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# Double framing in *Lilya 4-Ever*: Sex trafficking and postsocialist abjection

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**Abstract**

The image of the trafficked woman from a former state socialist country has come to symbolize the global crisis in sex trafficking. The 'Natasha' image is also a referent for the failure of state socialism. This article provides an analysis of the film *Lilya 4-Ever* (dir. Lukas Moodyson, 2002) to show how both sex trafficking and postsocialism are framed in representations of sex trafficking. The film presents the problem of sex trafficking in two covertly problematic ways, narrowing the issue to prostitution and illegal migration. While the film avoids voyeurism of sexual violence, this is replaced by voyeurism of postsocialist abjection. Postsocialist abjection is aesthetically captured as an eternal state of collapse. Thus, the tragedy of sex trafficking is the result of and a symbol for the failure (post-)state socialism.

**Keywords**

Abject, *Lilya 4-Ever*, postsocialism, sex trafficking, transnational cinema

**Introduction**

The classically 'abject' experience is that of the corpse, that is, something that was once a subject and is now an object, but an object to which cling all the properties, particularities, appearances and memories of a subject. (Elsaesser, 2010: 119)

It turned into a film about two children, Lilya and Volodya, who live in a country that was once part of the mighty Soviet empire and which now lies in ruins. (Lukas Moodysson, director's comment released by MEMFIS film production company)

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the image of the trafficked woman from former state socialist countries has come to signify the global crisis in sex trafficking: beautiful and naïve ‘Natashas’ entered the international trade in sex slaves, opening the formerly closed economies of state socialism to the market forces of transnational crime and sexualized labor. As the newest victims of sex trafficking, the exposure of the ‘Natasha trade’ politicized the issue of sex trafficking since the end of the Cold War (Hughes, 2001).<sup>1</sup> However, due to the close association between the collapse of the USSR and the explosion of sex trafficking, the image of Natasha also generates meanings for defining postsocialism:<sup>2</sup> It has become a referent for the failure of state socialism, or what I define as postsocialist abjection.<sup>3</sup> The image of the victim of sex trafficking reflects deeper beliefs in the western imaginary about the downfall of state socialism.

There are now numerous documentaries, news reports and feature films depicting sex trafficking.<sup>4</sup> Feminists primarily have analysed representations of sex trafficking in terms of their political content as it pertains to anti-trafficking policy debates. In addition, theorists have evaluated the male gaze common to the voyeurism of sexualized violence that often is depicted in representations of sex trafficking. This work is important for understanding what is at stake in different representations of, and policies toward, sex trafficking. In this article I interject an additional lens for examining the messages embedded in representations of sex trafficking. I am interested in how cultural productions aimed at educating the public about sex trafficking are contextualized in culturally specific ways. In particular, I am concerned about how the problem of sex trafficking is framed geopolitically in the post-Cold War period. Sex trafficking is a transnational phenomenon and thus exceeds the boundaries of the nation-state, yet the victims and perpetrators of sex trafficking are localized. I am specifically interested in how sex trafficking as a morally outrageous crime is represented as an effect of postsocialism; more precisely, how sex trafficking is a reminder of the failure of state socialism.

I turn to Lukas Moodysson’s widely viewed film, *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002) to analyse representations of both sex trafficking and postsocialism. As a film that is commonly used as an anti-trafficking tool, *Lilya* is a compelling cultural production as a transnational film that speaks to a transnational phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Shot in Paldiski, Tallinn, Trollättan and Malmö, the Swedish director Moodysson enlisted native Russian speakers in order to ensure cultural authenticity. He wrote the script in Swedish and then had it translated into Russian. Speaking about the project, Moodysson explains that he directed by interpreting emotions because he does not know Russian; he allowed the actors to improvise, and often did not know what they were saying (Michael, 2003). The film could be mistaken as one made by native Russian speakers.<sup>6</sup> However, as I argue, there are important ways that this attempt at authenticity plays into a problematic framing of the postsocialist context. Despite its wide use as an anti-trafficking tool in former state socialist countries, I suggest that the film privileges a gaze that objectifies postsocialist abjection.<sup>7</sup>

The film dramatises one young girl’s tragic story of sex trafficking. I analyse how sex trafficking is represented in the film in terms of the dominant policy debates that animate global anti-trafficking discourses. The overt message of the film provides overwhelming sympathy towards trafficking victims. Yet, there are two more subtle messages about prostitution and migration that situate *Lilya* within the ethical and political debates that

are a part of current discourses on sex trafficking. It is with these two cautionary tales that I suggest the film fails to advance a more sophisticated grasp of the complexities of sex trafficking, and specifically in the post-state socialist region.

