arrived home for the abortion, Daryna finds her daughter, Myroslava (played by Oleksandra Syzonenko), in similar turmoil. She is also pregnant and the child's father, the decadent young son of her university rector, refuses to support her, underlining the moral corruption of an increasingly unjust Ukrainian society.

Yet the boy's influential father's offer to pay for an abortion provokes a contrarian reaction in both women. Supported by her mother, Myroslava decides to keep the baby, a step that motivates Daryna to keep hers, as well. Both mother and daughter return to their home village. After tense discussion, a distrustful and humiliated Dmytro finally accepts the male offspring and reconciles with his wife. The social and moral equilibrium is also restored for Myroslava. Although she loses her child after a troublesome encounter with her reckless lover, she finds a humble and acquiescent husband in her neighbor Mykhas. Both families, united by place and the fates of their migrant mothers, become kin through the wedding of their children. The traditional Hutsul ceremony seems to provide important harmonizing relief from the considerable moral tensions arising from the extramarital relations of absent women, which also stand for new cultural experiences, gained away from the village by Daryna, Halyna, and Myroslava. Through the traditional rituals and songs, both female heroines again become authentic *berehynias* (Ukrainian sacral term for the female head of the family and »preservers of the hearth«). However, this bucolic scene of reconciliation does not last long. Missing Daryna and ready to take responsibility as father of the child, Alessandro insistently calls on his Ukrainian lover and threatens to disturb this new Carpathian idyll.

Alessandro's reappearance in the final scene betrays not only the return of a repressed desire for a caring and cultivated »European« man on the part of Daryna. His reemergence furthermore exposes the painful contradictions and transcultural continuities in the ideological structure of the film. It suggests that Daryna's struggle for self-determination culminates in her return to her home village. Her repatriation is critical because it means a reintegration into the patriarchal order, where Daryna pretends to find her place and peace. However, the ironic twist of such a denouement also hides the fact that as an ideal Ukrainian mother—caring, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry—Daryna is now forced to perform the same duties as in Italy, yet under much less rewarding circumstances.

This tension also marks the interplay of the film's visual, musical, narrative, and ideological regimes. Its images are slow and poetic, allowing time and space for sympathizing with the protagonist and her inner turmoil. Above all, director Tkachenko brings to the fore places and objects that are avoided and stigmatized as *chornukha* (from the Russian *chernukha*, or »doom-mongering«) in mainstream post-Soviet cin-

ema. The mundane details of the migrant experience: the destitute infrastructure of Ukrainian mountain villages, a battered enamel mug hanging on the pipe of a mountain spring, the iconic beat-up taxi busses connecting villages and cities, Sunday church services in Ukraine and Italy.

Unique settings are beautifully complemented by Stefano Lentini's music, which guides us through Daryna's inner life. In melodramatic terms, the heroine's inner conflict is primarily rendered through the constant juxtaposition of the two worlds of Ukraine and Italy. This binary effect is further intensified by the extensive use of analepses and prolepses, reflecting Daryna's emotional disarray. Apart from the nuanced portrayal of its main character, the film clearly shows that family dramas in Ukraine and Italy are surprisingly similar, despite unequal living standards and cultural differences. The melodramatic »excess of emotion« is further secured by a peculiar technique—the Italian episodes are not subtitled, but in Italian. Surprisingly, such bilingualism does not impede the general understanding of the film. It almost forces, with great intensity, the viewer to carefully listen and re-experience Daryna's being lost in translation. Even as Daryna acquires a fair command of the language and changes her clothes »to become an Italian woman,« as one of her fellow villagers ambiguously remarks, inside she remains firmly tied up within the boundaries of her native culture with its traditional, patriarchal order: a stunning continuity connecting *The Nest* to another migration masterpiece, Petr Todorovskii's melodrama *Intergirl* (*Interdevochka*, 1989). Despite the differences in time, political and economic systems, and cultural borders, the two films nonetheless share a striking tendency to bring their women back home, to their families and local husbands. Moreover, both films issue serious moral warnings against any kind of emancipatory adventures, at home or abroad—in contradiction to a poetic and sympathetic portrayal of their female protagonists' genuine drive for liberation.

References

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