While the film may be faulted for an overly simplified depiction of sex trafficking, it avoids the voyeurism that is so often part of the aesthetics of representing sexual violence. Recently, critics have looked at the problematic images of women and violence that are used to politicize the issue of sex trafficking and other forms of gender violence (Andrijasevic, 2007; Bumiller, 2008; Hesford, 2005). Moodysson successfully avoids the typical voyeurism of sexual violence: as a film depicting sex trafficking, the audience is left with a feeling of outrage. The message of the film is that sex trafficking is tragic; however, that message is not conveyed by the objectification of sexualized violence. In fact, I suggest that there is no clear message about preventing systematic sexual violence produced by the film. The audience is meant to feel, but not necessarily to think. The powerful affect produced by the film is generated by a voyeurism of postsocialist abjection: the voyeurism that is common to representations of sexualized violence is replaced by postsocialist abjection in the film. Indeed, Lilya's postsocialist context is a competing actor in the film, and is depicted as morose and abjected.

## **Lilya and anti-trafficking**

*Lilya* narrates the making of a sex trafficking victim and compels the audience to care. The film's narrative and production is emotionally powerful. The horrors presented are excessive, which results in an unambiguous message about the evils of sex trafficking. Thus, the film is successful in politicizing the issue of sex trafficking. Given that the film is used to warn the public about sex trafficking, it is important to evaluate what messages it presents about why sex trafficking happens. In this section, I analyse how the film depicts the multiple forces that engineer Lilya's victimization, and how those depictions frame the problem of sex trafficking. Specifically I locate two cautionary tales in the film: an anti-prostitution message, and a warning against illegal labor migration. There are no neutral representations of sex trafficking: there is always something at stake when a director, government or non-governmental organization decides to present the problem in a particular way. All anti-trafficking tools are set within an agenda that rests on particular views of what the sources of trafficking are, and what the harm or violations are.

In November 2003, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began a counter-trafficking campaign in Moldova, using the film *Lilya 4-Ever* as the centerpiece of its media strategy. Allan Freedman, the IOM's Chief of Mission, stated: 'We created the *Lilya 4-Ever* campaign so we could all gain a better understanding of the realities of human trafficking' (International Organization for Migration, 2004). The movie was broadcast on Moldovan television as well as widely distributed in cinemas across the country. The aim of the campaign was to inform young Moldovans between the ages of 14 and 30 who are female, poor, rural and lacking education (International Organization for Migration, 2004). Since its release in 2002, the film has received broad international acclaim and has had an impact on anti-trafficking campaigns across Europe. For example, in addition to the IOM program in Moldova, it was screened

before the deputies of the Moscow City *Duma*, spurring their action to combat child prostitution (Vansovich, 2003). Clearly, the film presents a moral argument against sex trafficking and has been a useful tool for politicizing the issue – but what exactly does Lilya's story tell us about trafficking?

The plot of the film is focused on the lost childhood of Lilya, a 16-year-old girl who lives with her mother in an undisclosed post-Soviet town.<sup>8</sup> Lilya's mother abandons her early on in the film, by leaving for America with her boyfriend. Lilya's hopes of going to 'Amerika' are dashed, and then made worse by the deep trauma of abandonment. Lilya is betrayed by her remaining kin, a malcontent and drunkard aunt who kicks her out of the house and sends her to live in a dilapidated apartment whose previous tenant (an elderly Second World War veteran) had just died. With no family and few friends, she is forced to navigate the harsh world that surrounds her. Poverty is the overwhelming context of her life. When she is abandoned, we witness a child's response to indigence. Lilya experiences new freedoms as well, from hanging out with friends and fantasizing about the future to experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

Despite her negligent mother, Lilya is presented as an innocent girl with a moral compass. A portrait of angels accompanies Lilya throughout the film and represents her status as a pure soul. In the last scene we see Lilya and her friend Volodja wearing angel wings. Lilya is framed as an innocent victim institutionally, because she is only 16, but also metaphorically, given that she is depicted as naïve in comparison to her peers.<sup>9</sup> For example, it is Lilya who shockingly learns that her friend Natasha is willing to sell sex for money. The two friends 'doll up' and head for the city to go to a dance club. There they meet men who are willing to pay for their drinks and more. At first Lilya refuses and witnesses her friend's easy transaction. When asked how it went, Natasha replies '*normal' no*' ('normal, the usual') – an indication of a common transaction in the young girl's life. Natasha too betrays Lilya when she blames her sudden cash flow on Lilya in order to save face with her parents and peers. Lilya is left with just one friend, the young Volodja, who is an orphan to dysfunctional parents. The two become each other's family. We learn that Lilya's mother has officially disowned her, and because she is still a minor, Lilya is left to the care of a crumbling state that has no social safety net. Now faced with the reality of having no one to take care of her, Lilya is pushed into the world of prostitution and trafficking.

The avalanche of push factors presented in the film is excessive, but help to ensure Lilya's unambiguous innocence. The vulnerabilities that Lilya experiences, including the lack of family and social services, make her easy prey for the handsome trafficker Andrei. Once Lilya hits rock bottom, she turns to the local sexualized labor economy that Natasha showed her. Eschewing her moral reservations from before, Lilya returns to the urban dance club to earn cash. She is physically repulsed by the work, but empowered by her ability to buy food and a gift for Volodja. Importantly, it is in her movement between town and city that Andrei finds her; thus her activity in local sexual exchange is linked to sex trafficking and global sexual economies. However, it was not necessary for Lilya to have 'chosen' prostitution in her local context in order to be approached by Andrei. He was never in the bar – at least that we can see – but is shown first as an outsider to that world. Thus, Lilya's engagement with prostitution before being trafficked serves as a warning that any prostitution is linked to sexual slavery everywhere. The film questions

whether it is possible to engage in sex work and exist in a morally and physically safe place. Lilya's brief encounter with local prostitution cautions all young women against this strategy as a safe solution to economic desperation.

With the message that young women should be suspicious of local sexual labor, the film privileges an anti-prostitution worldview. Because Lilya, not Natasha, is the ethical focus of the film, her narrative of victimization begins with the violation that she experiences at her first consensual sexual exchange (she vomits afterwards). Through Lilya we see why the 'choice' of prostitution was doomed from the beginning. It was never meant to be a way out of her economic hardship. Lilya's life is so bleak and vulnerable to sexual violence prior to being trafficked that the experience of sexual slavery in Sweden becomes a gratuitous statement about the intersection of poverty and sexual violence.

Importantly, the critique of prostitution in the film is not focused on Lilya's agency – a controversial issue that is avoided easily by making her a minor. From the very beginning of the film Lilya lacks agency and is a victim of repetitive acts of abandonment and violence. Rather, the critique of prostitution rests on the portrayal of masculinity as cruel and grotesque. Volodja, also a minor, is the only male figure in the film that has redeeming qualities. We come away from the film overwhelmingly sympathetic to Lilya, and thoroughly disgusted by the men who violate her. This message is achieved visually in the forced sex scenes in Sweden. In these scenes Lilya experiences forced sex, but the viewer also is forced to see the faces of the multiple men who violate her. The camera closely focuses on the men's faces from Lilya's perspective. This visual arrangement situates the viewer in the position of victim and forces the audience to take on the emotions of that experience. There is no mistaking that prostitution is a sexual violation: the absence of a visual object of victimization in these scenes forces the viewer to equate prostitution with rape.

The covert anti-prostitution message of the film is more overtly present in the Moscow City *Duma* discussions around the film. The prominent US feminist Donna Hughes was present for the viewing. Her anti-trafficking work is solidly grounded in an anti-prostitution or abolitionist position. Hughes was instrumental in advancing US policy on anti-trafficking, and possibly more indirectly on Russian policy. Her position at the *Duma* meeting, to which she was invited, was that governments that legalize prostitution as a profession 'acquire significant economic stake in the sex industry' (Vansovich, 2003). Rather than legalize prostitution, Hughes believes governments should punish the men who buy sexual services (Vansovich, 2003).<sup>10</sup> News reporting of the *Duma* discussions stated that the deputies 'unanimously agreed that movies, advertising, books, fashions, music and especially media create a false picture of prostitution' (Vansovich, 2003: 7). Citing films such as *Interdevochka* (*Intergirl*) and *Pretty Woman*, the report explained that *Lilya 4-Ever* is a more accurate portrayal of prostitution. This discussion at the city *Duma* further suggests that the film frames the problem of sex trafficking as one of prostitution. In the end, the deputies unanimously declared their opposition to legalize prostitution. Thus, while the film is associated regularly with anti-trafficking campaigns, on a deeper level these campaigns carry an abolitionist approach to anti-trafficking.

By having Lilya sell sex for money, *Lilya* is situated within the messy debate between pro-sex worker rights and anti-prostitution approaches to anti-trafficking.<sup>11</sup> Given that Lilya is lured to Sweden with the promise of romance and farm work, it was not necessary for her to engage in sex work in order to be trafficked. Yet, because she does engage

in sex work and this is presented as one of the main tools of sex trafficking, the film provides an anti-prostitution message as part of its moral outrage against sex trafficking. Moodysson may have wanted to extend that critique of prostitution – and as discussed earlier, the film presents a provocative take on sexual violence, inverting the typical gaze used in such scenes. My interest in the presentation of pre-trafficking prostitution in the film is in the fact that it is privileged, while at the same time being one of many horrors in Lilya's life. The plethora of struggles in Lilya's life (abandonment, poverty, sexual violence, etc.) could serve individually as push factors for sex trafficking. Thus, in the end, the film presents an excessive picture of trafficking which, while emotionally effective, leaves the audience too numb to think about a clear anti-trafficking position.

The film also presents a cautionary tale of illicit migratory labor. Lilya trusts Andrei to transport her to Sweden for work and to make a new life together. The tactics of forged passports, trafficking middlemen and deception are portrayed accurately in the film. The audience is educated about how traffickers are not often strangers, but people that one knows and trusts. We also learn about how consent is a part of the trafficking experience. Lilya is never forced to take the forged passport or to get on the airplane headed to Sweden – despite the fact that Andrei ducks out at the last minute. While poverty and lack of social support drive her towards desperation, she fully consents to illegal migration. Lilya's desire to leave and escape her circumstances serves as the final push factor. In fact, from the very beginning of the film, when she still believes that her family is moving to America, Lilya fantasizes about leaving.

The role of labor migration has been somewhat less controversial than prostitution in the anti-trafficking policy debates since the 1990s. Illegal migration is contentious, but the moral outrage carried by the abolitionist position that views prostitution as sexual slavery, thus sex trafficking, is most prominent in public discourse and media representations of trafficking. Labor migration does not carry the same moral register that sexualized violence does in sex trafficking discourses.<sup>12</sup> Rather, as a cautionary tale about labor migration, *Lilya* may play into some older tropes about 'selling out' the nation. Lilya's dreaming of America and overly childish romanticization of Sweden (she does not even know where it is) is not just a strategy to escape poverty, but tied to a desire to leave a home or country that no longer has symbolic meaning.

At the beginning of the film, she flaunts her soon-to-be cancelled trip to America. Curiously, we also see that Lilya's mother leaves her daughter for life in the USA with a man about whom we know little. When her aunt suggests that her mother 'spread her legs' to make money, the idea that her mother is also precariously caught up in sexualized labor becomes a possibility. The mother could be a mail-order bride, or a prostitute 'liberated' from her work through marriage – not unlike Tanya in *Interdevochka*. Interestingly, the shots of her mother's abandonment of Lilya closely mirror Lilya's own abandonment of Volodya, when she reluctantly gets into her trafficker's car. These mirrored scenes hint at a generational repetition of victimization and migration. In neither case does migration result in an unambiguous, better life. Although we do not know what happens to Lilya's mother, we do know that her leaving results in the abandonment, violation and death of her daughter.

The cautionary tales about prostitution and labor migration situate the film within the contentious and multifaceted debates that are part of sex trafficking discourses. I suggest

that *Lilya 4-Ever* uncritically situates Lilya in a totalized world of violence, the primary being the sexual violence of prostitution. It may be that Moodysson chose to present prostitution as sexual violence unambiguously in order to ensure a morally clear response against sex trafficking. However, that lack of ambiguity comes at a cost. The utter lack of agency in Lilya's life, including her young age, circumvents the sticky issues that are in fact major realities to sex trafficking. For example, we do not see how women or girls involved in precarious sexual labor have agency and can become the victims of violence. We see that clients and pimps enact violence. However, police and government officials also perpetrate that violence, many of whom act in the name of 'anti-trafficking' (Agathangelou and Ling, 2003; DeStefano, 2008; Soderlund, 2005; Thrupkaew, 2009). Moreover, we do not see how women's migratory labor is precarious and susceptible to sexual violence, even when it does not end in forced prostitution. These and other realities complicate the overly determined and simplified story presented in *Lilya 4-Ever*. Thus, the film has its limitations as an anti-trafficking tool.

### Locating victimization: postsocialist abjection

Interestingly, the film does avoid some of the voyeurism typical of representations of sex trafficking in the media. In Rutvica Andrijasevic's (2007) analysis of the IOM's counter-trafficking poster campaigns in the Czech Republic and Baltic states, she argues that the images of female bodies present a victimized body: inert and scarred. These bodies are to be gazed at and objectified. The use of sexualized and victimized images of women's bodies in the posters lends a voyeuristic gaze, even while attempting to warn the public about the presence of sex trafficking. Andrijasevic argues that due to the objectification of the victimized female in the posters, the 'real' message of the campaign is to prevent women's migration within Europe.

Film theorists have explained that voyeurism is a process of looking, engineered by images and narrative, that positions 'the woman' as an object of the male gaze (De Lauretis, 1987; Mulvey, 1975). The object of voyeurism is passive and cannot return the gaze. There is also an illicit pleasure with looking at this inert object. It is easy to see how a voyeuristic gaze is difficult to avoid in representations of sex trafficking, because its central harm is fixated on sexual violence. This fixation is consolidated in the image of a passive female victim of sexual violence. The harm of sex trafficking is focused also on the individual victim, rather than looking at structural social and economic violence. Thus, in policy and media campaigns, sex trafficking is represented in a testimonial mode. The voyeurism associated with the image of the sex trafficking victim is mutually constitutive of the image of the rights-bearing individual whose sexual inviolability is of primary concern.

*Lilya 4-Ever* circumvents some of the pitfalls of voyeurism in both the cinematic representations of sexual violence and the narrative structure of the film. While Lilya lacks agency, her position as an object of visual pleasure is disrupted in two important ways. Most provocatively, the sexual victimization that she undergoes in Sweden inverts the typical gaze presented in such scenes. As mentioned previously, the audience is forced to witness the men's faces, one after another, as she is pimped through the night. The possibility of titillation is circumvented by the repulsion that the viewer feels towards

the strangers who sexually violate her – and who are most likely oblivious to her utter and total non-consent. Visually, Lilya is most beautiful in her innocence, not when she is altered for sexual labor. This juxtaposition between beauty and prostitution is made explicit when she cuts her hair with a razor blade and violently applies lipstick to her face in a protest against her pimp. Despite her ugliness (and the winter hat she is forced to now wear), men use her ‘services’.

In addition to these visual aspects of the film, the narrative challenges a voyeuristic representation of sexual violence. Interestingly, as a feature film about trafficking, *Lilya 4-Ever* largely takes place prior to the violation of trafficking. The time in Sweden takes up only 30 minutes of the approximately 100 minutes of the film. The audience is so emotionally exhausted by the time that she is actually trafficked, that the sexual victimization she experiences in Sweden does not serve as a climax, rather as excess. This excess is not pleasurable, but exhausting, troubling and dystopic. Because the weight of the narrative is prior to trafficking, there is less emphasis on the consumption of the trafficking victim. Indeed, for the majority of the film the viewer is consuming poverty, loss of identity and stagnation. I argue that it is in the very lack of voyeurism of sexual violence that the film displaces sexual violence for postsocialist abjection. The voyeurism of the filmic gaze is of postsocialist abjection.

Lilya is a victim of sex trafficking, but her experience represents more than that of any individual victim. She is the product of, and represents, the post-Soviet descent into postsocialism. Postsocialism is represented as the quality of being an embalmed corpse. Like Lenin’s body, postsocialism lies there with no future outside of its reference to the past. Postsocialism cannot generate new meaning, but can be used repeatedly as a reminder of failure and someone else’s triumph.<sup>13</sup> We can turn to Julia Kristeva’s classic work on abjection to analyse how postsocialist abjection is crafted in the film. For Kristeva, the corpse is the ultimate referent of abjection. She writes: ‘The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life’ (1982: 4). Postsocialism infects the young life of Lilya and dooms her to victimization. As Kristeva hauntingly claims, the abject is:

immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that *uses the body for barter* instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you. (1982: 4; emphasis added)

Indeed, sex trafficking is a primary register of postsocialist abjection, for it reveals how the body is bartered and betrayed – by the state, friends and even family.

This frame of postsocialism as abjection helps us to understand why postsocialism has come to be so closely associated with the horrors of sex trafficking. As stated previously, women are being trafficked all over the world, but the image of the beautiful ‘Natasha’ has come to represent both all of sex trafficking and, as we see here, the abject state of postsocialism itself. Since the collapse of the USSR, the former Second World lost its world-historical subject position as the communist threat to First World power. The former Second World fell from ideological ‘other’ to postsocialist abjection. No longer respected for its theoretical alternative to capitalism, postsocialism now is the eternal referent to that failure, entombed forever in its past. The image of the sex trafficking victim is a symbol

of that failure: she is the victim of failed state socialism which is now caught up in a double helix of failure (postsocialism) and power (global capitalism). Thus postsocialism and sex trafficking are mutually reinforcing tropes as sites of tragedy. The voyeurism in the film is not of Lilya's victimized body, but of the failed state that lies in ruin and cannot protect an innocent child from daily structural and sexual violence. Postsocialist abjection is produced by the voyeurism of this tragic failure.

An uncritical and oversimplified western gaze of former state socialist societies produces postsocialist abjection. Unlike the *chernukha* ("black" or "dark") cinema associated with the bleak and hopeless worldview of many late *perestroika* films in Russia, postsocialist abjection is a mythologizing of that loss in the post-Soviet landscape.<sup>14</sup> Like the voyeurism of sexualized violence, postsocialist abjection cannot return the gaze. It is cemented in location, both geographically and historically. Postsocialism is static – in a permanent state of failure – but is not lifeless. Generations of new blood inhabit this space. This is in part the tragedy of Lilya's life. She is doomed to suffer the effects of the previous grand failure. In the film, the audience plays witness to this suffering, and in that witnessing there is an illicit pleasure from looking at the postsocialist abject from the perspective of the western gaze.

The postsocialist abject is produced in the film both through the narrative of Lilya's victimization, and in providing the backdrop for that victimization. The multiple aesthetics of temporality in the film suggest that Lilya is doomed due to her location in postsocialism. She is not a random victim of sex trafficking. In addition to the temporal messages in the film, I analyse the how Lilya's trauma is mapped onto the greater trauma of state socialist failure. I argue that the film presents the failure of state socialism as the primary cause of Lilya's trauma (and why she is trafficked). This is an important gesture in the film, because it shows how economic and social structures are embedded in sex trafficking. Compared to the reading of the film I presented in the first part of the article, we cannot simply condemn sex trafficking as the evil product of prostitution or illegal migration. We also must look to state economic policies and the violence that they can enact. However, the abjection of postsocialism in the film exonerates the West (represented as Sweden), while raising the question of these socio-economic causes. Thus the abjection of postsocialism allows a focus on societal causes, but only insofar as they are characterized as failures of the postsocialist state, and not the common economic policies that fuel precarious labor across the globe.

### *Temporality*

The story of Lilya is a story of the eternal return of the same. There is no teleological progression, even if life appears to be repeating itself. Lilya is more than an anti-trafficking poster-child: as the title states, her life is a story of eternal return, Lilya *forever*. However, Lilya's eternal life is more like purgatory; she is stuck (doomed). The circular and mirroring details of the film construct this temporality, but it is not just of Lilya's life. Lilya is only a minor; she cannot be the sole subject of the film. Rather, it is her context (where she lives, her family, her state) that serves as the complementary subject of the film. Considering that the majority of the film takes place prior to Lilya being trafficked,

and that Lilya's life is only dramatised in film because of that trafficking, we must look at the enormous but subtle subject of postsocialism in the film.

The movie begins with Lilya running, searching and clearly panicked. In her ubiquitous postsocialist tracksuit, Lilya's heart is pounding as the soundtrack beats out 'mein herz brennt'. This is how the movie begins and ends. This circularity sets the temporality of the narrative: we begin and end in the same place. Lilya is looking for the end, which is also the beginning. Once she finds the bridge that she uses to exit her cruel life, she transforms into an angel. Her winged existence symbolizes innocence and purity, but she does not transcend her existence. It seems that she will look forever onto the landscape of her mortal life. Lilya and Volodya race along the rooftops of their dilapidated townscape, free of their burdens, but remain where they came from.

This circularity of the narrative is not about liberation, but tragedy. The film presents Lilya's story starting from what will be the end of her life. She is about to become a corpse and this, her death, is the referent for why her life has meaning and representation. Lilya becomes a subject in death because she becomes a victim of sex trafficking. Her status as victim symbolizes the ontological stagnation of postsocialism. It too has meaning in death, and is eternally a referent to that failure. The film presents Lilya's context as a monolithic place of poverty, loss and hopelessness. The adults who populate her world cannot be trusted. These qualities of her environment loom large in the film, both visually and in terms of the narrative. As mentioned previously, the plot is set up so that the audience is sympathetic towards Lilya. She is just a child, and we come to judge her context for the role that it plays in her victimization. Lilya inhabits a land that is failed. She lives in the skeleton of former power. This is the unique quality of postsocialist poverty. Unlike the poverty of underdevelopment, postsocialist poverty is remarkable for being rundown. It is a place where there once was industrial productivity, full employment and a sense of purpose. Like the Pentagon building, where Volodya and Lilya go for refuge and to sniff glue, we see that there once was life there. In fact, we learn that Volodya's father once worked there, making munitions. The building is now a ghost, a broken-down building that forever reminds those around it of what once was, and what is no longer. It is a sign of loss.

The Pentagon building is also the only refuge that Volodya and Lilya have, yet they never experienced the Soviet past as grandeur (even if only ideologically). The Pentagon building is a surrogate parent and state. It is a ghost for the mother who abandons, the father who abuses, or the state that forgets. It symbolizes these things not because the actual building is a metaphor for Lilya and Volodya, but because this Soviet relic is forever part of their landscape. Regardless of the generations that pass, postsocialism will never exceed the boundaries of its referent: state socialism. Thus the scenes at the Pentagon building represent postsocialist abjection as a temporality of eternal loss. The rundown apartment that Lilya is sent to also represents this temporality, as it was once the functioning apartment of a Second World War veteran. In his lifetime, the apartment crumbled along with the value of the war hero; and like the Pentagon, the apartment is a ghost from the past. The kids who live and play in it now have no personal memory of the supposedly glorious times past; they only know its current, rundown existence. When

they find a box of old medals, it is like they are in Egypt and have found interesting artifacts of a past civilization.

This temporality of the eternal return is subtly crafted also by the mirrored stories of Lilya and her mother. As mentioned previously, we learn through Lilya's aunt, Ana, that her mother probably survived as a lone parent by engaging in sex work. Although Ana says this with disdain, the circumstances of her Lilya's mother's life are not made clear. One interpretation is that the constraints and pressures that Lilya experiences are simply newer versions of what her mother went through: the virtually identical departure scenes suggest this interpretation. Lilya and her mother leave in fancy cars with men that promise a better life in another country; and the cost of leaving is to abandon the only creature that depends on you. Both Lilya and her mother make that ultimate decision to leave within terribly difficult circumstances.

Although this is not explicitly explored with the mother, one possible reading is that the mother was not in ideal circumstances. While the film does not curry any sympathy towards the mother, the mirroring of their lives (depicted in these scenes) intonates that she may not simply be cruel. What if, like Lilya does with Volodya, her mother naively assumes that she will be reunited with her daughter in that other location? Or, more likely, that the money and life they have in the West is good enough to send back money to the one they left behind. The film crafts Lilya's story of being trafficked as inevitable, she had no other destiny.

## Trauma

The postsocialist abject is produced in the film also through Lilya's trauma: not only is she deceived and trafficked into prostitution, but her mother betrays her, her biological father is missing and the father/state figure is absent. The masculine state should be able to protect the vulnerable, especially children. Lilya is the victim of a context where the father/state has lost symbolic power, and the mother has 'sold' herself to leave the country. It is a western mythologizing of Soviet failure: the father is bankrupt, the mother is a whore and the child is a victim. The post-Soviet significance of Lilya's victimization is tied up in the Soviet legacy of that era's victim of prostitution. To draw out the post-Soviet meaning of Lilya's trauma, we need to make a link between the Soviet and post-Soviet period. To do this, I turn to the widely popular *perestroika* film *Interdevochka* (1989). In that film, the main character Tanya sells sex to earn hard currency in the USSR. She takes the opportunity to leave and live in Sweden with her former client. She is a 'sell out' because she chooses monetary comfort over national *qua* spiritual nourishment. In the end, she dies.

As many cultural critics have explained, rather than an expression of concern for women, the character of the prostitute is often a referent for some greater national question (Borenstein, 2006). In the case of *Interdevochka*, Tanya symbolizes the loss of a national asset. She also functions to juxtapose Russian or Soviet culture to the West: a beautiful woman is better off with a poor Russian than a rich Swede. From the outside, the Soviet prostitute also represented an infantile sexuality. The Soviet prostitute seeks sex work not due to a perverse sexuality, but for money. Her prostitution exemplifies the economic failure of state socialism. The Soviet prostitute was

educated, possibly even a rocket scientist, but sells her body for basic needs. A version of this infantile sexuality runs through the contemporary mail-order bride industry. Here, 'Slavic' women are represented as beautiful, 'white' and traditional: there are no feminists here. The Soviet woman would never prostitute herself if she had enough money to support herself and family.

Using *Interdevochka* to connect historically the Soviet to the post-Soviet, I suggest that we can see a crucial film lineage here: Tanya is Lilya's mother. Tanya chooses monetary gain over the maternal/national responsibility for her child. She does this not because she is a whore, but because she is the victim of a feminized state. There are no men to protect or care for her, as postsocialism castrated the socialist state. Thus, the trauma that we associate with Lilya's life is ultimately about how she is the child of the failure of state socialism. The overwhelming affective power of the film is rooted in the presentation of trauma associated with the poverty and abuse that are intrinsically tied to postsocialism. Lilya is trafficked because she is from the postsocialist world.

Yet, unlike Tanya in *Interdevochka*, Lilya's character does not create a dichotomy between East/West. The failure of the postsocialist state is that it could not provide for the mother, and now cannot help to keep its daughter from being raped. The audience does not view Sweden as the sole perpetrator of Lilya's victimization. By the time she arrives in Sweden, the girl has experienced grueling emotional and physical trauma. As mentioned previously, her sex trafficking is gratuitous, it is excessive in terms of what the narrative has already provided. While the forced sex scenes in Sweden depict what may be assumed to be the primary harm of the film (i.e. sexual slavery due to trafficking), the grotesqueness of those scenes produce a disidentification in the West-identified audience. It is not Sweden or the West, in juxtaposition to postsocialism, that is at fault. The clients are not representatives of national boundaries, but a foil for the postsocialist state's failure to protect Lilya from that perversity.

Furthermore, the socio-economic failure that is depicted is presented as self-contained and not entwined with global capitalism. This representation is flawed, and perpetuates a conceptualisation of poverty as culturally or nationally bound and internally determined. There is no gesture to the longstanding interconnection, officially and unofficially, between former state socialist economies, Western Europe and the broader global economy. The unhinging of the state socialist safety net is not separated from the historical movement towards the privatization of the welfare state. With the absence of a more critical lens on the global socio-economic structures that play into sex trafficking, the representation of postsocialist abjection is a distraction from a true transnational film on the issue of sex trafficking.

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## Notes

1. Since the collapse of the USSR and the re-politicization of sex trafficking, there have been major advances to anti-trafficking measures. The exposure of sex trafficking in and through the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries had a major impact on the evolution

- of these measures, including the US Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 and the UN Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (Berman, 2003; Pickup, 1998).
2. There is considerable controversy over the number of women trafficked into forced prostitution. It is often the very definition of what sex trafficking is that is at stake with the different data reports on trafficking (Laczko et al., 2002).
  3. For a different use of the concept of abject in the context of post-state socialist film, see Marciniak (2003).
  4. A sampling of visual media includes *Bought & Sold* (1997), *Sex Slaves* (2006), *Bucharest Express* (2004), *Redlight* (2010) and *Not for Sale* (2007). Examples of photography exhibitions include *Warte Mal! Prostitution after the Velvet Revolution* by Ann-Sofi Sidén (Hayward Gallery, London, 2002); *The Price of Sex* by Mimi Chakarova (2005); and photo collections on human trafficking and sex tourism by Kay Chernush (nd). Numerous public service announcements have been made for the internet, music videos and television.
  5. I use the term ‘transnational’ here to describe the multinational collaborations that produced the film as well as to describe the effects of the film, given that it is used in multiple cultural contexts as an anti-trafficking tool. Notably, Moodysson is not working from diasporic, post-colonial or exiled positions. On defining and theorizing transnational film, see Durovicová and Newman (2009) and Ezra and Rowden (2006).
  6. The film was submitted by Sweden for the US Academy Awards’ Best Foreign Film category. Spurring controversy, the Academy disqualified it because the dialogue is not in Swedish.
  7. As Yana Hashamova (2010) explains in her analysis of the reception of sex trafficking films by viewers in Eastern Europe, the representation of cultural context in films that depict sex trafficking (including language, actors and *mise-en-scène*) is important for how audiences respond to the trauma.
  8. The film was shot in Estonia and Sweden.
  9. This is illustrated in the first ‘hang out’ scene in Lilya’s new apartment. She tells her friends ‘that’s enough’, when they seem to be going too far with their intimacy. She also rejects Volodya’s advances, telling him that he is too young.
  10. See also Hughes’ position in the advocacy video *Demand* (2006).
  11. Generally, this debate is between anti-trafficking advocates, who admonish the institution of prostitution for the role that it plays in sexual violence (and some argue that this is inherent to prostitution), and those who focus on sex workers’ rights, including protection from forced sexual labor but also the human rights of sex workers (including migrant laborers). There are additional perspectives, but these two have dominated the public policy discourse since the early 1990s.
  12. Examples of feminist analyses of the politics of migration in the sex trafficking debate include Agustín (2008), Andrijasevic (2007) and Demlëitner (2001).
  13. This point about postsocialist abjection is tied to scholarship that has problematized the gaze on the (post)socialist ‘East’ as it was or is constituted during and after the Cold War (see Bjelić and Savić, 2002; Forrester et al., 2004; Neumann, 1999; Vidmar, 2011).
  14. For work on *chernukha*, see Graham (2000) and Isakova (2009).

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